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A longitudinal analysis of political parties' use of disintermediated digital campaigning on Facebook during the UK general elections of 2015, 2017, and 2019, and its impact on the gatekeeping function of political journalism.

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Writing a PhD thesis is a marathon, not a sprint, and doubly so when the researcher is working on it part-time. During the past seven years or so, I have switched jobs three times and moved house on four occasions. I've even worn out two office chairs. My son was five years old when I began; he's now thirteen. All of this is to say that there are many people to thank for their support and patience in this long-distance project.

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Abstract

The period from 2015 to 2019 has provided a unique moment to study the use of Facebook as a campaigning tool in UK elections. With three general elections in a little more than four years, this study has taken a census of Facebook activity during the campaigns and used content analysis to understand the output of both political parties and party leaders' feeds. The study takes a longitudinal approach to demonstrate how party digital communication strategies have developed over time. It finds that the parties are using Facebook to speak directly to voters, using a sophisticated range of media to persuade and motivate the electorate. The quantitative data are triangulated with qualitative interviews with political campaigners and leading political journalists to consider the impact of disintermediation on the gatekeeping function of journalism. Conceptually, this study seeks to extend the understanding of disintermediation by arguing that two-step flow models of communication theory might be updated for the social media age by replacing journalists with social media users.

Chapter 1 Introduction

In the early summer of 2007, the shadow leader of the House of Commons, Theresa May, sat down to answer questions from users of a new political blog, ConservativeHome. One of them asked how Parliament's website might be improved. Mrs May answered in generalities: she talked of the use of video and made a dig about the Labour government's decision to fund a new communications allowance for MPs. But here, at the cusp of the change from Web 1.0 to 2.0, a politician not known for innovative thinking around digital put her finger on one of the key changes taking place in political communication. "The internet is changing all forms of communication, and this definitely includes political communication. It makes it much easier for politicians to communicate directly with voters," she said. "But this easier communication doesn't make it easier to control a message. On the contrary, the internet makes information easier to come by, but harder to control" (Conservative Home, 2007).

Fast-forward ten years, to the moment when Prime Minister May prepared to step out from behind the black door of 10 Downing Street and call a snap election. Aides had placed a podium in front of the television cameras sparking frenzied speculation on social media. At the same time, journalists and constitutional experts shared their views about the podium's lack of a government logo and what that meant for the content of her speech. The real-time conversation through social media, including both political insiders and outsiders, would have been unimaginable a decade earlier. The following election campaign would mark a significant step forward for digital campaigning as politicians tried to speak directly to voters on their smartphones, controlling and shaping their campaign messages through sophisticated forms of media.

This thesis seeks to track these changes in digital political communication and the consequent impact on journalism through an analysis of party election campaigning on Facebook in the UK's three most recent general elections. Drawing on data gathered through content analysis of political

Facebook accounts and semi-structured interviews with both campaigners and leading political journalists, it aims to identify the changing strategies employed to speak directly to voters through social media.

The impact of social media on political discourse has been profound. There have been many breakthrough moments, perhaps most notably the digital campaign of Barack Obama during the 2008 US Presidential Election. His use of data-led digital campaign messaging and distributed fund-raising shaped the subsequent thinking of political actors in many Western democracies. Some of the communication specialists who worked on the campaign went on to have commercial success as digital communications consultants, touring the world's elections, including those in the UK, and selling their secret sauce of voter targeting and data-led market segmentation.

As social media became a more dominant area of discourse through the early 2010s, British political actors became more aware of its capacity to engage highly active political communities of interest and swing voters in marginal constituencies.

For the first time, political actors could curate their own audiences without relying on mass media to supply a megaphone to reach voters. With the dilution of the message, critique, fact-checking and spin, political journalism could be circumvented and, in some cases, entirely ignored. Politicians could potentially create a disintermediated space that was theirs to control; messages no longer needed to pass through a mediating filter of editorial perspective. The impact of framing on messages has always been significant, but its influence was magnified. Political actors could use social media to frame their messages to audiences, forcing journalists to follow up on stories where politicians have already set the terms of the debate.

This change to the gatekeeping function of political journalists has had a significant impact on their work. The privileged access of previous generations of journalists to contacts, including politicians, spin doctors and party workers, provided a steady stream of both on-the-record and anonymised sources for stories. The Lobby system of daily briefings delivered the official lines to take. For the complaisant Lobby hack of legend, access journalism meant stories. Although there were significant dangers, as Henry Porter wrote in the 1980s, "In pursuit of an easy life, journalists have progressively relegated themselves to the status of mere instruments of government propaganda" (Barnett and Gaber, 2001, p1).

Social media have disrupted this cosy relationship. Pressure from two directions broke the consensus: political elites and the grassroots. Firstly, Web 2.0 tools such as blogs and, latterly, social networks allowed entrants from outside the Westminster Village to cover and critique political actions, policies, personalities, and journalism. Perhaps not since the pamphleteers of the 18th century have self-published works, such as the Guido Fawkes blog, had such an impact on the thinking of the political class. The grassroots revolution forced political actors and writers to engage with voters in new ways. The power relationship between voters and politicians was equalised in a way that other forms of disintermediated communication failed to provide, such as the stump speech or surgery meeting. On social media, a constituent and politician may speak as equals; similarly, *The Times* leader writer arguing online with the newly minted citizen-journalist of a hyperpartisan blog may be unable to rely on any prior status garnered from the reputation of their publication. Digital media's tendency to overturn existing social norms might be both exhilarating and liberating, but it also conceals dangers. A politician, for example, finding themselves at the centre of a tweetstorm could face opprobrium as significant and career-damaging as the more traditional forms of bad press.

As politicians began to understand the impact of social media and the immediacy of two-way communication with voters, it led some to consider what benefits they derived from subjecting their messages to the framing of a hostile media. Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign explicitly set out to reach past what he saw as an inherently partial and liberal media to voters who felt disenfranchised and marginalised. Other political parties observed his success and considered how they could copy his strategy, if not his messages.

Not least among them was the UK's Labour Party (McTague and Cooper, 2017). The success of Jeremy Corbyn in mobilising his supporters via social media during his two leadership campaigns in 2015 and 2016 led Labour strategists to conclude that they could bypass what they believed to be an unsympathetic right-wing media and campaign directly to voters via digital communication. Similarly, in 2019 the Conservative Party leader Boris Johnson would run a campaign appealing directly to voters through highly repetitious Facebook posts, calling on the electorate to back him and his vision of Brexit, while circumventing what he considered the Remainer-elite.

As this research will show, these approaches brought successes and failures. But social media have fundamentally changed how political actors conceive of election campaigning. There will never again be a general election campaign without a digital strategy.

1.1 Researcher motivations

Since the mid-nineties, I have been a working journalist, mainly in broadcast and digital news at ITN and *The Times*. I have worked on many local and national election campaigns as a reporter, producer, and editor. I edited live political events shows, such as US presidential election results or Budget analysis programmes, and ran general election coverage. My time in the news media coincided with the revolutionary impact of the internet and the emergence of digital journalism as a

serious platform for public interest reporting. I became increasingly interested in its implications for political communication, even as political reporting came under strain following the Iraq war and the Hutton Inquiry into the BBC's reporting of the David Kelly affair.

On becoming a full-time academic in 2014, it seemed to me that the use of digital, specifically social media, in British political communication was worthy of serious study. While there had been an academic focus on the use of social media in radical and revolutionary political communication, particularly focused on the Arab Spring, as well as extensive writing in the United States in connection with the presidential campaigns of 2008 and 2012, relatively little had been written about the development of social media campaigning in the UK.

Naturally, I thought I could bring my experience in journalism to this project, both in terms of professional insight and drive to deliver a quickly completed thesis. However, the first thing I was forced to recognise was that an academic dissertation could not be journalistic and would not be turned around in a couple of months. It would require several years of data-gathering and analysis. Fortunately, that has coincided with one of the most fascinating political periods of recent history. Since I began this work, there have been three British general elections. The leaders of the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat parties have changed several times, and Brexit has redefined Britain's place in the world and traditional political party affiliations.

The rapidly changing and maturing use of social media to communicate directly with the electorate has been at the heart of all these developments. I could not have wished for a more significant historical period to study.

As of spring 2023, 591 of the 650 Members of Parliament have Twitter accounts. The most-followed account as of this writing is that of Boris Johnson, with around 4.7 million followers (Politics-

social.com, 2022). At the other extreme, a mere 1,064 people follow the former ITN newsreader and Conservative representative for Aylesbury, Rob Butler. In all, a little more than 39 million accounts follow UK MPs, with an average number of followers per account of just over 66,100. On Facebook, around 2.4 million people liked Johnson's page as of spring 2023, considerably more than the roughly 754,000 who liked the official Conservative Party page. Even accounting for duplication, bots, and fake accounts, these figures represent a significant number of accounts actively engaged with British politicians.

The desire to curate a loyal, or at least interested, following and undercut the media's gatekeeping raises questions about the health of political journalism. As new media began to emerge at the turn of the millennium, Barnett and Gaber (2001) identified three traditional primary drivers for good political journalism: to relay opinions from the public to politicians, to provide accurate information to the electorate, and to help create a space in which public opinion can be formed on political questions of the day.

Although the rise of digital journalism, citizen journalism and social media activism has changed the landscape for political journalism, these traditional drivers still play a part. Yet as this thesis shows, political parties' use of digital campaigning has evolved over time, becoming increasingly sophisticated in its ability to bypass journalists and their traditional civic functions. During the period of the three elections, confidence and expertise in digital campaigning have grown, and the activities of digital media production have been normalised as part of parties' election infrastructure. This use of digital campaigning and its reliance on and subversion of media and journalism conventions allowed political actors to circumvent journalists and talk directly to voters at scale. The size of the engaged audience on Facebook and other social platforms and the speed at which parties can communicate with voters dwarfs the direct communication of previous eras. Where previously a politician might address a town hall audience of dozens, now they can talk to an audience numbered

in millions. As this thesis will show, that approach was explicitly underlined by Jeremy Corbyn's 2017 use of campaign trail and stump speech videos to reach beyond his immediate supporters and bypass the political media, which his team viewed as irredeemably hostile.

I hope that this thesis will prove of interest to political campaigners and journalists as a record of how digital campaigns were conducted during the mid to late 2010s, the motivations and intentions of those that worked on them, and in considering the impact on the gatekeeping activity of political journalists. Through critical reflection on these elements of Facebook campaigning and its coverage, I hope that lessons may be drawn for improvements in the quality of the information provided to voters.

1.2 Thesis Structure

The thesis will be split into ten chapters, including this introduction. Chapter Two will review the historical development of digital election campaigning in the UK and examine the influence of American presidential campaigns, especially Obama 2008. Chapter Three will consider the current literature and research, looking at the use of disintermediated communication as well as examining the main theoretical framework that supports the thesis, namely gatekeeping theory and the influence of two-step communication theory. That concept stems from Lazarsfeld et al.'s work in the 1940s but is also examined in relation to much more recent thinking in the area, such as Jenkin et al.'s concept of spreadable media.

Chapter Four will outline the methodological approaches to the research and data analysis. Chapters Five, Six, and Seven will report on data gathered in each of the three general elections considered by this thesis, those in 2015, 2017, and 2019. Chapter Seven will also draw together comparisons between the campaigns. Chapter Eight will consider the results of the semi-structured interviews

with political journalists and campaigners. Chapter Nine will critically discuss the findings and set them in the appropriate context. Finally, Chapter Ten will consider the research limitations and areas for future study.

1.3 Locating the research within existing work

Building on work by Chadwick and Anstead (2010), Lilleker and Jackson (2010), and Vaccari (2013), this thesis looks at how politicians have used digital tools and political communication strategies to speak directly to voters, influence the media and mobilise supporters to get the vote out. Starting with a quantitative approach, it examines the nature of communication on Facebook during the 2015, 2017, and 2019 general elections. I believe the detailed content analysis of the three case studies and the comparative analysis that follows contribute significantly to the literature on digital campaigning by providing an in-depth look at the nature of political communication on Facebook within the context of contemporary British campaigns.

However, because of the benefits of methodological triangulation and my background as a journalist and media practitioner, I did not want to present the case studies in isolation. Therefore, the analysis of Facebook posts is complemented by qualitative, semi-structured interviews that help illuminate the relationship between the media and political actors. These qualitative data provide unique insights that extend understanding of how and why both political journalists and political campaigners are using social media. The interpretation of the datasets is guided by contemporary political communication literature and long-standing theories of gatekeeping, disintermediation, and two-step communication.

Political campaigning and journalism are rapidly maturing as digital media become increasingly dominant forms of communication, attracting extensive scrutiny by practitioners and scholars. I

hope that the combination of practitioner insight, content analysis, and robust theoretical context offered here will prove attractive and valuable to future readers.

1.4 Justification for research

There has long been a combative relationship between politicians and the press, from members of Burke's Fourth Estate holding to account the powers of the executive to taking *The Times*' Louis Heren's approach to political interviewing by asking, "Why is this lying bastard lying to me?" (Harcup, 2021). As new technology develops and matures, it may be that the traditional route to communicating with voters en masse, through the amplification of journalistic practice, will change.

Understanding how the growth in digital campaigning, and the use of digital and social media communication by political actors, affects the traditional functions of political journalism is thus vital to the health of the democratic process. The ability to hold the powerful to account relies on journalists curating audiences large enough and powerful enough to make it worthwhile for politicians to both placate and exploit those journalists. When a political leader chooses to appear in a publication that is not naturally supportive of their policies, a message is sent both by the political actor and the publication about the importance of the message being delivered to that outlet's audience. With the decline in newspaper readership and the increasingly rapid drop in audience for TV news bulletins, more and more journalism is moving to at least digital-first environments and, in some cases, digital-only ones. In that space, politicians also have the power to curate their audiences and create news feeds for supporters and, for the cannier, floating voters.

At the heart of this research is the question: if political actors disintermediate journalists, and if the mechanisms of journalistic authority and power are undermined, how can political journalism continue to act as a check on the power of politicians? How can the media remain effective in

exposing corruption and deceit by those who wield, or hope to wield, executive authority in our society? As the politics of the 21st century continues to develop in unexpected ways, the solutions of the 20th century may no longer be appropriate. A new relationship between the political class and the press may have to be defined.

Chapter 2 Contextualising the research

This chapter will consider the development of digital campaigning and the use of social media to communicate directly with voters. Through the literature, it will locate the research in its historical context by considering effective presidential campaigns in the United States and early forms of digital campaigning in British parliamentary elections. It will also briefly consider recent campaigns in other countries, showing that digital communication has become embedded in national election campaigns over the past 20 years. Although digital media have long been a component in UK election campaigns, caution about using internet tools and two-way communication with voters meant its impact was limited through the 2010 General Election. The groundwork in this chapter will set in its proper context the scope of the data analysis outlined in the chapters dealing with the 2015, 2017, and 2019 UK elections.

The development of digital political campaigning can be separated into two distinct periods, as outlined in section 2.1. During the first decade of the digital era, political party websites were designed primarily as destination sites for the politically hyper-engaged, starting in the mid-nineties. With Barack Obama's first US presidential campaign in 2008, coinciding with the rise of social media, a methodology based on distribution was developed that sought to communicate with voters in the digital spaces they inhabited (Davis et al., 2009). This development is considered in more detail in section 2.2.

Obama's first presidential campaign became a model for many of those that succeeded it, as it took advantage of the then-new Web 2.0 tools. These included not just social media and video sharing but also improved interactivity and the use of data to target voters with personalised advertising. This development is examined in greater detail in section 2.2.2. The subsequent influence on British politics of Obama's advisers, such as Jim Messina and David Axelrod, conformed to predictions made by academics in the early part of the 2000s that the growing sophistication of digital campaigning

would require a new breed of political consultants who worked explicitly on campaigns and whose motivations were not only ideological (Farrell et al., 2001).

Political parties quickly saw the internet's potential as a campaigning tool (Coleman, 2017). In the United Kingdom, the three major national parties had established websites by the time of the 1997 General Election (Waterson, 2015). These websites allowed the parties to develop new forms of campaign communication with some limited interactivity (Bowers-Brown and Gunter, 2002). Even in the mid-nineties, parties used email mailing lists to ask for policy feedback (Margetts, 2001). This development in the context of the UK political parties is considered in section 2.3.

But with the maturation of social media as a tool for political campaigning, the political parties in the UK and in other Western democracies began to play increased emphasis on engaging social media users with persuasive content. These developments are considered in section 2.4, and section 2.5 assesses the impact on political parties' digital strategy of the variations to the Facebook algorithm.

2.1 The role of digital media in political campaigning

In the early days of digital political campaigning, websites served mainly as destination sites for those interested in researching party policy, or perhaps to demonstrate a candidate's modernity and digital savviness (Norris, 2003; Gibson et al., 2007). Websites were published, and users with the URLs could seek them out. Search remained a hit-and-miss process relying on manual indexing until the development of search engines such as Google, which indexed the entire web, gained public traction in the early 2000s (Sutherland, 2012). During this period, seeking political information online required a degree of motivation, favouring those already engaged by politics. Therefore, it made sense for political communications teams to remain focused on traditional media, such as billboards, or influencing print and broadcast journalists, with websites playing a supporting role in these

activities. Several studies have tracked the increasing sophistication of party and candidate websites during the 1990s and early 2000s (Bimber and Davis, 2003; Bowers-Brown, 2003; Cornfield, 2004; Stromer-Galley, 2000).

Modern campaigns employ a different strategic approach to those first faltering steps into digital campaigning. Underpinned by data interpreted via increasingly sophisticated analytics, digital campaigns are split between organic or viral advertising that relies on interaction on social media and data-led paid advertising targeting specific demographics (Dommett, 2019). Managing clarity of message in this environment is not without challenges. As Chadwick and Stromer-Galley (2016) argue, there is a tension between old-style, broadcast-era, top-down message discipline and modern data analytics-led campaigning, where strategy is formulated in response to quantitative information. As discussed in Chapter Eight, this was a tension that Labour Party campaigners experienced during the 2019 General Election.

However, in seeking to understand the strategic imperatives of digital campaigning in the German context, Jungherr (2016a) suggested four areas of campaign activity where digital tools are employed:

1. Organisational structures and work routines
2. Presence in information spaces online
3. Support in resource collection and allocation; and
4. Symbolic uses

These over-arching categorisations, which clarify the strategic imperatives of political campaigns, align with findings from this study that show development in functional rhetoric in social media discourse. As discussed in the findings, Chapters Five through Eight, as well as in the Discussion

chapter that follows, parties sought to use Facebook to understand the impact of their campaigns, motivate supporters, raise funds, explain policy persuasively to the undecided, and denigrate their opponents. These activities are the core functions of organic political campaigning for the political parties featured in this study.

The role of data in political campaigns has become increasingly controversial in recent years. Some observers have credited the effective use of data for the success of Obama's 2012 campaign, David Cameron's surprise re-election in 2015, and the 2016 European Union referendum result (Ross, 2015; Shipman, 2016; Susskind, 2018; Worcester et al., 2015). These campaigns all used paid Facebook advertising to target persuadable voters. As Moore (2016) has argued, this form of targeted political advertising was opaque, with little oversight or accountability, and could potentially jeopardise the openness and fairness of future elections. The nadir of this approach was the Cambridge Analytica scandal, where tens of millions of Facebook profiles were harvested without permission to create psychological profiles of users (Schneble et al., 2018). This scandal led to a public outcry and hearings in the United States Congress.

In the wake of the scandal, Facebook (later Meta) took a considerable step toward greater transparency. The company's chief executive Mark Zuckerberg declared he wished it to become more apparent when content is paid for political advertising (Ingram, 2017). Facebook established an ad library where it is now possible to search for adverts that political actors have purchased. While this was widely referred to during the 2019 General Election campaign, the move has also drawn criticism. For example, Sky News reported that researchers had discovered gaps in the data, which led to questions about the library's comprehensiveness (Manthorpe, 2019). However, targeted paid advertising is outside the scope of this study, which focuses on the use of organic campaigning.

2.1.1 Recent trends in digital politics

Communications scholars have long believed that trust in news media is an essential measure of the quality and credibility of the source material (Kohring and Matthes, 2007). The perception of the credibility of news media that it is fair, unbiased, exact, and complete is under growing pressure (Fletcher and Park, 2017; Henke et al., 2020; Newman and Fletcher, 2017). The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism reported in 2020, at the close of the period covered by this study, that despite a growth in the consumption of broadcast and digital news media during the Covid-19 pandemic, just 38% of respondents said they trusted the news most of the time. This was a fall of four percentage points from the previous year (Newman et al., 2020). It also reported a growing distrust of public broadcasters as political polarisation put pressure on normative journalistic qualities, such as impartiality. This finding was reinforced by an Ofcom report suggesting that just 58% of viewers believed BBC News to be impartial, the lowest result for any mainstream news broadcaster (Ofcom, 2020).

This fall in trust in mainstream journalism is accompanied by increasing exposure to partisan information sources through social media (Hasell, 2020). The Electoral Commission published a study following the 2019 election revealing that while 32% of voters had heard information about the candidates and parties from televised leaders' debates, 24% had found information from social media posts or adverts by campaigners (Electoral Commission, 2020). The Electoral Commission also reported that voters had raised concerns about the use of statistics, misleading information, and lack of transparency. The Commission proposed changes that should be implemented before the next UK general election, including more robust powers to regulate online political campaigning, tougher fines, and more transparency around the labelling of online political material, both of its origin and funding.

Since the late nineties, political audiences have migrated from traditional broadcast and print media to digital replacements, often enabled via social media (Nielsen and Schroder, 2014). The decline in the reach of legacy media means that political campaigners can no longer take for granted the assumption that mass media will deliver engagement with voters. Ofcom's latest report on news consumption demonstrated that while TV continues to be the most-used platform for news, it is closely followed by the internet, with two-thirds of UK adults using social media and other websites or apps for news (Ofcom, 2022). Several studies, including meta-analyses, have found the use of social media to correlate with more active and engaged users of political content (Boulianne, 2019; Skoric et al., 2016).

The political parties' approach to digital campaigning matured during the period of this study, as will be seen in the findings and discussion chapters. They devoted increasing resources to organic and paid campaigns, such as hiring dedicated staff, including photographers or videographers, to produce content for social media. They also learnt the value of having outriders. These are partisan supporters with significant social media followings or media profiles who can promote the parties' political messages to voters (Connock, 2017). In some cases, their use extended the role those partisan supporters have long played in the media. For example, Owen Jones is an influential *Guardian* columnist from the left of the Labour Party. He can use his newspaper columns to highlight issues and his large social media following to build support for political positions (Bassett and Mills, 2021). His influence is underpinned by his status as a columnist and his social media following. As discussed in Chapter Eight, several campaigners interviewed for this study spoke of his importance in driving virality for the content they produced in election campaigns. Left-wing political campaigners have become adept at this form of communication, in part to circumvent the press, which they view as biased against them. But this tactic is not limited to left-wing political actors. For example, the right-wing Guido Fawkes blog also had a weekly column in The Sun that ran for three years until

2016 (Turvill, 2016).

However, while it might seem logical to assume that political journalists' social media followers would be people with a keen interest in politics, campaigners interviewed for this study underlined the importance of reaching those less engaged with political debate. They drew comparisons between election campaigns and the football World Cup finals. The analogy was that most people only pay attention once every four years during the finals, ignoring the qualifying events. For digital political campaigners, the spillover from the highly engaged to disengaged was a crucial motivator for the organic campaign on Facebook. In Chapter Three, this point is considered in the light of the two-step flow communication model.

2.2 Locating the research in its historical context

This study examines the development of political campaigning on Facebook during the three UK general elections of 2015, 2017, and 2019. While an extensive survey of the development of political party election campaigns beyond these three cases is outside the scope of this work, it is worth considering the influence of presidential campaigning in the United States on party campaigns in the UK. Not only do campaigners in the United Kingdom look to the United States for examples of good practice, especially to the influential campaign run by Obama in 2008, but campaigners with experience working on US elections also played a part in modernising the approach of British political parties.

2.2.1 The early days of digital political campaigning in the United States

Digital media use in US presidential campaigning stretches back as far as 1992 and Bill Clinton's use of email (Bimber, 2014). Presidential campaigns in the 1990s and early 2000s embraced innovation,

not only web presence but also limited interactivity and personalisation, such as the Al Gore campaign's use of citizens' interests to customise its website (Bimber and Davis, 2003). But the first campaign to understand the distributed and decentralised nature of digital political campaigning was Howard Dean's primary campaign in the 2004 US presidential election (Hindman, 2005).

Traditionally, presidential campaigns were fought on two fronts: the ground game and the air war (Zhang and Chung, 2022). The ground game was the hard grind of door-knocking, fundraising, polling, and getting the vote out. The air war aimed to get the candidate's message onto the media through paid or earned mechanisms. The money raised by the ground game would be spent on advertising in the air war. The campaign would strive to ensure that as many people heard its message as possible through mass media broadcasting (Sides et al., 2021).

The former Democrat Governor of Vermont Howard Dean began his presidential campaign in 2003 as an outsider. However, his idealistic campaign founded on opposition to the Iraq War proved attractive to young, digital-savvy campaigners (Shirky, 2004). In a period before such Web 2.0 social tools as Facebook, Twitter or YouTube, the campaign established many of the core techniques of digital political campaigning: paid search advertising, search engine optimisation, email newsletters and peer-to-peer communication (Freiss, 2011). In turn, this modern campaigning approach proved attractive to political bloggers who were cultivating their growing audiences, a relationship that became a two-way discourse with benefits for both parties. Dean made clear that message testing with political bloggers was a crucial part of his strategy, "We listen. We pay attention. If I give a speech and the blog people don't like it, next time I change the speech" (Wired staff, 2004, para. 2).

As Kreiss (2009; 2011) argues, the Dean campaign was the first to deploy new media platforms and nascent social networks to address an organised political goal. Dean was able to leverage supporters to raise funds from small donations by using what were then new tools such as Meetup.com (a site

that allows users with similar interests to meet up in person), news reactive email alerts, fundraising appeals, online referendums, and distributed decision making (Cornfield, 2005). Around 40% of the $50 million raised in the primary campaign came from web-based small donations (Medvic, 2012). As Chadwick (2007) has pointed out, the campaign was a hybrid, bringing together netroots-style campaigning from radical social movements that grew out of the 1990s anti-globalisation campaigns and combining it with the seasoned professionalism of TV-age campaigners.

Dean's campaign came to a sudden and ignominious end. After finishing third in the Iowa Caucuses of January 2004, the first digital candidate became one of the first political memes. His fiery losing speech aimed at motivating supporters on the ground ended with a high-pitched "yeah". What became known as the Dean Scream was widely mocked online and in broadcast media. As Hogan (2004) argues, its repetition hundreds of times on broadcast media, in both news and comedy programming, as well as on satirical websites, reinforced the idea that Dean was somehow unpresidential. A month later, the campaign officially ended after the loss of several primaries. Dean subsequently made it clear that he did not believe the political legend of a candidacy unravelling because of an unguarded moment had much basis in fact. In 2018, Dean told the Washington Post he thought the campaign had lost momentum several weeks before the Iowa vote took place: "I was going to rallies, and I began to realize the same people are following me around" (Shinn, 2018, para. 29). Indeed, Shirky (2004) has written persuasively that the failure to convert fervour to votes meant that the campaign was effectively a mirage, a construct created by the media and the hype of supporters that failed to connect with voters.

But the subsequent impact of the campaign's digital approach was immense. By the end of the 2004 primaries, the leading Democrat candidates had taken note of the Dean campaign, set up their own blogs and Meet-ups, and begun to elicit online donations (Kreiss, 2011). People who worked on the Dean campaign founded digital campaigning and lobbying organisations or worked on the Obama

campaign of 2008 (Freiss, 2011). The lessons learned about the value of peer-to-peer

communication came simultaneously with the launch of Facebook and Twitter, where the ability to

deliver political messages at scale and unmediated by the lens of the media gave political actors an

unprecedented mechanism to speak directly to voters.

2.2.2 Obama's presidential campaigns

2006 was a significant year in the development of social media. Facebook launched in 2004 as a

student-facing site, but it was in 2006 that it first allowed public access to everyone aged 13 or older

with an email address. Twitter was also launched in 2006. The growth in the political impact of these

sites during the following few years was exponential. In 2008, Barack Obama's tweet claiming victory

in the presidential election was retweeted 157 times. In 2012, the equivalent message was

retweeted more than 800,000 times in just three days (Kreiss, 2014).

Obama's 2008 campaign marked a breakpoint with the developments in digital campaigning during

the decade that preceded it. Reflecting on Obama's successful campaign, the entrepreneur and

founder of Huffington Post, Ariana Huffington, was able to say, "Were it not for the internet, Barack

Obama would not be president. Were it not for the internet, Barack Obama would not have been

the nominee" (Cain Miller, 2008, para. 2). But it is also important to acknowledge the campaign's

proficiency in the range of tools at its disposal. Arguably, advertising via two older technologies,

email and television, were what supercharged the campaign (McClellan, 2008).

For scholars and political campaigners, the proficient and confident use of digital media marked the

campaign out from its predecessors. Obama used email to distribute messages that felt personal to

voters. By creating an inclusive campaign that emphasised the voter's individual contribution to a

moment in history, the election of the first Black American President, the Obama campaign

mobilised supporters. Using a database of millions of voters' emails, the campaign was able not only

to mobilise voters and persuade them to vote but also to create the belief that this was a social movement, not merely a presidential campaign (Carr, 2008; Bimber, 2014). YouTube (founded in 2005 and bought by Google in 2006) also was widely used, with more than 1,800 videos uploaded to the site. Taking inspiration from the Dean campaign, grassroots tools such as SMS text messages were used to mobilise voters. The campaign recruited 1.5 million volunteers, created 8,000 online affinity groups, and organised 30,000 events (Miller, 2013), with activists able to download tools through a dedicated social media site, MyBO.com.

While digital tools were influential in organising the campaign's volunteers, television advertising was crucial to its wider messaging. Obama spent $235.9 million on television advertising, compared with opponent John McCain's $125.5 million (Crigler et al., 2012). The template of multiplatform advertising and messaging, data acquisition, and online-to-offline voter motivation has become a standard that other first-order political campaigns have sought to emulate (Boulianne, 2018).

Where Obama's 2008 campaign was about digital innovation, the 2012 campaign was about deploying techniques at scale. Such was the impact of the 2008 campaign that Obama's presidential rivals copied his techniques to reach voters. The ability of Republican candidate Mitt Romney to close the innovation gap showed that the methods the Obama team had pioneered had been commodified in the subsequent four years (Bimber, 2014). But the incumbency effect had an impact on the scale of the digital audiences the candidates were able to reach. By the 2012 election, Obama had more than 33 million Facebook followers and 22 million followers on Twitter. In comparison, Romney had just 12 million Facebook followers and 1.7 million followers on Twitter (Bimber, 2014). Dashboard, the successor to MyBO.com, was successfully used to run offline events, although the turnout dip in 2012 reflected the lack of social movement fervour and youth appeal of 2008 (Wicks et al., 2014). Data acquisition, behaviour modelling and microtargeting were all used significantly in 2012, with the campaign manager, Jim Messina, reputedly spending $100 million on technology

(Bimber, 2014).

During the Obama presidency, social media became increasingly valuable tools, not merely for elite political actors in national elections but also for liberation and radical political campaigns, particularly those in the Middle East. The so-called Green Movement of 2009, the Arab Spring of 2011, including the Tahrir Square protests culminating in the overthrow of Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak, all saw activists use social media to organise protests, communicate messages to supporters, and control messaging to media organisations (Margetts et al., 2016; Vargas, 2012). The successful use of social media as organisational tools also inspired Western social movements in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, such as the Indignados in Spain, Occupy Wall Street, and, in more recent years, the Black Lives Matter movement, as well as less savoury organisations on the political far-right, such as Pegida in Germany. The maturation of technology, particularly smartphones, which allow instant communication using video, imagery, and text, meant activists had new tools to communicate and motivate supporters. But as Fenton (2016), Hindman (2009), and Margetts et al. (2016) have shown, techno-determinative solutions cannot by themselves create social change. Power and powerlessness, context, and ideology are essential to successful social change. The example of Syria, where an Arab Spring-inspired protest movement sparked a multi-year conflict, shows that user-generated content is no match for armoured divisions.

2.2.3 The 2016 US presidential campaign

By the time of the 2016 presidential election in the United States, it was clear that the campaign would be fought as hard digitally as the air war and ground game. Against a backdrop of increasing political frustration, two candidates dominated social media during the primaries: the Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders and the businessman turned reality TV star, Donald Trump (Groshek and Koc-Michalska, 2016).

When the 73-year-old Sanders announced his primary campaign in April 2015, it was as a rank

outsider. A CNN poll gave him just 5% support among Democrats and Democrat-leaning

independent voters. By comparison, Hillary Clinton gained 69% support among the same groups

(Mercia, 2015). The Sanders campaign drew inspiration from previous digital campaigns, particularly

Howard Dean's and Obama's primary ones. However, unlike Obama, Sanders was not a candidate

with a natural affinity for broadcast media. He distrusted corporate media, instinctively feeling that

it was not interested in the issues that motivated him or his supporters. In his autobiography cum

manifesto, *Our Revolution*, Sanders wrote, "As a general rule of thumb, the more important an issue

is to a large number of working people, the less interesting it is to the corporate media" (Sanders,

2016, p421). Indeed, one study found that the Clinton campaign drew four times as much coverage

from mainstream media as Sanders garnered during the primary period. However, much of the

coverage was highly negative (Patterson, 2016).

The Sanders campaign team emphasised social media as communications, allowing supporters to

amplify messages among their distributed networks of friends and contacts. Indeed, the Sanders

campaign website, *Connect with Bernie*, which offered similar tools to MyBO.com, explicitly made

this clear with a megaphone icon to encourage social media users to amplify the campaign's

messages (Penney, 2017). The campaign expressly connected real-world events, such as speeches,

with viral messaging and videos to encourage supporters to share media as widely as possible. The

campaign also adopted unofficial social media slogans when they became successful, such as the

popular hashtag #feelthebern (Penney, 2017).

Lacking similar financial support to Hillary Clinton, Sanders looked to the distributed, small-donation

fundraising techniques of Dean and Obama. According to Sanders, 2.5 million Americans made

around eight million donations to the campaign. The average donation size was $27 (Sanders, 2016).

As with Obama in 2008, the grassroots nature of the campaign gave it the feeling of a social

movement rather than a traditional top-down political campaign. But like Dean before him, Sanders

did not make it past the primaries. When Sanders failed to secure the Democrat nomination, losing

to Hillary Clinton at the Democrat convention after she gained the support of 2,807 delegates

compared with Sanders' 1,894, there was a backlash on social media. According to Penney (2017),

Sanders' staffers pointed to the use of Reddit to attack Clinton by the so-called Bernie Bros (young,

well-educated, male, and enthusiastic Sanders supporters) as a major issue for their campaign. Some

staff members were forced to intervene online to ask that discourse remain respectful. Clinton

herself partly attributed her eventual defeat to the divisiveness of the Bernie Bros, saying their

actions prevented the different wings of the party from uniting to face the challenge presented by

Donald Trump: "(It) caused lasting damage, making it harder to unify progressives in the general

election and paving the way for Trump's 'Crooked Hillary' campaign" (Levin, 2017, para. 5). Sanders'

supporters hotly dispute this analysis (Greenwald, 2016). That said, it served as a potential warning

about the potential dangers of future engagement with distributed and unofficial campaigns and

their ability to create new narratives that disrupt the official message.

After seeing off the challenge presented by Sanders in the primaries, Clinton had a formidable

operation of more than 100 digital staff creating content across many platforms using a media

production company model (Hendricks and Schill, 2017). But where she struggled to find an

authentic voice, her opponent, Donald Trump, had already successfully established a tone and

perspective. Trump's use of Twitter is undoubtedly the standout development in digital campaigning

during the 2016 election (Morris, 2017).

Beckett and Deuze (2016) have written about the importance of emotional authenticity in creating

journalistic impact in the digital era. The same is true of political communication. Where Clinton's

Snapchat video about "Chillin' in Cedar Rapids" jarred (Rogers, 2015), Trump's Twitter voice rang

true. It had what Stephen Colbert calls "Truthiness", even when what it said was misleading or false.

Trump had been road-testing his messages for several years before the 2016 campaign. The phrase

"Make America Great Again", with an exhortation to vote for Trump, was first used in a tweet on

February 3rd, 2015 (Clarke and Grieve, 2019), but Trump had trademarked the slogan as early as

2012 (Kasprak, 2018). Hendricks and Schill (2017) have described Trump in post-modern terms as a

hyper-real candidate in the Baudrillardian sense; the mediated reality of his use of Twitter is more

important than the underlying truth of what he says. But Trump's slipperiness, mendacity and

outright lies provoked a response from political journalists, with the growth of live fact-checking of

speeches, policy and communication fact-checks, and a more clearly defined sense that neither

Trump the candidate nor Trump the President could be taken at face value (Singer, 2018).

2.3 The use of digital in the United Kingdom's general elections

As in the United States, digital campaigning has become an increasingly important part of political

parties' election approaches in Britain. The influence of Web 1.0 and 2.0 tools can be tracked

through the quarter-century since the first UK political party websites were established, through to

more recent elections and the focus on social media-based campaigning.

2.3.1 The early days of digital political campaigning in the United Kingdom

In the mid-nineties, using the internet was a minority interest. In 1997, just 2% of the UK population

had home access to the internet (Coleman, 2001). While the political parties had established

websites from 1993 to 1996 in preparation for the coming election, few people used them (Bowers-

Brown and Gunter, 2002). That did not, of course, prevent the parties from trumpeting success. The

Labour Party claimed to have had 1.25 million page impressions on its site during the 1997 election

campaign. At first hearing, this sounds impressive, but it is unclear how the figure translates to the

modern standard of unique users. That figure would undoubtedly be far smaller. Not only were

there relatively few internet users, but it was also hard to track down relevant information. While

early search engines did exist, the application of search engine optimisation was still years away. In

this pre-Google period, the parties also used unusual domain names, such as

www.labourwin97.org.uk, which would have made it difficult for casual browsers to locate their sites

(Butler and Kavanagh, 1997).

The internet became a significant interest as the nineties gave way to the new millennium. The dot

com boom and subsequent bust were playing out, with technology stock indexes tumbling after

reaching peaks in March 2000 (McCullough, 2018). Google, AOL and lastminute.com had become

household names. Against this backdrop of public excitement in the new media, the 2001 election

was widely hailed as the first internet election, but as Coleman (2001) argues, the political parties

failed to capitalise on the potential of interactive campaigning. Political party websites were mainly

used as repositories for information on policy, including downloadable manifestos. But despite this,

there were signs of innovation in direct speech to supporters. For the first time in UK politics,

campaigns could offer targeted communication to voters through email without the necessity of

engaging with political journalists. Keen to ride the zeitgeist, the Labour Party used the 35,000 email

addresses in its records to send out 32 daily e-bulletins through the campaign. SMS messaging to

mobile phones was also popular; Labour used it to send out a mass message to an estimated

100,000 people asking them to vote for Labour in support of extended pub opening hours (Coleman,

2001).

The rationale for political campaigners to use any technology is vote maximisation (Stromer-Galley,

2000). But these Web 1.0 mechanisms were top-down and controlled. Parties did not allow voters to

engage with them on the voters' own terms, instead using them as passive recipients of information.

The digital campaign remained an addition to the core campaign, often branded in terms of youth

engagement (Coleman, 2001). As Ballinger (2002) argued, the digital campaign was hampered by a lack of willingness to use emails addressed to non-subscribers for fear of intrusiveness. It also suffered competition from more mature technologies such as rolling news television. Campaigners at the time recognised the potential but failed to capitalise on the opportunity (Butler and Kavanagh, 2002). Political websites were designed to reach as broad an audience as possible, but as the sites lacked personalisation, digital content was effectively shovelware - material 'shovelled' online without any attempt to tailor it to the digital medium (Stanyer, 2010). A MORI poll after the election found that only 7% of the electorate had used the internet to find political information, compared to 74% for newspapers and 89% for television (Ipsos MORI, 2001).

By the time of the 2005 General Election, both the public and the political parties had grown more sophisticated in using digital technology. There was a far higher level of internet penetration in the UK, with 55% of people having access at home (Prescott, 2017). Internet use for access to news and information had become routine, with a quarter of users accessing news websites at least once a week (Ofcom, 2015a).

After eight years in power, both the Labour Party and Tony Blair's personal popularity were waning (Denver and Garnett, 2011). The invasion of Iraq and the widespread perception that he had lied about the existence of weapons of mass destruction were just two of the drivers of increasing cynicism and public dissatisfaction with the prime minister (Scammell, 2007). During the lead-up to the election, numerous media stories suggested he would step down early into his third term in office (Channel 4 News, 2006). But running against a weak and unpopular opponent, Conservative Leader Michael Howard, Labour was re-elected with a comfortable, if much reduced, majority of 66 (BBC, 2005).

In the wake of the increasing sophistication of digital campaigning in the 2004 US presidential

election, there was widespread press speculation before the general election campaign that the internet might be a decisive tool. But, as Downey and Davidson (2007) argue, that proved not to be the case. They point out that political parties were unwilling to use the internet's power to disintermediate the press because those who visit party websites were unlikely to be undecided voters. At this transitional stage between Web 1.0 and 2.0, websites were still considered mechanisms to pull users to a destination. The ability to push content through social media distribution was not yet being exploited.

A study of political websites published shortly before the 2005 election described the six main functions of a political website: information provision, resource generation, Q and As, interactivity, networking (internal/external), and direct email (Gibson et al., 2003). As Stanyer (2005) notes, these functions were all in evidence, as was blogging, during the election campaign. But as the medium began to mature, there was more evidence of a transactional relationship developing between campaigners, party supporters, and the broader electorate. Kavanagh and Butler (2005) quote an anonymous Labour Party respondent as saying, "We don't reach the mass public through the internet, but it does allow us to promote the three Ms: to spread our Message to our own people, to Mobilise them and to get Money out of them" (p173).

The most significant innovation in the digital campaign was the take-up of blogging. According to Anstead and Chadwick (2010), 50 candidates ran active blogs during the campaign. Partisan political blogging was growing in popularity after the launch of the Guido Fawkes blog in 2004; Iain Dale's Diary, which he started to use regularly as a Tory candidate in 2004; and ConservativeHome, which was launched in 2005. While the future deputy leader of the Labour Party, Tom Watson, was the first MP to write a regular blog, a sample conducted by Ferguson (2006) suggested that it was right-wing blogs and, in particular, the blog of future prime minister, Boris Johnson, that generated traffic and engagement. But while there was significant interest inside the Westminster bubble and from

those deeply engaged in politics, blogging did not significantly impact the electorate. Reflecting on the influence of political blogging after the campaign, Francoli and Ward (2008) argued that blogs were met with indifference by the public and media, generating little engagement.

For researchers into digital political campaigning, the 2005 General Election is remembered as the last hurrah of the Web 1.0 approach. The widespread influence of Obama's 2008 presidential campaign and the rapid development of social media would mean that the 2010 UK election would be fought using quite different methodologies.

2.3.2 The use of digital media during the 2010 General Election

The election of David Cameron as Conservative Party leader at the tail end of 2005 sparked a period of rapid change in the use of digital media as a political marketing tool for the UK's main opposition party. At 39 years of age, Cameron was relatively youthful when he won the party leadership. Having been an MP for little more than four years, with a background in public relations, he was determined to modernise the image of the Conservatives (Wheeler, 2016). With his director of strategy, Steve Hilton, he embraced digital technology as a driver of change. The pair launched WebCameron, a digital video diary that provided insight into Cameron's life and views. They ensured that in April 2008, the Conservatives became the first British political party to sign up for Twitter (Crabtree, 2010; Ross, 2015). Drawing on expertise from the worlds of right-wing partisan blogging, advertising, and Silicon Valley, Cameron began to build a team that understood the power of digital media (Crabtree, 2010). Inspired by Obama's 2008 campaign, the Conservatives' digital team would launch MyConservatives.com, based on Obama's MyBO.com, and invest in new databases to track potential Conservative voters (Crabtree 2010; Ridge-Newman, 2020). The preparation meant the party was better equipped for the 2010 election campaign than the Labour Party (Ridge-Newman and Mitchell, 2016).

By 2010, internet use was a mainstream activity, with 73% of UK households having access and 60% of users saying they used it daily, a figure that had doubled since 2006, driven upwards by the rapid uptake of smartphones following the launch of the Apple iPhone in 2007. Some 43% of internet users had a social media account. Although social media remained more popular with younger people, 31% of those aged 45-54 had used the internet to post messages (Office for National Statistics, 2010).

This growth in internet penetration led, once again, to claims that this campaign would be the first internet election (Deacon and Wring, 2011), a claim made for every general election since at least 2001. Press reporting at the time began to emphasise the importance not only of political messaging online but also the use of social media to motivate voters and raise money. As Helm (2010) makes clear, while there was a sense that the Conservatives were ahead of Labour in preparing for the contest, Labour too had begun to prepare. In 2009, the party appointed parliamentarian Kerry McCarthy as its "Twitter Tsar" (Bowser, 2009). Her enthusiasm for disintermediated campaigning on social media prompted her to declare, "Labour doesn't need The Sun. We've got Twitter" (McCarthy, 2009).

It is clear thinking about the disintermediation of the press had progressed since 2005. Despite some commentators' derision of McCarthy's tweet, the idea that social media could successfully disintermediate the Lobby was being discussed, even if it was still a fringe concept (Charles, 2009). As Crabtree (2010) demonstrates, the Conservatives were buying Adwords with Google to directly target voters searching for specific policy areas. But there remained some residual bias among campaigners, with some still seeing digital campaign teams as something of a joke. As Ross (2015) explains, there were still occasions when campaigners would be asked to spend time creating internet jokes without any apparent transactional payoff, such as increasing votes. While there was

more digital activity and a greater understanding of available tools, campaigning was still not fully aligned with the strategic imperative to maximise votes, as outlined by Stromer-Galley (2000).

That said, the use of social media was no longer a fringe interest as it had been in 2005. Graham et al. (2013) suggest that 416 candidates for election from the Conservatives, Labour, and Liberal Democrats were actively using Twitter to support their campaigns. However, their finding that 80% of the tweets were concerned with updates on campaign or party issues rather than engaging with policy suggests that the use of social media to persuade undecided voters was still not being fully exploited. A study by Lilleker and Jackson (2010) similarly found that while websites and social media had become campaign tools, they had not yet changed the fundamental nature of campaigning. The key technology in the 2010 election remained television. The first televised election debates in the UK were broadcast, and the main news story of the campaign resulted from an off-the-cuff comment by Prime Minister Gordon Brown that was picked up by a television radio microphone (Kavanagh and Cowley, 2010). Where there were online enthusiasms, such as Cleggmania, there was no resulting electoral breakthrough (Gibson and Cantijoch, 2011). But, as Williamson (2010) argued, using the internet to find information about and respond to political events had become part of everyday life, and that would set the scene for future contests where the battle for attention on smartphone screens would be more bitterly fought.

2.4 The study of social media campaigning since 2010

In recent years, election campaigning on social media has been the subject of considerable study (Stier et al., 2018). There has been significant academic interest in how politicians use social media platforms to communicate with the electorate (Anstead and Chadwick, 2010; Bimber, 2014; Borah, 2016; Chadwick and Stromer-Galley, 2016; Hendricks and Schill, 2017; Miller, 2013). As Stier et al. (2018) argue, much of this interest has focused on the use of Twitter and, to a lesser extent,

Facebook.

Early studies of political Facebook use in the United States looked to understand candidates' use of the platform through content analysis and coding of the focus, emotional tone of a post, or meta-data around engagement (Borah, 2016). Similarly framed studies looking at UK elections have also sought to understand the emotional appeal of political Facebook use in driving engagement and virality (Gerbaudo et al., 2019). Lilleker et al. (2015) found that the UK's system of first-past-the-post elections led to a hybrid approach combining elements of European electoral systems and the presidential campaigning approach in the United States. These models led to an initial focus on party campaign approaches – marked more by caution than a desire to innovate (Lilleker et al., 2015) – rather than a personality-led communications style. While the UK parties gradually enabled participatory campaigns via digital media, they were themselves initially reluctant to engage with voters through social media. As this study will show, this approach changed over time as digital election campaign methodologies matured on Facebook. However, this study will also show that interactivity remains low on the parties' list of priorities for the use of digital media, with influence still sought through the broadcasting of key messages on social platforms, amplified using high-profile supporters.

Other studies have revealed that social media are used to deliver a wide range of functions during election campaigns. They can be used to frame issues to voters (e.g. Banks et al., 2021), to persuade potential converts (e.g. Gil de Zuniga et al., 2018), to motivate supporters (e.g. Schaub and Morisi, 2020), or to create political commentary (e.g. Grant et al., 2010). In the UK, the range of studies published since the mid-2010s, the period also covered by the present research, has been extensive, partly because of the significant number of elections and the impact of 2016's Brexit referendum on British politics. Scholars examining UK election activity since 2015 have found an increasing sophistication, with campaigns making significant use of media logic to frame political

communication (Chadwick, 2017; Chadwick and Vaccari, 2019). Others have examined the development of satellite campaigns that help drive virality in political communication (Dommett and Temple, 2018; Hotham, 2021).

As Jungherr (2023) argues, despite a growing number of studies examining digital media use by political parties, little has been revealed about the strategic use of digital media, their organisational embedding, or their effects on campaign goals. The literature requires greater use of mixed methods research to analyse empirical evidence and understand strategic intention alongside theory building. Jungherr suggests that some of the richest accounts stem from the insights of participants and consultants (Bond and Exley, 2016; Pearlman, 2012; Therriault, 2016) or journalists (e.g. Edelman, 2020) but warns that these accounts need to be critically interrogated. Although acknowledging observational approaches -- such as embedded participatory observation (Baldwin-Philippi, 2015; Nielsen, 2012) or interview-based ethnography (e.g. Dommett et al., 2021a; 2021b; Kreiss, 2012;) – and practitioner-based meta-accounts (Stromer-Galley, 2014) are useful, Jungherr (2023) also suggests there are methodological gaps, such as the lack of randomised control studies to understand digital media effects in election cycles. Although not pursuing that particular approach, this thesis attempts to examine the UK elections of 2015, 2017, and 2019 using a mixed-method approach to partially fill the literature gap Jungherr identifies.

The findings chapters of this study consider the context of the elections in some detail and the use of Facebook as a communications tool. As discussed in Chapter Three, this is because I believe there to be a gap in the literature relating to the comparative use of Facebook across the three most recent UK elections. But it is also worth briefly considering the impact on political communication and journalism of Twitter, a main rival platform to Facebook during the period covered by this study. Much of the work looking at election campaigning in the UK in the early to mid-2010s gave primacy to Twitter as a campaigning tool (Stier et al., 2018), though academic interest in Facebook political

communication grew in the wake of the 2015 General Election and David Cameron's success in using

microtargeting to reach persuadable voters (Ross, 2015).

Scholars have considered a wide range of functions for Twitter communication, such as whether it

might be used to predict election results (Chandio and Sah, 2020; Khan et al., 2021). Studies have

looked at the use of the platform by politicians in issue framing (North et al., 2020; Ross and Comrie,

2019; Usherwood and Wright, 2017), position taking (Graham et al., 2013; Jackson and Lilleker,

2011), voter mobilisation (Dutceac Segesten and Bossetta, 2016; Southern and Lee, 2018), and

constituent contact (Bright et al., 2019). Researchers have also been keen to examine the differences

in use by political campaigners of social media platforms (Bossetta, 2018; Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan,

2012), for instance, showing that Twitter is often used to try to influence the behaviour of journalists

or active supporters rather than to reach persuadable voters (Dagoula, 2019; Dubois and Gaffney,

2014; Kelm, 2020). Results of the present study support this finding, as detailed in Chapter Eight.

For many scholars, the idea that social media might have a democratising impact on political

communication was an engaging one (Davies et al., 2020; Macnamara and Kenning, 2011; Sanchez

Medero, 2020). There has been significant interest in the agenda-setting effect of Twitter (Conway

et al., 2015; Rogstad, 2016; Su and Borah, 2019) and how journalists have used it to source (von

Nordheim et al., 2018) and share news (Rudat and Buder, 2015). The interactions between

politicians and journalists on Twitter have also been explored, with scholars mapping influence and

considering how the platform might be used to understand power relationships within the political

bubble (Dagoula, 2019; López-Rabadán and Mellado, 2019; Xu and Feng, 2014).

2.4.1 Studying Facebook political communication in the UK

Since the 2017 General Election, there have been increased efforts to research Facebook use in UK

elections. As discussed above, many commentators pointed to the Conservatives' targeted Facebook

advertising as a critical factor in David Cameron's unexpected re-election in 2015. But the use of

Facebook as a campaigning tool by the Labour Party and its influence on the party's unexpectedly

impressive 2017 election result has been the source of significant discussion. Researchers have

sought to understand why Labour's performance under Corbyn caught both pollsters and the media

by surprise (Walsh, 2017; Walsh, 2020), as well as whether social media use by the young might have

had a previously unsuspected impact (Margetts, 2017). Gerbaudo et al. (2019) suggested a

correlation between the positive nature of Labour's Facebook posts during the campaign and high

levels of user engagement, which ran counter to Corbyn's negative media coverage. McLoughlin and

Southern (2021) argued that citizen creation of political memes meant that communications

bypassed political parties as voters took on responsibility for promoting Corbyn's message.

During the 2015 election, opaque political advertising on Facebook made it hard for researchers to

understand the exact methodologies employed to target and influence voters. By 2017, researchers

had identified some solutions to this problem. Anstead et al. (2018) reflect on the use of a browser

extension called Who Targets Me, which allowed researchers to understand the behaviour of a self-

selecting group of users who installed the software. However, more attention has gone to whether

social media can be used as a predictive tool for election results. Several studies have found that the

unrepresentative nature of politically engaged social media users means it is of limited value in

forecasting outcomes (Barbera and Rivero, 2014; Mellon and Prosser, 2017; Vaccari et al., 2013).

Less research has been published on Facebook use during the 2019 campaign. Nizzoli et al. (2019),

using network analysis of datasets from both Facebook and Twitter, claimed to have uncovered

coordinated attempts to promote messages by political activists and supporters of both main

parties. Ritchie (2021) analysed the approach of the Conservative campaign and suggested it

represented a move to greater output at a lower cost. Power and Mason (2021) argued that their

analysis of paid advertising on Facebook showed the Conservatives were keen to reach out and

engage voters on issues traditionally viewed as Labour Party strengths, such as the NHS; however,

the effect of the organic campaign was less clear. Famulari (2021) found that many Facebook image

posts by both Conservatives and Labour contained attacks on their opponents, either in verbal or

non-verbal formats.

As this summary suggests, most research has looked at each election as a discrete entity, with little

attempt to systematically analyse the use of Facebook across the three most recent UK elections.

The present study seeks to fill this literature gap.

2.4.2 Social media campaigning in broader international contexts

Although this study is concerned with the impact of Facebook political campaigning in the context of

UK elections and journalism, it is worth considering the wider range of studies, including

comparative research, looking at the national and international impact of social media campaigning

in the wake of Obama's influential 2008 campaign.

Despite the plaudits for Obama's campaign, parties outside the US were initially cautious in their use

of digital media. In Germany, press reporting of the 2010 federal election suggested that digital

campaigning had little impact other than annoying voters, with parties accused of having 'tiresome

online campaigns' (Marcinkowski and Metag, 2014). According to Baldwin-Phillippi (2017), only 30%

of the German campaigns used social media in 2010, though by 2013 76.6 % had profiles on either

Twitter or Facebook. Parties elsewhere in Europe were also slow to replicate Obama's 2008

approach. During elections in 2010 and 2011, 32% of candidates in the Netherlands and 19% in

Finland used social platforms (Vergeer and Hermans, 2013). According to Jungherr's (2016b)

summary of the overall literature relating to social media campaigning on Twitter, opposition parties

were more likely than those in government to use the social media platform to speak directly to supporters.

European candidates' social media content has differed markedly from the model created in Obama's presidential campaigns. When Obama won re-election in 2012, a tweet posted on his account featuring a photograph of him embracing his wife became the most retweeted on the platform to that point in its history (McIntyre, 2012). This highly personal photograph captured the politician at an intimate moment in his political career, seeming to encapsulate his campaign's themes of leadership and compassion. But the party-centric parliamentary systems of European democracies reduce the need for candidates to craft similar political identities, Baldwin-Phillippi (2017) argues, making candidates less inclined to provide voters with personal information on social media. More readily translatable has been what Chadwick (2013) calls the hypermedia style – the use of social tools and adoption of professionalised consultant-based campaign strategies – even if specific tactics and strategies are influenced by local political contexts (Lilleker et al. 2015).

In recent years, there has been a growing focus on transnational comparisons of social media use, especially Twitter use. van Vliet et al. (2020), for example, established a database of parliamentarians from all European Free Trade Association countries with more than 45% of parliamentarians on Twitter, as well as including a selection from English-speaking countries. Their analysis found both commonalities and differences between territories; for instance, when interacting with other political actors, the parliamentarians tended not to quote-tweet each other. The study also suggested that different political systems might lead to different styles of approach to social media use. For example, political actors in majoritarian political systems tended to have a more polarised approach to social media. A comparative approach has also enabled other scholars to examine how rhetoric and tone are used across the platform during elections. For example, Alonso-Muñoz and Casero-Ripollés (2020) found similarities in rhetorical approaches among populist

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parties in Spain, Italy, France, and the United Kingdom that contested the 2019 European Parliament election, but also significant differences in the ways in which these parties chose to frame policy and ideological discussions on social media.

Elections in democracies outside of Europe have followed a not dissimilar trajectory, with some local variation. Australia, for instance, lagged in developing effective digital campaigning, with high expectations for Twitter use in the 2010 campaign not matched by actual impact (Burgess and Bruns, 2012). By 2013, though, most federal officeholders and candidates used Facebook and/or Twitter, and party organisations embraced social media campaigning activities (Bruns, 2016). Unlike in some other political systems, victory in Australian elections depends on persuading a small number of swing voters to change candidate choice; Australian campaigning on social and other media is therefore targeted at such swing voters (Bruns et al., 2021). Activity during the 2016 Australian federal election diverged from Jungherr's (2016b) finding that opposition politicians are more likely to use social media than those in government, a finding Bruns et al. (2021) suggested might stem from this need to target swing voters.

The world's most populous democracy, India, has also seen widespread use of digital campaigning. Social media use in campaigns first became prominent with Narendra Modi's election as Prime Minister in 2014. Some researchers (Ahmed et al., 2016; Gonawela et al., 2018; Sharma, 2022) have compared his use of Twitter to that of Donald Trump, highlighting the use of direct engagement with voters to both disintermediate mainstream media and act as an intermedia agenda-setting device. Neyazi and Schroeder (2021) argue that social media and the impact of two-step influence through digital political communication may have also had a substantial effect in the 2019 election, leading to a better-than-predicted result for Modi's BJP.

Interest has grown in the use of Facebook, as well as Twitter, for political communication. 'Boomer Memes', fast-paced and repetitive Facebook posts, had an impact on the 2019 Australian Federal election (Mills, 2020), and the present study documents their use in the UK 2019 General Election, as well. More broadly, a comparative study of Facebook use during election campaigns in 18 different countries (Caeccobelli, 2018) found the main political leaders of advanced industrial democracies making increasing use of personalisation in their political communication and reducing the percentage of posts about policy issues during the course of a campaign; he also found a declining propensity for negative campaigning over time. In contrast, the present study found that political leaders in the UK failed to take advantage of Facebook communication to present a softer, more personalised view of their character.

2.5 The Facebook algorithm and engagement

The assumptions in this study are based on behaviour by engaged supporters of political parties who will share or comment on posts by political actors, delivering a spillover effect with influence on other users through two-step communication. While this organic process is not reliant on paid advertising or microtargeting, there is a degree of algorithmic intervention by Facebook.

The exact mechanism that powers the Facebook algorithm is secret, but like all such recommendation engines, its goals include increasing engagement, keeping users on the site, and allowing more adverts to be served to its users, all to increase the profit the platform can generate. These purposes are far from uncontroversial. A News Whip analysis (Hazard Owen, 2019) found that changes made in 2018 to decrease the prevalence of news content on the site had led to an increase in polarising, angry, and divisive material. Controversy breeds engagement; if a user interacts – either liking, sharing, or commenting - with controversial material, then the algorithm will serve them other controversial posts. Oremus et al. (2021) reported that Facebook researchers had

discovered that nearly 90 per cent of the content the algorithm surfaced to the one million most

politically oriented users in the US was about political and social issues. This group also received the

most misinformation. One subset of users associated with mostly right-leaning content was shown

one misinformation post out of every 40. However, the company that owns Facebook, Meta, says

that the algorithm is to help users. By using a ranking process, the algorithm sorts through the

thousands of posts a user might potentially see to find the most meaningful content, placing it at the

top of the news feed. Meta's President of Global Affairs Sir Nick Clegg argues, "The goal is to make

sure you see what you find most meaningful — not to keep you glued to your smartphone for hours

on end" (Clegg, 2021, para 16).

The way the algorithm influences engagement with content has changed over time, as

demonstrated in Table 2.1:

2009	Facebook releases its first algorithm to bump posts with the most likes to the top of the news feed.
2015	The algorithm starts downranking pages that post too much promotional content.
2016	A 'time spent' ranking is added to measure a post's value even if users didn't like or share it.
2017	Emotional reactions such as hearts or the angry face are added, as is a video completion ranking signal.
2018	Facebook's new algorithm prioritises posts that spark conversations and meaningful interactions (Mosseri, 2018). Posts from friends, family and Facebook Groups are prioritised over organic page content.
2019	Facebook prioritises videos that keep viewers watching longer than one minute, especially videos that hold attention longer than three minutes.
2020	Facebook reveals some details of the algorithm's workings. It begins to evaluate the credibility of news articles to promote trustworthy news rather than mis/disinformation.
2021	Facebook releases new details about the algorithm and gives people better access to their data.

Table 2.1: Facebook algorithm changes over time
Source: https://blog.hootsuite.com/facebook-algorithm/

These changes would directly impact the types of content that political campaigners produce. A

study published in 2016 (Kite et al., 2016) found that during communications campaigns, video

content tends to be the most engaging for users; an effect they suggest is a response to the

algorithm's tendency to serve this type of content to users rather than necessarily one of audience

preference. But subsequent algorithmic shifts necessitated strategic shifts in response, as described

in the findings chapters of the present study. For example, in 2017, Momentum produced relatively

short sketch videos supporting the Labour Party. The 2019 algorithm changes meant that created an

impetus to continue sketches for longer than three minutes to garner the greatest organic boost

from the algorithm, even if creators acknowledged that complicated their creative and production

processes.

Other studies have also tracked changes to journalistic output in response to algorithm changes,

notably with the increased video content production. Tandoc and Maitra (2017) argued that an

external agent had begun to influence news organisations' journalism as they reacted to Facebook's algorithmic incentives. Cornia et al. (2018) looked at the coping strategies of a dozen news publishers in six different organisations in response to changes in the Facebook algorithm that aimed to reduce the impact of news content and favour posts from friends. The researchers found that despite uncertainty and concerns over long-term platform risk, private sector legacy news organisations continued to invest in Facebook distribution as it continued to generate audiences and offered a route to pursue both editorial ambitions and commercial objectives. But by 2023 Meta's strategic decision to give less priority to news content on Facebook (Tobitt, 2023) had begun to result in a decline in traffic from the site to news publishers (Majid, 2023).

As this work indicates, political parties and news organisations have strategically altered their approach to social media distribution to ensure that content reaches audiences despite continual changes to the Facebook algorithm. In this study, I used CrowdTangle to measure engagement, but that Facebook tool neither tracks nor segments the audiences for political party content. The quantitative data from CrowdTangle only considers overall numbers in engagement. While a general assumption is that most people who are exposed to party-created content follow party Facebook pages, as highlighted in Chapter Seven, there is one exception: what I have termed the spillover effect. This is accidental exposure to political content, usually news items, sometimes framed as incidental exposure by other researchers (Thorson, 2020). The reason I have redefined the term is that my research clearly shows political campaigners aimed to achieve the spillover effect through their own content and posting – it was a clear strategic objective rather than a lucky accident or additional incidental bonus.

Several earlier academic studies have considered this mechanism as well as its impact on political messaging. Gil de Zúñiga and Valenzuela (2011) argue that social media facilitate exposure to political information via weak ties that can drive engagement by the politically uninterested.

Messing and Westwood (2014) suggest that social media users exposed to counter-attitudinal information through their networks may be willing to set their political preferences aside. Valeriani and Vaccari (2016) examined how social media users reacted to accidental exposure to political information in elections in Italy, Germany, and the UK; they concluded that political actors can try to harness social media affordances to reach people not highly interested in politics by indirectly invading their timelines, thus augmenting their political engagement. The present study demonstrates that political campaigners now see getting user engagement from non-supporters via the spillover effect as a clear signifier of communications strategy success, as highlighted in Chapter Nine.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated the evolution of digital campaigning from the web destination approach used from the late nineties until the 2008 US presidential election, through bridge technologies such as email, to a strategy that started to embrace greater interactivity and distribution through social media.

It has also shown the debt owed by British election campaigners to the strategic approach undertaken by Democrat campaigners in the United States, in particular. Both the Conservatives and Labour Party would explicitly acknowledge this debt in the run-up to the 2015 election by hiring advisers with a record of success working with Barack Obama. Jim Messina would work on the Conservative campaign; David Axelrod and Matthew McGregor would advise Labour. The 2015 campaign will be examined in detail in Chapter Five.

This chapter has also considered some of the wider literature on social media campaigning in the context of elections in the United Kingdom and other Western democracies. Through the literature,

it has shown that the mechanisms for reaching and persuading social media users have resonance for political campaigners. Chapters Eight and Nine consider these strategies and drivers in greater detail.

In the next chapter, the literature relating to the conceptual framework will be considered, including the development of political communication and how gatekeeping theory has developed to understand journalistic activity.

Chapter 3 Literature review and conceptual framework

This chapter examines the literature and theory linking the thesis to academic work that considers the impact of digital political communication and the gatekeeping function of political journalism. It will provide an overview of some of the critical areas of analysis, drawing on publications in the fields of journalism studies, communications, and political science. These areas of publication are by their nature broad, and while some listed works are classics in their fields, much of the cited work is more recent, reflecting a rapidly changing field of study.

The first section of this chapter will examine some of the core concepts around communications theory and the role of political communication in the democratic process. It also considers the literature relating to the development of digital campaigning and the impact that this has had on public discourse. The second section will consider the effect of gatekeeping theory and its place in understanding the function of political journalism. The concluding section will consider the role of disintermediation and whether the use of theories connected to market activity might be aligned with those looking at two-step flow communication theory to aid the understanding and analysis of digital political communication.

3.1 The rise of political communication

Since the rise of mass media in the early 20th century, political communication has been mediated. Political actors used media such as newspapers and posters to reach voters, building on the messages they delivered directly through public speaking. As broadcast media grew in popularity, the importance of direct communication with voters declined, replaced with a mediated form of communication through electronic media and journalistic activity. German sociologist Jürgen Habermas defined this public sphere of debate and communication as "a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed" (Habermas, 1964). Habermas identified the public sphere as developing in the 18th century with the rise of newspapers, journals, and the intellectual debate of the coffee shops. Through these venues, he posited, news and opinion could be discussed and disseminated, positively impacting public life. Habermas suggests that this positive vision of a lively and democratic public sphere was overturned by the formation of capitalist monopolies of information in the 19th century. Habermas's view of this mediated public sphere was pessimistic, born from his wartime and post-war experiences in Germany. This chapter will consider how contemporary journalism and other forms of political communication are changing how information is delivered in a digital society.

In the post-war period, the role of newspapers in that public sphere was crucial. An analysis of ABC circulation figures by the consultancy Communications Management Inc (2011) suggests that in 1950, the average daily total paid circulation for British national daily newspapers was about 21 million (equivalent to almost 150 per cent of households); the total paid circulation for British Sunday newspapers was about 31 million (equivalent to more than 200 per cent of households). It was not unusual for people to buy two or more newspapers daily: morning and evening newspapers during the week and several Sunday papers. As audiences for broadcast news grew and newspaper readership declined, the public sphere gravitated towards an electronic medium, but the importance for political actors of mediated communication remained (Bennett and Entman, 2005). As Roger

Ailes, the Republican advisor who would later help found Fox News, told then-presidential candidate Richard Nixon in 1968, "Television is not a gimmick, and nobody will ever be elected to major office without presenting themselves well on it" (Baker, 2009, p71). Political actors had to successfully articulate concepts via mediated communication, whether broadcast or in print, to influence the greatest number of voters. With the rise of digital campaigning, as outlined in Chapter Two, the reliance on traditional mediated communication began to break down. Political actors have again found that direct contact with the public has paid electoral and fundraising dividends.

Much of the study of political communication grew out of the experiences of the world wars. Academics studying propaganda grappled with the question of how the media persuaded people to hold beliefs that they might previously have rejected. In his classic analysis *Propaganda Technique in the World War* (1927), American political scientist Harold Lasswell concluded that propagandists hired by governments directly affected what people believed about their state at war. Lasswell made it clear that the state was looking to influence the population through its use of media and communication and that this influence could be exerted to deliver an effect that went against the interests of the population, "When the public believes that the enemy began the war and blocks a permanent, profitable and godly peace, the propagandist has achieved his purpose" (Lasswell, 1927, p77). Drawing on aspects of psychological theories such as behaviourism and Freudianism, Lasswell outlined what he saw as a strong media effect on the shaping of belief in the population. Lasswell's (1948) classic definition of communication (who says what, in which channel, to whom, and with what effect) remains influential in the field.

This theory of a strong relationship between a cultural artefact and its effect on the audience, sometimes called the hypodermic syringe model, was initially viewed as plausible. It regarded the mass audience as homogeneous and receptive to communicated messages (Bennett and Manheim, 2006). It anticipated uniform responses to biological and external stimuli and a lack of agency from

the audiences, something rejected by later cultural scholars (Gauntlett, 1998). It also appealed to

theoreticians, such as those in the Frankfurt School, who viewed the impacts of mass media through

the lens of Marxist dialecticism (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1944). However, the theory fell from

favour after the publication of Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet's classic study of the 1940 US

presidential election, *The People's Choice: How the voter makes up his mind in a presidential*

campaign (1944). The authors were able to show, through repeatedly interviewing the same group

of voters in Erie county Ohio, during the 1940 Presidential campaign, how different environmental

and media factors affected their voting choices. Contrary to expectations, they were able to show

that only a few voters changed their minds as the result of media consumption but that their

contacts with other voters were far more influential, concluding, "In the last analysis, more than

anything else, people can move other people" (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944, p158).

This analysis would become known as the two-step flow model of communication. Media messages

are rebroadcast through influencers in social groups, gaining power through endorsement by

respected figures within a social circle. This theory would be refined in Katz and Lazarsfeld's 1955

work, *Personal Influence: The part played by people in the flow of mass communications*. The

authors point to the importance of leadership in communications and show that opinion leaders

within a community are often highly exposed to ideas via mass media and then translate those

concepts for opinion followers in their social groupings. As Livingstone (2006) suggests, in the end,

people talk.

Such was the impact of Katz and Lazarsfeld's work that two-step communication became the

dominant theoretical construct for analysing media effects. But Gitlin's 1978 attack on the

methodological shortcomings of the study led to a more nuanced approach to the concept of both

media effects theory and the idea of a single public sphere, as envisioned by Habermas. As the 20th

century wore on, the idea of a simple broadcast message having a societal impact looked less

convincing.

3.1.1 Theoretical approaches to digital communication

Nonetheless, the emergence of digital political campaigning and the development of social media have reignited academic interest in two-step flow communication theory. With political actors again able to speak directly to voters and political outriders able to pass on their messages to followers, the two-step communication theory suddenly seemed more applicable to people's behaviour on social media. If Kylie Jenner can, with one tweet, cut $1.3 billion from the value of Snap, the parent company of the social app Snapchat, by telling her 25.5 million followers she no longer opens the app after a redesign (Murphy, 2018), then two-step flow communication theory may have value in explaining and understanding the behaviour of people on social media. In considering whether this is two-step flow communication, pace Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), an analysis of the purposes of their social media communication from Kardashian family members and other influencers is required. Lueck (2015) suggests that the main driver for Kim Kardashian is parasocial interaction that gives the illusion of intimacy but that retains commercial drivers to sell products through endorsements and that builds her personal brand. For Kardashian family members some digital communication is merely conversational or community-building communication but in other posts they are aiming to exert influence on followers to make commercial or political decisions, not least in Kanye West's tweets in support of Donald Trump (Strauss, 2018).

The idea that political communication and digital campaigning effects might be explained by a re-examination of the two-step flow model of communication developed early on as the political parties adopted digital campaigning. Even before the social giants Facebook and Twitter became the focus of a new digital public sphere, Norris and Curtice (2008) were able to apply the theoretical framework to the UK's 2005 General Election. But their tentative conclusion that in 2005 the

internet was one player among many would soon be overtaken by events. Younger, more tech-savvy

politicians were coming to the fore and experimenting with new communication tools. In the UK, for

example, the new Conservative leader of the opposition, David Cameron, started to broadcast video

messages to supporters via a web video strand called WebCameron. As Ridge-Newman (2014)

makes clear, the disintermediated nature of the project and its ability to agenda-set for the

traditional media were viewed by party workers as critical parts of its appeal.

Despite its innovative ideas about disintermediation, much of WebCameron's architecture relied on

the "build it, own it" philosophy of Web 1.0. Built on the cusp of Web 2.0, party workers later

reflected that building their own website and creating something from scratch had been expensive

(Ridge-Newman, 2014). Had the project been attempted 12 to 18 months later, it would have

undoubtedly made use of the Web 2.0 tools just coming on stream, such as YouTube for video

sharing. It would have been built to become a viral product rather than a destination one. The

importance of designing for virality is explored in Jenkins et al.'s *Spreadable Media: Creating Value*

and Meaning in a Networked Culture (2013). The authors outline five design requirements for media

to spread online:

- Available when and where the audience wants it

- Portable

- Easily reusable in a number of ways

- Relevant to multiple audiences

- Part of a steady stream of material

        (Jenkins et al., 2013, p197)

But in an echo of Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) work on two-step communication they conclude,

"Content spreads, then, when it acts as fodder for conversations that audiences are already having"

(Jenkins et al., 2013, p199).

Framing theory is also relevant to this conceptual area of understanding social media messages'

influence. Communications scholars have long understood the relevance of framing as a mediational

process in making meaning (Lecheler and de Vreese, 2012; Schuck and de Vreese, 2012). Someone

considering information in public communication may be influenced to reach a conclusion preferred

by the publisher through framing the message (Scheufele, 2009). For example, a political actor may

choose to hail the achievement of 90% employment in society; their opponent may choose to

condemn a 10% unemployment rate. As Shoemaker and Reese (1996) argue, frame-building can be

understood as a structural quality that informs the approaches of journalists to topics in stories. The

choice to approach a story from a particular angle is not always the reporter's own but may reflect

the editorial position of the publication or broader cultural norms. However, frame-setting, the

interaction between a media story's framing and an individual's prior knowledge, can also help

understand the effects of framing on audiences (Scheufele, 2006).

In understanding the application of framing theory to political communication, it is helpful to think

about the concept of spin, the emphasis of positive interpretations of a situation at the expense of

the negative. As Mearsheimer (2013) argues, there is a difference between spin and lying. But spin,

or emphasis, can influence audience behaviour. This manipulation also risks altering the factual basis

of an argument, even if the spinner falls short of actual lying (Garland, 2018). Gabor and Fisher

(2021) have argued that both the European Referendum and the 2019 General Election saw the

deployment of strategic lying, where campaigners deliberately made misleading statements in the

knowledge that attempts to rebut false claims would see the further dissemination of those claims,

on social media and through traditional media.

While framing theory has traditionally been considered in reference to print and broadcast media,

considerable work has been done to update it for the digital age (López-Rabadán, 2021). Valenzuela et al. (2017) argue that while some of the traditional framing techniques, such as conflict, have been identified in studies on journalistic messages, social media users are more likely to frame shared messages in terms of moral or emotional responses to content, a finding also shared by other studies (Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan, 2013; Tellis et al., 2019). Outrage is a strong driver of sharing. Pond and Lewis (2017) argue that action frames can also be seen on social media in response to significant events of social unrest. Cascading messages and framing them to achieve virality is an active process.

As described by Jenkins et al., media can spread beyond audiences for which it was originally intended, whose readings and reception of the content can be significantly different to the original intentions of the producer. The near frictionless sharing mechanism of social media, combined with the ability to frame that content in ways the original producer may not have intended, has severely impacted some social media users. The author and journalist Jon Ronson's 2015 book, *So You've Been Publicly Shamed*, examined the impact on social media users of tweets that had gone viral and had impacted their personal and professional lives. One case study Ronson reported involved a communications professional, Justine Saccao, who tweeted a tasteless joke, "Going to Africa. Hope I don't get AIDS. Just kidding. I'm white!". The tweet went viral and was retweeted tens of thousands of times, many users framing her original tweet with their interpretations of her meaning. She lost her job and was ostracised, at least temporarily, by many members of her friends and family. What had been intended as a joke for her 173 Twitter followers became an infamous example of online mob behaviour. To put it into the context of media theory, her joke to friends was an example of one-step communication; other Twitter users chose an oppositional reading of her meaning, branding her a racist and a fool, and redistributed that content to their own social groups using framing devices that reinforced those oppositional readings, thus an example of two-step flow communication.

3.1.2 The impact of digital on political communication

This chapter has thus far considered some of the theoretical approaches to digital communication. Traditionally, the study of political communication considers and defines audiences, analyses the content of messages, and considers the effects on voters (McNair, 2018). In the classic essay *The Third Age of Political Communication: Influences and Features,* Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) argued that political communication had entered a new, third age of communication at the turn of the century that responded to media abundance, such as increased radio output and 24-hour rolling news television. They argued political parties responded with increased professionalism, centralised communications and spin. While there were dangers in the quest for more control, there was also an opportunity to increase active citizenship through engagement with the new interactive media, radio talk shows and discussion programmes. While the strategic purpose of the political message and its content might be defined centrally through a hard-nosed, top-down approach to communication, the media might use that message to challenge political decision-making and improve citizen engagement.

Nearly twenty years later, Bennett and Pfetsch (2018) argued that this top-down communication had been disrupted by digital technologies, polarised political information flows and hybrid media systems. While the traditional politician and press discourse may still take place on the front pages of newspapers, increasingly, the discussion of policy takes place in atomised locations outside of the mainstream, in a disintermediated form. Indeed, Bennett and Pfetsch (2018) suggest that scholars should consider whether their core concepts of political communication (such as framing, gatekeeping, etc.) are still valid, as well as update their methods for analysing those conversations in a big-data world.

These challenges to political communication and the role of the media are captured by Van Aelst et al. (2017) in a list of six pressing issues, which include the decreasing quality and quantity of political news, plurality, polarisation, and growing information inequality. They suggest that emerging trends require longitudinal approaches to studying political communication, such as the one provided in this thesis. Reflecting on how political communication and the study of the field have changed in the digital era, Blumler pointed to the importance of empirical work to underpin the analysis of the changing nature of the area. Warning against utopian thinking, he argued that it was important for "comparative, cross-national, and longitudinal political communication research to continue to prosper" (Blumler, 2019, p53).

One of the issues Van Aelst et al. contend with is the extent to which politics and democracy is a process that requires active engagement. This points to an issue of growing importance in the digital age: digital political activity is networked between candidates, supporters, and parties. (Kreiss, 2010; Kreiss et al., 2018; Williamson et al., 2010). As Perloff argues, political campaigns were already highly focused on image and candidates. Now with the need to cultivate a permanent campaign and the development of new technologies, "Cultural changes also eviscerated the boundary between the private and public." (Perloff, 2014, p244). For Vaccari and Valeriani though (2016), this destruction of the distinction between private party supporter and public party campaigner is a form of hybridisation that delivers increased engagement with supporters and helps to drive politically engaged social media users towards political parties, which may in turn help rejuvenate their activist bases. As Drommett and Temple (2018) argue, this hybrid form allowed the 2017 Labour Party campaign to combine effective use of social media on its official party campaign and leader pages on Facebook and leverage satellite campaigns to humanise messages and mobilise supporters.

While it is wrong to see social media communication as representative of political opinion or to view it as a shortcut to understanding the respective performances of a political party in a campaign (see

findings chapters), there is a measurable effect. The most extensive randomised study to date on the 2010 Congressional election in the United States (Bond et al., 2012) found unmistakable evidence that seeing a political communication on a friend's social media pages directly influenced voting behaviour. The study also found that not just those users who were directly targeted were affected but also their friends and friends of friends. The study found that the spillover effect through two-step flow was more significant than the single-step direct effect. As seen in the findings chapters, political campaigners believe this to be important for positive message carrying to potential supporters.

Despite new forms of interaction developing, some researchers have cautioned that many of the interactions by politicians replicate old strategic activities. Focusing on Twitter, Gainous and Wagner point out that while the use of social media may be improving the efficiency of communication with supporters, much of the activity is like analogue-era strategies, "Twitter should help candidates win by making traditional campaign goals such as advertising, credit claiming and position-taking more efficient and immediate" (Gainous and Wagner, 2014, p80). The difference, as Stromer-Galley warns, is that communication is more targeted because of increased data-gathering and more distributed due to widened participation in political debate through social media. While she acknowledges that engaging with a polarised electorate risks bringing "unhinged" views to the fore, she concludes, "A healthy democracy enables full participation, which means political elites consider those perspectives and make changes because of them" (Stromer-Galley, 2014, p187). That interactivity between politicians and supporters produces value for both, through politicians wanting to persuade and mobilise, and supporters wishing to make a positive contribution to the political process (Parmelee and Bichard, 2013).

The direct relationship between politicians and voters is one of the factors driving concern about the range of news and opinion to which social media users are exposed, referred to as echo chambers or

filter bubbles (Pariser, 2015; Sunstein, 2017; Bruns, 2019) Several scholars and political leaders, most famously Barack Obama, have raised concerns about increased polarisation as a result (Barbera, 2020). Choi et al. (2020) demonstrate echo chambers led to the increased virality of social media rumours on Twitter, as those in the echo chamber were more likely to pass on rumours than those not part of the cluster. However, as Dubois and Blank (2018) argue, there are methodological challenges in demonstrating the echo chamber effect. They point out that many studies are of a single platform and cannot be generalised, and there is inconsistency in measuring a user's media sources. They say social media users draw on multiple sources in a high-choice environment, so the result of such studies can overstate the echo chamber effect. Indeed, some scholars have gone as far as to suggest that it is not general social media users who are within a filter bubble but politicians and political journalists (Nuernbergk, 2016).

This points to one of the significant challenges of digital political communication, identifying the difference between speaking and being heard. As Hindman (2009) makes clear, while digital technology may have democratised the number of people able to engage in political debate, that does not equate to influence. Considerable numbers of people are simply speaking into the ether. For political parties, as Stromer Galley argued in 2000, the point of using a digital technology is voter maximisation. As Baum (2011) shows, with increased consumer self-selection and media polarisation, it is easy to fall into the trap of preaching to the choir rather than trying to convert new members to join the flock. There is always a danger of trying to do something for the sake of doing it rather than thinking about the hard, measurable effects of taking a particular communications strategy compared with its opportunity cost.

3.2 The development of gatekeeping theory

Having considered how digital technologies have impacted political communication activity, this chapter will next consider one of the key theories of journalism studies, gatekeeping theory, and look at how it has been refined because of disintermediated political communication. Gatekeeping theory has its origins in the first half of the 20th century, not initially in connection with the media but in the analysis of food shopping choices (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009). However, its application to news production in the US by David Manning White in his classic study 1950 study *The Gatekeeper: a case study in the selection of news* provided a model that has been regularly cited in the subsequent decades. White examined the case of "Mr Gates", a pseudonym for a copy editor on a mid-western newspaper who chose stories for publication from an agency wire. Gates made choices about the reports on the wire, discarding stories if he thought the audience would not be interested in them or if they were too close to a story already running in the paper. White concluded that the process was highly subjective and based upon the gatekeeper, Mr Gates's, own beliefs about the quality of the stories rather than any objective framework. Gates was making decisions based upon a set of news values (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Shoemaker and Vos, 2009; Harcup and O'Neill, 2017) and his understanding of audience interests, all of which informed his choices in allowing stories through the gate to publication.

White's theory proved highly influential, being refined in several subsequent studies (Sigal, 1973; Gans, 1979), including one replication study with the original Mr Gates (Snider, 1967), and has been revisited over the years. Gatekeeping in legacy media has continued to be explored up until the present day. The concept of news judgement being both subjective and a result of newsroom socialisation is reflected in a range of works, including Herman and Chomsky's (1994) work on the propaganda model and Nick Davies's popular book, *Flat Earth News.* Davies (2009) posited a degradation of news because of the problem of "Churnalism", the repeating of news from a limited range of sources without further investigation or examination. At the heart of all this work lies the

concept of gatekeepers who give greater credence to news from official sources. Despite changes over time, these authors suggest that editorial judgement has continued to rest on gatekeepers' news values and news judgement, with accompanying limitations.

This is not to say that gatekeeping theory itself has not evolved. In the first wave of gatekeeping studies, scholars analysed personal judgements by gatekeepers; the second phase of studies focused on the organisational nature of gatekeeping activity (Barzilai-Nahon, 2009). In their 2009 work, *Gatekeeping Theory*, Shoemaker and Vos outline five levels of analysis (Individual, Routine, Organisational, Social Institution and Social System) that affect the choices gatekeepers make about the stories they publish. While some individual frameworks might reflect professional standards (for example, the weight given to double-sourcing a story), others might reflect personal prejudice, for instance, Mr Gates's dislike of the Pope. At a broader level, institutional frameworks might include concepts of audience, pressure from advertisers or even social constructs such as the identity and values of the nation-state. Shoemaker developed her concept of influence in gatekeeping in her work with Reese (2016), reflecting changes to the production of news in a networked public sphere but also emphasising that "Social structures define and support mediated spaces, through which symbolic reality is formed and expressed" (Reese and Shoemaker, 2016, p407).

Other thinkers have also considered how gatekeeping has come under pressure with the development of digital and social media (Singer, 2001; Bruns, 2005; Singer et al., 2011; Hermida, 2013). In a world where everyone has access to the tools of publication, what role do gatekeepers fulfil? As Rosen put it in his manifesto for citizen journalism, *The People Formerly Known as the Audience*, "You were once (exclusively) the editors of the news, choosing what ran on the front page. Now we can edit the news, and our choices send items to our own front pages" (Rosen, 2006, para. 9).

While the idealised concept of citizen journalism, as envisaged by Rosen, has also come under pressure in recent years (Ceron, 2015; Abbott, 2017), it remains the case that it is possible to curate content online for large audiences in a way which appears to undermine the gatekeeping function of journalists, if not ultimately making redundant the concept of gatekeeping (Bro and Wallberg, 2014; Tandoc and Vos, 2016). For example, political activists, such as the so-called Rachael Swindon, can satisfy large audiences with their political commentary and activism through the creation of their content and curation of other people's work, but they are not working as professional journalists, nor do they subscribe to journalistic norms around verification, fact-checking or objectivity (Waterson, 2017; Topple, 2017). Instead, they view their role as passionate cheerleaders for their chosen political leaders and vehement critics of their political opponents. The blurred line between activists and journalists is also reflected in the wider hyperpartisan alt-left media (Cushion, 2020).

These changes seem more in line with the concept of gatewatching as outlined by Bruns, a mass-participatory model of information production for a dedicated audience, less the public sphere of Habermas but more a relatively tight-knit community around a specific political interest. Bruns (2005, p31) suggests that "gatewatchers engage in an adaptation of both traditional journalistic gatekeeping methodologies and librarianly resource collection approaches to the web environment". This mix of content curation and content development rings true with political activist accounts that reject journalistic norms. However, some scholars have pointed to the weakness of gatewatching as a theory – particularly highlighting Bruns' over-reliance on a single study, described in Herbert Gans' 1980 book *Deciding What's News* (Milberry, 2005).

Meta, the parent company of Facebook, has come under pressure to clarify how it makes gatekeeping decisions relating to news and information (Ingram, 2021). With the appointment of fact-checkers and content moderators (Hern, 2019a; Bernal, 2021), researchers have argued the organisation is moving closer to accepting that it has some of the responsibilities of a traditional

publisher, despite Meta's apparent reluctance (Starinsky, 2021). During the period of the series of

three elections examined by this thesis, this was an active debate. In her 2016 essay, *Facebook is*

eating the world, Emily Bell of the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University also

explored the loss of control by the gatekeepers of public discourse. Bell argued that publishers have

moved from a destination to a distribution-based model, increasing the power of the social media

platforms and reducing the power of journalistic gatekeeping. The lack of clarity about how social

media platforms use algorithms to surface news has provoked concern, especially in the wake of the

investigation into Russian influence on the 2016 US Presidential election and the Cambridge

Analytica data harvesting scandal. In early 2018, Facebook announced a series of changes to its

News Feed algorithm that would see less news from publishers in users' news feeds; it also said it

would filter news based on the trusted nature of the publisher (Beckett, 2018). While there is

disagreement among scholars on the virtues of optimising for trust or even that trust is a relevant

metric upon which to base decisions (Monck and Hanley, 2008; Beckett, 2017; Rosen, 2018), much

of the impact of Facebook's decision to use trust as an indicator of quality remains opaque.

However, as Charlie Beckett has pointed out, trust does not equate to usefulness. People use

Facebook but do not necessarily trust it (Beckett, 2011). With that in mind, it becomes even more

critical to understand the gatekeeping decisions by Facebook. Unfortunately, Facebook's "Mr Gates"

is an algorithm that is poorly understood (Mehrotra, 2017). That may change. The former editor of

The Guardian, Alan Rusbridger, who sits on Facebook's Oversight Board, has told the Lords'

Communications and Digital Committee that at some point, the board would have to see and review

Facebook's content algorithm (Hern, 2021).

3.2.1 Social media, gatekeeping, and trust

Integrating social media content into the everyday activity of journalistic newsgathering has taken

place at a significant speed. Singer, in her 2001 analysis of the early online behaviours of newspaper

publishers, described their postings as "shovelware" – merely taking printed content and shovelling

it onto the web with little thought as to how the digital user experience is different to that of the

newspaper reader (Singer, 2001). The early use of social media, particularly Twitter, as a distribution

platform for journalism followed a similar model (Hermida, 2013). Automated feeds were

established that broadcast stories to Twitter users, with little sense of the potential networked

benefits garnered from a more human form of interaction. However, journalists who took the time

to not only broadcast to their audiences but also to talk to them and explain their views, as well as

their work processes and practices, developed huge followings on social media.

Hermida (2013) describes how journalists incorporated participatory networks such as Twitter into

their work in three ways: distribution, sourcing, and verification. It has a clear benefit in delivering

eye-witness accounts of news stories to a broad audience at speed (Lee, 2015), which has made it an

attractive tool for journalists. Newsgatherers have routinely set up Twitter lists based on their beats

that provide a steady stream of information from sources, whether trusted or otherwise. During

breaking news events, they have become experts at searching for relevant eyewitness material.

These skills have now become so embedded within digital journalism that they are routinely taught

to undergraduates on journalism degrees (Wardle, 2016).

Twitter has also been useful for journalists promoting their personal brands. For example, the

former tabloid editor turned TV host, Piers Morgan, has used his Twitter following of more than 8.4

million to support his opinion-led journalistic career in newspapers and television. Such is its

importance to him that he regularly taunts rivals and detractors with the size of his following

(Morgan, 2020). His influence as an opinion former was clearly of value to editors at both ITV and his

new channel, the Murdoch-owned Talk TV. While many journalists have become enamoured of Twitter, some broadcasters have begun to caution journalists not to allow their online presence to detract from the impartiality of their broadcast reporting. Sky News, Channel 4 News and, most recently, BBC News have updated their reporting guidelines to provide more precise rules for journalists publishing on social media (BBC, 2020). The current BBC Director-General Tim Davie has made clear that restating broadcast impartiality is a crucial part of his mission in the face of increasing government hostility to the corporation (Tobitt, 2020).

Journalists have also become all too aware of the dangers of fake material being posted online, sometimes to persuade them to use the content for propaganda purposes, to make a point about the quality of journalistic verification, to make money, or sometimes just because the poster found it funny to do so (Wardle, 2017). After several high-profile cases where journalists have been caught out, journalists have become more cautious about using material from previously unknown social media sources without gaining other forms of verification. However, mistakes and poor practice continue to happen. This has been less of an issue with political journalism because, as Metag and Rauchfleisch (2017) point out, in many relatively small communities, participants tend to know one another and communicate offline and online. Westminster is not referred to as a village without reason. That said, mistakes still happen. During the 2019 election campaign, the BBC's then-political editor Laura Kuenssberg and her ITV opposite number Robert Peston tweeted the false claim that a Labour activist had assaulted a Conservative Party aide (Wring and Ward, 2020). Although both journalists later withdrew their claims, the desire to be the first to report a breaking story led to a breakdown in journalistic standards regarding sourcing.

Journalists have long made decisions about whether to cover a story according to its newsworthiness or the extent to which it matches the news values of their news organisations (Galtung and Ruge,1965; Harcup and O'Neil, 2016; Bro and Wallberg, 2014). Some studies have

shown a similarity in news judgement that is divorced from individual characteristics (Shoemaker et al., 2001), but social media has increasingly enabled journalists to develop personal brands that are divorced from the publication where they work. Journalistic identities, especially of editorial opinion writers, can be defined by a struggle for authenticity (Brems et al., 2017).

The role of journalists as gatekeepers has been increasingly negotiated by social media, with the job of disseminator or news marketer becoming a role conception increasingly understood in journalism (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009; Tandoc and Vos, 2016). While this is one part of the panoply of roles modern online journalists might conceive for themselves, failure by journalists to quickly engage with trending online topics can lead to accusations of bias or elitism. As Cushion et al. (2021) have argued, this is partly because some social media users reject professional standards of journalism such as impartiality, fact-checking, and avoidance of churnalism. This has given rise to forms of alternative news that merge opinion and reporting, which use social media to reach audiences and see themselves as countering the gatekeeping role of mainstream media (Cushion, 2021).

Trust in traditional or legacy media in the United Kingdom has declined sharply since 2015 (Newman et al., 2021). Examining why trust in the media has declined in the United States, the Knight Commission on Trust, Media, and Democracy listed six reasons: the proliferation of news sources, media disintermediation, confusion between news and opinion, the spread of misinformation and disinformation, decline of local media and politicised criticism of media (Aspen Institute, 2019). The first four factors are linked to conceptions of journalistic practices and gatekeeping functions, but they may also reflect low levels of media literacy among some social media audiences. Studies have found that users exposed to news incidentally may find it hard to recall where stories originated but are likely to read recommendations from opinion leaders they value (Bergström and Jervelycke Belfrage, 2018). According to research from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, news consumers' perceptions of quality and trust are often based on poorly understood characterisations

of a brand rather than professional behaviours that journalists believe are important in establishing

veracity and trust (Toff et al., 2021). As Tufekci argues, while the ability to circumvent traditional

gatekeepers has created an integrated digital public sphere, not all information sources are of equal

veracity and trustworthiness, "The challenge is that there is too much information, some of it false,

and there is often little guidance for sorting through it" (Tufekci, 2017, p39).

Much of the writing and revision of thinking around gatekeeping theory during the past decade and

a half has been concerned with identifying and creating typologies of new gatekeepers, whether in

the form of citizen journalists, participatory journalism, algorithmic typologies, or activist

approaches (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008; Shoemaker et al., 2010; Shaw 2012; Boczkowski and Mitchelstein,

2012; Singer, 2014; Wall, 2015; Wallace, 2018). However, all these attempts at theory construction

remain focused on the importance of journalists retaining a form of gatekeeping function, if more

negotiated and complex than in previous generations. The following section will consider the

implications for journalists of political disintermediation; political actors speaking to audiences

without relying on gatekeepers to manage interactions with audiences.

3.3 Disintermediating political communication

The concepts of disintermediation and reintermediation (Katz 1988; 2003) have had a significant

history in relation to communications theory, relating to the moments when a new information

provider disintermediates an existing one. But the idea that digital political communications might

disintermediate the gatekeeping function of political journalism was raised in Bennett and Pfetsch's

influential 2018 essay titled *Rethinking Political Communication in a Time of Disrupted Public*

Spheres, itself a response to Blumler's writing on the third age of political communication. The

authors argue that communication abundance means that networked gatekeeping might be a way

to envisage the changing role of journalists' gatekeeping function. While Bennett and Pfetsch (2018)

suggest that better methods are needed to analyse the phenomena, they do not explore the subject in further detail.

Conceptually, the proposition is straightforward: some political actors are highly active on social media, curating their audiences and speaking directly to them via Twitter, Facebook, etc. In doing so, they are removing the need for an interlocutor to interpret their meaning for the public. But the application of the proposition has proved harder to pin down. As Eldridge et al. (2019) argue, the idea that politicians speak to an integrated digital public sphere is incorrect. Followings are constructed, and while information may flow easily between highly engaged individuals, the distance it may have to travel to reach the persuadable may be considerable. Even in circumstances where a politician has a large social media following relative to the population size of their nation, it is not the case that all their followers are fellow citizens or even real (Cole, 2018). For example, Donald Trump used his Twitter following to speak directly to supporters, but he also exercised an intermedia agenda-setting power through journalists who hung on his every tweet, reaching their audiences as well as his own (Lewandowsky et al., 2020).

However, the ease of frictionless sharing of political memes on Facebook demonstrates that a post can easily be shared with an audience that would not typically have seen that political message. A group of strong party supporters might share content supporting policy proposals. Through organic sharing, that content can be passed via a network of weak ties to supporters of other political parties or floating voters who would not otherwise have seen those messages. The spillover of what might have started as targeted communication would have a greater impact by influencing the undecided rather than merely bolstering the committed. Indeed, Wojcieszak and Mutz (2009) argue that the politically unengaged may be more likely to engage with content on social media as it is not explicitly seen as being politically motivated, increasing the chance that they will be exposed to unfamiliar views.

Part of the mechanism of information flow through a social network is explained by Granovetter's theory of weak ties (1973). In trying to understand the strength of the ties that bind nodes together within a network, Granovetter suggested that the strength of a relationship might be based on a combination of its duration, emotional intensity, intimacy, and the reciprocal benefits it might bring the two nodes. From this, one might deduce that a strong tie would exist with family members or life-long friends. However, when Granovetter examined the utility of the information transmitted between a cluster of nodes with strong ties, he discovered it was of limited benefit. A rumour shared around the cluster would be repeated by two or three sources but would not necessarily bridge to other clusters. For that bridging to occur, it would have to flow through weaker ties to other clusters. Granovetter conducted an empirical study on how people found new jobs through real-world social networks and showed people were more likely to find work through weak ties than through strong ones.

While the origins of social network theory were not specifically concerned with media effects, as the two fields have developed, more crossover between them has become apparent. With greater computational analysis methods available, researchers have become concerned with understanding how media messages pass through a social network and how the activity of nodes leads to influence on other actors or audiences within the network. While the analysis developed in the 1970s and 80s, a more recent study of Twitter has suggested that it is a limited benefit when explaining the influence of thought leadership on digital platforms (Liu et al., 2017).

Considering these ideas alongside Katz and Lazarsfeld's work on influence and thought leadership indicates the potential for significant media effect through a social network's ability to pass information through weak ties. As this thesis shows, this concept of spillover influence would underpin campaign approaches in 2017 by the Labour Party and the Conservatives in 2019, as the

parties sought to maximise the political impact of organic sharing through social media. Other

studies have also found that people who find political information on the internet are likely to

discuss it with others (Norris and Curtice, 2008; Vaccari, 2013). Two-step flow communication on

social media can influence on voting behaviour, either through politicians sharing information with

their followers (Choi, 2015; Velasquez, 2012) or through opinion leaders sharing content within their

networks (Harrigan et al., 2021; Weeks et al., 2017). Social media users are more likely to engage

with political information shared by close connections, they trust opinion leaders' posts (Anspach

(2017); Turcotte et al., 2015). The spillover effect and connection through weak ties may expose

users to political information for which they were not explicitly searching (Vaccari and Valeriani,

2015).

In 1999, Chircu and Kauffman argued that the growth of internet shopping could be analysed

through a cycle based on phases of intermediation, disintermediation and reintermediation. A

traditional market might rely on intermediaries to sell a product, but these could be disrupted,

forcing the intermediaries to either leave the market or be reformed. New entrants would then

assume the intermediary role themselves. While Chircu and Kauffman (1999) analysed this model

through the lens of electronic markets, this principle can also be considered in relation to social

media political communication. Legacy media gatekeepers worked as intermediaries with audiences

but are now being disintermediated by new entrants. Those new entrants include both political

actors speaking directly to audiences and political influencers and opinion leaders who are

influencing voters in line with the two-step flow communications theory. It is important to consider

that the action of the disintermediation/reintermediation cycle also creates change in the relative

position and competitive advantage of different providers within a media system (Jungherr et al.,

2020), and sees both platforms and their users exert influence (Dijck et al., 2018).

Through the use of this conceptual framework, it is possible to analyse several different aspects of

the changes to political communication and journalism that are taking place at the moment: the change in the nature of the gatekeeping role of journalists, the changes in the way political parties are communicating with voters during election periods, and the democratisation of media production and political activism in support of party politics.

3.4 Research questions

This thesis will undertake research using both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to explore the following research questions. As explained in the following Methods chapter, the focus here was on Facebook because it is the social media platform on which political communicators rely most heavily:

RQ-1: In what ways did political actors use Facebook for organic or viral campaigning during the 2015, 2017 and 2019 UK General Elections? How did these develop and change over time?

RQ-2: How do political campaigners view and understand Facebook as a communication tool for engaging voters? Has this understanding changed their perception of the role of journalists in providing access to audiences?

RQ-3: How do political journalists view the impact of Facebook and other social media platforms on their gatekeeping role in sourcing news and communicating with audiences, including users and political campaigners?

RQ-4: To what extent can two-step flow and disintermediation be used to explain the changes we see in political communication and journalism because of social media?

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter has sought to outline some of the key conceptual areas that apply to digital political communication and its ability to influence the electorate. It has considered how social networks function as carriers of information and looked at the role of gatekeeping theory in explaining how political journalism is developing. In reviewing the literature on these topics, it has attempted to show that the relatively simple relationship between journalists and politicians of pre-digital times has become more complex as social media has created new power structures and relationships between political actors, journalists and the "people formerly known as the audience" (Rosen, 2006). The next chapter will outline the methodological approaches to gathering quantitative and qualitative data and the techniques used to analyse and interpret it.

Chapter 4 Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodologies used to gather and analyse the data that underpin the study. This study takes a mixed-methods approach incorporating quantitative analysis of Facebook datasets from elections combined with qualitative interviews to illuminate decision-making by political actors along with the perspective of political journalists covering election campaigns. The methods used to select and structure interviews and their associated ethical considerations, including anonymity, are discussed. The iterative nature of developing the codebook and coding tool is also considered.

This triangulated approach aims to deliver a more complete answer to the research questions than would be the case through any single methodology. Mixed-methods studies have become more popular among researchers during the past 20 years (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003; Creswell, 2005; Bryman, 2016), but academics continue to debate whether the epistemological foundations of the two approaches can be easily combined. This study utilised a sequential explanatory design approach and demonstrated the value of quantitative and qualitative triangulation in allowing one research method to be cross-checked via another (Bryman, 2016). A sequential explanatory design approach has two distinct phases: an initial quantitative phase followed by a qualitative one (Ivankova et al., 2006). By quantitatively analysing Facebook posts and then conducting qualitative interviews, this study can effectively explore the use and impact of disintermediated political communication. By understanding the motivations, intentions, and strategies of political campaigners in their approach to Facebook, the study aims to deliver a more complete answer to the research questions than could otherwise be achieved through quantitative analysis alone.

The fact that three general elections took place in less than five years meant the study evolved to adopt a longitudinal design that allowed analysis of the changing nature of party approaches to social media. As discussed in the findings, the study revealed growing confidence in organic digital

campaigning, which complements the expertise political parties have developed in targeted political advertising. Longitudinal research helps scholars understand the nature of change over time in a sampled cohort. As Ployhart and Vanderberg outline (2009), by avoiding design based on convenience or an event-driven methodology, the researcher can better produce comparable datasets and demonstrate change over time. This study's application of this guidance is outlined in section 4.2.2.

4.1 Research overview

By comprehensively examining the Facebook posts of political parties and party leaders, this research provides an in-depth analysis of the parties' organic, or viral, election campaigning on the platform. Research into the use of social media tends to fall into two methodological approaches: programmatic research that uses a large dataset to provide a high-level view of an account's reach, or a more granular approach that analyses the account's activity (Fuchs, 2017). This research study takes the second approach, which is more suitable for the quantitative content analysis method used here. By its nature, research of this type must set limits on what is being analysed. In this case, it is a tightly defined group of accounts and a specific time frame: official party accounts and leaders' accounts during the short campaign and polling day in the general elections of 2015, 2017, and 2019. This definition is expanded below in section 4.2.1.

This quantitative research was informed and supplemented by a series of semi-structured interviews with key political advisers and party workers who were closely involved in the election campaigns and political journalists who reported on the elections. These provided insight into political parties' motivations and strategic approaches to digital campaigning. For example, interviews with Labour Party workers helped explain the different strategies employed by the communications team working directly for Jeremy Corbyn and those based at the party's HQ who controlled the party's

accounts. These insights, combined with data from CrowdTangle, also helped identify the dataset's most successful and influential posts.

The interviews also demonstrated the extent to which political journalists understood, or failed to understand, the importance of political communication on Facebook. Time and again in interviews, journalists spoke of the importance to them of Twitter as a news source. This is far from surprising, as many journalists are hopelessly addicted to Twitter (Ottovordemgentschenfeld, 2017). But party workers were far more focused on Facebook as a tool for communicating with voters. As will be shown in Chapter Eight, campaigners put relatively little emphasis on Twitter, which they saw as a less effective communication tool.

Because the parties so overwhelmingly favoured Facebook over Twitter, it was decided to abandon early plans to include both platforms in this study. The literature supports this decision. As Ross (2015) argues, the Conservatives considered Twitter an elite, left-leaning platform obsessed over by journalists. The party found it useful for influencing journalists but not persuadable voters. Statistics from We Are Social (Digital 2020 UK, 2020) support this view, suggesting that of the 45 million active social media users in the UK in 2020, 73% of them reported using Facebook in the previous month and just 45% reported using Twitter.

4.2 Quantitative data: Facebook posts

At the start of this research in 2015, the use of social media in political communication in the United Kingdom was under-studied. Much of the academic analysis of digital campaigning examined Barack Obama's presidential campaigns, notably the 2008 campaign, as outlined in Chapter Two. Some previous work looked at the UK, notably studies by Lilleker and Jackson (2010) and Anstead and Chadwick (2010). However, there was a lack of more systematic studies analysing party strategies

during a general election campaign. A significant dataset needed to be compiled to enable an analysis of parties' use of digital campaigning and political advertising through account activity. The creation of such a dataset to facilitate a content analysis of social media posts was needed for the inductive phenomenological approach taken here. As Thomas (2006) notes, inductive phenomenological analysis can be used to record raw data to derive concepts and themes through the researcher's interpretations. This approach is consistent with Strauss and Corbin's (1998) axiom, "The researcher begins with an area of study and allows the theory to emerge from the data".

Quantitative content analysis was selected as the best approach to understanding these data because the method is distinguished by an acknowledgement that society is enacted through communication and its interpretation of texts viewed as forms of communication "created and disseminated to be seen, read, interpreted, enacted and reflected upon according to the meanings they have for their recipients" (Krippendorf, 2018, p. xii). Content analysis systematises the assignment of communication content to categories according to rules, thus allowing the statistical analysis of category relationships (Riffe et al., 2019). Berelson (1952), one of the pioneers of content analysis in social science research, usefully describes it as "a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication" (p18). In both journalism studies and research into political communication, the method is used to achieve the goal of creating systematic and replicable analyses of communication (Krippendorff, 1989; Benoit, 2013). Content analysis can be used to draw up a dataset of samples and, using trained coders, analyse data, measure reliability, and identify relationships and meaning. Because communication messages stand apart from communicators, it is not necessary to speak to the creator to understand the message, an additional benefit of quantitative content analysis. Moreover, as with this research, the method can enable longitudinal study through the creation of a model that is applicable to different datasets over time.

The use of quantitative content analysis to understand political communication is widespread (Graber and Smith 2005; Benoit, 2013; Neuendorf and Kumar, 2017). Studies have investigated news reporting (e.g., Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000), manifestos (e.g., Volkens et al., 2009), and political advertising (e.g., Prior, 2010), alongside many other facets of political communication. With the development of social media, researchers have examined blogs (e.g., Herring et al., 2012), and digital election campaigns (e.g., Gerodimos and Justinussen, 2014), as well as platform-specific studies (e.g., Small, 2011).

As with this research, several studies have applied quantitative content analysis to data derived from Facebook. Magin et al. (2016) used quantitative content analysis as part of a multi-method study to examine the use of Facebook in German and Austrian national campaigns. The study demonstrated a range of uses of Facebook, some of which have echoes in this study, such as the mobilisation of voters. Like this study, the researchers used a mixed-method approach, using data from semi-structured interviews with political actors to triangulate their findings from the content analysis. Stier et al. (2018) also took a corpus of data from the German federal election of 2013, using content analysis to compare the use by political actors of Twitter and Facebook. Their key finding was that politicians were more focused on Twitter as a platform for political commentary and Facebook as a mechanism for campaigning. This finding is also reflective of this study, which found a similar approach espoused by political campaigners through the data acquired in semi-structured interviews.

Content analysis has also been used to establish how politicians' Facebook posts drive engagement through likes and comments on the platforms. For example, Heiss et al. (2018) used tonal and rhetorical style coding to content analyse Facebook posts by Austrian politicians outside of an election period. The researchers found that negative posts tended to increase commenting and sharing. This study similarly linked content analysis of Facebook posts to CrowdTangle data to

analyse engagement; as the findings demonstrate, negativity was an important driver of

engagement although it was not the only mechanism to effectively engage audiences.

4.2.1 Identification and selection of Facebook posts

This research project began in February 2015, intending to use that year's UK general election as a

case study, looking at how parties and politicians used Facebook to communicate with the public.

Parliament prorogued on the 26th March, effectively kicking off an early start to the campaign for the

election on the 7th May. Thus, decisions on gathering data had to be made relatively early in the

study's time frame. While Twitter at the time had a fairly open application programming interface

(API) that allowed third parties to build tools to download and analyse tweets, Facebook did not.

During the period of this study, Facebook granted researchers access to its API only on a case-by-

case basis, and the short election period did not allow time to negotiate access. However,

Facebook's CrowdTangle tool, which monitors post engagement, was available during the period of

this study and therefore was used to assess public reaction to politicians' use of Facebook. Without

access to the API, analysis of user response at a more granular level would have been immensely

complex and time-consuming, yet still unlikely to yield results comparable to those obtained using

computational analysis of large datasets.

This study captured two sets of Facebook posts in 2015, then replicated the sample in 2017 and

2019:

- By the political parties' main Facebook account: This content was screen-captured along

   with any relevant metadata visible to the viewer, such as the number of shares or video

   views. These numerical data were entered into a spreadsheet for analysis.

- By party leaders' public Facebook account. Some leaders, such as Green Party co-leader

   Jonathan Bartley, had both a public and a private Facebook account. No data were captured

from private accounts. During the research period, the separation of public and private accounts was explicitly made clear by the introduction of verified public figure accounts (Facebook, 2020).

- In addition, every video, animation, or other piece of multimedia content publicly available on Facebook was recorded using a screen recording programme called Screen-o-matic.com. This is browser-based screen-recording software, which records the video and audio output of a website and saves it for later use.

Several justifications supported this approach. Near-contemporaneous data recording was beneficial because it was difficult to look at old Facebook posts at the start of the research study. The process involved scrolling back through prior posts to find the relevant date. Contemporaneous logging also was a safeguard against the complete loss of datasets because of party or user decisions. For example, the former Liberal Democrat leader and now Meta's President of Global Affairs Nick Clegg has deleted all the posts from his time in government. The former UKIP leader Paul Nuttall also deleted his Facebook account on the night of the 2017 General Election. These user decisions would have made it difficult to reconstruct the dataset later.

For the 2015 campaign, data were captured in the weeks after the election. In the 2017 and 2019 elections, all posts were recorded within three days of publication using screen grabs and video recordings. By the time of the 2019 election, it took two to three hours to log each day's posts and record the videos. In all, 8,389 Facebook posts were coded in the sample.

During the 2015 election campaign, the sampled parties were the Conservatives, Greens, Labour, Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru, Scottish Nationalists and UKIP - broadly in line with Ofcom's definition of the main parties that would receive national Party Election Broadcasts during the short campaign (Ofcom, 2015b). Ofcom did not define the Green Party as a major party based on its

electoral support in the 2010 General Election. However, I took the view that as the televised debates included the Green Party, it was reasonable to include them in the dataset.

The selection of parties remained the same in 2017 and 2019, with one exception. After its performance during the 2017 election campaign, UKIP declined, with its most influential campaigner, Nigel Farage, eventually quitting the party in 2018 (Walker, 2018). Farage went on to establish a new party, the Brexit Party, which successfully contended the 2019 European Parliament elections (Parker et al., 2019). UKIP could only field candidates to contest 44 of the 2019 election's 650 constituencies (BBC News, 2019a). As such, the sample set was updated, replacing UKIP with the Brexit Party. This was in line with decisions that broadcasters took on televised debates and was further justified by the fact that many leading Brexit Party figures were UKIP defectors.

Parties contesting seats in Northern Ireland were omitted for several reasons. The important issues tend to be different to the ones that are relevant to the rest of the country (although this is not always the case; for example, Brexit and its impacts were significant concerns in Northern Ireland in 2019), and elections are always set against the background of the competing fortunes of nationalism and unionism (Hayward, 2020). It is also the case that parties such as the Democratic Unionist Party or Sinn Féin do not field candidates in the rest of the United Kingdom, and successful Sinn Fein candidates do not take their seats in the House of Commons. For these reasons, the parties do not take part in televised election debates.

This study presents data drawn from the short campaign and polling day. The general definition of the short campaign is the period between the dissolution of a Parliament and the election of its replacement. However, prorogation can sometimes slightly extend the effective length of the campaign. This was defined by the Fixed Terms Parliament Act 2011, which was in force during the period of this study. Under its provisions, each five-year Parliament was dissolved automatically 25

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working days before polling day unless the House of Commons agreed to an early dissolution, or the government lost a vote of no confidence (UK Parliament, 2020). Table 4.1 illustrates the sample period for the three campaigns.

Election campaign	Sample period
2015	30th March to 7th May
2017	3rd May to 8th June
2019	6th November to 12th December

Table 4.1: Campaign sample periods

The 2015 General Election campaign period was slightly longer because there were three public holidays (Good Friday, Easter Monday, and the early May Bank Holiday Monday) during the short campaign. There was also a public holiday during the 2017 campaign (the late May Bank Holiday Monday).

4.2.2 Data collection of Facebook posts

As indicated above, using quantitative content analysis to interpret datasets of political messages is a well-established approach in social science research (Burnham et al., 2008). Using this method, the Facebook posts were assigned characteristics that described their content to facilitate identifying umbrella domains and creating categories within those domains. See Appendix Four for the final coding manual.

This study's approach to content analysis was in many ways conventional in that it tried to avoid preconceived categories, instead allowing the categories to emerge based on the analysis of the data (Hsieh and Shannon, 2018). The coding manual, therefore, was developed mainly through an inductive process that involved examining the political Facebook posts, empirically identifying

categories, and then adjusting those categories in response to a dataset that evolved. For example, some policy issues did not appear in all three elections, so the codebook was modified accordingly.

However, a potential risk is that relying wholly on the inductive development of categories and domains might lead a researcher to miss important information. To minimise this risk, directed content analysis (Assarroudi et al., 2018; Kibiwsa, 2019) also was used to establish initial coding categories, based on the work of other political communications scholars. For instance, several studies from the first half of the 2010s were influential in establishing policy categories (Graham et al., 2013; Giglietto and Selva, 2014; Deacon et al., 2015; Southern, 2015). That said, this approach also revealed some limitations. Broad categories often failed to capture the reality of what was being discussed; for example, "higher education" was too generic a term when the parties were actually discussing undergraduate tuition fees. On the other hand, some granular definitions proved too narrowly framed over the course of the three election cycles considered here. An example involved health issues; I began with several unique categories but ultimately combined them to create consistency and eliminate coding confusion.

Previous studies that coded social media messages by US politicians were reviewed in developing the domains of strategic function and rhetorical style. However, these coding tools proved of limited utility, in particular, because of their relatively narrow focus, for instance, on types of persuasive language (Bronstein, 2012) or function (Golbeck et al., 2010). These studies from other countries also failed to address some of the fundamentals of digital political campaigning in the British context. So while previous studies were of use in establishing some of the domains to be considered, they were less useful in assigning categories to the codebook. The overarching domain definitions are outlined below, and the full list of categories is available in Appendix Four. Each domain

describes an empirically observable aspect of the content in the dataset (e.g., the type of media present), and the categories establish the specific description (e.g. photograph or video).

The codebook went through nine iterations before the final version, provided in Appendix Four, was used to code the entire data universe. Several different batches of data were coded using early versions of the coding tool in an iterative process that sought to identify and correct any shortcomings. A second coder, my wife, was involved in two rounds of coding iteration. In the first round, the second coder was presented with no training other than a basic explanation of the codebook. The rationale for the lack of training was to get a high level of feedback on what the second coder felt they were seeing in the Facebook posts and to understand how their understanding differed from mine.

In this initial round, the second coder was asked to code a batch of Facebook posts but also asked to write in extra information if they were unable to identify a relevant code. This process led to changes to the codebook. For example, more codes were included for media types that the second coder felt were more reflective of what they saw in the Facebook posts. A different example is related to the operationalisation of the "campaign" category. The second coder felt that everything they were seeing was "campaigning", as the posts were part of a campaign. In response, the codebook was revised to reflect more granularity, leading to more meaningful data.

Feedback on the coding was also received from peers after the conference presentation of early findings. Again, this led to increased granularity around areas such as strategic function, resulting in a more useful analysis of the data.

The researcher continued to refine the coding instrument as the work progressed, with some insights gained from interim attempts to analyse isolated years within the dataset (Walsh, 2017;

Walsh, 2020). The codebook was finalised prior to the consideration of the full set of longitudinal data after the 2019 General Election. This refining aimed to:

1. Eliminate any confusion of meaning. For example, in early iterations of the codebook, "Horse Race" was used to describe the entire election campaign rather than explicitly referring to polling or responses to polling.

2. Capture new areas of policy interest that became important as the study progressed. For example, public utility nationalisation became a significant Labour election theme during the 2019 General Election.

3. Capture new types of engagement, such as GIFs, as the political parties' approach to Facebook campaigning developed.

4. Gather reliable information. Early iterations of the codebook elided some concepts or placed ideas into categories that did not withstand reflective scrutiny. For example, leadership was initially included as a policy area rather than a strategic function. To increase the accuracy of the coding instrument, later versions also accommodated primary and multiple secondary policy areas within a single post.

5. Gather extra information. For example, early iterations didn't include the post's geographic location or references. Including this information helped identify areas of the country that parties viewed as important during the campaigns.

6. Add new codes in response to second-coder feedback. For example, as indicated above, the Media Type category was expanded to reflect the diversity of content used by the parties.

As Bryman (2016) argues, content analysis researchers' core problem is data interpretation. Codebooks require coders to interpret, which in turn requires shared cultural knowledge. In this study, that meant removing duplication or confusion between domains and categories, and eliminating overlap that could diminish the clarity of the data or cause confusion in replication. With

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some domains, this was relatively easy. For example, the duration of a video is not a matter of interpretation. For others, such as tone, it was more complex. This tension between manifest and latent content (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992; Kondracki et al., 2002) is due to the abstract nature of meaning and the requirement for coders to apply a higher level of interpretation of the data. Creating clear definitions minimised the need for subjective interpretation by the coders, but there remained the requirement to look for either an overall or thematic tone in posts (such as an attack ad denigrating an opponent) or language that could be understood as either positive or negative. This is captured in the codebook in Appendix Four. These data were then tested for reliability using an intercoder test; see section 4.2.3.

One potential ethical issue raised by the study was the lack of consent from political actors to examine their social media output. No political party or party leader was approached for permission to examine this material. However, as Bartlett and Miller argue (2013), information that has been put on Facebook by political actors and enabled for public consumption is in the public domain. Facebook makes this clear in its terms and conditions: "Public information can be seen by anyone, on or off our Products, including if they don't have an account' (Facebook, 2018). Thus, it is reasonable to assume that a political actor uploading content to Facebook intends for it to be consumed by the public, and consent for analysis of that material is unnecessary. It is also reasonable to assume that there is little danger of harm befalling a public figure because of a content analysis of their social media output.

4.2.3 Intercoder reliability

An intercoder reliability test was undertaken with the final coding tool. The second coder looked at a sample of 5% of the total universe, 420 posts, using a sample from the accounts across all elections and focusing on the key variables, as shown in Table 4.2. This was the second time that the second

coder had coded a batch of Facebook posts. Training was provided in this round, along with a copy

of the codebook, which had undergone multiple revisions between the first and second coding

exercises. On this occasion, a greater level of guidance and training was given to the second coder,

including joint coding of a training batch of Facebook posts. This feedback helped clarify for the

second coder how to operationalise the codebook definitions and led to a high level of agreement in

most coding domains.

Krippendorff (2004) suggests that values of more than 0.800 should provide reassurance of reliability

in content analysis. This was achieved for all but two of the domains, rhetorical style, and strategic

function. Given the politically nuanced nature of these categories and their situated context within

each of the three campaigns studied, it was decided to accept this relatively low level of agreement

for the purposes of this study. The reliability scores were deemed high enough to allow tentative

conclusions around both domains. This limitation of the study is discussed further in Chapter Ten.

	Percent Agreement	Scott's Pi	Cohen's Kappa	Krippendorff's Alpha (nominal)	N Agreements	N Disagreements	N Cases	N Decisions
Linked or embedded?	98.8%	0.958	0.958	0.958	415	5	420	840
Presented media	96.7%	0.959	0.959	0.959	406	14	420	840
Media source	87.9%	0.851	0.852	0.851	369	51	420	840
Rhetorical style	86.4%	0.758	0.759	0.758	363	57	420	840
Discourse tone	91.7%	0.819	0.819	0.819	385	35	420	840
Strategic function	66.4%	0.601	0.603	0.602	279	141	420	840
Policy area	86.7%	0.843	0.843	0.843	364	56	420	840
Video style	96.4%	0.947	0.947	0.947	405	15	420	840
Video length	99%	0.983	0.983	0.983	416	4	420	840
Repost?	98.6%	0.868	0.868	0.868	414	6	420	840
Shared from other user?	97.9%	0.899	0.899	0.899	411	9	420	840

Table 4.2: Intercoder reliability test results

4.2.4 Domain definitions for Facebook posts

The complete codebook is included in Appendix Four. Presented here is a summary of the domain definitions. A more detailed examination of the meaning and implications of the definitions is presented in the findings in Chapters Five through Eight.

1 - Date. The date of a post's publication

2 - Media linked? There are essentially three types of posts on Facebook. The first links to content elsewhere on the internet. These posts usually contain framing text that outlines the poster's perspective on the linked content, though this convention is not always followed. For example, the Green Party leader during the 2015 General Election campaign, Natalie Bennett, often linked to content without adding any framing text. In the second type, users embed media into their posts. In this sample set, this usually means media created by the poster or their political allies. Finally, some posts are text-based and do not contain any other media or links. This type is the least used but often appears in reaction to news developments.

3. Presented media. A classification of the media either embedded or linked to the post. These ranged from simple article teases, automatically generated via a publisher's website, to photographs or even complex animations. As will be seen in the findings, some formats were more popular than others, but a wide range of different formats was found in the dataset.

4. Media source. Where did the media originate? This helped define who was creating the content. For example, did mainstream publishers produce the media, or was it the party's own content? Again, some sources were more popular with some accounts than others.

5. Publisher. Who published the media in the post? The coder manually entered this as the range of

publishers was large. Some publishers were frequently referenced, while others were only

referenced by one party.

6. Location. Was a location mentioned in the post or the media? Perhaps surprisingly, parties

seemed to take a haphazard approach to tagging their content with locations. There were times

when it was possible to deduce a location, even though the post didn't mention it explicitly. For

example, a post might mention the location of an event, but later posts excluded it. In these cases,

the location was not referenced unless there was explicit evidence of place.

7. Rhetorical style. What was the tenor of the post? Much of political rhetoric is aimed at

persuading and influencing voters. This is reflected in this domain, which includes a range of styles

used by the poster. For example, a post might be attacking an opponent or attempting to motivate

supporters to act.

8. Discourse tone. What tone is the poster trying to impart to Facebook users? This domain contains

a five-point Likert scale from strongly positive to strongly negative. As Asún et al. (2016) argue,

researchers should avoid using Likert scales with just two or three response categories, but scales

beyond seven points deliver diminishing returns in accuracy. Thus, a five-point scale was enough to

ensure a sufficiently meaningful range in tone. For example, political actors often referred negatively

to opponents, and a five-point scale gave flexibility and nuance to the description of that negativity.

A post might be negative if expressing disapproval but strongly negative if it negatively caricatures

an opponent's position. Other studies (see Demir, 2018) have also successfully applied a Likert scale

to analyse Facebook content.

9. Strategic function. A domain that categorises the strategic approach of the post by analysing its

function through a range of frames. For example, is the post about attacking an opponent's record or explaining one's own policy?

10. Policy area. An inductive list of policy areas is mentioned in the dataset. Many posts featured references to multiple policy areas. In those cases, the primary policy area was listed first, with secondary policy areas mentioned in sequential but not in magnitude order.

11. Video style. If a video was presented, did it have a particular style? For example, was it an attack advert, a policy explainer, or a campaigning video?

12. Video length. The duration of any video content in the post.

13. Repost? Had the political actor posted the content previously during the time frame of the study?

14. Shared from another user? One of the core functions of social media is the ability to share content published by others. This domain captures the extent to which political actors chose to do this.

4.3 Qualitative data: practitioner interviews

As outlined above, the decision was taken early in the research to conduct qualitative interviews. The data generated from the interviews would then be used to triangulate with the data generated by the content analysis, providing a richer set of findings than could be achieved through quantitative analysis. Qualitative interviews provided context and insight missing from the quantitative data, helping shed light on the motivations of party workers when engaging in digital

political campaigning. They also helped identify strategies for engaging with voters and political journalists and demonstrated the understanding, reflection, and learning evident among digital campaign teams. Interviews also aided comprehension of how political journalists understand digital campaigning and their view of its importance in newsgathering and news production. They revealed how journalists viewed the changing nature of their role and whether they thought social media made political actors less reliant on traditional journalism to connect with voters.

The method chosen for conducting this research was the use of semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interview is a widely used technique when speaking to participants. It provides more rigour than an unstructured interview by ensuring that the same topics are covered with all participants. It also grants the researcher greater flexibility to pursue interesting responses than would be the case in a structured interview (Renner, 2001; Wilson, 2014). Using this methodology, the researcher creates a question set ahead of the interview that covers the key themes about which they are seeking data. This ensures replicability. But it is reasonable for the researcher to pursue follow-up questions. Thus, the semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed me to pursue interesting thoughts and avenues of discussion based on a subject's responses while having a spine of questions to revisit to keep the conversation moving forward. This aligns with the guidance outlined by Burnham et al. (2008) that giving respondents space to consider their answers in-depth and allowing "rambling" can often be helpful in social science research.

Such is the prevalence of semi-structured interviewing in journalism studies and political communication that some scholars have argued that it is perhaps "the central resource through which the social sciences – and society – engages with the issues that concern it" (Brinkman, 2020, p.424). The array of studies based on the methodology has been used to examine many facets of political communication, but of relevance to this study are those that have triangulated interview data with content analysis of social media posts. Examples include research that has examined

personalised campaigns by candidates on social media (e.g., Enli and Skogerbo, 2013), the tension

between broadcasting messages and interacting with users on social media (e.g., Kalsnes, 2016), and

the structure of presidential digital election campaigns across different platforms (e.g., Bossetta,

2018). In general, the use of interview data to enrich content analysis data has become a staple of

political communication research into social media.

The objective of elite interviewing is to gain insight and understanding of the motivations and

processes of professional activity (Burnham et al., 2008). Few people have direct experience either

of national digital campaigning in the United Kingdom or reporting on the campaigns that are the

focus of this project. This study draws on semi-structured interviews with some of those who do:

party workers, digital strategists, and political journalists who have reported on recent election

campaigns. Potential political interviewees were identified throughout the research period as

dramatic changes in the leadership of the political parties led to the shake-up of communications

teams and digital campaign advisers. The only party leader who contested all three general elections

between 2015 and 2019 was the Scottish National Party leader, Nicola Sturgeon. The Conservative

Party, in office throughout, had three leaders who served as prime minister in a little more than four

years.

Journalist respondents were selected either based on experience reporting on Westminster or their

experience leading newsgathering teams. Given that there are more journalists covering politics

than digital political campaigners, there was more scope for selectiveness. The sample reflects the

specialities of broadcast, print and digital political journalism.

4.3.1 Identification and selection of interviewees

The interviewees were identified using a combination of purposive sampling techniques, including

background research, snowball sampling and the recommendations of colleagues as people with

expertise in the field. These claims of expertise were checked before the interview.

In the rationale given to prospective interviewees, (see Appendix One), the criteria outlined for choosing a participant in the study were that they demonstrate one of the following characteristics:

A significant track record in political journalism at national or international level.

or

Managerial and editorial responsibility for the work of political journalists.

or

Current or recent experience and/or responsibility for digital campaigning within a major political party.

or

Current or recent communications experience within a major political party or department of state.

Ethical approval to carry out the interviews was obtained from the research ethics committee of the journalism department at City, University of London (see Appendix Three). The project was considered low-risk and was approved in May 2020. Approval was obtained shortly before the interviews began. Each interviewee was provided with a participant information form and a consent form via email before the interviews took place. In line with the approval process, changes of heart by interviewees were respected. On one occasion, after the interview, I agreed to make a participant's contribution anonymous, given the sensitivity of some of the information they revealed.

Two interviews took place early in the research process before upgrade to Ph.D. candidature. Ethical approval was also sought at this stage, detailed in Appendix One.

Given the nature of employment of some of the respondents, in particular party workers, it has been necessary to anonymise some of their responses. Given the limited number of potential respondents

in national politics, it has occasionally been necessary to anonymise job functions.

4.3.2 Data collection of qualitative interviews

During the spring and summer of 2020, around fifty people were approached via email for interviews. Twenty-one interviews ultimately were conducted, 12 with campaigners and nine with political journalists.

Ensuring a diversity of political views, gender and ethnicity among interviewees was a challenge. Despite improvements in recent years, as Alexander (2020) has argued, parliament and political reporting remain dominated by white, middle-aged men. Table 4.3 outlines the breakdown of respondents in this study by role, gender, and ethnic background.

Role:	Male	Female	White	BAME
Journalists	6	3	7	2
Political campaigners	11	1	11	1

Table 4.3: Gender and ethnicity breakdown of interviewees

The interviews were recorded using Zoom. In two cases, technical faults meant interviews were conducted by phone. In these cases, quotes were hand-written, and the interview transcripts were created immediately after the call. Where there was recorded audio, Otter.ai was used to transcribe the interviews. The audio and transcripts were subsequently stored on a password-protected hard drive.

As outlined above, semi-structured interviews were used. Two question sets were developed that probed slightly different areas of emphasis, which reflected the differences in professional interests between political campaigners and journalists. The question sets are included in Appendix Five.

Interviews lasted between 17 and 87 minutes, with an average length of 42 minutes. In addition to the questions outlined in the sets, respondents were asked at the end of the interview whether they felt any question was missing and for suggestions for additional interviewees. On occasion, these questions led to further fruitful discussions and, in a couple of instances, other names for the interview long-list.

4.3.3. Analytical procedures for qualitative interviews

Conducting interviews with respondents from a range of professional roles created a significant amount of data. The interview transcriptions were coded thematically in line with grounded theory to draw out these data and find complementary ideas and concepts. This is a method for establishing theory based on data from systematic social science research rather than verifying theory based on *a priori* assumptions (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). An example of an interview transcript is included in Appendix Six.

Through multiple readings and drawing on my experience as a journalist, where seeking the best quote from an interview is a core skill, I was able to see several themes emerge across the range of interviews. I then assigned these data codes, which enabled me to take the best quotes from an interview and match them against data from other interviews. Often interviewees agreed with each other; sometimes, there was disagreement or views that challenged ideas expressed elsewhere. Thematic coding and analysis of the textual outputs of the interviews also revealed connections and insights that complemented the information provided by the quantitative content analysis of the Facebook dataset. Drawing the coded themes – for example, fact-checking or sourcing -- from different interviews allowed direct thematic comparison.

These quotes were then put into a Word document for easy reference under thematic headings such as campaigns or disintermediation. This approach enabled the comparison and development of ideas and themes from these data, creating a richer experience for the reader than, for example, a tabulated survey response. This result justified the approach of using semi-structured interviews to develop data with significant depth and detail that could then be triangulated against the data from the content analysis of social media content. These themes are explored in detail in Chapter Nine.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the approaches taken to the study. It presents and discusses the value of using a mixed-methods approach incorporating quantitative analysis of Facebook datasets from elections combined with qualitative interviews to understand the campaign action taken by political actors during the three elections considered in chapters five, six, and seven, as well as the impact of social media campaigning on political journalists.

By drawing links with existing literature and prior studies in the field, it demonstrates a justification for the methodologies deployed to gather and analyse these data. Through the use of a mixed-method approach, the research has created an extensive dataset of quantitative data that can be analysed on a longitudinal basis and triangulated against a qualitative dataset, thus delivering depth and breadth to the insights yielded in the findings chapters.

The chapter has also illustrated the iterative development of the codebook and outlined the processes that took place to ensure the replicability of the data garnered through the quantitative content analysis. It has sought to outline the approaches to interview selection and the development of thematic coding for the qualitative data. It also discusses the ethical considerations for conducting both quantitative and qualitative research in the study.

The next chapter looks at the study's findings from the 2015 election.

Chapter 5 The 2015 General Election

This chapter first provides context related to the 2015 General Election, the first of the series of three elections studied in this thesis. It then presents the findings from analysing the posts of parties and party leaders' Facebook accounts in a series of data tables. It also considers levels of user engagement with these posts with information gathered from Meta's CrowdTangle tool.

5.1 Context of the 2015 election

Unlike the other elections considered in this thesis, the 2015 General Election took place on a long-planned date. The election was the first and only election to take place as planned under the Fixed-Term Parliaments Act of 2011, which was enacted by the coalition government of the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats. The act stipulated general elections should take place on the first Thursday in May every five years unless an election was agreed upon by two-thirds of the House of Commons or the government fell to a no-confidence motion. This removed the power of the prime minister to call an election at a time of their choosing under the Royal Prerogative, which prime ministers had often used for tactical advantage to help them secure a subsequent term in office (Turnbull-Dugarte, 2022).

This clarity about the election date meant the political parties had an unusually long period to prepare campaigns and road-test political messages. The Conservatives' campaign director Lynton Crosby hired the digital campaigners Tom Edmonds and Craig Elder more than two years before the short campaign began (Ross, 2015). Labour also brought in expertise from outside the party and hired Blue State Digital's Matthew McGregor, who had formerly been a digital advisor to the Obama 2012 campaign (Ferguson, 2013).

In the run-up to the short campaign, both opinion polling and the received wisdom of political

pundits predicted another coalition government, either a repeat of the Conservative and Liberal Democrat administration of the previous five years or a Labour Party government supported by the Scottish National Party (Cowley and Kavanagh, 2016). Much of the reporting and framing of the election was consistent with this narrative (Deacon et al., 2015). On the day before the election, *The Guardian* newspaper baldly stated that the political parties were preparing for coalition talks (Cowley and Kavanagh, 2016), having already reported Labour Party leader Ed Miliband's coalition red lines (Mason, 2015).

Launching the Labour Party campaign, Ed Miliband warned that it was "neck and neck" and would come "down to the wire" (Chappell, 2015). Labour emphasised its core messages through the campaign, in particular warning the NHS would not survive five-years of Conservative government. In a tightly controlled and stage-managed campaign, David Cameron spoke about the Conservatives' "long-term economic plan" and asked the electorate to continue supporting his approach to public finances (Mullen, 2015). The Liberal Democrats marketed themselves as a moderating force in any future coalition. At the same time, the Scottish National Party regrouped from the failure of 2014's independence referendum and pushed for more devolved powers for Scotland (Higgins, 2015).

Despite television news being the primary source of election information for most voters (Ofcom, 2015c), the Conservatives were reluctant to agree to a repeat of the TV election debates that had been pioneered in 2010, reflecting Cameron's view that they "shouldn't suck all the life out of the rest of the campaign" (Cameron, 2019, p563). Cameron avoided debating the other leaders head-to-head, apart from a single ITV programme with all seven of the main party leaders. In other debates, the leaders were quizzed sequentially, or Cameron chose not to appear. When a challengers' debate took place without him, social media reaction lauded the women leaders of the SNP, Green Party, and Plaid Cymru (Pedersen et al., 2015), although polling results suggested that the SNP remained an unpopular choice of coalition partner for voters outside of Scotland (Dahlgreen, 2015).

Photo opportunities helped the parties generate videos and photographs that reflected their core messages. But the two most notorious led to ridicule in the press: the 'EdStone' where the Labour leader had six of his election pledges engraved on a 2.6-metre-tall, two-tonne slab of limestone (Wring and Ward, 2015), and a speech in which a red-faced and sweating David Cameron tried to rebut accusations he lacked the passion for winning by claiming to be "bloody lively" (Watt and Mason, 2015).

Despite the pundits' predictions, the Conservatives increased their majority, allowing them to form a single-party government, as demonstrated in Table 5.1.

Party	Share of the vote	Share change from 2010	Seats	Seats change from 2010
Conservatives	36.9	0.8%	331	24
Labour	30.4	1.5%	232	-26
UKIP	12.6	9.5%	1	1
Liberal Democrats	7.9	-15.2%	8	-49
Scottish National Party	4.7	3.1%	56	50
Green Party	3.8	2.8%	1	0
Plaid Cymru	0.6	0.0%	3	0
Others	3.1	-2.4%	18	0

Table 5.1: General election results, 2015 campaign
Source: BBC - https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election/2015/results

Cameron, by then a prime minister accustomed to winning, described it as "the sweetest victory of them all" (Cameron, 2019, p577). In the aftermath of the election, there was considerable interest in how the party had achieved its route to power via the decimation of the Liberal Democrats (Curtice, 2015). There was also debate as to whether the party's use of Facebook advertising had been a little-understood secret weapon that had allowed it to convert voters in a way that had been undetectable to pollsters (Moore and Ramsay, 2015). The Conservatives had hired Jim Messina, a veteran of Obama's presidential campaigns, to help develop data on persuadable voters. The party identified a series of marginal seats it needed to secure to remain in power. This came to be known

as the 40:40 strategy; a target of forty parliamentary seats to defend and forty to win. Using

Messina's insight and Facebook's advertising data, the party spent hundreds of thousands of pounds

to reach the constituencies' floating voters with tailored messages (Ross, 2015). The political parties

spending on digital advertising can be seen in Table 5.2 below.

Party	Facebook	Twitter	Snapchat	Google	Total (£)
Conservatives	£379,321.75			£179,204.22	£558,525.97
UKIP	£90,311.31				£90,311.31
Green Party	£20,999.04	£6,902.39		£290.81	£28,192.24
Liberal Democrats	£22,198.36				£22,198.36
Labour	£5,215.87			£289.02	£5,504.89
SNP	£4,876.47	£200.00			£5,074.47
Plaid Cymru	£1,146.81	£47.90			£1,194.71

Table 5.2: Digital advertising spend by party, 2015 campaign
Source: The Electoral Commission

Following the election, Miliband announced he would stand down as Labour leader, paving the way

for a leadership election that would set the tone for Labour's subsequent two general election

campaigns. Under Jeremy Corbyn, the party moved to the left despite resistance from some party

workers and Members of Parliament. There were two other major impacts of the election. The first

was the wholesale dominance of Scottish seats by the SNP, which emerged as the third-largest party

in the Parliament. This would reinvigorate the SNP, allowing the independence debate to move

again into the centre of Scottish politics. The second was the performance of UKIP. While it only

returned a single MP, the Conservative defector Douglas Carswell, the party's 12.6% vote share

meant Cameron felt he had no choice but to adhere to his promise to hold an in/out European

referendum. Fearing it would dominate the Parliament, he pushed for an early vote in June 2016.

This proved a momentous decision for the UK's place in Europe and Cameron's career.

5.2 Findings: Party accounts' Facebook posts

The 2015 General Election saw the political parties use Facebook as a campaigning tool during the short campaign plus election day, as shown in Figure 5.1. The Labour Party posted the most frequently (337 posts), and the Liberal Democrats the least (116 posts). The smaller parties were also very active on Facebook, using it to amplify media coverage to their supporters. Plaid Cymru posted 264 times, ahead of the Conservatives, despite only contesting 40 seats in Wales. The Green Party also posted at a high rate (238 posts).
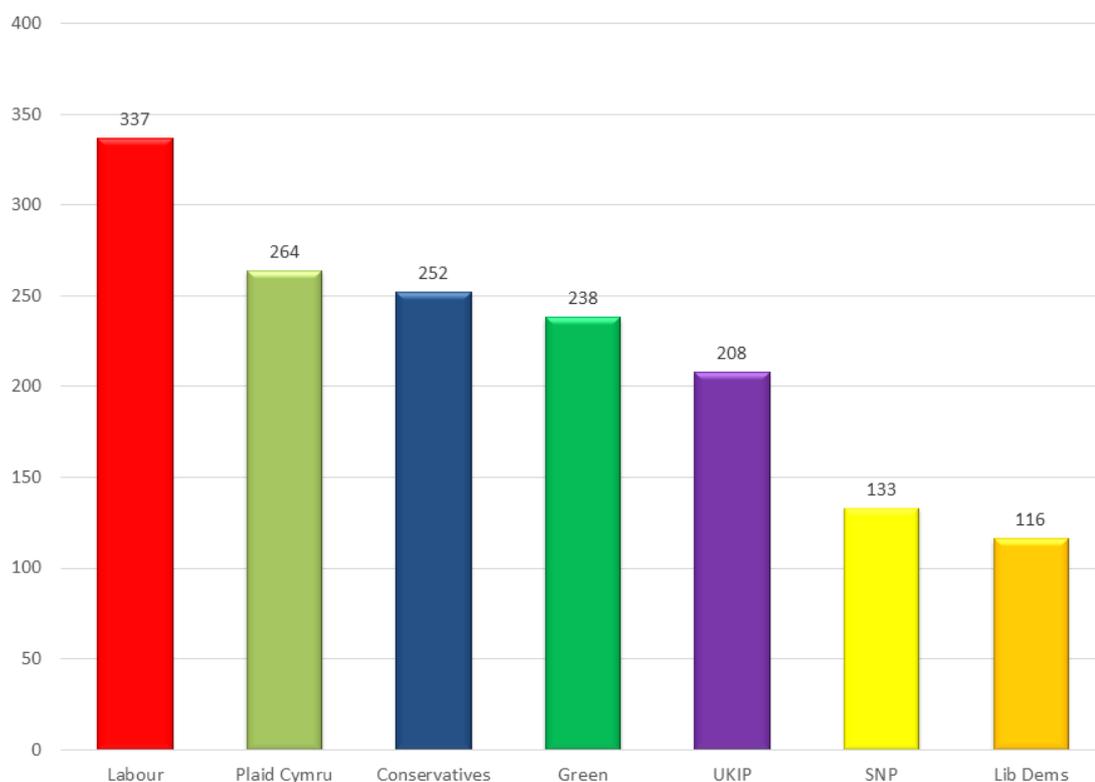
Figure 5.1: Party Facebook posts, 2015 campaign (*n*=1,548)

All the parties received a boost in the number of Facebook users liking their pages, thus increasing the chance of seeing organic posts on their feed (Mendenhall, 2018). The Facebook algorithm

promotes content to users based on their prior behaviours. By liking a page, it increases the

likelihood of the algorithm serving content that is thematically linked to that page.

As Table 5.3 demonstrates, there was significant growth in followers throughout the short campaign,

with the Conservatives gaining the largest number of new followers. This allowed it to maintain its

position as the party with the most Facebook likes, just ahead of UKIP. The Labour Party also saw a

large percentage rise in the number of people who liked its page, albeit starting from a lower base.

Name	Likes on 30/03/15	Likes on 07/05/15	Change figure +/-
Conservatives	363,384	505,870	+142,486 (+39.21%)
UKIP	345,102	469,840	+124,738 (+36.15%)
Labour Party	220,416	318,586	+98,170 (+44.54%)
Green Party	164,039	229,975	+65,936 (+40.20%)
Scottish National Party	189,566	208,967	+19,401 (+10.23%)
Liberal Democrats	106,263	114,381	+8,118 (+7.64%)

Table 5.3: Growth in likes for party accounts, 2015 campaign
Source: CrowdTangle (2021)

CrowdTangle does not include data for Plaid Cymru from the 2015 campaign. However, Lilleker

(2015) suggests the party saw an increase of 3,440 people who liked its page. This took it to 18,223

likes. Despite this, Plaid Cymru's page remained by far the least liked in the sample.

5.3 Findings: Leaders' Facebook posts

There was a considerable range in Facebook activity by the political party leaders, as shown in Figure 5.2. Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg (36 posts) and SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon (42 posts) were both infrequent posters. The Green Party's Natalie Bennett posted most frequently (309 posts), followed by Plaid Cymru's Leanne Wood (194 posts). This pattern differs greatly from the party accounts, where Labour was the most prolific. As the interviews in Chapter Eight demonstrate, party workers ran most leaders' accounts, but the dataset suggests Bennett and Wood ran their own accounts. They answered questions and debated policy in the comments on some of their posts.
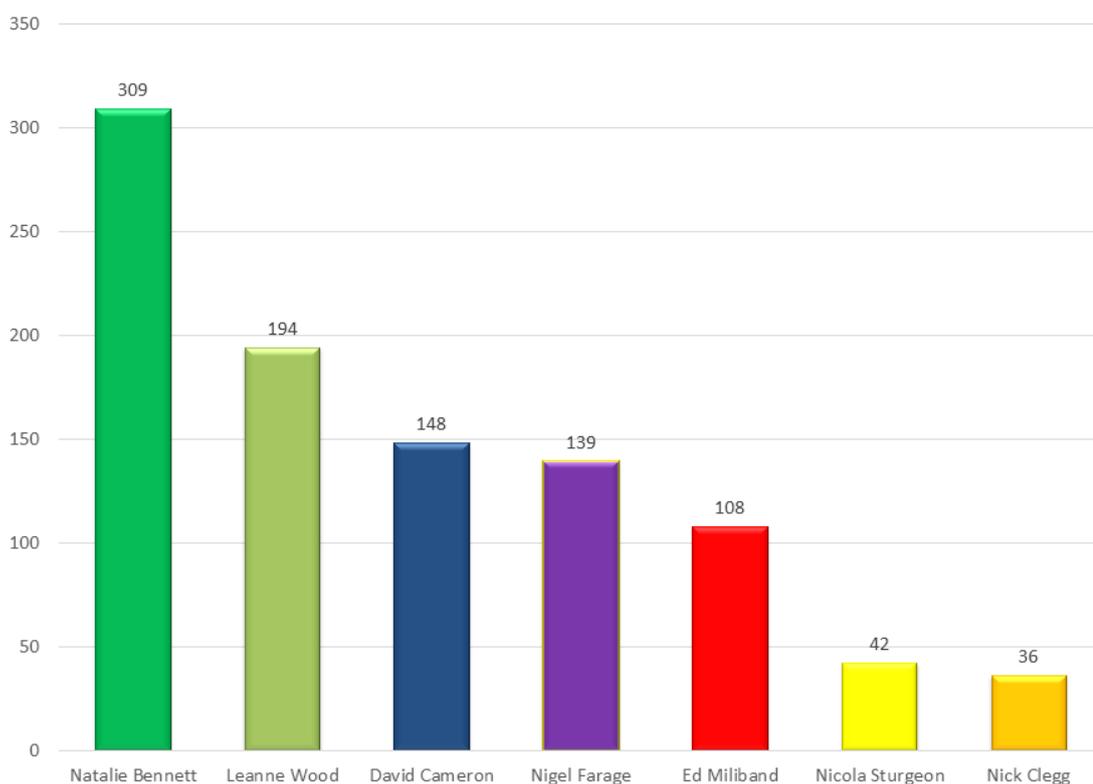
Figure 5.2: Leader Facebook posts, 2015 campaign (*n*=976)

The party leaders, for whom there is data recorded in CrowdTangle, all saw increased likes on

Facebook, as shown in Table 5.4. In some cases, the growth was dramatic. UKIP leader Nigel Farage saw the largest increase in the number of followers during the short campaign (up by 108,964). Conservative Party leader David Cameron had by far the most extensive following of any leader at the beginning of the campaign, and it continued to build throughout. Ed Miliband started from a far smaller base but still saw substantial progression. Data was not recorded in CrowdTangle for either Nick Clegg or Leanne Wood.

Name	Likes on 30/03/15	Likes on 07/05/15	Change figure +/-
Nigel Farage	138,436	247,400	+108,964 (+78.71%)
David Cameron	495,236	562,485	+67,249 (+13.58%)
Ed Miliband	75,968	124,573	+48,605 (+63.98%)
Nicola Sturgeon	150,316	173,714	+23,398 (+15.57%)
Natalie Bennett	12,943	27,029	+14,086 (+108.83%)

Table 5.4: Growth in likes for leader accounts, 2015 campaign
Source: CrowdTangle (2021)

5.4 Findings: What they were trying to achieve

In the next section, Facebook data will be analysed on the different strategic purposes employed by the parties' accounts, and then in section 5.4.2, the leaders' accounts. This will be followed in section 5.5 by an analysis of both the style and tonal range of the posts.

5.4.1 Findings: Facebook strategies for party accounts

The analysis of the parties' accounts reveals differing approaches to Facebook communication. The communications teams in the different parties had competing priorities, as is demonstrated in Table 5.5.

Strategic Function	Cons (*n*=252)	Labour (*n*=337)	Lib Dems (*n*=116)	SNP (*n*=133)	Green Party (*n*=238)	Plaid Cymru (*n*=264)	UKIP (*n*=208)	Total (*n*=1,548)
Amplify media coverage	16 (6.35%)	11 (3.26%)	4 (3.45%)	21 (15.79%)	54 (22.69%)	90 (34.10%)	86 (41.35%)	282 (18.22%)
Attack on government record		43 (12.76%)		1 (0.75%)	15 (6.30%)	6 (2.27%)	19 (9.13%)	84 (5.43%)
Attack on media				2 (1.50%)			3 (1.44%)	5 (0.32%)
Attack on party policy	19 (7.54%)	8 (2.37%)	5 (4.31%)	3 (2.25%)	5 (2.10%)	5 (1.89%)	11 (5.29%)	56 (3.62%)
Attack on politician	6 (2.38%)	43 (12.76%)	8 (6.90%)	1 (0.75%)	1 (0.42%)	3 (1.14%)	9 (4.33%)	71 (4.59%)
Canvassing	19 (7.54%)	15 (4.45%)	33 (28.45%)	45 (33.83%)	20 (8.40%)	54 (20.45%)	8 (3.85%)	194 (12.53%)
Celebration of historical achievement		7 (2.08%)	2 (1.72%)			1 (0.38%)		10 (0.65%)
Coalition speculation	48 (19.05%)	9 (2.67%)	6 (5.17%)	5 (3.76%)		7 (2.65%)	1 (0.48%)	76 (4.91%)
Defence of government record	64 (25.40%)		2 (1.72%)					66 (4.36%)
Fundraising		6 (1.78%)	3 (2.59%)	3 (2.25%)	4 (1.68%)	8 (3.03%)	6 (2.88%)	30 (1.94%)
Horse race						1 (0.38%)	4 (1.92%)	5 (0.32%)
Leadership	3 (1.19%)	23 (6.82%)	1 (0.86%)	9 (6.77%)	9 (3.78%)	12 (4.54%)	4 (1.92%)	61 (3.94%)
Personalisation	5 (1.98%)	2 (0.59%)	3 (2.59%)		16 (6.72%)		7 (3.36%)	33 (2.13%)
Policy outline or discussion	49 (19.44%)	99 (29.38%)	35 (30.17%)	23 (17.29%)	65 (27.31%)	51 (19.32%)	34 (16.35%)	356 (23%)
Reaction to news event			1 (0.86%)		3 (1.26%)	1 (0.38%)		5 (0.32%)
Voting	22 (8.73%)	71 (21.07%)	13 (11.21%)	19 (14.28%)	46 (19.33%)	25 (9.47%)	16 (7.69%)	212 (13.70%)
N/A	1 (0.40%)			1 (0.75%)				2 (0.13%)
Total	252 (100%)	337 (100%)	116 (100%	133 (100%)	238 (100%)	264 (100%)	208 (100%)	1,548 (100%)

Table 5.5: Strategic function of party accounts, 2015 campaign

The Conservative Party went into the 2015 election campaign with a record of five years in coalition

government to defend. The party's strategists had identified that leadership, the choice between

David Cameron or Ed Miliband as the next prime minister, would be a key battleground. According

to Cowley and Kavanagh (2016), the election campaign chief Lynton Crosby, confident that Miliband

was unelectable, wanted to waste little time discussing anything other than leadership and the

economic recovery. Cameron's two key messages, "the long-term economic plan" (Elliot, 2015) and "stability and strong Government with me, or chaos with Ed Miliband" (Cameron, 2015), were repeated so often they became subjects of parody. However, neither the Conservatives' party account nor Cameron's account spent much time on leadership comparisons. Just 1.19% of the party account's posts and 3.38% of Cameron's dealt specifically with leadership. The party's Facebook posts were driven by the imperative to defend the party's role in government (25.40%) and by negative speculation about the impact of a potential coalition between Labour and the SNP (19.05%). There was also some policy explanation (19.44%). Unlike other parties, there was no use of Facebook to fundraise, and a comparatively small amount of the dataset consisted of calls to get supporters either registered or out to vote (8.73%).

The Labour Party had been in opposition for five years by the time of the 2015 General Election, forced from power after thirteen years in government by the close result of 2010. Ed Miliband controversially won the party leadership and surprised many who had expected his older brother David to win. While voters may not have absorbed all the details of the 2010 leadership race, people retained the impression that he had stabbed his brother in the back (Mludzinski, 2015). Ed Miliband was keen to draw a line under the New Labour years and oversaw the development of policies designed to reinvigorate the party (Cowley and Kavanagh, 2016). But the party went into the 2015 campaign faced with two serious challenges, the increasingly buoyant popularity of the SNP following the failed Scottish independence referendum of 2014 and Miliband's poor personal ratings on leadership. This is reflected in the sample set. There was a strong tendency for Labour's posts to concentrate on policy explanation (29.38%) and voting (21.01%). Attacks on individual politicians (12.76%) and the government's record in office were also favoured (12.76%). Compared to other parties, there was little attempt to amplify positive media coverage to supporters (3.26%).

As the campaign began, the Liberal Democrat Party was simultaneously enjoying its only successful

period of national government and was looking anxiously at opinion poll results. The party had been the junior partner in the coalition, its leader Nick Clegg serving as deputy prime minister. Yet, it had also paid a price for joining the Conservatives in power. The party's electoral performance had been poor since 2010, in both local and parliamentary by-elections. To address points of difference with the Conservatives, the party's Facebook posts focused on policy discussion (30.17%) and canvassing (28.45%) during the campaign. Compared to its competitors, the party shied away from partisan attacks. While there was no attack on the government's record, there was little defence of it either (1.72%).

The Scottish National Party had experienced an extraordinary period in the run-up to the 2015 election. It had emerged from the 2011 Scottish Parliament elections as the victor, holding an absolute majority (Electoral Commission, 2011). The party was able to make good on its pledge to force the Westminster government to grant an independence referendum. The campaign's success caught many by surprise, but in the end, it was lost by a narrow margin: 55% voted No to Scotland becoming an independent country, and 45% voted Yes on an 84.6% turnout. However, in the wake of the referendum's result, the SNP saw a bounce in popularity. By the time of the general election, it had experienced a rapid rise in membership from around 25,000 in 2013 to approximately 100,000 in 2015 (Audickas et al., 2019). With polls suggesting a hung Parliament, the party approached the election campaign with a core message that asked who would best represent Scottish interests in Westminster, rather than repeating the independence question. It proved enormously successful, with the SNP winning 56 of the 59 Scottish seats (BBC, 2015a). The party tended to focus on posts that celebrated canvassing (33.83%) and encouraged voting (14.28%). There was also some policy discussion (17.29%) and amplification of positive media coverage (15.79%).

The 2010 election saw the Green Party of England and Wales win its first parliamentary seat, Caroline Lucas taking Brighton Pavilion. It was a breakthrough moment for the party, which

continued to build its powerbase in the town, taking control of Brighton and Hove Council in 2011.

While Lucas was able to use her position as the party's only Member of Parliament to generate news

coverage for the Greens, she decided to stand down as leader in 2012. Her successor was the former

journalist Natalie Bennett. Bennett participated in the 2015 televised leaders' debates, but her

media performances were widely criticised. She also suffered from what she called a "mind blank"

during a radio interview on the day of the party's election launch (Perraudin and Mason, 2015).

Although the party, along with the Scottish Greens and the Green Party of Northern Ireland, stood

for election in 573 seats (Keen, 2015), its only success was the retention of Lucas's seat. While there

was a strong showing in Bristol West (Prendiville, 2015), the party was unable to transform a rise in

national vote share to 3.8% into increased seats. The Green Party frequently posted to discuss policy

(27.31%). It also spent considerable time trying to amplify media coverage (22.69%) and explaining

the process of voting (19.33%).

The period running up to the 2015 election had seen Plaid Cymru struggling to rebuild its electoral

support after being overtaken by the Welsh Conservatives as the second-largest party in the 2011

Welsh National Assembly election. Having been in power in the coalition government of 2007-11,

the Welsh nationalists chose a new leader, Leanne Wood, to help rebuild support. A former

probation officer and university lecturer, Wood was given a national platform by the televised

debates. She appeared in the leaders' debate on ITV and the BBC challengers' debate, despite not

running herself for a seat in the election. Ultimately, the 2015 election was a stand-still election for

Plaid Cymru. The party retained three seats and slightly increased its vote share in Wales by 0.9% to

12.1% (BBC News, 2015b). Plaid Cymru used many of its Facebook posts to amplify media coverage

(34.10%). It also extensively highlighted canvassing (20.45%) and policy discussion (19.32%).

UKIP went into the campaign on a high. The party had won the largest UK vote share of the

European Parliamentary Election in 2014 (BBC News, 2014), and two Conservative MPs had quit and

joined the party, sparking and winning by-elections. This forced the Conservative Party to act defensively to secure its support on the right, with David Cameron pledging to hold a referendum on European Union membership. No longer could the party's supporters easily be dismissed as "fruitcakes, loonies, and closet racists" (Taylor, 2006). The party was also building support among socially conservative Labour voters, a trend that would continue through later elections (Ayres, 2015). The level of support through the 2010 Parliament meant the broadcasters agreed to allow Nigel Farage access to the televised debates. In the end, UKIP polled strongly, taking 12.6% of the national vote, making it the third-largest party by vote share. However, it only managed to return one MP to Parliament. The party used Facebook to try and amplify media coverage (41.35%), and there was some use of the platform to discuss policy (16.35%). This was the smallest proportion of all the parties in the sample, as was the 7.69% of posts devoted to voting.

5.4.2 Findings: Facebook strategies for leader accounts

David Cameron had been prime minister for five years by the time of the 2015 election. For many voters, he was a known quantity. They understood his strengths and weaknesses. Many people saw the personally wealthy Cameron as out of touch with ordinary voters, especially women (Skinner, 2013). While polling showed that voters thought Cameron was posh and privileged, he continued to perform well on measures of trust and leadership, especially in comparison with Ed Miliband (YouGov, 2015). As shown in Table 5.6, his Facebook account focused on outlining policy plans (24.32%) and defending his leadership (22.3%). Comparing Cameron's and the Conservatives' accounts, there was a greater focus on canvassing by Cameron (15.54% vs. 7.54%). There was also some attempt to soften his image using personalisation (6.76% vs. 1.98%). The Conservatives' official account was also proportionally slightly more frequently used than Cameron's to attack political opponents (2.38% vs. 2.03%) and their policies (7.54% vs. 6.76%).

Strategic function	David Cameron (*n*=148)	Ed Miliband (*n*=108)	Nick Clegg (*n*=36)	Nicola Sturgeon (*n*=42)	Natalie Bennett (*n*=309)	Leanne Wood (*n*=194)	Nigel Farage (*n*=139)	Total (n=976)
Amplify media coverage	3 (2.03%)	8 (7.41%)		13 (30.95%)	186 (60.19%)	71 (36.60%)	41 (29.50%)	322 (32.99%)
Attack on government record		6 (5.55%)			2 (0.65%)	6 (3.09%)	8 (5.75%)	22 (2.25%)
Attack on media							8 (5.75%)	8 (0.82%)
Attack on party policy	10 (6.76%)	2 (1.85%)			5 (1.62%)	1 (0.51%)	2 (1.44%)	20 (2.05%)
Attack on politician	3 (2.03%)	1 (0.92%)			5 (1.62%)	4 (2.06%)	10 (7.19%)	23 (2.36%)
Canvassing	23 (15.54%)	4 (3.70%)	18 (50%)	13 (30.95%)	20 (6.47%)	54 (27.83%)	18 (12.95%)	150 (15.37%)
Celebration of historical achievement			1 (2.78%)			1 (0.51%)	1 (0.72%)	3 (0.31%)
Coalition speculation	16 (10.81%)		3 (8.33%)	2 (4.76%)		11 (5.67%)		32 (3.28%)
Defence of government record	33 (22.30%)		1 (2.78%)					34 (3.48%)
Fundraising		2 (1.85%)			17 (5.50%)	6 (3.09%)	5 (3.60%)	30 (3.07%)
Horse race	1 (0.67%)				11 (3.56%)	1 (0.51%)	6 (4.32%)	19 (1.95%)
Leadership	5 (3.38%)	7 (6.48%)	1 (2.78%)	3 (7.14%)	10 (3.24%)	2 (1.03%)	4 (2.88%)	32 (3.28%)
Personalisation	10 (6.76%)	13 (12.04%)			7 (2.26%)	6 (3.09%)	7 (5.03%)	43 (4.41%)
Policy outline or discussion	36 (24.32%)	52 (48.15%)	10 (27.78%)	4 (9.52%)	14 (4.53%)	15 (7.73%)	10 (7.19%)	141 (14.45%)
Reaction to news event					2 (0.65%)			2 (0.21%)
Tactical voting					1 (0.32%)			1 (0.10%)
Voting	8 (5.40%)	12 (11.11%)	2 (5.55%)	7 (16.67%)	29 (9.38%)	16 (8.25%)	19 (13.67%)	93 (9.53%)
N/A		1 (0.92%)						1 (0.10%)
Total	148 (100%)	108 (100%)	36 (100%)	42 (100%)	309 (100%)	194 (100%)	139 (100%)	976 (100%)

Table 5.6: Strategic function of leader accounts, 2015 campaign

Discussion of policy was the core driver of Ed Miliband's posting (48.15%). Although there was some

use of the posts to tackle issues around his personal style and approach (12.04%) and his leadership

(6.48%), there was not a consistent approach to these issues. Comparing Miliband's and the Labour

Party's accounts, it is apparent that the party account was used to a much greater degree to attack the government's record in office (12.76% vs. 5.55%) and Labour's political rivals (12.76% vs. 0.92%) and their policies (2.37% vs. 1.85%).

Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg's account was under-used compared with other party leaders, apart from Nicola Sturgeon. Clegg posted just 36 times in the short campaign. Half of the posts focused on canvassing (50%), following Clegg as he campaigned around the country. There was also some evidence of policy discussion (27.78%). The party's official account replicated these strategic drivers. While Clegg did not attempt to attack his rivals' positions or personalities, there was some minor use of negative campaigning by the party account, attacking other parties' policies (4.31%) and politicians (6.90%).

Nicola Sturgeon posted the second least of the party leaders. She focused on canvassing (30.95%) and amplifying media coverage (30.95%). There was also some posting on the process of voting (16.67%). This meant a more limited range of strategic functions was used in the Sturgeon account than in the SNP account (6 vs. 11). There was no use of attack messaging, and there was less use of policy discussion (9.52% vs. 17.29%).

Green Party leader Natalie Bennett's account was the most active of all the leaders' accounts during the election campaign (*n*=309). Bennett frequently posted links to things she had read or articles sympathetic to the Green Party. This meant amplification of media was the most frequently employed strategic function (60.19%). However, it was quite common for her to share these links with little or no framing text. This meant there were a very large number of posts that did not have any reference to policy at all (63.43%), and just 4.53% of posts were focused on policy discussion. This compared with the Green Party's main Facebook account, where more than a quarter (27.31%) of posts were centred on policy.

Like the other leaders of the smaller parties, the account of Plaid Cymru leader Leanne Wood was most often used to amplify positive media coverage (36.6%). In the United Kingdom's first-past-the-post system, smaller parties can struggle to get their voices heard, and canvassing was the focus of more than a quarter of Wood's posts (27.83%). Like Bennett, most of Wood's posts did not reference policy at all (70.10%), and policy discussion was used as a strategic driver in just 7.73% of posts.

UKIP leader Nigel Farage's Facebook page was extensively used to drive home the message that he was a change candidate with a change agenda. This led to many posts focused on canvassing for change without any specific reference to policy (47.48%). This is perhaps surprising given that the most significant policy outcome of the 2015 election was the European referendum, and withdrawal from the European Union was a long-held policy ambition of UKIP. Amplification of media coverage was the most often used strategic function (29.5%). There was relatively little policy discussion (7.19%), but there were regular attacks on the government (5.75%), media (5.75%), and other politicians (7.19%) and their policies (1.44%). The main UKIP account was similarly combative.

5.5 Findings: Style and tone

The strategic approach the parties and leaders took with their accounts fed directly into the rhetorical style used. The choice to use more policy discussion, for example, led to greater use of persuasive rhetoric. As Table 5.7 demonstrates, for all the parties' persuasion was the most used rhetorical style, ranging from Labour at the bottom end of the scale (47.77%) to the Green Party at the top (78.57%).

Style	Cons (*n*=252)	Labour (*n*=337)	Lib Dems (*n*=116)	SNP (*n*=133)	Green Party (*n*=238)	Plaid Cymru (*n*=264)	UKIP (*n*=208)	Total (*n*=1,548)
Approval	21 (8.33%)							21 (1.36%)
Attacking	60 (23.81%)	99 (29.38%)	14 (12.07%)	12 (9.02%)	23 (9.66%)	27 (10.23%)	53 (25.48%)	288 (18.61%)
Celebration							3 (1.44%)	3 (0.19%)
Certainty	1 (0.40%)							1 (0.07%)
Disapproval	1 (0.40%)							1 (0.07%)
Gratitude	6 (2.38%)	3 (0.89%)	1 (0.86%)		3 (1.26%)		2 (0.96%)	15 (0.97%)
Humour	3 (1.19%)	1 (0.30%)	5 (4.31%)		1 (0.42%)	1 (0.38%)		11 (0.71%)
Information					1 (0.42%)		1 (0.48%)	2 (0.13%)
Motivational	17 (6.75%)	64 (18.99%)	11 (9.48%)	15 (11.28%)	22 (9.24%)	45 (17.05%)	29 (13.94%)	203 (13.11%)
Persuasion	142 (56.35%)	161 (47.77%)	85 (73.28%)	104 (78.19%)	187 (78.57%)	191 (72.35%)	120 (57.69%)	990 (63.95%)
Pride		9 (2.67%)		1 (0.75%)	1 (0.42%)			11 (0.71%)
N/A	1 (0.40%)			1 (0.75%)				2 (0.13%)
Total	252 (100%)	337 (100%)	116 (100%)	133 (100%)	238 (100%)	264 (100%)	208 (100%)	1,548 (100%)

Table 5.7: Rhetorical style of party accounts, 2015 campaign

All party accounts used two other rhetorical styles: attacking and motivational. The Labour Party made the greatest use of attacking styles of rhetoric (29.38%), and the SNP the least (9.02%). For all the parties though, the ability to use attacks on their opponents and their policies was important. Motivational styles were critical to the parties for two key functions: fundraising and getting voters registered and motivated to go out and vote on election day. The Labour Party made the most use of motivation (18.99%), and the Conservatives the least (6.75%). While a range of other styles were used by the parties intermittently, such as humour, pride, and gratitude, these were only used in a small minority of posts in the sample.

With the leaders' accounts, there was far less uniformity of approach, as demonstrated by Table 5.8. While persuasion was still the most important rhetorical style for all the accounts, ranging from Nigel Farage (48.92%) to Nick Clegg (100%), it was the only style used by all the accounts. In Clegg's limited

posting, he only attempted to use persuasion, whereas all the other leaders used a wider variety of styles. For example, all the leaders bar Clegg used gratitude, information, and motivation.

Style	David Cameron (*n*=148)	Ed Miliband (*n*=108)	Nick Clegg (*n*=36)	Nicola Sturgeon (*n*=42)	Natalie Bennett (*n*=309)	Leanne Wood (*n*=194)	Nigel Farage (*n*=139)	Total (*n*=976)
Anger		1 (0.93%)						1 (0.10%)
Approval	20 (13.51%)	2 (1.85%)						22 (2.25%)
Attacking	19 (12.84%)	7 (6.48%)			38 (12.30%)	20 (10.31%)	46 (33.09%)	130 (13.32%)
Celebration					5 (1.62%)	2 (1.03%)	4 (2.88%)	11 (1.13%)
Certainty	1 (0.68%)							1 (0.10%)
Commemoration							1 (0.72%)	1 (0.10%)
Condolence	2 (1.35%)							2 (0.21%)
Disapproval		1 (0.93%)						1 (0.10%)
Gratitude	2 (1.35%)	2 (1.85%)		2 (4.76%)	2 (0.65%)	3 (1.55%)	2 (1.44%)	13 (1.33%)
Humour		1 (0.93%)		2 (4.76%)	17 (5.50%)	4 (2.06%)	3 (2.16%)	27 (2.77%)
Information	3 (2.03%)	2 (1.85%)		2 (4.76%)	7 (2.27%)	3 (1.55%)	1 (0.72%)	18 (1.84%)
Motivational	3 (2.03%)	7 (6.48%)		3 (7.14%)	35 (11.33%)	22 (11.34%)	14 (10.07%)	84 (8.61%)
Persuasion	90 (60.81%)	77 (71.30%)	36 (100%)	32 (76.19%)	202 (65.37%)	136 (70.10%)	68 (48.92%)	641 (65.68%)
Pride	8 (5.41%)	6 (5.56%)		1 (2.38%)	3 (0.97%)	4 (2.06%)		22 (2.25%)
N/A		2 (1.85%)						2 (0.21%)
Total	148 (100%)	108 (100%)	36 (100%)	42 (100%)	309 (100%)	194 (100%)	139 (100%)	976 (100%)

Table 5.8: Rhetorical style of leader accounts, 2015 campaign

Although the attacking style remained important for some accounts, notably Nigel Farage (33.09%), Clegg and Sturgeon did not attack their opponents. Of the leaders who did use the attacking style, Ed Miliband used it the least (6.48%), in contrast with the Labour party account (29.28%). Cameron used it less frequently than the Conservatives' party account (12.84% vs. 23.81%). When he did use it, it was to attack the concept of a Labour and SNP coalition government. It was also notable that

the party leaders tended to use Facebook with a wider emotional range than the party accounts.

Styles of rhetoric that lend themselves towards more personalisation were used, such as approval, pride, humour, gratitude, and celebration.

Both the rhetorical style and the strategic function were key in establishing the tone of the accounts. As Table 5.9 shows, there tended to be clustering of posts as either positive (range: Conservatives 67.46% to SNP 90.98%) or negative (range: SNP 9.02% to Labour 28.19%). Only a small number of outliers were classed as strongly positive (range: Labour 0.59% to Conservatives 1.59%) or strongly negative (range: UKIP 0.48% to Conservatives 7.54%).

Tone	Conservatives (*n*=252)	Labour (*n*=337)	Lib Dems (*n*=116)	SNP (*n*=133)	Green Party (*n*=238)	Plaid Cymru (*n*=264)	UKIP (*n*=208)	Total (*n*=1,548)
Strongly positive	4 (1.59%)	2 (0.59%)	0	0	0	0	3 (1.44%)	9 (0.58%)
Positive	170 (67.46%)	224 (66.47%)	102 (87.93%)	121 (90.98%)	214 (89.92%)	237 (89.77%)	151 (72.60%)	1,219 (78.75%)
Neutral	1 (0.40%)	0	0	0	1 (0.42%)	0	1 (0.48%)	3 (0.19%)
Negative	58 (23.02%)	95 (28.19%)	14 (12.07%)	12 (9.02%)	23 (9.66%)	27 (10.23%)	52 (25%)	281 (0.58%)
Strongly Negative	19 (7.54%)	16 (4.75%)	0	0	0	0	1 (0.48%)	36 18.15%)
Total	252 (100%)	337 (100%)	116 (100%)	133 (100%)	238 (100%)	264 (100%)	208 (100%)	1,548 (100%)

Table 5.9: Tone of party accounts, 2015 campaign

5.6 Findings: What they talked about

As would be expected in any political campaign, a large number of policies were discussed by the party accounts. Table 5.10 records the actual and percentages of policy areas referenced by the parties.

Policy	Cons (*n*=252)	Labour (*n*=337)	Lib Dems (*n*=116)	SNP (*n*=133)	Green Party (*n*=238)	Plaid Cymru (*n*=264)	UKIP (*n*=208)	Total (*n*=1,548)
Arts			1 (0.86%)			1 (0.38%)		2 (0.13%)
Austerity		1 (0.30%)	1 (0.86%)	11 (8.27%)	9 (3.78%)	14 (5.30%)		36 (2.33%)
BAME rights					3 (1.26%)			3 (0.19%)
Banking					1 (0.42%)	1 (0.38%)		2 (0.13%)
Brexit	2 (0.79%)					4 (1.51%)	12 (5.77%)	18 (1.16%)
Broadband						1 (0.38%)		1 (0.07%)
Business	8 (3.17%)	3 (0.90%)	1 (0.86%)	1 (0.75%)		3 (1.14%)	8 (3.85%)	24 (1.55%)
Childcare	2 (0.79%)				1 (0.42%)			3 (0.19%)
Civil rights			1 (0.86%)					1 (0.07%)
Copyright law					2 (0.84%)			2 (0.13%)
Crime	1 (0.40%)	4 (1.19%)						5 (0.32%)
Cybersecurity	1 (0.40%)				1 (0.42%)			2 (0.13%)
Debt	2 (0.79%)							2 (0.13%)
Defence	7 (2.78%)	1 (0.30%)		4 (3.01%)	7 (2.94%)	2 (0.76%)	15 (7.21%)	36 (2.33%)
Deficit	4 (1.59%)	1 (0.30%)				1 (0.38%)	1 (0.48%)	7 (0.45%)
Devolution	2 (0.79%)			2 (1.50%)		27 (10.23%)	5 (2.40%)	36 (2.33%)
Disability rights					1 (0.42%)			1 (0.07%)
Economy	57 (22.62%)	4 (1.19%)	14 (12.07%)		2 (0.84%)	8 (3.03%)	3 (1.44%)	88 (5.69%)
Education	4 (1.59%)	2 (0.59%)	4 (2.45%)	2 (1.50%)	4 (1.68%)	1 (0.38%)	1 (0.48%)	18 (1.16%)
Employment	20 (7.94%)	13 (3.86%)	8 (6.90%)	2 (1.50%)	7 (2.94%)	3 (1.14%)		53 (3.42%)
Energy		1 (0.30%)			5 (2.10%)	2 (0.76%)		8 (0.52%)

Environment	1 (0.40%)		5 (4.31%)		25 (10.50%)			31 (2.00%)
Fishing							2 (0.96%)	2 (0.13%)
Foreign affairs		2 (0.59%)	1 (0.86%)	1 (0.75%)	3 (1.26%)			7 (0.45%)
Foreign aid			1 (0.86%)				3 (1.44%)	4 (0.26%)
Health	5 (1.98%)	90 (26.71%)	6 (5.17%)	6 (4.51%)	9 (3.78%)	11 (4.17%)	4 (1.92%)	131 (8.46%)
Housing	2 (0.79%)	6 (1.78%)	3 (2.59%)	1 (0.75%)	8 (3.36%)		4 (1.92%)	24 (1.55%)
Immigration	1 (0.40%)	6 (1.78%)		2 (1.50%)	5 (2.10%)	3 (1.14%)	9 (4.33%)	26 (1.68%)
Media					1 (0.42%)		3 (1.44%)	4 (0.26%)
Mental health			5 (4.31%)					5 (0.32%)
Pensions	1 (0.40%)			1 (0.75%)	1 (0.42%)		1 (0.48%)	4 (0.26%)
Rail transport	2 (0.79%)						4 (1.92%)	6 (0.39%)
Religion	3 (1.19%)							3 (0.19%)
Rural affairs			1 (0.86%)		1 (0.42%)	4 (1.51%)		6 (0.39%)
Scottish independence	2 (0.79%)		2 (1.72%)					4 (0.26%)
Security	1 (0.40%)							1 (0.07%)
Social care			4 (2.45%)	1 (0.75%)	1 (0.42%)			6 (0.39%)
Spending		1 (0.30%)				4 (1.51%)		5 (0.32%)
Tax	28 (11.11%)	27 (8.01%)	5 (4.31%)		6 (2.52%)	1 (0.38%)	7 (3.36%)	74 (4.78%)
Transport	2 (0.79%)				3 (1.26%)		4 (1.92%)	9 (0.58%)
Tuition fees		5 (1.48%)	2 (1.72%)	4 (3.01%)	3 (1.26%)			14 (0.90%)
Voting					1 (0.42%)			1 (0.07%)
Welfare	2 (0.79%)	23 (6.82%)			5 (2.10%)	2 (0.76%)		32 (2.07%)
Welsh independence						2 (0.76%)		2 (0.13%)
Workers' rights		5 (1.48%)		3 (2.25%)			3 (1.44%)	11 (0.71%)
Youth issues		1 (0.30%)		1 (0.75%)	1 (0.42%)	7 (2.65%)		10 (0.65%)
Multiple policies	42 (16.67%)	58 (17.21%)	19 (16.38%)	19 (14.28%)	38 (15.97%)	22 (8.33%)	33 (15.87%)	231 (14.92%)
No stated policy	50 (19.84%)	83 (24.63%)	32 (27.59%)	72 (54.13%)	84 (35.29%)	140 (53.03%)	86 (41.35%)	547 (35.38%)
Total	252 (100%)	337 (100%)	116 (100%)	133 (100%)	238 (100%)	264 (100%)	208 (100%)	1,548 (100%)

Table 5.10: Policies referenced by party accounts, 2015 campaign

Several findings emerge from this. Firstly, more than a third of Facebook posts did not contain any reference to policy (35.38%). This was something common to all parties, rising from 19.84% of Conservative Party posts to 54.13% of SNP posts.

The parties often fought parallel campaigns. There were only two policy areas where all the parties posted: education (range: Plaid Cymru 0.38% to Liberal Democrats 2.45%) and health (range: UKIP 1.92% to Labour 26.71%). The party accounts were not involved in a conversation with each other but were broadcasting their policy strengths to their followers. For example, 22.62% of Conservative posts referenced the economy, just 1.19% of Labour's did; 26.71% of Labour posts talked about health policy, and just 1.98% of Conservative posts discussed this issue. The Conservatives never referred to issues associated with the impact of austerity measures; instead, there were occasional references to policies to reduce the deficit. The party preferred to concentrate on its core themes associated with the economy (22.62%) or tax (11.11%). The Labour campaign focused on health (26.71%), welfare (6.82%), and tax (8.01%). In most cases, the parties were not competing for dominance on a single issue but were fighting campaigns that spoke to their supporters alone. For example, the Greens were not competing with other parties for voter attention on the environment (10.50%), which other parties barely mentioned, nor was UKIP on Brexit (5.77%). While the parties might have argued about wider issues on broadcast media, in their Facebook activity they focused tightly on their own key messages.

When looking at posts with multiple policies mentioned, a slightly different picture emerges, as shown in Table 5.11. There are no column or row totals in this table because the n is the number of Facebook posts, whereas the percentages measure the frequency of policies referenced. As multiple policies were referenced, these figures are always higher than n.

Policy	Cons (*n=42*)	Labour (*n=58*)	Lib Dems (*n=19*)	SNP (*n=19*)	Green Party (*n=38*)	Plaid Cymru (*n=22*)	UKIP (*n=33*)
Austerity		23 (39.65%)	7 (36.84%)	12 (63.16%)	11 (28.95%)	6 (27.27%)	2 (6.06%)
Borrowing	13 (30.95%)						
Brexit	2 (4.76%)	1 (1.72%)		1 (5.26%)		2 (9.09%)	19 (57.57%)
Business	7 (16.67%)			2 (10.53%)		5 (22.73%)	1 (3.03%)
Childcare	5 (11.90%)	2 (3.45%)	5 (26.31%)	1 (5.26%)			
Copyright law					1 (2.63%)		
Crime	2 (4.76%)						
Cybersecurity			1 (5.26%)				
Debt	7 (16.67%)		4 (15.79%)				
Defence	5 (11.90%)	3 (5.17%)		4 (21.05%)	2 (5.26%)		4 (12.12%)
Deficit	12 (28.57%)	4 (6.90%)		1 (5.26%)		3 (13.63%)	1 (3.03%)
Devolution		2 (3.45%)		5 (26.31%)		1 (4.54%)	1 (3.03%)
Economy	8 (19.05%)	3 (5.17%)	7 (36.84%)	2 (10.53%)	11 (28.95%)	5 (22.73%)	3 (9.09%)
Education	6 (14.28%)	3 (5.17%)	10 (52.63%)	4 (21.05%)	5 (13.16%)	5 (22.73%)	6 (18.18%)
Employment	11 (26.19%)	31 (53.45%)	5 (26.31%)	7 (36.84%)	4 (10.53%)	5 (22.73%)	8 (24.24%)
Energy		5 (8.62%)	1 (5.26%)		3 (7.89%)	1 (4.54%)	4 (12.12%)
Environment		2 (3.45%)	4 (15.79%)		18 (47.37%)	1 (4.54%)	1 (3.03%)
Foreign affairs		3 (5.17%)				1 (4.54%)	
Foreign aid							6 (18.18%)
Fox hunting		1 (1.72%)					
Health	4 (9.52%)	40 (68.96%)	8 (42.10%)	8 (42.10%)	18 (47.37%)	6 (27.27%)	12 (36.36%)
Housing	10 (23.80%)	6 (10.34%)		1 (5.26%)	8 (21.05%)	5 (22.73%)	8 (24.24%)
Immigration		4 (6.90%)			4 (10.53%)	3 (13.63%)	22 (66.67%)
LGBT rights					1 (2.63%)		
Media					1 (2.63%)		
Nationalisation					6 (15.79%)		
Pensions	6 (14.28%)						
Rail transport		1 (1.72%)			7 (18.42%)		
Scottish independence	1 (2.38%)	1 (1.72%)		1 (5.26%)			

Social care					3 (7.89%)	2 (9.09%)	
Spending	3 (7.14%)	1 (1.72%)	2 (10.53%)	2 (10.53%)	1 (2.63%)		1 (3.03%)
Tax	28 (66.67%)	21 (36.21%)	6 (31.58%)	3 (15.79%)	2 (5.26%)	3 (13.63%)	8 (24.24%)
Transport	1 (2.38%)						
Tuition fees		11 (18.96%)		3 (15.79%)	5 (13.16%)		
Voting					1 (2.63%)		
Welfare	9 (21.43%)	15 (25.86%)	4 (15.79%)	7 (36.84%)	1 (2.63%)	1 (4.54%)	
Women's rights		1 (1.72%)					
Workers' rights		7 (12.07%)		1 (5.26%)			
Youth issues	1 (2.38%)	5 (8.62%)		1 (5.26%)	1 (2.63%)	3 (13.63%)	4 (12.12%)

Table 5.11: Posts with multiple policy references by party accounts, 2015 campaign

There were more areas common to all parties in Table 5.11 than 5.10. All the parties referenced five policy areas. Economy (range: Labour 5.17% to Liberal Democrats 36.84%), education (range: Labour 5.17% to Liberal Democrats 52.63%), employment (range: Green Party 10.53% to Labour 53.45%), health (range: Conservatives 9.52% to Labour 68.96%) and tax (range: Green Party 5.26% to Conservatives 66.67%).

For the Conservatives, there were also several posts relating to economic concerns, such as public sector borrowing (30.95%), public spending (7.14%), and the structural deficit (28.57%). These policy areas were consistently framed in terms of improvement under the coalition, and posts warned of the danger of allowing Labour to "ruin" this progress. This was countered by the arguments from other parties about the impact of austerity (range: UKIP 6.06% to SNP 63.16%).

5.7 Findings: How they communicated

All the parties tried to include creative media content in their posts, with text-only posts only used in a minority of cases, as shown in Table 5.12. Only the Conservatives posted text-only updates with

any frequency, which accounted for just 6.35% of the party's posts. These tended to be blog-style posts by politicians or personal messages from David Cameron's allies giving him their support.

Media type	Conservatives (*n*=252)	Labour (*n*=337)	Lib Dems (*n*=116)	SNP (*n*=133)	Green Party (*n*=238)	Plaid Cymru (*n*=264)	UKIP (*n*=208)	Total (*n*=1,548)
Animation	5 (1.98%)	12 (3.56%)		2 (1.50%)	29 (12.18%)	6 (2.27%)		54 (3.49%)
App							1 (0.48%)	1 (0.07%)
Audio							4 (1.92%)	4 (0.26%)
Composite image	5 (1.98%)							5 (0.32%)
Facebook link	1 (0.40%)				3 (1.26%)	12 (4.54%)	3 (1.44%)	19 (1.23%)
Image	4 (1.59%)	2 (0.59%)	1 (0.86%)	5 (3.76%)		15 (5.68%)	6 (2.88%)	33 (2.13%)
Image and text	51 (20.24%)	49 (14.54%)	14 (12.07%)	28 (21.05%)	33 (13.86%)	41 (15.53%)	38 18.27%)	254 (16.41%)
Infographic	32 (12.70%)	133 (39.46%)	19 (16.38%)	7 (5.26%)	23 (9.66%)	41 (15.53%)	6 (2.88%)	261 (16.86%)
Linked article	52 (20.63%)	10 (2.97%)	35 (30.17%)	6 (4.51%)	55 (23.11%)	60 (22.73%)	114 (54.81%)	332 (21.45%)
Photograph	23 (9.13%)	12 (3.56%)	3 (2.59%)	44 (33.08%)	25 (10.50%)	48 (18.18%)	4 (1.92%)	159 (10.27%)
Poll		2 (0.59%)						2 (0.13%)
Text only	16 (6.35%)			1 (0.75%)	2 (0.84%)	4 (1.51%)	5 (2.40%)	28 (1.81%)
Twitter link	2 (0.79%)					2 (0.76%)		4 (0.26%)
Video	61 (24.21%)	117 (34.72%)	44 37.93%)	40 (30.07%)	68 (28.57%)	35 (13.26%)	27 (12.98%)	392 (25.32%)
Total	252 (100%)	337 (100%)	116 (100%)	133 (100%)	238 (100%)	264 (100%)	208 (100%)	1,548 (100%)

Table 5.12: Media type by party account, 2015 campaign

The parties all made use of video as a communication tool. More than a quarter (25.32%) of the posts contained video (range: UKIP 12.98% to Liberal Democrats 37.93%). They also used communication techniques that harked back to approaches seen in billboard advertising. For example, the Conservatives used composite images (1.98%) to attack Sturgeon as Miliband's puppet-master. Posts that used image and text (range: Liberal Democrats 12.07% to SNP 21.05%) and infographics (range: UKIP 2.88% to Labour 39.46%) tended to be analogous to traditional poster advertising that the parties had repurposed for social media distribution. Indeed, during the campaign, the Conservatives used the motif of Ed Miliband peeping out of Alex Salmond's pocket as

an animation, a composite image, and a traditional billboard poster.

The parties also widely used links to articles (range: Labour 2.97% to UKIP 54.81%). These were either written by their own communications teams or were articles that had been published in the wider media. For the smaller parties, this allowed them to deliver an effective message without the expense of creating media from scratch.

The parties all made use of political advertising to get their messages across to voters. As Table 5.13 demonstrates, media created by the parties to target voters with attacking, persuasive or motivational messages were widely used throughout the campaign (range: UKIP 22.11% to Labour 70.92%). The vast majority of Labour's posts were political adverts, content that was produced to persuade users to consider voting Labour or attacking the government's record.

The parties all used clips from broadcast media (range: Liberal Democrats 3.45% to UKIP 17.79%). These were clips from TV debates or interviews and usually featured the party leader making a political point unopposed. Journalists' questions or challenges were edited out. Where the Conservatives linked to publishers' content, the party relied heavily either on the BBC, or newspapers with a right-wing editorial stance. Notably, the Liberal Democrats made little use of clips from broadcasters (3.45%). The parties themselves created large amounts of media content. Video, text, and photography were all widely used.

Media source	Cons (*n*=252)	Labour (*n*=337)	Lib Dems (*n*=116)	SNP (*n*=133)	Green Party (*n*=238)	Plaid Cymru (*n*=264)	UKIP (*n*=208)	Total (*n*=1,548)
App store							1 (0.48%)	1 (0.07%)
Broadcaster's content	20 (7.94%)	38 (11.28%)	4 (3.45%)	21 (15.79%)	25 (10.50%)	42 (15.91%)	37 (17.79%)	187 (12.08%)
Digital publisher's article		1 (0.30%)	2 (1.72%)		8 (3.36%)	1 (0.38%)	5 (2.40%)	17 (1.10%)
Facebook frame						1 (0.38%)		1 (0.07%)
Facebook page	2 (0.79%)					12 (4.54%)	3 (1.44%)	17 (1.10%)
Facebook poll		2 (0.59%)			3 (1.26%)			5 (0.32%)
Film			1 (0.86%)					1 (0.07%)
Film screengrab					1 (0.42%)			1 (0.07%)
Instagram		1 (0.30%)						1 (0.07%)
Letter			1 (0.86%)					1 (0.07%)
Newspaper article	10 (3.97%)	4 (1.19%)	1 (0.86%)	5 (3.76%)	19 (7.98%)	18 (4.54%)	48 (23.08%)	105 (6.78%)
Newspaper video			1 (0.86%)		1 (0.42%)		1 (0.48%)	3 (0.19%)
Party election broadcast	4 (1.59%)	20 (5.93%)	4 (3.45%)	1 (0.75%)	3 (1.26%)		3 (1.44%)	35 (2.26%)
Party photographic content	17 (6.75%)	13 (3.86%)	3 (2.59%)	44 (33.08%)	23 (9.66%)	48 (18.18%)	4 (1.92%)	152 (9.82%)
Party's audio content	12 (4.76%)						1 (0.48%)	13 (0.84%)
Party's text content	52 (20.63%)	5 (1.48%)	24 (20.69%)	5 (3.76%)	25 (10.50%)	51 (19.32%)	48 (23.08%)	210 (13.57%)
Party's video content	34 (13.49%)	9 (2.67%)	30 (25.86%)	15 (11.28%)	34 (14.29%)	4 (1.51%)	5 (2.40%)	131 (8.46%)
Political advert	98 (38.89%)	239 (70.92%)	36 (31.03%)	41 (30.83%)	90 (37.81%)	85 (32.20%)	46 (22.11%)	635 (41.02%)
Twitter	2 (0.79%)					1 (0.38%)		3 (0.19%)
UGC	1 (0.40%)	1 (0.30%)			2 (0.84%)		2 (0.96%)	6 (0.39%)
Voter registration site					1 (0.42%)	1 (0.38%)		2 (0.13%)
Website (other)		4 (1.19%)	9 (7.76%)	1 (0.75%)	3 (1.26%)		4 (1.92%)	21 (1.36%)
Total	252 (100%)	337 (100%)	116 (100%)	133 (100%)	238 (100%)	264 (100%)	208 (100%)	1,548 (100%)

Table 5.13: Media source by party account, 2015 campaign

It was also notable that few posts encouraged users to register to vote by linking to registration sites (0.13%). One might hypothesise that this was because the election date was known long in advance. Yet, while the general elections in 2017 and 2019 were snap elections, posts linking to voter

registration sites were still infrequent (2017: 0.26%; 2019: 0.76%). The party leaders used a different mix of media sources from the party accounts, as shown in Table 5.14. This was driven by a focus on the leader in photography or campaigning video clips.

Media source	David Cameron (*n*=148)	Ed Miliband (*n*=108)	Nick Clegg (*n*=36)	Nicola Sturgeon (*n*=42)	Natalie Bennett (*n*=309)	Leanne Wood (*n*=194)	Nigel Farage (*n*=139)	Total (*n*=976)
App store							1 (0.72)	1 (0.10%)
Broadcaster's content	4 (2.70%)	4 (3.70%)		6 (14.29%)	20 (6.47%)	33 (17.01%)	18 (12.95%)	85 (8.71%)
Crowdfunding site						1 (0.51%)		1 (0.10%)
Digital publisher's article	1 (0.68%)	1 (0.93%)			79 (25.57%)	11 (5.67%)	6 (4.32%)	98 (10.04%)
Facebook page					6 (1.94%)	4 (2.06%)	1 (0.72)	11 (1.13%)
Instagram		18 (16.67%)						18 (1.84%)
N/A					1 (0.32%)			1 (0.10%)
Newspaper article	1 (0.68%)	9 (8.33%)		5 (11.90%)	136 (44.02%)	41 (21.13%)	35 (25.18%)	227 (23.26%)
Newspaper video					1 (0.32%)		2 (1.44%)	3 (0.31%)
Party election broadcast	1 (0.68%)	5 (4.63%)	3 (8.33%)	1 (2.38%)	2 (0.65%)		1 (0.72%)	13 (1.33%)
Party photographic content	52 (35.13%)	16 (14.81%)	11 (30.56%)	16 (38.09%)	3 (0.97%)	60 (30.93%)	13 (9.35%)	171 (17.52%)
Party's audio content							1 (0.72)	1 (0.10%)
Party's text content	36 (24.32%)	32 (29.63%)	7 (19.44%)	2 (4.76%)	19 (6.15%)	15 (7.73%)	18 (12.95%)	129 (13.22%)
Party's video content	24 (16.22%)	2 (1.85%)	10 (27.78%)	3 (7.14%)	5 (1.62%)	1 (0.51%)	1 (0.72%)	46 (4.71%)
Petition site					4 (1.29%)			4 (0.41%)
Political advert	28 (18.92%)	20 (18.52%)	5 (13.89%)	8 (19.05%)	3 (0.97%)	23 (11.86%)	36 (25.90%)	123 (12.60%)
Register of members' interests					1 (0.32%)			1 (0.10%)
Twitter					3 (0.97%)		2 (1.44%)	5 (0.51%)
UGC	1 (0.68%)	1 (0.93%)			2 (0.65%)		1 (0.72%)	5 (0.51%)
Voter registration site						1 (0.51%)	1 (0.72)	2 (0.21%)
Website (other)				1 (2.38%)	24 (7.77%)	4 (2.06%)	2 (1.44%)	31 (3.18%)
Total	148 (100%)	108 (100%)	36 (100%)	42 (100%)	309 (100%)	194 (100%)	139 (100%)	976 (100%)

Table 5.14: Media source by leader account, 2015 campaign

David Cameron's posts heavily used photographic imagery (35.13%). These photographic posts often featured Cameron on the campaign trail. There was also extensive use of text-only posts (24.32%). These were a mix of blog-type posts discussing a particular issue or, on occasion, attacks on his opponents' positions. There was also some use of political advertising (18.92%) but little use of supportive media coverage.

Miliband extensively used text to communicate (29.63%), often putting up messages either attacking government policy or pledging to act on an issue. Unusually, at this stage, there was also extensive use made of links to content on Instagram (16.67%). Most parties only began to take Instagram seriously as a campaigning tool during the 2019 campaign.

Half of Clegg's posts featured videos, although these were often the same videos published by the main Liberal Democrats page. The media sources reflected the dominance of video and photography, with party-created content proving to be an important driver of the page's engagement. This was also true of Nicola Sturgeon, whose page focused on her campaigning and canvassing of voters. More than a third (38.09%) of her posts contained embedded photographs. Leanne Wood also used extensive photography from the campaign trail (30.93%).

Bennett's use of Facebook to link to positive media coverage meant that by far and away the most frequent source in her posts were newspaper articles (44.02%). This was followed by links to digital publishers' articles (25.57%). Nigel Farage also used his posts to amplify positive media coverage, usually from newspaper articles (25.18%). In Farage's account, extensive use was also made of political advertising (25.9%).

All the parties used clips from the mainstream broadcasters: the BBC (range: SNP 8.7% to Labour 52.17%) and ITV (range: UKIP 4.35% to SNP 65.22%), as demonstrated in Table 5.15, which shows

links by publisher. Perhaps surprisingly, parties did not have a strong tendency to link to ideologically sympathetic publishers. The Conservatives were the most partisan, linking to The *Daily Mail* (13.79%), *The Telegraph* (13.79%), the *Evening Standard* (3.45%), *The Times* (3.45%) and *The Sun* (3.45%). The Labour Party linked to the *Financial Times* (2.17%), the *Independent* (2.17%) and *The Times* (2.17%). Ed Miliband's interview with Trews, a YouTube channel launched by the comedian Russell Brand, was also linked.

The smaller parties, who tended to use more linking to media publishers, had a wide array of different publishers who they infrequently cited. For example, the Liberal Democrats tended not to link to content created by outside publishers, but when they did, they tended to link to the mainstream media. They also managed to achieve the first meme reference to the film *Love Actually* in the dataset.

Plaid Cymru often linked to external publishers, such as the BBC (41.38%). The broadcast media were preferred, but the party also linked to Welsh news publishers, such as the *Western Mail* (10.35%). The appearance of Scottish media reflected flattering comparisons that had been made between leader Leanne Wood and Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon.

UKIP tended not to follow the same trends in linking to external publishers as the other parties. Its preferred publisher was the *Daily* and *Sunday Express* (20.65%), whose owner Richard Desmond was a party donor, giving them a £1 million donation during the short campaign. The newspaper was highly supportive of the UKIP campaign, and leader Nigel Farage was one of their weekly columnists. The party also used some media links to attack the press. More widely, the party was focused on linking to media in areas where its candidates were fighting to win constituencies, for example, Thurrock in Essex, where the party's candidate came within less than a thousand votes of taking the seat.

Publisher	Cons (*n*=29)	Labour (*n*=46)	Lib Dems (*n*=10)	SNP (*n*=23)	Green Party (*n*=63)	Plaid Cymru (*n*=58)	UKIP (*n*=92)	Total (*n*=321)
Absolute radio							1 (1.09%)	1 (0.31%)
Amnesty International					1 (1.59%)			1 (0.31%)
BBC	8 (27.59%)	24 (52.17%)	1 (10%)	2 (8.70%)	20 (31.75%)	24 (41.38%)	18 (19.57%)	97 (30.22%)
BFBS							1 (1.09%)	1 (0.31%)
Big Issue					1 (1.59%)			1 (0.31%)
Bloomberg						1 (1.72%)		1 (0.31%)
Brighton Argus					1 (1.59%)			1 (0.31%)
Business Zone							1 (1.09%)	1 (0.31%)
Buzzfeed		1 (2.17%)	1 (10%)		2 (3.18%)		1 (1.09%)	5 (1.56%)
Cambrian News						1 (1.72%)		1 (0.31%)
Cardiff University						1 (1.72%)		1 (0.31%)
Carmarthen News						1 (1.72%)		1 (0.31%)
Change.org			2 (20%)					2 (0.62%)
Channel 4						1 (1.72%)		1 (0.31%)
CNBC							1 (1.09%)	1 (0.31%)
CNN							1 (1.09%)	1 (0.31%)
Common decency campaigning			1 (10%)					1 (0.31%)
Cosmopolitan							1 (1.09%)	1 (0.31%)
Daily Express							19 (20.65%)	19 (5.92%)
Daily Mail	4 (13.79%)						6 (6.52%)	10 (3.12%)
Daily Mirror			1 (10%)					1 (0.31%)
Daily Post						2 (3.45%)		2 (0.62%)
Daily Star							1 (1.09%)	1 (0.31%)
Daily Telegraph	4 (13.79%)			2 (8.70%)	2 (3.18%)		8 (8.70%)	16 (4.98%)
EU Parliament TV							2 (2.17%)	2 (0.62%)
Evening Post						2 (3.45%)		2 (0.62%)
Evening Standard	1 (3.45%)				1 (1.59%)			2 (0.62%)
Express and Star							3 (3.26%)	3 (0.94%)
Financial Times		1						1

		(2.17%)						(0.31%)
Francesca Martinez					1 (1.59%)			1 (0.31%)
gov.uk						1 (1.72%)		1 (0.31%)
Greenpeace					1 (1.59%)			1 (0.31%)
Grit Digital					1 (1.59%)			1 (0.31%)
Heart radio							1 (1.09%)	1 (0.31%)
Huffington Post					1 (1.59%)		1 (1.09%)	2 (0.62%)
Independent		1 (2.17%)			7 (11.11%)	1 (1.72%)	4 (4.35%)	13 (4.05%)
ITV	4 (13.79%)	10 (21.74%)	3 (30%)	15 (65.22%)	7 (11.11%)	14 (24.14%)	4 (4.35%)	57 (17.76%)
JSEO							1 (1.09%)	1 (0.31%)
Kent News							1 (1.09%)	1 (0.31%)
LBC							4 (4.35%)	4 (1.25%)
League of young voters					1 (1.59%)			1 (0.31%)
Love Actually (Film)			1 (10%)					1 (0.31%)
Médecins San Frontières					1 (1.59%)			1 (0.31%)
Metro					1 (1.59%)			1 (0.31%)
Mooney Opaque					1 (1.59%)			1 (0.31%)
Morning Advertiser							1 (1.09%)	1 (0.31%)
My vote advisor					1 (1.59%)			1 (0.31%)
Nick Clarke blog							1 (1.09%)	1 (0.31%)
Parliament TV		1 (2.17%)						1 (0.31%)
Pensions Insight							1 (1.09%)	1 (0.31%)
Premier Christian Radio							1 (1.09%)	1 (0.31%)
Scotsman						1 (1.72%)		1 (0.31%)
Senedd TV						1 (1.72%)		1 (0.31%)
Sky News	3 (10.34%)	6 (13.04%)		2 (8.70%)			3 (3.26%)	14 (4.36%)
Star Wars (film)					1 (1.59%)			1 (0.31%)
STV	3 (10.34%)			2 (8.70%)				5 (1.56%)
The Guardian					5 (7.94%)			5 (1.56%)
The Herald						1 (1.72%)		1 (0.31%)

The Sun	1 (3.45%)							1 (0.31%)
The Times	1 (3.45%)	1 (2.17%)						2 (0.62%)
Thurrock Gazette							3 (3.26%)	3 (0.94%)
Time Out					1 (1.59%)			1 (0.31%)
Trews (Russell Brand)		1 (2.17%)			1 (1.59%)			2 (0.62%)
Use your voice					1 (1.59%)			1 (0.31%)
Vice							1 (1.09%)	1 (0.31%)
Voice							1 (1.09%)	1 (0.31%)
Vote for policies					1 (1.59%)			1 (0.31%)
Western Eye					1 (1.59%)			1 (0.31%)
Western Mail						6 (10.35%)		6 (1.87%)
Why should we vote					1 (1.59%)			1 (0.31%)
Total	29 (100%)	46 (100%)	10 (100%)	23 (100%)	63 (100%)	58 (100%)	92 (100%)	321 (100%)

Table 5.15: Publishers of media content used by party accounts, 2015 campaign

As can be seen in Table 5.16, there was a strong preference to use the party leader in video clips, whether this was in TV debates (range: Liberal Democrats 9.3% to Plaid Cymru 56.1%), leader statements (range: Green Party 3.23% to Conservatives 41.33%), or interviews (range: Conservatives 2.67% to UKIP 17.86%). The exception was the Green Party, whose former leader and only Member of Parliament, Caroline Lucas, was a more fluent media performer than Natalie Bennett. This gave them an unusually high rate for posts featuring other politicians (16.13%).

The use of animation allowed the Conservatives to run attack ads that played on perceptions of Miliband's poor leadership, especially compared with the SNP's Nicola Sturgeon. There was some use of other politicians (16%), this was mainly Eric Pickles, then seeking re-election in the constituency of Brentwood and Ongar. The seat was a safe one, allowing Pickles to campaign around the country. He recorded a video diary of his experiences for the Conservatives' page.

Video style	Cons (*n*=75)	Labour (*n*=127)	Lib Dems (*n*=43)	SNP (*n*=38)	Green Party (*n*=93)	Plaid Cymru (*n*=41)	UKIP (*n*=28)	Total (*n*=445)
Attack ad	10 (13.33%)	41 (32.28%)	2 (4.65%)	2 (5.26%)			1 (3.57%)	56 (12.58%)
Campaign promo	3 (4%)	11 (8.66%)	3 (6.98%)	1 (2.63%)	6 (6.45%)	1 (2.44%)	4 (14.29%)	29 (6.52%)
Campaigning	3 (4%)	2 (1.57%)	24 (55.81%)	2 (5.26%)	2 (2.15%)			33 (7.42%)
Celebrity endorsement	2 (2.67%)	17 (13.39%)		1 (2.63%)	4 (4.30%)	1 (2.44%)		25 (5.62%)
Endorsement (non-celebrity)		1 (0.79%)			2 (2.15%)			3 (0.67%)
Film clip			1 (2.33%)					1 (0.23%)
Interview	2 (2.67%)	7 (5.51%)	3 (6.98%)	3 (7.90%)	6 (6.45%)	4 (9.76%)	5 (17.86%)	30 (6.74%)
Leader statement	31 (41.33%)	16 (12.60%)	3 (6.98%)	7 (18.42%)	3 (3.23%)	4 (9.76%)	9 (32.14%)	73 (16.41%)
Other politician statement	12 (16%)	2 (1.57%)	3 (6.98%)	3 (7.90%)	15 (16.13%)	2 (4.88%)	3 (10.71%)	40 (8.99%)
Policy explainer	2 (2.67%)	4 (3.15%)		4 (10.53%)	34 (36.56%)	6 (14.63%)	1 (3.57%)	51 (11.46%)
TV clip							2 (7.14%)	2 (0.45%)
TV debate	9 (12%)	25 19.69%)	4 (9.30%)	15 (39.47%)	19 (20.43%)	23 (56.10%)	3 (10.71%)	98 (22.02%)
Undercover video	1 1.33%							1 (0.23%)
Voxes		1 (0.79%)			2 (2.15%)			3 (0.67%)
Total	75 (100%)	127 (100%)	43 (100%)	38 (100%)	93 (100%)	41 (100%)	28 (100%)	445 (100%)

Table 5.16: Video styles by party account, 2015 campaign

The Labour Party made extensive use of attack ads (32.28%). The party created videos of

Conservative politicians failing to answer questions in interviews, sometimes compared with Ed

Miliband, who they showed in videos looking decisive and making clear policy points. There were

also attacks on Conservative policy, especially around health and tax. The party also heavily relied on

celebrity endorsements (13.29%). These often featured the actors Steve Coogan and Martin

Freeman or the comic Jo Brand.

Of the 43 Liberal Democrat posts that contained video, 24 (55.81%) were of campaign events. While

other formats were used, there was not much use of attack ads (4.65%).

Perhaps surprisingly, there was no widespread use of video to explain policy. Only the Green Party used video to explain party policy (36.56%). It created a regular series of video policy explainers that addressed some of its key campaign messages.

The party leaders made far less use of video, as shown in Table 5.17 (Range: Wood *n*=5 to Cameron *n*=29). The tool common to all was the leaders addressing the camera (range: Leanne Wood 20% to David Cameron 89.65%). Overall, the leader statement was the most frequently used video style (44%).

Video style	David Cameron (*n*=29)	Ed Miliband (*n*=15)	Nick Clegg (*n*=15)	Nicola Sturgeon (*n*=7)	Natalie Bennett (*n*=10)	Leanne Wood (*n*=5)	Nigel Farage (*n*=19)	Total (*n*=100)
Campaign promo		1 (6.67%)	1 (6.67%)	1 (14.29%)	2 (20%)		4 (21.05%)	9 (9%)
Campaigning			3 (20%)	1 (14.29%)		1 (20%)	1 (5.26%)	6 (6%)
Celebrity endorsement		5 (33.33%)			1 (10%)			6 (6%)
Interview		2 (13.33%)				2 (40%)	7 (30.84%)	11 (11%)
Leader statement	26 (89.65%)	4 (26.67%)	5 (33.33%)	2 (28.57%)	2 (20%)	1 (20%)	4 (21.05%)	44 (44%)
Other politician statement			1 (6.67%)		1 (10%)			2 (2%)
Parody					1 (10%)			1 (1%)
Policy explainer	2 (6.90%)	1 (6.67%)	5 (33.33%)		1 (10%)		1 (5.26%)	10 (10%)
TV clip							1 (5.26%)	1 (1%)
TV debate		2 (13.33%)		3 (42.86%)		1 (20%)		6 (6%)
TV report							1 (5.26%)	1 (1%)
Undercover video	1 (3.45%)							1 (1%)
Voxes					2 (20%)			2 (2%)
Total	29 (100%)	15 (100%)	15 (100%)	7 (100%)	10 (100%)	5 (100%)	19 (100%)	100 (100%)

Table 5.17: Video styles by leader account, 2015 campaign

Perhaps the most unusual use of video in the Conservative Party campaign was the publication of an undercover film of former Scottish First Minister Alex Salmond. In it, he appeared to suggest he would have significant influence over the budget of a future Labour and SNP coalition administration.

There were comparatively few videos posted to the Miliband account during the campaign; just 15 of the 110 posts had video embedded. The most common reason for a video post was a celebrity endorsement of Labour (33.33%), closely followed by a statement from the leader (26.67%).

During the 2015 campaign, the received wisdom was that videos should be short to deliver the most impact and reach the most viewers (NewsWhip, 2015). This would change in later campaigns as alterations to Facebook's algorithm began to boost longer videos, especially those of three minutes or longer in duration. In 2015, only UKIP had the majority of its videos last longer than 181 seconds (54.17%), as shown in Table 5.18.

Duration	Cons (*n*=69)	Labour (*n*=127)	Lib Dems (*n*=39)	SNP (*n*=34)	Green Party (*n*=80)	Plaid Cymru (*n*=41)	UKIP (*n*=24)	Total (*n*=414)
30 seconds or less	21 (30.43%)	26 (20.47%)	1 (2.56%)	3 (8.82%)	34 (42.5%)	19 (46.34%)	4 (16.67%)	108 (24.27%)
31-60 seconds	9 (13.04%)	31 (24.41%)	15 (38.46%)	17 (50%)	21 (26.25%)	17 (41.46%)	1 (4.17%)	111 (24.94%)
61-90 seconds	17 (24.64%)	26 (20.47%)	13 (33.33%)	10 (29.41%)	6 (7.5%)	1 (2.44%)	2 (8.33%)	75 (16.85%)
91-120 seconds	5 (7.25%)	12 (9.45%)	5 (12.82%)	0	6 (7.5%)	0	3 (12.5%)	31 (6.97%)
121-180 seconds	6 (8.70%)	27 (21.26%)	3 (7.69%)	4 (11.77%)	6 (7.5%)	1 (2.44%)	1 (4.17%)	48 (10.79%)
181 seconds or more	11 (15.94%)	5 (3.94%)	2 (5.13%)	0	7 (8.75%)	3 (7.32%)	13 (54.17%)	41 (9.21%)
Total	69 (100%)	127 (100%)	39 (100%)	34 (100%)	80 (100%)	41 (100%)	24 (100%)	414 (100%)

Table 5.18: Video duration by party account, 2015 campaign

As demonstrated by Table 5.19, most of the posts in the party sample set were created specifically for that account. The main exception was the Conservative Party account which shared 20.63% of its posts from other accounts, usually David Cameron's.

	Conservatives (*n*=252)	Labour (*n*=337)	Lib Dems (*n*=116)	SNP (*n*=133)	Green Party (*n*=238)	Plaid Cymru (*n*=264)	UKIP (*n*=208)
Original	200 (79.37%)	336 (99.70%)	114 (98.28%)	131 98.50%)	224 (94.12%)	247 (93.56%)	198 (95.19%)
Shared	52 (20.63%)	1 (0.30%)	2 (1.72%)	2 (1.50%)	14 (5.88%)	17 (6.44%)	10 (4.81%)
Post	231 (91.67%)	262 (77.75%)	108 (93.10%)	130 (97.74%)	234 (98.32%)	253 (95.83%)	205 (98.56%)
Repost	21 (8.33%)	75 (22.25%)	8 (6.90%)	3 (2.26%)	4 (1.68%)	11 (4.17%)	3 (1.44%)

Table 5.19: Sharing by party account, 2015 campaign

The parties also tended not to repost the same post more than once. The main exception was Labour, which reposted 75 of the 337 (22.25%) posts in the set. These tended to be the most sophisticated pieces of media, such as the party election broadcasts.

5.8 Findings: engagement

The source for data in this section is CrowdTangle, a Meta-owned tool that tracks interactions on public content from Facebook pages and groups. It does not include paid ads unless they began as organic, non-paid posts that were subsequently "boosted" using Facebook's advertising tools. It also does not include activity on private accounts or posts made visible only to specific groups of followers.

Measuring the success of political messages on Facebook is far from simple. An obvious method might be electoral success: did a party that achieved high levels of engagement go on to win more parliamentary seats?

Yet as Table 5.20 reveals, the party with the most engaging content was UKIP. The party achieved by far and away the most engagement, with double the number of reactions of its nearest competitor. In 2015, reactions on Facebook were limited to 'likes'; a wider range of reactions, including love, laughter, and anger, were introduced in early 2016. It seems unlikely that this high level of performance can be attributed to 'hate shares', where a Facebook user shares a party's content with some derisive or attacking text to frame the share to their followers. While it is true that the 2015 General Election marked the high-water mark in UKIP support, it cannot be inferred from its Facebook performance that it was the most successful party in the election.

Party	Total interactions	Reactions	Comments	Shares	Seats won (change)
UKIP	1,593,655	1,221,767	130,920	240,968	1 (0)
Labour	1,147,702	625,758	122,177	399,767	232 (-26)
Conservatives	871,904	595,228	136,845	139,831	331 (+24)
Green Party	451,961	316,236	39,839	95,886	1 (0)
SNP	305,135	228,176	27,041	49,918	56 (+50)
Liberal Democrats	44,309	23,976	11,960	8,373	8 (-49)
Plaid Cymru	42,804	33,117	2,671	7,016	3 (0)

Table 5.20: Engagement by party, 2015 campaign.
Source: CrowdTangle (2021)

The second most engaged with account was Labour. Yet, the party went on to lose 26 seats on polling day. This table also reveals the very poor performance of the Liberal Democrats. Despite being the third-largest party in the 2010-15 Parliament, the party saw very low levels of engagement

on Facebook. Its total interactions were less than a tenth of the Green Party. The party clearly failed

to create the type of engaging content needed to drive a successful organic Facebook campaign.

A slightly different pattern of engagement can be seen when looking at engagement with the

leaders' accounts, as shown in Table 5.21. David Cameron had the largest number of interactions.

This is in line with the fact that he had the most extensive Facebook following of any leader during

the 2015 campaign. UKIP leader Nigel Farage saw growth in his following across the course of the

campaign, and this is reflected in the high level of interactions with his account. No data was

recorded in CrowdTangle for Nick Clegg.

Name	Total interactions	Reactions	Comments	Shares	Seats won
David Cameron	787,844	538,086	123,719	126,039	331
Nigel Farage	697,398	501,416	101,939	94,023	1
Ed Miliband	288,881	213,016	35,205	40,660	232
Nicola Sturgeon	283,195	240,828	25,680	16,687	56
Natalie Bennett	115,002	90,124	8,140	16,738	1
Leanne Wood	70,009	55,577	7,180	7,252	3

Table 5.21: Engagement with leader accounts, 2015 campaign.
Source: CrowdTangle (2021)

While CrowdTangle does not record a social media post's reach, it provides some information about

the posts that generated the most engagement through interactions, as shown in Table 5.22. The

most successful post was of a Labour Party election broadcast with the comic actor Steve Coogan.

This was widely shared and was the most viewed party video of the campaign, with more than 1.2

million views during the short campaign (Walsh, 2016). Labour enjoyed further success with video.

Two attack ads were successful, one that used archive news footage to show what voters might

expect if the Conservatives were returned to power. The other was of a BBC interview with the

Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, showing him on 18 occasions failing to answer a

question on NHS funding.

	Party	Description	Total interactions	Likes	Shares	Comments
1	Labour	Steve Coogan PEB	67,500	19,739	45,267	2,494
2	Conservatives	Thanks for voting Image and text	65,397	55,114	6,465	3,818
3	Labour	Five more years attack ad	42,268	11,387	28,934	1,947
4	Labour	Vote Labour infographic	31,132	13,498	16,948	686
5	Labour	Evasive Osborne attack ad	25,597	8,174	15,506	1,917
6	Green Party	Green party policies infographic	19,183	12,461	4,826	1,896
7	Conservatives	Party policies infographic	19,141	9,498	8,100	1,543
8	Green Party	Change the tune PEB	18,924	7,817	9,639	1,468
9	Labour	Party policies infographic	18,586	9,464	8,210	912
10	Conservatives	Party policies infographic	18,362	11,351	6,042	969

Table 5.22: Most engaged with posts by party account, 2015 campaign
Source: CrowdTangle (2021)

Interestingly, the second most interacted with piece of content was one that thanked voters for turning out, which was published on polling day. A similar pattern was seen in the leaders' accounts, shown in Table 5.23. Nicola Sturgeon's photograph thanking supporters and urging them to support the SNP was also published on election day. The most engaged with post was a video of David Cameron giving an Easter Sunday message. However, it was notable that several of the most engaged leaders' posts were text-only. This was a different pattern from the more produced content in the party accounts and, perhaps, reflects the importance of personality in political communication.

	Name	Description	Total interactions	Likes	Shares	Comments
1	David Cameron	Easter message leader statement	48,095	19,858	24,739	3,498
2	Nicola Sturgeon	Thank you and vote SNP photograph	36,910	31,453	3,035	2,422
3	Nicola Sturgeon	Thank you message post-debate. Text only	33,462	30,219	790	2,453
4	David Cameron	Vote Conservative today leader statement	26,856	15,181	8,614	3,061
5	Nigel Farage	90-second manifesto animation	26,571	15,131	8,378	3,062
6	Ed Miliband	Reflection on the campaign text only	26,211	20,709	2,881	2,621
7	David Cameron	Nepal earthquake reaction text only	24,067	19,816	2,327	1,924
8	David Cameron	Royal baby congratulations text only	23,363	20,247	1,287	1,829
9	David Cameron	Sikh parade congratulations leader statement	22,071	13,206	6,753	2,112
10	Nigel Farage	EU Parliament debate leader statement	21,490	11,484	6,861	3,145

Table 5.23: Most engaged with posts by leader accounts, 2015 campaign
Source: CrowdTangle (2021)

Video attracted considerable views across the campaign, especially for Labour. The party produced more videos and achieved more views than its competitors. On average, each Labour video attracted 107,431 views. The party's closest rivals, the Conservatives, averaged 113,801 views per video. UKIP's videos garnered an average of 235,740 views per owned video. Owned videos are videos that the party uploaded to its account, rather than those shared from other accounts, YouTube, or other video platforms.

Party	Owned videos	Views
Labour	132	14,180,903
Conservatives	34	3,869,242
UKIP	11	2,593,141
SNP	36	2,070,505
Green Party	87	3,529,753
Liberal Democrats	38	302,921
Plaid Cymru	41	166,599

Table 5.24: Total video views by party account, 2015 campaign
Source: CrowdTangle (2021)

Data from the leaders' accounts, as demonstrated in Table 5.25, again shows the impact of David

Cameron's account. It generated around three million more views than the Conservatives' official

account during the campaign. Also notable was the failure to effectively use Ed Miliband's account

to engage people through video.

Name	Owned videos	Views
David Cameron	32	6,900,484
Nigel Farage	21	2,687,224
Ed Miliband	9	836,141
Nicola Sturgeon	1	95,081
Leanne Wood	0	0
Natalie Bennett	0	0
Nick Clegg		

Table 5.25: Total video views by leader account, 2015 campaign
Source: CrowdTangle (2021)

5.9 Conclusion

This chapter has looked at the 2015 General Election campaign and the Facebook activity of party

and leader accounts in some detail. Several factors stand out when considering this activity. In many

cases (35.38%), posts lacked explicit references to policy or failed to contain text that drove home

the party's message. The dataset contained 547 posts without any stated policies, for instance

providing photographs of campaign events instead; when policies were included, primarily on party

rather than leader accounts, breadth was emphasised over depth, and the presentation was short on personality. The evaluation through CrowdTangle indicated that even successful posts did not capitalise on followers' attention. This was particularly the case in the leaders' accounts, where posting tended to be intermittent and lacking in a clearly articulated strategic purpose for vote maximisation. Although more positive and less likely to attack opponents than the party accounts, leaders' accounts (with exception of Ed Miliband) tended to be light on policy; they also struggled to focus on leadership and personality.

As Bode (2015) points out, users have an opportunity to learn from exposure to political information on social media. But without repeatedly encountering issues salient to them, these users are unlikely to be persuaded by spillover content. This study showed that UK politicians in 2015 failed to capitalise on opportunities afforded to them to persuade social media users with engaging content that might have encouraged sharing and commenting. The evidence from 2015 is that their use of social media was far from optimal.

While the body of social media posts analysed in this chapter is from Facebook, the results are in line with Jungherr's (2016b) hypothesis that opposition parties will post more frequently than those in government. In this study, Labour posted more often than the Conservatives, and the leaders of the smaller parties were more frequent posters than David Cameron. The 2015 election campaign is also unusual compared with the other two analysed in this research in that right-wing parties and politicians were the most followed. By the time of the 2017 election, Corbyn's Labour party would be far more influential and his account the most followed in the sample. In addition, 2015 was the high watermark for UKIP electoral support.

Although policy discussion featured in just under a quarter of party posts and slightly less than 15% of leaders' posts, those that did consider policy were most aligned with strategic functions. When

the parties took advantage of the opportunity to engage with users, they did so by positioning policy

as persuasion intended to encourage voters to back their approaches. Their posts also urged users to

register to vote, attend campaign events, and vote on Election Day, in line with Jungherr's (2016a)

imperative to mobilise supporters with regular calls-to-arms. However, Jungherr's (2016a)

operationalised approaches to Facebook campaigning also suggest parties should have made a

greater attempt to raise funds from supporters, a function that did not feature widely in the dataset.

Plaid Cymru pursued this function the most often (3.03%) – but that still amounted to only eight

posts. Again, this appears to be an opportunity missed by the parties, despite looking to the Obama

campaigns for inspiration. While there is far less money in British politics than in America, raising

funds remains an important aspect of political activity, especially for parties that cannot rely on

wealthy backers.

Most of the posts displayed little humour – with a few exceptions, such as the Green Party's *Change

the Tune* election broadcast. Given the long history of political satire in the United Kingdom, as well

as the likelihood that voters perceive Facebook use as leisure time and are therefore open to being

entertained, this was another missed opportunity. The results were also not in line with Ceccobelli's

(2018) finding that leaders make use of personalisation in their digital political communication; while

there was more use of personalisation in leaders' accounts, particularly Ed Miliband's, than party

ones, it was still a relatively small amount. Nor did the parties or leaders reduce the use of negative

posts as the campaign progressed. Indeed, for the first time in British general elections, there was

significant use of video attack ads (Walsh, 2016), which did generate significant engagement,

especially for the Labour Party (see Table 5.22).

There was also considerable use of video statements by party leaders (44% of leaders' video posts),

where they spoke directly to camera about an issue. This added to the immediacy of political

communication through Facebook, allowing some leaders to develop a relatively informal and

conversational style. David Cameron, in particular, was able to use this approach to drive engagement with his account. As other elections in this study show, leaders incapable of appearing relaxed and charismatic in video struggled to communicate their messages well through social media. The use of video marked a significant departure from the campaigning approaches of previous elections (Walsh, 2015). As Lee and Campbell (2016) point out, much of the posting on Facebook is reminiscent of the billboard posters of previous elections, consisting of image and text posts that do not achieve significant levels of user engagement. The parties' videos bucked this trend. These did generate user engagement and, as the literature reviewed in Chapter Two suggests, were therefore likely to receive a positive boost from Facebook's algorithm.

In retrospect, it is surprising how little debate there was during the 2015 election over the issue of what came to be known as Brexit. This was the zenith of UKIP support, and with Cameron having conceded that a referendum on membership of the European Union would take place in the next Parliament, the parties seem to have been content to leave the debate about Brexit for another day. Only UKIP talked about the issue with any regularity. Given that a year later the UK would narrowly vote to leave the EU, this seems both surprising and a lost opportunity to engage with a significant constitutional issue that would lead to considerable political turmoil in the coming years. But as the next chapter will show, the 2017 election would also be one in which the Brexit dog didn't bark.

Chapter 6 The 2017 General Election

This chapter will examine Facebook activity by the parties and party leaders during the snap election of 2017. Using the coding tool, it will build on the analysis of 2015 outlined in the last chapter. It will also examine public engagement with the parties using data from Meta's CrowdTangle tool. An early version of this chapter, developed using a prior version of the coding tool, was published as *Snap election surprises: A quantitative analysis of Facebook use by political actors in the 2017 UK election* in *Journalism, Society and Politics in the Digital Media Era* (Jebril et al., 2020).

6.1 Context of the 2017 election

When Prime Minister Theresa May stepped into Downing Street on the morning of the 18th April 2017, few people knew she was about to announce a snap general election. Even *The Times*' well-connected political columnist Daniel Finkelstein, a man so close to her predecessor that he used to contribute drafts of David Cameron's conference speeches, tweeted, " It won't be an election" (Finkelstein, 2017a). This was followed shortly afterwards by a rueful acknowledgement that predicting things is hard, "On the other hand" (Finkelstein, 2017b).

Having returned from a walking holiday in Snowdonia convinced that she had an opportunity to secure her own mandate as prime minister, Theresa May caught not only her rivals on the hop but also her allies (Rayner, 2017a). Conservative Campaign Headquarters was unprepared for the election; talented staff had been allowed to drift away, data allowed to atrophy and the consultants who had successfully run previous campaigns had to be swiftly rehired (Wallace, 2017). Expecting the Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn to try to block the election, Mrs May gave herself time to achieve the two-thirds Parliamentary majority required by the Fixed Term Parliaments Act, 2011. However, to the surprise of some of his own MPs (Mason and Elgot, 2017), Mr Corbyn welcomed the election. Parliament voted to dissolve itself and for an election to be held on the 8th June, 2017.

This decision had the effect of creating an unusually long election campaign. When Parliament was dissolved on the 3ʳᵈ May, in many parts of the UK, the political parties were already campaigning for local council elections due to be held the following day. The snap election announcement effectively triggered a national campaign of more than seven weeks, the most extended campaign, as measured by days between the election date being announced and the election taking place, since at least 1979 (Jones, 2015).

It also increased the pressure on the air war and the digital campaign. As supporters were mobilised, campaign messages tested, and advertising bought, all the parties had to rely more on digital and broadcast media to deliver key messages. The parties all used Facebook as a battleground for communicating directly with voters.

The election campaign was unusual. Conservative leader Theresa May entered it from an apparent position of strength. She had been under growing pressure to consider an election after months of favourable polling (Allen, 2017). Conversely, Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn's position seemed vulnerable following the Brexit campaign and a backbench rebellion that had led to a leadership challenge. The local elections on the 4ᵗʰ May saw Labour secure just 27% of the vote, losing 382 seats. Some polling suggested the party was on course to secure just 147 parliamentary seats (Shipman, 2017).

The campaign did not conform to expectations. Labour was buoyed by a series of eye-catching policy proposals and a campaign that played to Jeremy Corbyn's strengths in addressing crowds (Bell, 2018). Labour Party election strategists had two clear drivers for strategy in the digital campaign. Firstly, they believed when voters saw Jeremy Corbyn during the short campaign, unfiltered by the media's perceived biases, the electorate would find him an engaging and sympathetic figure

(Stewart, 2017). To that end, much of the focus during the campaign was on Corbyn as a leader and personality. The second strategic driver was to counter negative reporting of Labour's policy positions. Labour's communications team believed it had to counter aggressively the media's framing of party policies. Labour refused to accept the narrative composed for it in the press. It used social media to highlight policies and videos of election rallies to reinforce the message that the party was a social movement. This strategic approach to campaigning has been noted by scholars (Gerbaudo et al., 2019; Dommett and Temple, 2018), yet it is also the case that there was a gulf between the communication team in Jeremy Corbyn's office and the party communication team based at Southside. Each viewed the other with suspicion, and relations were often acrimonious (Pogrund and Maguire, 2021). But campaigning by the leader's digital team was also supported by the third-party organisation Momentum, set up to support Corbyn's election campaigns, which was able to connect with young people and help drive up support among online-savvy audiences (Dorey, 2017).

The Conservatives struggled. Despite a campaign ostensibly being fought to strengthen the prime minister's hand in Brexit negotiations, the Conservatives were regularly forced onto the back foot. A policy to reform social care, quickly branded the 'Dementia Tax' by the press, turned into a political disaster forcing an embarrassing U-turn (Anushka and Elgot, 2017). Theresa May proved a stiff and awkward campaigner, the "weak and wobbly" jibe under-cutting her bid to establish strong leadership credentials (Atkins and Gaffney, 2020).

The campaign was also suspended twice after mass-casualty terrorist attacks. The first suspension occurred following the suicide-bombing of Ariana Grande's concert in Manchester on 22nd May. The bombing killed 22 people and injured more than 100 others. The campaign was suspended again following an attack on the 3rd June at Borough Market near London Bridge, in which eight people were murdered before police shot dead the three attackers.

The final result, as seen in Table 6.1, shocked many people, including pollsters (Cowling, 2017).

While the Conservative Party increased its vote share, overall, it lost 13 seats along with the slender

majority it achieved in 2015. Labour supporters were ecstatic when Corbyn increased his vote share

by almost 10%, taking 30 additional seats.

Party	Share	Share change from 2015	Seats	Seats change from 2015
Conservatives	42.40%	+5.50%	318	-13
Labour	40.00%	+9.50%	262	30
Liberal Democrats	7.40%	-0.50%	12	4
Scottish National Party	3.00%	-1.70%	35	-21
UKIP	1.80%	-10.80%	0	-1
Green Party	1.60%	-2.10%	1	0
Plaid Cymru	0.50%	-0.10%	4	1
Others	3.30%	+0.20%	18	0

Table 6.1: General election results, 2017 campaign
Source: BBC News - https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election/2017/results

In Scotland, the SNP fell back from its 2015 high watermark and lost 21 seats. The Liberal Democrats

managed a slight improvement on their 2015 wipe-out. UKIP, struggling under the leadership of Paul

Nuttall, saw its vote share collapse and failed to take a single seat. After the result, Nuttall quit as

party leader and deleted his Facebook and Twitter accounts.

During the 2015 election, targeted advertising by the Conservatives in key marginal constituencies

was credited as a critical factor in the success of David Cameron's campaign (Ross, 2015). Using a

data model developed by the former advisor to Barack Obama, Jim Messina, the Conservatives'

digital team could use Facebook to identify undecided voters and deliver messages based on their

interests. Such was the perceived impact the Conservatives, Labour, and Liberal Democrats all

committed themselves to increased digital advertising spending in 2017, as demonstrated in Table

6.2.

Party	Facebook	Twitter	Snapchat	Google	Total (£)
Conservatives	2,118,045.95	25,000.00	17,770.49	562,153.59	2,722,970.03
Labour	569,687.02	390.84	63,887.18	254,515.51	888,480.05
Liberal Democrats	409,141.43	17,105.52	4,260.95	203,531.09	634,038.99
SNP	43,345.44	7,487.01	0	0	50,832.45
Green Party	18,753.15	72.00	0	0	18,825.15
Plaid Cymru	5,895.96	0	0	0	5,895.96
UKIP	0	0	0	0	0

Table 6.2: Digital advertising spend by party in 2017 campaign
Source: The Electoral Commission

Facebook native digital tools, such as a chat app, were also developed that directed users to relevant policies. These had the added value of retaining user data for future contact. Indeed, the chat app was reactivated with personalised messages for supporters at the start of the next party conference the following September. The Labour Party developed its own internal tool, Promote, which matched social media accounts to voter interests to help it deliver more targeted advertising (Stewart 2017). Labour's digital team also built a polling station finder and supported it with paid advertising on Snapchat. In the final 24 hours before the polls closed, it was visited 1.24 million times, 61% of its traffic originating from Snapchat (Howell, 2018).

6.2 Findings: Party accounts' Facebook posts

All the political parties made use of Facebook to communicate with supporters. As Figure 6.1 demonstrates, Labour made the most extensive use of Facebook campaigning (*n*=486), posting more than twice as often as its nearest rival, the Scottish National Party (*n*=207).
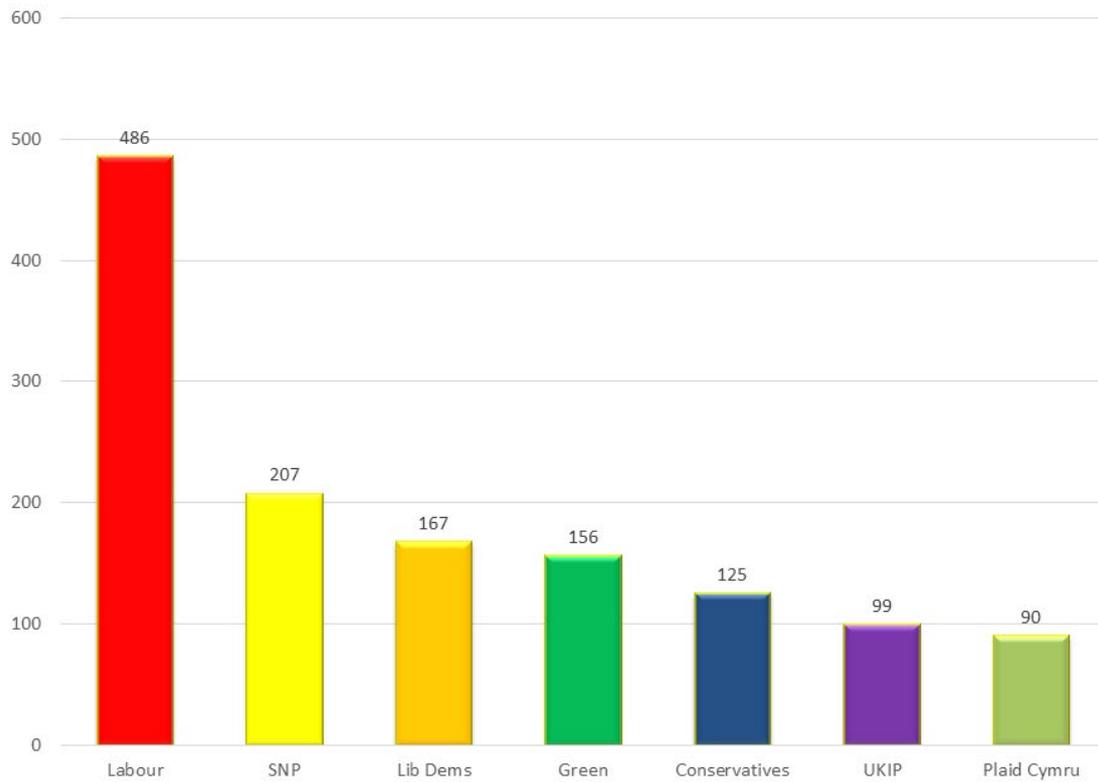
Figure 6.1: Party Facebook posts, 2017 campaign (*n*=1,330)

The Conservative Party was one of the less frequent posters on Facebook during the campaign (*n*=125). While its posts were often highly produced and polished, this relative inaction created the impression of a static campaign compared to the much more frequent posting of Labour. As shown in Table 6.3, by the time of the 2017 election, Labour had overtaken the Conservatives as the political party with the most Facebook supporters.

Name	Likes on 03/05/17	Likes on 08/06/172	Change figure +
Labour Party	657,837	968,678	310,841 (47.25%)
Conservatives	572,789	629,755	56,966 (9.95%)
Green Party	281,711	303,525	21,814 (7.74%)
Liberal Democrats	167,961	185,179	17,218 (10.25%)
UKIP	583,222	596,125	12,903 (2.21%)
SNP	277,970	286,913	8,943 (3.22%)
Plaid Cymru	26,954	28,948	1,994 (7.40%)

Table 6.3: Growth in likes for party accounts, 2017 campaign
Source: CrowdTangle (2021)

Across the short campaign, Labour added a large number of extra followers to its Facebook page, up by almost a half in five weeks (47.25%). While there was growth across all the parties, none of the others were able to develop such a wave of support. This is most clearly shown in the stalling of UKIP's digital growth (2.21%).

6.3 Findings: Leaders' Facebook posts

The leaders' use of Facebook differed from its use by the party accounts. As shown in Figure 6.2, the Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn was the most prolific poster, although at a slower rate than the party account (233 Corbyn posts vs. 486 Labour Party posts). The next most frequent user was Plaid Cymru leader Leanne Wood (*n*=131), perhaps surprising when one considers the Plaid Cymru account was the least frequent poster in the campaign (*n*=90). The Green Party's joint leaders, Caroline Lucas and Jonathan Bartley, both posted a similar number of times. The Liberal Democrats' Tim Farron was the least frequent user.
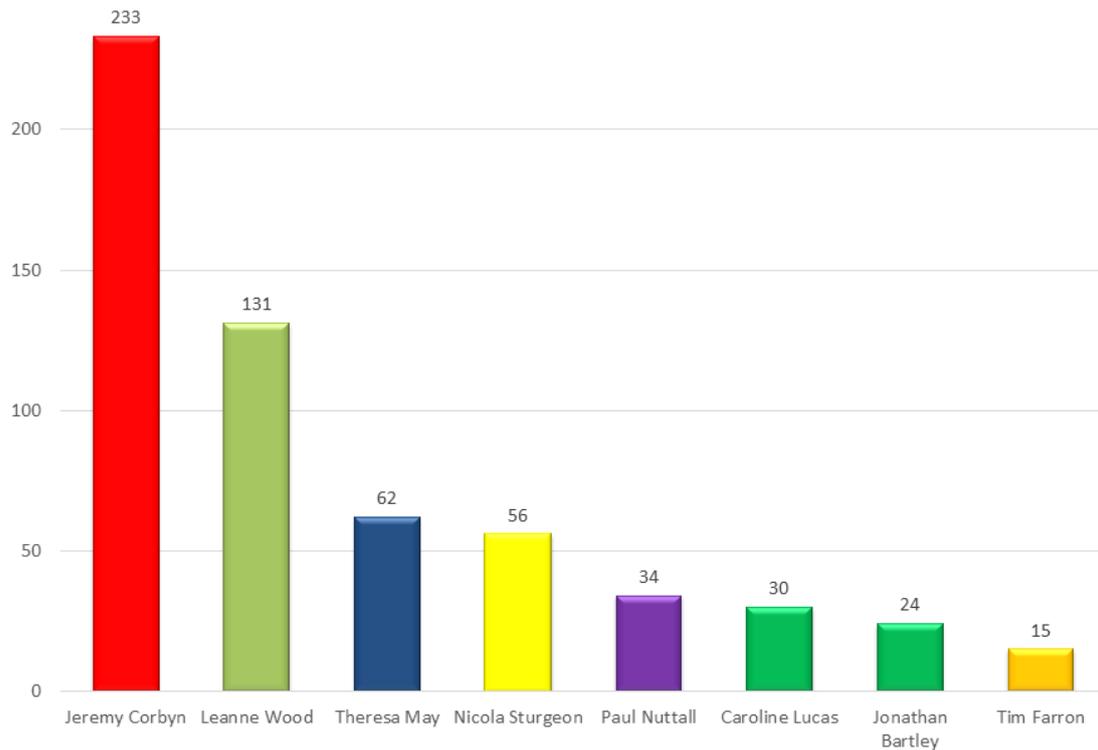
Figure 6.2: Leader Facebook posts, 2017 campaign (*n*=585)

As with the party accounts, all the leaders increased the number of likes on their Facebook pages, as demonstrated in Table 6.4. Jeremy Corbyn's account was already the most liked page in the sample, but he was able to add almost a third (32.57%) more likes through the short campaign, taking him to more than a million. None of the other leaders was able to match this level of growth; the second-largest increase was Theresa May, who added 53,100 likes or 14.49% to her following. SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon's account grew the least (1.42%).

Name	Likes on 03/05/17	Likes on 08/06/17	Change figure +
Jeremy Corbyn	863,029	1,144,135	281,106 (32.57%)
Theresa May	366,581	419,681	53,100 (14.49%)
Caroline Lucas	74,413	82,269	7,856 (10.56%)
Tim Farron	32,956	37,479	4,523 (13.72%)
Nicola Sturgeon	295,250	299,450	4,200 (1.42%)
Jonathan Bartley	7,934	9,138	1,204 (15.18%)
Leanne Wood	31,352	32,469	1,117 (3.56%)

Table 6.4: Growth in likes for leader accounts, 2017 campaign
Source: CrowdTangle (2021)

No data were recorded in CrowdTangle for Paul Nuttall as he deleted his account after the election's exit poll was announced.

6.4 Findings: What they were trying to achieve

In this section, data are presented on the approaches of both the party accounts and the leader accounts to the 2017 digital campaign. This will be analysed through a series of data tables to show the strategic approaches employed and the policy areas discussed.

6.4.1 Findings: Facebook strategies for party accounts

In contrast to the 2015 campaign for both the Conservatives and Labour Party, this election represented a break from the past. The Tories did not attempt to run on their record in government despite being in power for seven years; instead, there was considerable use of Facebook to explain policy and attack opponents, as demonstrated in Table 6.5.

Strategic Function	Cons (*n*=125)	Labour (*n*=486)	Lib Dems (*n*=167)	SNP (*n*=207)	Green Party (*n*=156)	Plaid Cymru (*n*=90)	UKIP (*n*=99)	Total (*n*=1,330)
Amplify media coverage	4 (3.2%)		34 (20.36%)	43 (20.77%)	47 (30.13%)	37 (41.11%)	37 (37.37%)	202 (15.19%)
Attack on government record		49 (10.08%)	8 (4.79%)	4 (1.93%)	4 (2.56%)	9 (10%)	13 (13.13%)	87 (6.54%)
Attack on media					5 (3.21%)		2 (2.02%)	7 (0.53%)
Attack on party policy		1 (0.21%)	17 (10.18%)	16 (7.73%)	6 (3.85%)	4 (4.44%)	10 (10.10%)	54 (4.06%)
Attack on politician	33 (26.4%)	13 (2.67%)	22 (13.17%)	5 (2.42%)	3 (1.92%)		3 (3.03%)	79 (5.94%)
Canvassing	7 (5.6%)	59 (12.14%)	24 (14.38%)	14 (6.76%)	15 (9.62%)	9 (10%)	3 (3.03%)	131 (9.85%)
Celebration of historical achievement		3 (0.62%)		1 (0.48%)				4 (0.30%)
Coalition speculation	4 (3.2%)			6 (2.90%)	1 (0.64%)			11 (0.83%)
Defence of government record				17 (8.21%)				17 (1.28%)
Fundraising		24 (4.94%)	2 (1.20%)	6 (2.90%)	6 (3.85%)			38 (2.86%)
Horse race			1 (0.60%)		1 (0.64%)			2 (0.15%)
Leadership	23 (18.4%)	2 (0.41%)	12 (7.19%)	6 (2.90%)	4 (2.56%)	2 (2.22%)	4 (4.04%)	53 (3.99%)
Local election campaigning		2 (0.41%)	2 (1.20%)	22 (10.63%)	1 (0.64%)	6 (6.67%)		33 (2.48%)
Personalisation			1 (0.60%)	1 (0.48%)	5 (3.21%)	1 (1.11%)	1 (1.01%)	9 (0.68%)
Policy outline or discussion	28 (22.4%)	214 (44.03%)	19 (11.38%)	29 (14.01%)	24 (15.38%)	11 (12.22%)	17 (17.17%)	342 (25.71%)
Reaction to news event	2 (1.6%)	6 (1.24%)	8 (4.79%)	2 (0.97%)	6 (3.85%)	3 (3.33%)	3 (3.03%)	30 (2.26%)
Voting	24 (19.2%)	113 (23.25%)	17 (10.18%)	35 (16.91%)	28 (17.95%)	8 (8.89%)	6 (6.06%)	231 (17.37%)
Total	125 (100%)	486 (100%)	167 (100%)	207 (100%)	156 (100%)	90 (100%)	99 (100%)	1,330 (100%)

Table 6.5: Strategic function of party accounts, 2017 campaign

The parties had several common themes in their use of Facebook. All carried posts that explained policy (range: Liberal Democrats 11.38% to Labour 44.03%) and showed canvassing and campaigning activity (range: UKIP 3.03% to Liberal Democrats 14.38%). They all used Facebook to some extent to promote politicians' leadership qualities (range: Labour 0.41% to Conservatives 18.4%) and

occasionally to communicate directly with users about news developments (range: SNP 0.97% to

Liberal Democrats 4.79%).

The Conservative Party posts focused on the figure of Theresa May and emphasised her leadership.

This reflected polling in the run-up to the election that compared Mrs May favourably with Mr

Corbyn on the question of who would make the more capable prime minister (Skinner and Gottfried,

2017). As the campaign wore on, confidence waned in the electoral appeal of Theresa May. The oft-

repeated phrase "strong and stable leadership" was turned against her after the volte-face on social

care policy (Ridge-Newman, 2019). The party used Facebook to discuss its policy objectives (22.4%)

and attack its opponents (26.4%). This was chiefly Jeremy Corbyn but also included his close allies:

the shadow Chancellor John McDonnell and the shadow Home Secretary, Dianne Abbott.

The Facebook posting by the Labour Party during the 2017 election campaign differed from other

parties and its own posting in both previous and subsequent campaigns. Unlike other accounts in the

sample, there are more reposts than original posts. By the end of the campaign, core posts were

repeated almost every day as the party strove to drive home messages and motivate its supporters

to turn out to vote (23.25%) and donate money to the party (4.94%). The party used Facebook to

explain its policies (44.03%), believing it would not receive a fair hearing in the press, which it

believed to be fundamentally opposed to a Corbyn-led premiership. There was also some use of

Facebook to attack the Conservatives' record in government (10.08%).

The Liberal Democrats entered the 2017 election still dealing with the hangover created by the

party's participation in the coalition government of 2010-15. Having been all but wiped out in the

2015 election, new leader Tim Farron had begun to try and rebuild support. With a sharp wit and

personal charm, Farron had proved an attractive figure in the party's leadership campaign, but his

strong evangelical Christan belief led to difficult questions from the media. In a Channel 4 News

interview, he refused to answer three times when asked whether he believed gay sex was a sin (Wintour, 2015). The question of whether his firm theological belief sat in contradiction to his liberal values followed him throughout his leadership. Just before the 2017 election, he told the BBC he did not believe gay sex was sinful, but after stepping down, he admitted that this was merely a tactic to get the question off the table, saying his answer had been "foolish and wrong" (BBC News, 2018a). With the Liberal Democrats struggling to come back from the disaster of 2015, much of the Facebook activity of the party account was focused on amplifying media coverage (20.36%). Compared to 2015, there was greater use of the account to attack opponents (13.17%) and their policies (10.18%), as well as attacking the record of the government (4.79%). The party also used the account to discuss policies (11.38%) and encourage voters to register and turn out to vote (10.18%).

The 2015 election had been a major victory for the Scottish National Party, which secured a record 56 seats in the Parliament. At the start of the 2017 campaign, it was focused on the elections that took place in all 32 Scottish local authorities on the 4th May. This is reflected in the party's Facebook activity: 10.63% of the short campaign posts referenced the local elections. The party also used its account to amplify media coverage (20.77%), as well as to discuss policy (14.01%) and encourage voting (16.91%).

After failing to secure a breakthrough in the 2015 election, the Green Party had returned to the leadership of its most successful politician, Caroline Lucas. She shared the leadership with Jonathan Bartley, a former Conservative Party volunteer who had become disillusioned with the larger political parties. The Green Party used its Facebook account to amplify media coverage of its campaign (30.13%), as well as to talk about its policies (15.38%) and urge voters to back it (17.95%). Amplification of media was also the main driver of the Plaid Cymru account during the campaign (41.11%). The party also used the account to a lesser extent to discuss policy (12.22%) and highlight its canvassing (10%).

After UKIP's successful capture of 12.6% of the vote in the 2015 election, the party's leader Nigel Farage had stepped down, not once but twice. The first time he quit was in the election's immediate aftermath before returning to mastermind the party's approach to the European referendum. The second time was directly after the referendum and the decision to leave the EU, saying, "I want my life back" (BBC News, 2016). His successor Paul Nuttall struggled to articulate the purpose of UKIP following the referendum, the party's main policy goal having been accomplished with the decision to leave the EU. The party's Facebook account strove to amplify media coverage of its campaign (37.37%) and remained typically combative, attacking the government's record (13.13%) and its opponents' policies (10.10%). It also spent some time discussing party policy (17.17%).

6.4.2 Findings: Facebook strategies for leader accounts

As seen in Table 6.6, there was a wide range of use of Facebook by the party leaders; there were heavy users such as Jeremy Corbyn (*n*=233) and those who barely used it at all, such as Tim Farron (*n*=15).

Strategic Function	May (*n*=62)	Corbyn (*n*=233)	Farron (*n*=15)	Sturgeon (*n*=56)	Bartley (*n*=24)	Lucas (*n*=30)	Wood (*n*=131)	Nuttall (*n*=34)	Total (*n*=585)
Amplify media coverage	2 (3.23%)	23 (9.87%)	1 (6.67%)	6 (10.71%)	4 (16.67%)	8 (26.67%)	50 (38.17%)	14 (41.18%)	108 (18.46%)
Attack on government record		16 (6.87%)			4 (16.67%)	3 (10%)	9 (6.87%)	3 (8.82%)	35 (5.98%)
Attack on media					1 (4.17%)	2 (6.67%)	3 (2.29%)	1 (2.94%)	7 (1.20%)
Attack on party policy		4 (1.72%)		5 (8.93%)	3 (12.5%)		3 (2.29%)	3 (8.82%)	18 (3.08%)
Attack on politician	4 (6.45%)	32 (13.73%)		3 (5.36%)		2 (6.67%)	14 (10.69%)	1 (2.94%)	56 (9.57%)
Canvassing	12 (19.35%)	36 (15.45%)	4 (26.67%)	12 (21.43%)	3 (12.5%)	5 (16.67%)	15 (11.45%)	3 (8.82%)	90 (15.39%)
Celebration of historical achievement		1 (0.43%)							1 (0.17%)
Defence of government record				2 (3.57%)					2 (0.34%)
Fundraising							3 (2.29%)		3 (0.51%)
Horse race							2 (1.53%)		2 (0.34%)
Leadership	17 (27.42%)	14 (6.01%)	1 (6.67%)	1 (1.79%)	2 (8.33%)		2 (1.53%)	2 (5.88%)	39 (6.67%)
Local election campaigning		2 (0.86%)		2 (3.57%)			3 (2.29%)		7 (1.20%)
Personalisation		2 (0.86%)	1 (6.67%)		1 (4.17%)	1 (3.33%)	6 (4.58%)	2 (5.88%)	13 (2.22%)
Policy outline or discussion	20 (32.26%)	57 (24.46%)	2 (13.33%)	4 (7.14%)	1 (4.17%)	6 (20%)	4 (3.05%)	1 (2.94%)	95 (16.24%)
Reaction to news event	1 (1.61%)	11 (4.72%)	6 (40%)	6 (10.71%)	3 (12.5%)	1 (3.33%)	3 (2.29%)	3 (8.82%)	34 (5.81%)
Voting	6 (9.68%)	35 (15.02%)		15 (26.79%)	2 (8.33%)	2 (6.67%)	14 (10.69%)	1 (2.94%)	75 (12.82%)
Total	62 (100%)	233 (100%)	15 (100%)	56 (100%)	24 (100%)	30 (100%)	131 (100%)	34 (100%)	585 (100%)

Table 6.6: Strategic function of leader accounts, 2017 campaign

Despite serving as Home Secretary throughout Cameron's two administrations, Theresa May made no effort to defend Conservative policies from the preceding seven years, preferring to focus on her plan to get a mandate for the coming Brexit negotiations with the European Commission. Her posts emphasised her leadership (27.42%), often presented positively in comparison to Jeremy Corbyn, and policy discussion (32.26%). In contrast with the Conservatives' main account, there was little attacking of opponents (6.45%).

Jeremy Corbyn, who had endured a difficult period as leader since his surprise election in 2015, used his account extensively, emphasising the range of Labour's policies and explaining their likely impact (24.46%). The account also featured regular posts focusing on his campaigning activity (15.45%) and attacking his opponents (13.73%). Unlike the main Labour account, Corbyn also posted positive coverage in the media (9.87%). There was also more use of posts focusing on leadership by his account (6.01%) than the main party account (0.41%). Labour strategists in the Leader of the Opposition's office wanted to energise voters who had drifted away from the party since 1997's New Labour landslide, either by voting for other left-wing parties such as the Greens or because they had stopped voting altogether. Strategists were confident the campaign and Jeremy Corbyn could also energise younger voters, whose turnout had steadily declined since the nineties.

As such, the Facebook posts were dedicated to encouraging people to register to vote and getting the vote out (15.2%), and canvassing activity by Mr Corbyn (15.45%). Events and speeches were planned in many safe Labour seats, and Mr Corbyn was given a hero's welcome at events in places such as Prenton Park, the home of Tranmere Rovers in Birkenhead. Sceptics suggested he was preaching to the converted, but videos of these events built into a powerful narrative of a social movement gaining widespread popular support.

Liberal Democrat leader Tim Farron posted the least of the party leaders, and when he did use Facebook, it was often to react to developments in the news. Most notably the Ariana Grande concert bombing and the London Bridge attacks (40%). Nicola Sturgeon also used her account to react to news (10.71%), but the primary function was to highlight her campaigning activity (21.43%) and to amplify media coverage (10.71%). Media amplification was also the main function of Bartley (16.67%), Lucas (26.67%), Wood (38.17%) and Nuttall (41.18%). This reflects the findings in other elections and in the 2017 party accounts that the smaller parties used media amplification to

augment their Facebook posts. The data suggest this may have been because they lacked the

capacity to create their own media at the same scale as their better-funded opponents.

6.5 Findings: Style and tone

As demonstrated in Table 6.7, all parties used persuasion as their preferred rhetorical style (range:

UKIP 41.41% to Conservatives 57.6%). There was also extensive use of attacking (range: Labour

10.29% to UKIP 35.35%) and motivation (range: Liberal Democrats/Plaid Cymru 7.78% to Labour

33.33%). While other styles were employed sporadically, none were used extensively aside from

celebration, which was used by the SNP (9.18%) in a series of posts celebrating the party's success in

the local elections in Scotland.

Style	Cons (*n*=125)	Labour (*n*=486)	Lib Dems (*n*=167)	SNP (*n*=207)	Green Party (*n*=156)	Plaid Cymru (*n*=90)	UKIP (*n*=99)	Total (n=1,330)
Acceptance							2 (2.02%)	2 (0.15%)
Anger							1 (1.01%)	1 (0.08%)
Attacking	35 (28%)	50 (10.29%)	54 (32.34%)	36 (17.39%)	29 (18.59%)	26 (28.89%)	35 (35.35%)	265 (19.93%)
Celebration			1 (0.60%)	19 (9.18%)	1 (0.64%)	4 (4.44%)	1 (1.01%)	26 (1.96%)
Condolence		3 (0.62%)	5 (2.99%)	1 (0.48%)	5 (3.21%)	4 (4.44%)	2 (2.02%)	20 (1.50%)
Gratitude		2 (0.41%)	2 (1.20%)		3 (1.92%)			7 (0.53%)
Humour		1 (0.21%)	2 (1.20%)		6 (3.85%)			9 (0.68%)
Information	2 (1.6%)	2 (0.41%)	1 (0.60%)	1 (0.48%)	1 (0.64%)			7 (0.53%)
Motivational	15 (12%)	162 (33.33%)	13 (7.78%)	31 (14.98%)	22 (14.10%)	7 (7.78%)	17 (17.17%)	267 (20.08%)
Persuasion	72 (57.6%)	264 (54.32%)	88 (52.70%)	117 (56.52%)	88 (56.41%)	49 (54.44%)	41 (41.41%)	719 (54.06%)
Pride	1 (0.8%)	2 (0.41%)	1 (0.60%)	2 (0.97%)	1 (0.64%)			7 (0.53%)
Total	124 (100%)	486 (100%)	167 (100%)	207 (100%)	156 (100%)	90 (100%)	99 (100%)	1,330 (100%)

Table 6.7: Rhetorical style of party accounts, 2017 campaign

There was less uniformity in the styles employed by the party leaders, as shown in Table 6.8.

Persuasion was again the most employed style for all (range: Nuttall 29.41% to May 77.42%), but it

was also the only style used by all the leaders. There was also widespread use of attack, notably by

Jeremy Corbyn (26.18%) and Leanne Wood (28.24%).

Style	May (*n*=62)	Corbyn (*n*=233)	Farron (*n*=15)	Sturgeon (*n*=56)	Bartley (*n*=24)	Lucas (*n*=30)	Wood (*n*=131)	Nuttall (*n*=34)	Total (*n*=585)
Acceptance								1 (2.94%)	1 (0.17%)
Anger	2 (3.23%)								2 (0.34%)
Approval		1 (0.43%)	2 (13.33%)	2 (3.57%)			1 (0.76%)		6 (1.03%)
Attacking	4 (6.45%)	61 (26.18%)		11 (19.64%)	8 (33.33%)	9 (30%)	37 (28.24%)	9 (26.47%)	139 (23.76%)
Celebration		1 (0.43%)		2 (3.57%)	1 (4.17%)		1 (0.76%)	1 (2.94%)	6 (1.03%)
Commemoration		2 (0.86%)							2 (0.34%)
Condolence		4 (1.72%)	5 (33.33%)	2 (3.57%)	3 (12.5%)	1 (3.33%)	2 (1.53%)	2 (5.88%)	19 (3.25%)
Gratitude	2 (3.23%)	3 (1.29%)					1 (0.76%)		6 (1.03%)
Humour				1 (1.79%)	1 (4.17%)	1 (3.33%)	5 (3.82%)	1 (2.94%)	9 (1.54%)
Information	1 (1.61%)	2 (0.86%)		2 (3.57%)			1 (0.76%)		6 (1.03%)
Motivational	4 (6.45%)	32 (13.73%)		11 (19.64%)	1 (4.17%)	3 (10%)	10 (7.63%)	9 (26.47%)	70 (11.97%)
Persuasion	48 (77.42%)	120 (51.50%)	8 (53.33%)	23 (41.07%)	9 (37.5%)	16 (53.33%)	73 (55.73%)	10 (29.41%)	307 (52.48%)
Pride	1 (1.61%)	7 (3%)		2 (3.57%)	1 (4.17%)			1 (2.94%)	12 (2.05%)
Total	62 (100%)	233 (100%)	15 (100%)	56 (100%)	24 (100%)	30 (100%)	131 (100%)	34 (100%)	585 (100%)

Table 6.8: Rhetorical style of leader accounts, 2017 campaign

As Table 6.9 shows, there was some clustering of posts in tone, either as positive (range: UKIP

60.61% to Labour 86.36%) or negative (range: Labour 12.76% to UKIP 36.36%). This is similar to the

results for 2015. There were only a small number of outliers for each account, although it was

notable that the Conservatives had the highest proportion of strongly negative posts (4.8%).

Tone	Cons (*n*=125)	Labour (*n*=486)	Lib Dems (*n*=167)	SNP (*n*=207)	Green Party (*n*=156)	Plaid Cymru (*n*=90)	UKIP (*n*=99)	Total (*n*=1,330)
Strongly positive	0	6 (1.24%)	0	0	1 (0.64%)	0	1 (1.01%)	8 (0.60%)
Positive	85 (68%)	410 (86.36%)	106 (63.47%)	169 (81.64%)	124 (79.49%)	61 (67.78%)	60 (60.61%)	1,015 (76.32%)
Neutral	2 (1.6%)	5 (1.03%)	5 (2.99%)	2 (0.96%)	2 (1.28%)	3 (3.33%)	2 (2.02%)	21 (1.58%)
Negative	32 (25.6%)	62 (12.76%)	52 (31.14%)	36 (17.39%)	29 (18.59%)	25 (27.78%)	36 (36.36%)	272 (20.45%)
Strongly Negative	6 (4.8%)	3 (0.62%)	4 (2.40%)	0	0	1 (1.11%)	0	14 (1.05%)
Total	125 (100%	486 (100%)	167 (100%)	207 (100%)	156 (100%)	90 (100%)	99 (100%)	1,330 (100%)

Table 6.9: Tone of Party accounts, 2017 campaign

6.6 Findings: What they talked about

As in 2015, the parties rarely chose to engage in arguments with each other about policy. As Table 6.10 shows, they preferred to fight parallel campaigns in areas where they had prepared key messages. In posts where a single policy area was cited, only education was mentioned by all the parties and even then, only in passing (range: Conservatives 0.8% to Plaid Cymru 3.33%). Once again, many posts did not mention a single policy (range: Conservatives 14.4% to Plaid Cymru 52.22%).

Policy	Cons (n=125)	Labour (n=486)	Lib Dems (n=167)	SNP (n=207)	Green Party (n=156)	Plaid Cymru (n=90)	UKIP (n=99)	Total (n=1,330)
Austerity		1 (0.21%)	1 (0.60%)	15 (7.25%)				17 (1.28%)
Brexit	46 (36.8%)		32 (19.16%)	7 (3.38%)	5 (3.21%)	8 (8.89%)	9 (9.09%)	107 (8.05%)
Business			1 (0.60%)					1 (0.08%)
Child health		6 (1.24%)						6 (0.45%)
Childcare	1 (0.8%)	4 (0.82%)	1 (0.60%)					6 (0.45%)
Civil liberties			1 (0.60%)					1 (0.08%)
Crime	1 (0.8%)	7 (1.44%)					1 (1.01%)	9 (0.68%)
Cybersecurity			1 (0.60%)					1 (0.08%)
Defence	3 (2.4%)				1 (0.64%)		1 (1.01%)	5 (0.38%)
Devolution				1 (0.48%)		7 (7.78%)		8 (0.60%)
Disability rights					4 (2.56%)			4 (0.30%)
Economy	4 (3.2%)		1 (0.60%)	2 (0.97%)	1 (0.64%)		3 (3.03%)	11 (0.83%)
Education	1 (0.8%)	9 (1.85%)	5 (2.99%)	5 (2.42%)	4 (2.56%)	3 (3.33%)	3 (3.03%)	30 (2.26%)
Electoral reform					2 (1.28%)		1 (1.01%)	3 (0.23%)
Employment	2 (1.6%)	6 (1.24%)	3 (1.80%)	4 (1.93%)				15 (1.13%)
Energy	1 (0.8%)			1 (0.48%)	1 (0.64%)	1 (1.11%)		4 (0.30%)
Environment					13 (8.33%)			13 (0.98%)
Fishing				1 (0.48%)			4 (4.04%)	5 (0.38%)
Foreign affairs					1 (0.64%)		1 (1.01%)	2 (0.15%)
Foreign aid			1 (0.60%)		1 (0.64%)		2 (2.02%)	4 (0.30%)
Fox hunting		6 (1.24%)			1 (0.64%)			7 (0.53%)
Health		38 (7.82%)	5 (2.99%)	4 (1.93%)	3 (1.92%)	1 (1.11%)	1 (1.01%)	52 (3.91%)
Housing	1 (0.8%)	4 (0.82%)	4 (2.40%)		1 (0.64%)			10 (0.75%)
Immigration	2 (1.6%)		2 (1.20%)	3 (1.45%)	9 (5.77%)		9 (9.09%)	25 (1.88%)
LGBT rights				1 (0.48%)	1 (0.64%)			2 (0.15%)
Mental health	1 (0.8%)				2 (1.28%)			3 (0.23%)
Nationalisation		1 (0.21%)						1 (0.08%)
Pensions		8 (1.65%)		5 (2.42%)				13 (0.98%)

Rail transport		6 (1.24%)						6 (0.45%)
Religion			1 (0.60%)					1 (0.08%)
Royalty							1 (1.01%)	1 (0.08%)
Rural affairs				1 (0.48%)				1 (0.08%)
Scottish independence				1 (0.48%)				1 (0.08%)
Security	1 (0.8%)			1 (0.48%)			2 (2.02%)	4 (0.30%)
Social care	2 (1.6%)		14 (8.38%)				5 (5.05%)	21 (1.58%)
Spending			1 (0.60%)	1 (0.48%)			1 (1.01%)	3 (0.23%)
Sport		4 (0.82%)	1 (0.60%)					5 (0.38%)
Tax	7 (5.6%)	19 (3.91%)		1 (0.48%)	2 (1.28%)		1 (1.01%)	30 (2.26%)
Terrorism	1 (0.8%)		9 (5.39%)	1 (0.48%)	5 (3.21%)	3 (3.33%)	6 (6.06%)	25 (1.88%)
Tuition fees				2 (0.97%)	3 (1.92%)			5 (0.38%)
Welfare		1 (0.21%)		1 (0.48%)	3 (1.92%)			5 (0.38%)
Women's rights				2 (0.97%)	2 (1.28%)			4 (0.30%)
Youth issues		8 (1.65%)		1 (0.48%)				9 (0.68%)
Multiple policies	33 (26.4%)	201 (41.36%)	39 (23.35%)	91 (43.96%)	21 (13.46%)	20 (22.22%)	11 (11.11%)	416 (31.28%)
No stated policy	18 (14.4%)	157 (32.31%)	44 (26.35%)	55 (26.57%)	70 (44.87%)	47 (52.22%)	37 (37.37%)	428 (32.18%)
Total	125 (100%)	486 (100%)	167 (100%)	207 (100%)	156 (100%)	90 (100%)	99 (100%)	1,330 (100%)

Table 6.10: Policies referenced by party accounts, 2017 campaign

On the day she called the snap election, Conservative Party leader Theresa May made it clear that the coming negotiations with the European Commission were the primary reason for the decision to go to the country. Pointing to her slim majority and a fractious Parliament, she made it clear that she wanted a strengthened position ahead of the talks, "We need a general election, and we need one now because we have at this moment a one-off chance to get this done while the European Union agrees its negotiating position and before the detailed talks begin" (BBC News, 2017a).

This focus on Brexit was evident in the posting activity of the Conservative Party account. It was the most often cited single policy area (36.8%) and was the leading policy referred to in posts with multiple policy areas (63.64%). There were also references to some of the other policy areas that are associated with the traditional positions of the Conservative Party, for example, tax (3.6%) and the economy (3.2%). But these were far less frequently cited than just two years earlier when the party campaigned on stability and its "long-term economic plan". Traditional Conservative messages around business were also notable in their absence.

The Conservative campaign tried not to pin down policy specifics, partly because of feeling hemmed in by David Cameron and George Osborne's policy commitments in the 2015 election (Mason, 2017). The desire for flexibility was combined with a sense of hubris about their inevitable victory, which led to a lack of clarity about policy detail and defensiveness at a time when voters were growing weary of austerity and more receptive to a change narrative (Rayner, 2017b).

This was perhaps most clearly illustrated by the reaction to a change in social care policy, which would see voters pay for care using money defrayed against the value of their homes, which would then be sold upon their deaths. This key policy was briefed to the press the night before the manifesto launch, and the furious reaction to it dominated the following day's coverage, eventually prompting an apparent volte-face just four days later in a news conference where Theresa May repeatedly claimed that "nothing has changed" (Ross and McTague, 2017).

The analysis of the Labour Party's postings using the coding tool reveals that the party tended to reference multiple policies in its posts (41.36%). But the next most frequent category was no stated policy (32.31%). Where a single policy was referenced, health was most frequently cited (7.82%). Countering the Conservatives' framing of the election as a decision point on Brexit, Labour never

mentioned Brexit as a sole policy area and only referred to it in 22 of the 201 posts with multiple

policy areas (10.95%).

However, Brexit was a battleground upon which the Liberal Democrats chose to fight. The position

on continued membership of the European Union was the most evident policy difference between

the Liberal Democrats and the other parties. The party approached the election with a clear policy of

calling for a second referendum on the issue. The analysis of the party's Facebook activity shows

that Brexit was the most often cited single policy area (19.16%) and second only to health in posts

where more than one policy was referenced (56.41%). Social care was also regularly discussed

(8.38%) as the party attempted to take advantage of the Conservatives' difficulties on the issue.

The Green Party's most discussed policy area was the environment, although it was still relatively

sparsely referenced in single policy posts (8.33%). For Plaid Cymru, it was Brexit (8.89%), as it also

was for UKIP (9.09%). Immigration also proved an essential area for UKIP (9.09%).

For the Scottish National Party, the key policy area was the impact of UK government cuts during the

previous seven years. Austerity was discussed in 7.25% of posts referencing a single policy. As Table

6.11 demonstrates, for posts that mentioned more than one policy area, it was cited in 60% of the

posts.

Policy	Cons (*n*=33)	Labour (*n*=201)	Lib Dems (*n*=39)	SNP (*n*=55)	Green Party (*n*=21)	Plaid Cymru (*n*=20)	UKIP (*n*=11)
Austerity		46 (23.89%)	2 (5.13%)	33 (60%)	2 (9.52%)	2 (10%)	
Borrowing		2 (0.99%)					
Brexit	21 (63.64%)	22 (10.95%)	22 (56.41%)	19 (34.55%)	11 (52.38%)	11 (55%)	3 (27.27%)
Business		17 (8.46%)		4 (7.27%)			1 (9.09%)
Child health		1 (0.50%)					
Childcare		10 (4.98%)		5 (9.09%)		2 (10%)	
Crime	3 (9.09%)	44 (21.89%)	6 (15.38%)	5 (9.09%)		2 (10%)	2 (18.18%)
Cybersecurity			2 (5.13%)				
Defence	9 (27.27%)	12 (5.97%)	1 (2.56%)	5 (9.09%)	7 (33.33%)		1 (9.09%)
Devolution				8 (14.55%)		6 (30%)	
Disability rights			1 (2.56%)	3 (5.45%)			
Economy	9 (27.27%)	31 (15.42%)	4 (10.26%)	4 (7.27%)	3 (14.29%)	9 (45%)	
Education	11 (33.33%)	82 (40.80%)	20 (51.28%)	9 (16.36%)	3 (14.29%)	2 (10%)	
Electoral reform					3 (14.29%)		1 (9.09%)
Employment	7 (21.21%)	85 (42.29%)	1 (2.56%)	20 (36.36%)	6 (28.57%)	4 (20%)	
Energy	7 (21.21%)	17 (8.46%)			4 (19.05%)	2 (10%)	
Environment		3 (1.49%)	5 (12.82%)	4 (7.27%)	9 (42.86%)		1 (9.09%)
Fishing			1 (2.56%)				1 (9.09%)
Foreign affairs	3 (9.09%)	3 (1.49%)	4 (10.26%)	1 (1.82%)	3 (14.29%)		
Foreign aid							7 (63.64%)
Fox hunting		2 (0.99%)	2 (5.13%)				
Health	7 (21.21%)	112 (55.72%)	23 (58.97%)	18 (32.73%)	7 (33.33%)	5 (25%)	8 (72.73%)
Housing	7 (21.21%)	76 (37.81%)	3 (7.69%)	4 (7.27%)	8 (38.10%)		
Immigration	4 (12.12%)		8 (20.51%)	4 (7.27%)	7 (33.33%)	1 (5%)	9 (81.82%)
LGBT rights				1 (1.82%)	1 (4.76%)		
Nationalisation		12 (5.97%)					
Pensions		58 (28.86%)	5 (12.82%)	14 (25.45%)			
Rail transport		12 (5.97%)					

Rural affairs						1 (5%)	
Scottish independence			1 (2.56%)				
Security	17 (51.52%)	17 (8.46%)	4 (10.26%)	1 (1.82%)			7 (63.64%)
Social care	1 (3.03%)	41 (20.40%)	13 (33.33%)	4 (7.27%)	3 (14.29%)		1 (9.09%)
Spending	2 (6.06%)	8 (3.98%)		5 (9.09%)			
Tax	2 (6.06%)	42 (20.90%)	7 (17.95%)	8 (14.55%)	2 (9.52%)		2 (18.18%)
Terrorism	9 (27.27%)	8 (3.98%)	3 (7.69%)		2 (9.52%)	1 (5%)	2 (18.18%)
Transport				1 (1.82%)			
Tuition fees		65 (32.34%)		7 (12.73%)	5 (23.81%)		
Voting		13 (6.47%)					
Welfare		48 (23.88%)	7 (17.95%)	14 (25.45%)	2 (9.52%)	7 (35%)	
Women's rights		3 (1.49%)			1 (4.76%)		
Workers' rights	4 (12.12%)	23 (11.44%)		2 (3.64%)			
Youth issues		26 (12.94%)		8 (14.55%)	4 (19.05%)		

Table 6.11: Posts with multiple policy references by party accounts, 2017 campaign

There were two areas of common interest in posts with multiple policy references, as demonstrated by Table 6.11. Brexit (range: Labour 10.95% to Conservatives 63.64%) and health (range: Conservatives 21.21% to UKIP 72.73%) were discussed by all the parties.

The Labour Party made the most extensive use of posts with multiple policy references (*n*=201). The next most frequent was the SNP (*n*=55). Health was again the most frequently cited policy for the Labour Party, mentioned 112 times (52.72%). A considerable number of other policies were discussed, often in the context of the impact of government policies of the preceding seven years. In a series of posts, the Labour Party linked austerity (23.89%) with cuts to education (40.80%), employment (42.29%) and welfare (23.88%).

6.7 Findings: How they communicated

For all the parties, video played an important role in their communications with Facebook users (range: Green Party 22.24% to Liberal Democrats 57.49%), as demonstrated in Table 6.12. Slightly more than a third of the party posts included video (33.53%). The Conservative Party used videos (29.6%) focused on Theresa May making statements to camera or speaking at small events with a carefully chosen backdrop. Labour also used videos filmed with Jeremy Corbyn or other Labour politicians campaigning around the country (31.89%). These tended to differ from those posted to Corbyn's own account, emphasising podium addresses rather than campaign rallies.

Animation also featured heavily (17.97%), although Labour almost entirely drove this. The party frequently used animation to explain its policies to users (42.59%). Other parties made some limited use of animation, but nothing like on the scale of Labour. Image and text posts, sometimes redolent of billboard advertising, found favour with the Conservatives (32%). In comparison, smaller parties continued to use earned media appearances in linked articles (range: Conservatives 7.2% to UKIP 42.42%).

All the parties used some text-only posts (1.81%), usually in response to the terror attacks that blighted the campaign. Although the Conservatives continued to make some use of blog-like messages from the leader, or other leading figures, as text-only posts (4.8%).

Media type	Cons (*n*=125)	Labour (*n*=486)	Lib Dems (*n*=167)	SNP (*n*=207)	Green Party (*n*=156)	Plaid Cymru (*n*=90)	UKIP (*n*=99)	Total (*n*=1,330)
Animation	8 (6.4%)	207 (42.59%)	9 (5.39%)	8 (3.87%)	5 (3.21%)	2 (2.22%)		239 (17.97%)
Facebook link	1 (0.8%)		1 (0.60%)		2 (1.28%)			4 (0.30%)
GIF				1 (0.48%)				1 (0.08%)
Image		2 (0.41%)	2 (1.20%)		3 (1.92%)	1 (1.11%)	1 (1.01%)	9 (0.68%)
Image and text	40 (32%)	7 (1.44%)	19 (11.38%)	26 (12.56%)	30 (19.23%)	4 (4.44%)	20 (20.20%)	146 (10.98%)
Infographic	13 (10.4%)	22 (4.53%)	4 (2.40%)	47 (22.71%)	20 (12.82%)	2 (2.22%)	6 (6.06%)	114 (8.57%)
Instagram link	2 (1.6%)	6 (1.24%)						8 (0.60%)
Linked article	9 (7.2%)	85 (17.49%)	26 (15.57%)	55 (26.57%)	44 (28.21%)	33 (36.67%)	42 (42.42%)	294 (22.11%)
Photograph	9 (7.2%)		6 (3.59%)	13 (6.28%)	11 (7.05%)	4 (4.44%)	2 (2.02%)	45 (3.38%)
Text only	6 (4.8%)	2 (0.41%)	4 (2.40%)	1 (0.48%)	6 (3.85%)	1 (1.11%)	4 (4.04%)	24 (1.81%)
Video	37 (29.6%)	155 (31.89%)	96 (57.49%)	56 (27.05%)	35 (22.44%)	43 (47.78%)	24 (24.24%)	446 (33.53%)
Total	123 (100%)	486 (100%)	167 (100%)	207 (100%)	156 (100%)	90 (100%)	99 (100%)	1,330 (100%)

Table 6.12: Media type by party account, 2017 campaign

For all the parties, the use of clips of broadcasters' content had a place in their Facebook strategies, as demonstrated in Table 6.13. Labour and the Conservatives used clips less frequently than the smaller parties, who again found value in earned media performances (range: Labour 2.06% to Plaid Cymru 45.57%). Besides Plaid Cymru, the most important media source for all the parties was political advertising (range: Plaid Cymru 13.33% to Conservatives 58.4%). More than half the Labour posts were in the category, many making use of traditional billboard-style imagery as well as videos and animations. Aside from the Conservatives, the parties also began to realise the value of Facebook Lives and ran experimental transmissions. A Facebook Live video of the 6th June Corbyn election event in Birmingham, compered by the comic actor Steve Coogan and featuring a set by the dance act Clean Bandit, was watched 2.3 million times by the time polls closed two days later (Walsh, 2017). By comparison, the next most popular Labour Facebook Live video was of Jeremy

Corbyn's speech launching Labour's manifesto on 16th May. It had been watched 418,000 times by

the time polls closed on 8th June.

Media source	Cons (n=125)	Labour (n=486)	Lib Dems (n=167)	SNP (n=207)	Green Party (n=156)	Plaid Cymru (n=90)	UKIP (n=99)	Total (n=1,330)
Broadcaster's content	12 (9.6%)	10 (2.06%)	30 (17.96%)	35 (16.91%)	19 (12.18%)	41 (45.57%)	14 (14.14%)	161 (12.11%)
Digital publisher's article			3 (1.80%)		4 (2.56%)	2 (2.22%)	6 (6.06%)	15 (1.13%)
Facebook frame		5 (1.03%)	2 (1.20%)		1 (0.64%)			8 (0.60%)
Facebook live		7 (1.44%)	11 (6.59%)	7 (3.38%)	2 (1.28%)	4 (4.44%)	9 (9.09%)	40 (3.01%)
Facebook page					2 (1.28%)			2 (0.15%)
Facebook poll			1 (0.60%)					1 (0.08%)
Instagram	2 (1.6%)	6 (1.24%)		1 (0.48%)				9 (0.68%)
Newspaper article			5 (2.99%)	5 (2.42%)	31 (19.87%)	3 (3.33%)	12 (12.12%)	56 (4.21%)
Party election broadcast	2 (1.6%)	22 (4.53%)	1 (0.60%)	1 (0.48%)	2 (1.28%)	4 (4.44%)	2 (2.02%)	34 (2.56%)
Party photographic content	9 (7.2%)		6 (3.59%)	12 (5.80%)	11 (7.05%)	4 (4.44%)	2 (2.02%)	44 (3.31%)
Party's text content	17 (13.6%)	74 (15.23%)	29 (17.37%)	54 (26.09%)	6 (3.85%)	13 (14.44%)	25 (25.25%)	218 (16.39%)
Party's video content	9 (7.2%)	79 (16.26%)	24 (14.37%)	4 (1.93%)	6 (3.85%)	4 (4.44%)	1 (1.01%)	127 (9.55%)
Political advert	73 (58.4%)	268 (55.14%)	51 (30.54%)	84 (40.58%)	64 (41.03%)	12 (13.33%)	28 (28.28%)	580 (43.61%)
Reddit link						1 (1.11%)		1 (0.08%)
Storify				1 (0.48%)				1 (0.08%)
Twitter					2 (1.28%)	1 (1.11%)		3 (0.23%)
UGC			1 (0.60%)	1 (0.48%)	1 (0.64%)	1 (1.11%)		4 (0.30%)
Voter registration site		2 (0.41%)		1 (0.48%)				3 (0.23%)
Website (other)	1 (0.8%)	13 (2.68%)	3 (1.80%)	1 (0.48%)	5 (3.21%)			23 (1.73%)
Total	125 (100%)	486 (100%)	167 (100%)	207 (100%)	156 (100%)	90 (100%)	99 (100%)	1,330 (100%)

Table 6.13: Media source by party account, 2017 campaign

The party leaders tended to use media sources connected to campaigning and canvassing, as demonstrated in Table 6.14. Photography focused on events and visits (range: Nuttal 8.82% to Lucas 30%), as did video. While there was still use of political advertising, it often mirrored posts on the main party accounts (range: Wood 3.82% to Nuttall 35.29%).

Media source	May (*n*=62)	Corbyn (*n*=233)	Farron (*n*=15)	Sturgeon (*n*=56)	Bartley (*n*=24)	Lucas (*n*=30)	Wood (*n*=131)	Nuttall (*n*=34)	Total (*n*=585)
Broadcaster's content	4 (6.45%)	30 (12.88%)		12 (21.43%)	4 (16.67%)	1 (3.33%)	47 (35.88%)	3 (8.82%)	101 (17.27%)
Digital publisher's article		4 (1.72%)			2 (8.33%)	3 (10%)	15 (11.45%)	2 (5.88%)	26 (4.44%)
Facebook frame		1 (0.43%)							1 (0.17%)
Facebook live		5 (2.15%)	2 (13.33%)	2 (3.57%)			1 (0.76%)	1 (2.94%)	11 (1.88%)
Facebook page							1 (0.76%)		1 (0.17%)
Instagram				1 (1.79%)					1 (0.17%)
Newspaper article		34 (14.59%)		1 (1.79%)	7 (29.17%)	6 (20%)	7 (5.34%)	4 (11.77%)	59 (10.09%)
Party election broadcast	1 (1.61%)	7 (3.01%)	1 (6.67%)				5 (3.82%)		14 (2.39%)
Party photographic content	15 (24.19%)	26 (11.16%)	4 (26.67%)	16 (28.57%)	3 (12.5%)	9 (30%)	19 (14.50%)	3 (8.82%)	95 (16.24%)
Party's text content	11 (17.74%)	11 (4.72%)	4 (26.67%)	16 (28.57%)	1 (4.17%)	3 (10%)	5 (3.82%)	9 (26.47%)	60 (10.26%)
Party's video content	15 (24.19%)	52 (22.32%)	2 (13.33%)	1 (1.79%)	2 (8.33%)	2 (6.67%)	8 (6.11%)		82 (14.02%)
Political advert	16 (25.81%)	58 (24.89%)	2 (13.33%)	5 (8.93%)	3 (12.5%)	5 (16.67%)	5 (3.82%)	12 (35.29%)	106 (18.12%)
Reddit							1 (0.76%)		1 (0.17%)
Twitter							13 (9.92%)		13 (2.22%)
UGC				1 (1.79%)	2 (8.33%)	1 (3.33%)	1 (0.76%)		5 (0.86%)
Voter registration site		1 (0.43%)		1 (1.79%)					2 (0.34%)
Website (other)		4 (1.72%)					3 (2.29%)		7 (1.20%)
Total	62 (100%)	233 (100%)	15 (100%)	56 (100%)	24 (100%)	30 (100%)	131 (100%)	34 (100%)	585 (100%)

Table 6.14: Media source by leader account, 2017 campaign

All of the parties continued to turn to the public service broadcasters when they chose to highlight

interview appearances. As shown in Table 6.15, the BBC remained an important source for all, with

more than 42% of total posts featuring external publishers referencing it (range: UKIP 28.13% to

Conservatives (69.23%).

Publisher	Cons (*n*=13)	Labour (*n*=12)	Lib Dems (*n*=39)	SNP (*n*=42)	Green Party (*n*=56)	Plaid Cymru (*n*=46)	UKIP (*n*=32)	Total (*n*=240)
BBC	9 (69.23%)	8 (66.67%)	15 (38.46%)	20 (47.62%)	16 (28.57%)	26 (56.52%)	9 (28.13%)	103 (42.92%)
Change.org					2 (3.57%)			2 (0.83%)
Channel 4			1 (2.56%)			3 (6.52%)		4 (1.67%)
Channel 4/Sky News			1 (2.56%)		1 (1.79%)			2 (0.83%)
Channel 5		1 (8.33%)				1 (2.17%)		2 (0.83%)
Cornwall Live			1 (2.56%)					1 (0.42%)
Daily Express							4 (12.5%)	4 (1.67%)
Daily Mail			1 (2.56%)				2 (6.25%)	3 (1.25%)
Daily Mirror					3 (5.36%)			3 (1.25%)
Daily Record				1 (2.38%)				1 (0.42%)
Daily Telegraph							2 (6.25%)	2 (0.83%)
EU Parliament TV							3 (9.38%)	3 (1.25%)
Evening Standard			2 (5.13%)					2 (0.83%)
Fox News							1 (3.13%)	1 (0.42%)
gov.uk		2 (16.67%)		1 (2.38%)				3 (1.25%)
Holyhead and Anglesey Mail						1 (2.17%)		1 (0.42%)
Huffington Post			2 (5.13%)		4 (7.14%)			6 (2.50%)
Independent				1 (2.38%)	16 (28.57%)			17 (7.08%)
ITV	1 (7.69%)		9 (23.08%)	12 (28.57%)	2 (3.57%)	7 (15.22%)		31 (12.92%)
Llanelli Online						1 (2.17%)		1 (0.42%)
Metro					1 (1.79%)			1 (0.42%)
Parliament TV				3 (7.14%)				3 (1.25%)
Press and Journal				1 (2.38%)				1 (0.42%)
Senedd TV						3 (6.52%)		3 (1.25%)

Sky News	2 (15.39%)	1 (8.33%)	4 (10.26%)			1 (2.17%)		8 (3.33%)
South Wales Argus						1 (2.17%)		1 (0.42%)
The Conversation			1 (2.56%)					1 (0.42%)
The Guardian			2 (5.13%)	1 (2.38%)	10 (17.86%)			13 (5.42%)
The National				1 (2.38%)				1 (0.42%)
The Sun							5 (15.63%)	5 (2.08%)
Thunderclap				1 (2.38%)				1 (0.42%)
Viz					1 (1.79%)			1 (0.42%)
Wales Online						2 (4.35%)		2 (0.83%)
Westmonster							6 (18.75%)	6 (2.50%)
Your vote matters	1 (7.69%)							1 (0.42%)
Total	13 (100%)	12 (100%)	39 (100%)	42 (100%)	56 (100%)	46 (100%)	32 (100%)	240 (100%)

Table 6.15: Publisher by party account, 2017 campaign

Notably, the main parties did not link to partisan media to support their cases, reflecting a similar approach in 2015. UKIP bucked this trend. The party linked to right-wing mainstream media and also the right-wing blog Westmonster (18.75%), owned by the businessman and UKIP donor Arron Banks. The party also linked to speeches made in the European Parliament (9.38%) by the former leader Nigel Farage.

As demonstrated in Table 6.16, the most popular style of video distributed by the party accounts was the policy explainer. More than a quarter (25.80%) of all the videos in posts were policy explainers. Yet, this was almost entirely driven by the Labour party, which posted 152 of the 177 policy explainers in the campaign. As in 2015, there was considerable focus on the figure of the leader through leader statements (13.56%), clips from TV debates (10.93%), and interviews (6.85%). Two other trends were notable. Almost a 10th (9.18%) of the videos were attack ads. Down slightly as a percentage on 2015 but an increase in actual number (2015: 56, 2017: 63). As in 2015, the Labour Party posted more attack ads than its competitors. But as a proportion of Labour's posts, it was

relatively small (8.56%) when compared to policy explanation (41.99%) and campaign promos (20.72%). Subsequent reporting has made it clear that Corbyn had urged his team not to resort to negative campaigning (Stewart, 2017), although he could do this at least partly because other political actors were doing it for him. The party also made extensive use of celebrity endorsements (11.88%). Actors and entertainers such as Ben Elton, Paul McGann, and Jermain Jackman appeared in videos made for the party.

Video style	Cons (n=45)	Labour (n=362)	Lib Dems (n=105)	SNP (n=63)	Green Party (n=40)	Plaid Cymru (n=47)	UKIP (n=24)	Total (n=686)
Attack ad	12 (26.67%)	31 (8.56%)	17 (16.19%)		3 (7.5%)			63 (9.18%)
Campaign promo	1 (2.22%)	75 (20.72%)	10 (9.52%)	7 (11.11%)	6 (15%)	5 (10.64%)	1 (4.17%)	105 (15.31%)
Campaigning		19 (5.25%)	5 (4.76%)	1 (1.59%)	2 (5%)	1 (2.13%)		28 (1.17%)
Celebrity endorsement		43 (11.88%)	1 (0.95%)	1 (1.59%)				45 (6.56%)
Endorsement (non-celebrity)		1 (0.28%)	2 (1.91%)					3 (0.44%)
Interview	9 (20%)	6 (1.66%)	8 (7.62%)	6 (9.52%)	6 (15%)	9 (19.15%)	3 (12.5%)	47 (6.85%)
Leader statement	13 (28.89%)	23 (6.35%)	24 (22.86%)	13 (20.63%)	7 (17.5%)	7 (14.89%)	6 (25%)	93 (13.56%)
Other politician statement		7 (1.93%)	9 (8.57%)	4 (6.35%)	2 (5%)	6 (12.77%)	10 (41.67%)	38 (5.54%)
Policy explainer	7 (15.56%)	152 (41.99%)	7 (6.67%)	6 (9.52%)	3 (7.5%)	2 (4.26%)		177 (25.80%)
TV clip			2 (1.91%)		2 (5%)	1 (2.13%)		5 (0.73%)
TV debate	1 (2.22%)	4 (1.11%)	19 (18.10%)	25 (39.68%)	6 (15%)	16 (34.04%)	4 (16.67%)	75 (10.93%)
Voxes	2 (4.44%)	1 (0.28%)	1 (0.95%)		3 (7.5%)			7 (1.02%)
Total	45 (100%)	362 (100%)	105 (100%)	63 (100%)	40 (100%)	47 (100%)	24 (100%)	686 (100%)

Table 6.16: Video styles by party account, 2017 campaign

Again, there were similarities with the 2015 campaign in the style of videos posted by the leaders' accounts, as shown in Table 6.17. There was less use of policy explanation (6.54%) than in the party accounts, and there was little use of attack ads (5.14%). All the leaders' accounts used leader statements to camera (36.49%). Indeed, May's account used this almost to the exclusion of anything else (83.33%). Corbyn, who was the most prolific poster of videos among the leaders, also focused on campaign events (8.94%), campaign promos (13.01%) and celebrity endorsements (12.20%).

Video style	May (*n*=24)	Corbyn (*n*=123)	Farron (*n*=6)	Sturgeon (*n*=13)	Bartley (*n*=6)	Lucas (*n*=4)	Wood (*n*=35)	Nuttall (*n*=3)	Total (*n*=214)
Attack ad	1 (4.17%)	9 (7.32%)			1 (16.67%)				11 (5.14%)
Campaign promo		16 (13.01%)		1 (7.69%)			5 (14.29%)		22 (10.28%)
Campaigning		11 (8.94%)	1 (16.67%)			1 (25%)			13 (6.08%)
Celebrity endorsement		15 (12.20%)							15 (7.01%)
Focus group		1 (0.81%)							1 (0.47%)
Interview	3 (12.5%)	11 (8.94%)		3 (23.08%)	1 (16.67%)		11 (31.43%)		29 (13.55%)
Leader statement	20 (83.33%)	33 (26.83%)	4 (66.67%)	8 (61.54%)	3 (50%)	2 (50%)	7 (20%)	1 (33.33%)	78 (36.49%)
Other politician statement		3 (2.44%)					2 (5.71%		5 (2.34%)
Policy explainer		13 (10.57%)	1 (16.67%)						14 (6.54%)
TV clip				1 (7.69%)			1 (2.86%)		2 (0.94%)
TV debate		10 (8.13%)			1 (16.67%)	1 (25%)	6 (17.14%)	2 (66.67%)	20 (9.35%)
Voxes		1 (0.81%)					3 (8.57%)		4 (1.87%)
Total	24 (100%)	123 (100%)	6 (100%)	13 (100%)	6 (100%)	4 (100%)	35 (100%)	3 (100%)	214 (100%)

Table 6.17: Video styles by leader account, 2017 campaign

As Table 6.18 shows, the parties continued to focus on short video content of 30 seconds or less (41.12%). This was mainly driven by Labour's prolific posting of short animated policy explainers. Although there was some use of longer videos. UKIP, in particular, created videos longer than 181 seconds (65%), these were mainly Facebook Lives of speeches and events.

Duration	Cons (*n*=45)	Labour (*n*=362)	Lib Dems (*n*=104)	SNP (*n*=62)	Green Party (*n*=39)	Plaid Cymru (*n*=44)	UKIP (*n*=20)	Total (*n*=676)
30 seconds or less	25 (55.56%)	213 (55.84%)	20 (19.23%)	9 (14.52%)	1 (2.56%)	9 (20.46%)	1 (5%)	278 (41.12%)
31-60 seconds	10 (22.22%)	40 (11.05%)	42 (40.39%)	15 (24.19%)	11 (28.21%)	11 (25%)	1 (5%)	130 (19.23%)
61-90 seconds	5 (11.11%)	31 (8.56%)	17 (16.35%)	20 (32.23%)	17 (43.59%)	5 (11.36%)	2 (10%)	97 (14.35%)
91-120 seconds	2 (4.44%)	25 (6.91%)	10 (9.62%)	4 (6.45%)	4 (10.26%)	3 (6.82%)	0	48 (7.10%)
121-180 seconds	2 (4.44%)	28 (7.73%)	2 (1.92%)	2 (3.23%)	2 (5.13%)	3 (6.82%)	3 (15%)	42 (6.21%)
181 seconds or more	1 (2.22%)	25 (6.91%)	13 (12.5%)	12 (19.36%)	4 (10.26%)	13 (29.55%)	13 (65%)	81 (11.98%)
Total	45 (100%)	362 (100%)	104 (100%)	62 (100%)	39 (100%)	44 (100%)	20 (100%)	676 (100%)

Table 6.18: Video duration by party account, 2017 campaign

While most of the parties did not share posts from other accounts, as shown in Table 6.19, it was notable that the Conservatives did in more than a quarter of the party's posts (25.6%). This was almost always the party account sharing posts by Theresa May. It was also notable that, unlike any other account studied for this thesis, the Labour Party in 2017 frequently reposted (71.19%). No other account in the sample reposted more often than it created original posts. Fundraising appeals, voter registration, and policy explanation posts were reposted frequently, with some core posts repeated almost daily.

	Cons (*n*=125)	Labour (*n*=486)	Lib Dems (*n*=167)	SNP (*n*=207)	Green Party (*n*=156)	Plaid Cymru (*n*=90)	UKIP (*n*=99)
Original	93 (74.4%)	474 (97.53%)	160 (95.81%	184 (88.89%)	138 (88.46%)	79 (87.78%)	92 (92.93%)
Shared	32 (25.6%)	12 (2.47%)	7 (4.19%)	23 (11.11%)	18 (11.54%)	11 (12.22%)	7 (7.07)
Post	118 (94.4%)	140 (28.81%)	156 (93.41%)	196 (94.69%)	148 (94.87%)	88 (97.78%)	93 (93.94%)
Repost	7 (5.6%)	346 (71.19%)	11 (6.59%)	11 (5.31%)	8 (5.13%)	2 (2.22%)	6 (6.06%)

Table 6.19: Sharing by party account, 2017 campaign

6.8 Findings: Engagement

As in the 2015 General Election, the data from CrowdTangle reveals a disconnect between the highly engaged with accounts and electoral performance. In 2015, UKIP was the most engaged with party account. By 2017, following the decision to leave the European Union, the party saw a huge decline in its Facebook engagement, as demonstrated in Table 6.20.

The Labour Party ran a very successful Facebook campaign in 2017. Both the party account and Jeremy Corbyn's account outperformed their rivals. But while there was an increase in share and seats, the party could not translate Facebook support into power.

Party	Total interactions	Reactions	Comments	Shares	Seats won (change)
Labour	2,258,156	1,300,094	240,196	717,866	262 (+30)
Conservatives	1,131,527	561,124	288,747	281,656	318 (-13)
SNP	376,872	261,157	48,859	67,126	35 (-21)
Green Party	373,180	272,552	22,212	78,416	1 (0)
Liberal Democrats	218,313	149,005	25,544	43,764	12 (+4)
UKIP	149,617	91,347	36,702	21,568	0 (-1)
Plaid Cymru	27,799	18,529	2,288	6,982	4 (+1)

Table 6.20: Engagement by party, 2017 campaign
Source: CrowdTangle (2021)

The engagement performance of Jeremy Corbyn's page is remarkable, as shown in Table 6.21. The number of interactions hugely outstrips Theresa May's. There is no record in CrowdTangle for Paul Nuttall's account, as he deleted it shortly after polls closed on the election day.

Name	Total interactions	Reactions	Comments	Shares	Seats won
Jeremy Corbyn	2,189,945	1,600,508	131,414	458,023	262
Theresa May	617,684	340,978	202,697	74,009	318
Nicola Sturgeon	182,041	139,854	22,703	19,484	35
Caroline Lucas	42,875	34,275	2,410	6,190	1
Leanne Wood	36,968	28,028	3,855	5,085	4
Tim Farron	12,021	9,242	1,508	1,271	12
Jonathan Bartley	6,239	4,472	295	1,472	1
Paul Nuttall					0

Table 6.21: Engagement by leader, 2017 campaign
Source: CrowdTangle (2021)

The high level of engagement with Corbyn's account means that posts by him dominate Table 6.22.

Theresa May's most engaged-with post came after the terror attack at London Bridge. Clearly a

moment of national importance but not one explicitly linked to the campaign.

	Name	Description	Total interactions	Likes	Shares	Comments
1	Jeremy Corbyn	Thanks for voting image and text	149,326	131,185	12,148	5,993
2	Jeremy Corbyn	This is our chance leader statement	84,304	52,671	28,473	3,160
3	Jeremy Corbyn	Manchester bomb condolence text only	62,053	50,599	7,774	3,680
4	Theresa May	London Bridge anti-terror leader statement	58,175	27,811	17,985	12,379
5	Jeremy Corbyn	London Bridge condolence text only	55,054	44,023	6,634	4,397
6	Jeremy Corbyn	May's not asking for voter registration image	54,571	35,765	15,803	3,003
7	Jeremy Corbyn	NHS cuts link to Mirror	53,742	26,062	26,210	1,470
8	Jeremy Corbyn	Conservative funding link to mirror	53,021	31,119	19,348	2,554
9	Theresa May	If I lose seats appeal, text only	50,439	18,683	7,079	24,677
10	Jeremy Corbyn	Fox hunting link to Independent	50,014	38,495	9,924	1,595

Table 6.22: Most engaged with posts by leader, 2017 campaign
Source: CrowdTangle (2021)

The party account posts that led the way in engagement were often videos, as shown in Table 6.23.

In the top ten, all but two were either films or animations. Here, the Conservatives performed

better. While the most engaged with Facebook post was the election rally with Steve Coogan and

Clean Bandit, the Conservatives' attack ads also prompted high levels of engagement. The pattern of

engagement on the Corbyn terrorism attack ad is worth considering. Shares are very high, the

highest of any post in the top ten. There is also a very large number of comments. Yet, likes are

comparatively low. While there is no doubt many people will have found this ad convincing, it may

be that part of what drove its virality was hate-sharing, that is, users reposting with framing

comments disparaging the advert. More research would be needed to prove this, but the pattern of engagement suggests this may have been the case.

	Party	Description	Total interactions	Likes	Shares	Comments
1	Labour	Clean Bandit Facebook live	164,840	87,503	41,925	35,412
2	Conservatives	Corbyn terror attack ad	150,747	34,713	86,145	29,889
3	Green Party	Lucas TV debate attack on Rudd	70,207	47,519	20,370	2,318
4	Labour	I voted Labour infographic	66,657	19,999	45,423	1,235
5	Labour	10 reasons to vote Labour animation	45,700	15,306	26,181	4,213
6	Labour	I voted Labour infographic	39,045	18,433	19,199	1,413
7	Conservatives	Shoot to kill clip of Corbyn from BBC interview	38,597	12,630	15,666	10,301
8	Conservatives	Diane Abbott attack ad	31,970	12,610	17,673	7,706
9	Labour	Maxine Peak Party Election Broadcast	37,916	17,853	18,376	1,687
10	Conservatives	Vote Conservative polling day animation	36,449	26,237	6,913	3,299

Table 6.23: Most engaged with posts by party, 2017 campaign
Source: CrowdTangle (2021)

Viewing figures jumped enormously from the 2015 General Election, where a Labour Party election broadcast, again featuring Steve Coogan, was the most popular video, watched 1.2 million times on Facebook (Walsh, 2016). This time there was a large increase in video views for both Conservative and Labour, as shown in Table 6.24. It should be noted that a view is recorded by Facebook after a user has consumed three seconds of video.

Top 5 videos	Content	Party	Views
1	Attack ad on Corbyn's record on national security	Conservative	7.9M
2	Corbyn's question to May on ITV's Facebook live	Labour	4.6M
3	10 reasons to vote Labour animation	Labour	4.4M
4	Attack ad on May's record on national security	Labour	3M
5	Attack ad on Abbott's record on national security	Conservative	2.9M

Table 6.24: Most watched videos, 2017 campaign

It is notable that despite Jeremy Corbyn's intention to resist the black arts of negative campaigning, Labour's third most-watched video was an attack ad on Theresa May's security record, both as prime minister and home secretary. With a dramatic background music score and a reprise of the Police Federation's complaints about the impact of cuts on policing, its tacit allegation is clear; through unthinking, uncaring, and unnecessary austerity measures, Mrs May allowed the Manchester and London Bridge terror attacks to take place.

Overall, the Labour Party vastly outperformed its competitors in the number of videos it posted and the number of views it generated, as demonstrated in Table 6.25. But while it generated an average of 110,173 views per video, the Conservatives managed to generate an average of 773,199 views for each of its 27 owned videos. The Labour Party generated huge viewing figures through the sheer amount of material it created. The Conservatives drove greater video views with more engaging content.

Party	Owned videos	Views
Labour	297	32,721,328
Conservatives	27	20,876,366
Green Party	38	6,447,021
Liberal Democrats	98	4,381,086
SNP	60	2,806,981
UKIP	16	689,585
Plaid Cymru	41	603,131

Table 6.25*:* Total video views by party account, 2017 campaign
Source: CrowdTangle (2021)

That trend is reversed with owned videos released through the leaders' accounts. Theresa May's

account published more videos and generated more views overall, but on average, each video was

viewed 322,357 times. Jeremy Corbyn's account only released three owned videos, but each was

watched on average 1,248,056 times.

Name	Owned videos	Views
Theresa May	23	7,414,211
Jeremy Corbyn	3	3,744,168
Nicola Sturgeon	9	1,048,452
Leanne Wood	9	111,470
Tim Farron	4	57,629
Caroline Lucas	2	44,869
Jonathan Bartley	2	42,054

Table 6.26: Total video views by leader account, 2017 campaign
Source: CrowdTangle (2021)

Two other factors helped support the Labour campaign on Facebook, and both were performed by

political actors who sat outside the party's traditional structure.

The first was Momentum, the campaign group that had grown out of a youth-focused support group

for Jeremy Corbyn's leadership bid. Having fought two leadership elections in two years, it had

developed a strong sense of how to use social media and video to create viral messages. Humour

was a key tool, the emotional response adding to the shareable nature of the content. With 24,000

activists across the country, it mobilised support for Labour in previously hard-to-reach environments. For example, southern cities with large student populations, such as Canterbury, which returned its first-ever Labour MP (Grierson, 2017). According to the Momentum activist Adam Peggs, during the final week of the election, the group's Facebook videos were watched more than 23 million times by 12.7 million unique users (Peggs, 2017).

This was largely due to a single video entitled 'Dad, do you hate me?', which was watched around 7 million times in the campaign's final week. The film played on the inter-generational tensions the election had raised by suggesting a father in 2030 would have to tell his daughter about all the benefits he'd enjoyed as a young man, which would be denied to her because he had voted for Theresa May. Its impressive viral performance, which made it one of the most-watched political films of the election by any political actor, suggests it struck a chord with its target audience.

Momentum also had considerable social media impact in areas Labour needed to win, including Cardiff, Derby, Sheffield, Canterbury, and Plymouth. In the final week of the election, the group says 42.2% of Facebook users in Canterbury viewed its videos, while in Sheffield Hallam, where the former Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg was unceremoniously ejected, the percentage was 55.9% (Peggs, 2017).

The other factor in Labour's success was the growth of hyperpartisan political blogs. Sites such as The Canary, Another Angry Voice and the London Economic presented a relentlessly positive view of Jeremy Corbyn, an irredeemably damning view of his opponents, and an intensely hostile view of the mainstream media. While partisan political blogging is not new -- Guido Fawkes, Left Foot Forward and ConservativeHome have all been in existence since the New Labour years -- the new hyperpartisan sites achieved a level of success outside the wonkish circles of their forebears. As Buzzfeed's then UK Political Editor, Jim Waterson, pointed out, the use of graphics, clear and

understandable writing and consistent tone often mirrors the tabloid press they hold in such

contempt (Waterson, 2017). The sites do not make up stories for financial gain, but they exhibit a

ferociousness that means they are not interested in positive stories about the Conservatives.

6.9 Conclusion

It was clear from the moment the exit poll was published at 10pm on 8th June that Theresa May's

electoral gamble had failed to pay off. An election she called to strengthen her hand had weakened

it as she lost her majority. The result saw her lose 13 seats, while Labour gained 30. Mrs May was

still able to form a minority government propped up by Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist

Party, but far from being the electoral liability some of his MPs feared, Jeremy Corbyn again proved

himself to be a formidable campaigner. Overall, turnout was the highest in a general election since

1997, at 69 per cent. Voters other than the very old or the very young were more likely to vote than

in 2015, and with voters under the age of 50 more likely to vote Labour than Conservative, it is clear

Corbyn's message resonated with more than just a Millennial audience.

This chapter has shown that the use of organic Facebook posts as a campaigning tool grew in

sophistication between 2015 and 2017. The parties gained confidence in producing video and

animated posts, a strategy that played to the priorities afforded by the Facebook algorithm (Kite et

al., 2016), with Facebook Lives especially successful in drawing large audiences to party content. But

the increasing use of video placed greater emphasis on the leader being charismatic and engaging,

able to speak comfortably on camera and perform for the public. Corbyn's years of campaigning and

speaking at political rallies gave him a clear advantage. With little expectation of success, he was

able to defy the naysayers. His engaging character and his ability to hold an audience's attention

were well-used in the campaign videos analysed here. May suffered by comparison. She lacked

natural ease before the camera, appearing stiff and remote in Facebook videos.

In the 2015 General Election, it was right-wing parties that had the largest followings on Facebook. In 2017, Labour's Facebook support rocketed. Once again, the posting frequency of the accounts in the sample supported Jungherr's (2016b) hypothesis that opposition parties post more frequently on social media than parties in government. But Labour also had an unusual approach to posting, with a core set of messages repeated often, perhaps in an attempt to offset the decline in current affairs knowledge acquisition among Facebook users subsequently documented by Boukes (2019). Labour's strategy in 2017 was to frequently repeat messages to positively impact users.

More broadly, the findings also demonstrate the importance of using social media to amplify media content for the parties, serving to emphasise their place in the national debate or to capture issues of relevance to their campaigns. As Kleinnijenhuis et al. (2019) argue, there is both a reinforcement effect and a multistep-flow effect from amplified news of a party's successes and issue ownership. Social media thus not only reinforce prior predispositions but also help inform and construct vote choice.

As in 2015, around a quarter of the party posts discussed policy, and again there was less discussion of policy on leaders' posts. It was again the case that the posts in the dataset differed from Ceccobelli's (2018) finding that leaders make use of personalisation in their digital political communication, only just a little more than two per cent of the leaders' posts reflected personalisation as a strategic goal. While the election was ostensibly called to bolster May's hand ahead of Brexit negotiations, this study showed that parties other than the Conservatives chose to campaign on different policy issues. For the opposition parties, social policies were significantly more important to their campaigns. For Labour and the Liberal Democrats health policy was a key battleground, as was the impact of austerity for the SNP. It's perhaps unsurprising for opposition parties to want to campaign on their policy issues where they perform strongly and not fall into the

trap set for them by the Conservatives of refighting the EU referendum. For Labour, in particular,

Brexit had been a difficult experience with many traditional supporters of the party voting for Leave

(Mellon et al., 2018). This study demonstrates a reluctance by Labour to reference Brexit on

Facebook without explicitly connecting it to another policy area where the party polled more

strongly.

Again, as in 2015, differences in tone between the official party accounts and the party leaders'

accounts appeared in 2017, with particular tension between the more negative posting in the Labour

Party's official account and the more positive vision presented by Jeremy Corbyn's account. The

tension between these two approaches would become even more visible in the 2019 General

Election. But the findings here show that in 2017, Jeremy Corbyn and the Labour Party

demonstrated that they could use Facebook to engage voters and persuade them to consider their

message. That campaign template would be applied again, but with less success, just two years later.

Chapter 7 The 2019 General Election

This chapter will examine the use of Facebook during the third election in the series between 2015 and 2019. The sample set has one key difference from the preceding two elections; UKIP ceased to be a nationally competitive political party between 2017 and 2019. The party's former leader Nigel Farage quit for the final time, saying the party had become extremist (BBC News, 2018b). Farage went on to establish a new organisation, the Brexit Party, which fought the 2019 European Parliamentary election securing 31.6% of the vote (BBC News, 2019b). The party occupied the same space on the political spectrum as the increasingly irrelevant UKIP, a fact recognised by the broadcasters who again admitted Farage to televised leadership debates. Given this, I chose to look at the Brexit Party's Facebook use rather than at UKIP.

7.1 Context of the 2019 election

While the snap 2017 General Election caught almost everyone by surprise, the snap election of 2019 was widely anticipated. The 2017 Parliament had become mired in a fruitless effort to get an agreement on Brexit. Having lost her majority in 2017, Prime Minister Theresa May agreed to a confidence and supply arrangement with the Democratic Unionist Party (Prosser, 2021). While this temporarily shored up her position, May's 2017 decision to trigger Article 50 of the Treaty of Lisbon began the process of leaving the European Union before a clear vision for the style of Brexit had been agreed by Conservative Members of Parliament (BBC News, 2017b). Following a ruling by the Supreme Court that Parliament needed to vote to support the prime minister's decision (Chalmers 2017), May sought to provide reassurance to the right-wing of the Conservative Party that Brexit would not be watered down by promising a substantive vote on any withdrawal agreement.

The negotiations between Britain and the European Union ended in November 2018 with an agreement for Britain's exit from the bloc. But May's political position was weak. Opposition parties

did not support the government's policy, and her own party was split. Many Conservatives opposed an agreement they believed weakened Northern Ireland's position within the United Kingdom (Honeycombe-Foster, 2018) and forced Britain to continue to observe European rules during a substantial transition period (Fella, 2020). Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt presciently warned that, "If you go ahead with this deal, your premiership will be over. It won't get through Parliament and you will fall" (Seldon and Newell, 2020, p489). Although May survived a confidence vote in December 2018 (BBC News, 2018c), her repeated attempts to persuade Parliament to back the deal failed. After a disastrous performance by the Conservatives in the European Elections, on the 24th May 2019, Theresa May announced she would resign as Conservative Party leader and prime minister (BBC News, 2019c). The Leader of the Opposition Jeremy Corbyn immediately called for a general election (Corbyn, 2019).

After a short leadership election, the former Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson entered Downing Street as prime minister. Johnson had resigned from May's cabinet a year previously following disagreement about Brexit policy and had denounced her prospective deal, saying it would condemn the UK to "the status of a colony" (Stewart et al., 2018, para 1). During the leadership campaign, Johnson had already begun to use what would become a key campaign slogan during the general election, promising to "Get Brexit Done" and to leave the European Union by the 31st October, come what may (Ford et al., 2021). Brexit remained the chief issue occupying the new government. With a summer recess and an attempt to prorogue Parliament that had to be set aside by the Supreme Court, the new prime minister sought to avoid parliamentary criticism and oversight (Schleiter and Fleming, 2020).

By September, it had become clear that it would be necessary to have a general election to break the deadlock. Johnson sought to goad Corbyn into supporting it, accusing him of being a chicken and branding him a "big girl's blouse" (Reuters, 2019, para 1). Corbyn, whose leadership team had been

locked in fierce infighting for months, played for time. He refused to agree to an election warning

that it might allow the Conservatives to force through a no-deal Brexit. Labour's private polling

suggested the party's position on Brexit was draining support among both Remainers and Leavers,

with previously safe constituencies in the north and on the coasts looking increasingly likely to

return Conservative MPs. Some of Corbyn's key advisors refused to believe it, saying that while it

would be a difficult election, it would, in many ways, be normal despite the influence of Brexit

(Pogrund and Maguire, 2021). When the EU agreed to a British request to delay Brexit by three

months, Corbyn announced he would support an election as the prospect of a no-deal Brexit had

effectively been removed (Stewart et al., 2019). On the 29th October, Corbyn led his MPs into the

voting lobbies to back the Conservatives' call for a snap election. It triggered a campaign that would

see Labour win the fewest seats in Parliament since 1935 (Lee, 2019).

Party	Share	Share change from 2017	Seats	Seats change from 2017
Conservatives	43.6%	+1.2%	365	+47
Labour	32.2%	-7.8%	203	-59
Liberal Democrats	11.5%	+4.2%	11	-1
Scottish National Party	3.9%	+0.8%	48	+13
Brexit Party	2.0%	+2.0%	0	0
Green Party	2.7%	+1.1%	1	0
Plaid Cymru	0.5%	0%	4	0
Others	3.6%	+0.2%	18	0

Table 7.1: General election results, 2019 campaign
Source: BBC - www.bbc.co.uk/news/election/2019/results

The 2017 election was marked by the high vote share achieved by both the Conservatives and

Labour, but, as shown in Table 7.1, Corbyn's party could not maintain that performance in 2019.

Labour's vote share dropped from 40% to 32.2%, winning just 203 seats. Although the Conservatives

had been in power for more than nine years and were fighting the fourth general election since

2010, the party increased its vote share to 43.6% and added 47 seats. Johnson secured an 80-seat

majority, the largest Conservative majority since 1987.

The Scottish National Party recovered some of the losses it sustained in 2017. Scottish dislike of

Boris Johnson, the resignation of the high-profile Scottish Conservative leader Ruth Davidson, and

Jeremy Corbyn's lack of clarity about Brexit, all helped the SNP (Gordon, 2019). Once again, it

returned to Westminster as the third-largest party.

The Liberal Democrats had widely been expected to improve on the performance of 2015 and 2017

but again struggled to connect with voters. The party's core message of revoking Article 50 was

polarising; many voters perceived it as anti-democratic and believed it ignored the result of the

Brexit referendum (Cutts and Russell, 2020). The party leader Jo Swinson was a high-profile casualty

on election night, losing her East Dunbartonshire seat to the SNP for the second time in four years.

Despite early optimism, especially in the wake of its dominating performance at the European

elections, the Brexit Party could only secure two per cent of the national vote. This was far below

UKIP's 2015 share (12.6%), although slightly up on the 2017 performance (1.8%). During the

campaign, leader Nigel Farage announced the Brexit Party would not put up candidates against

Conservatives defending their parliamentary seats (Proctor and Wearden, 2019). While this took

much of the momentum out of the party's campaign, it had the combined effect of syphoning off

Leave-supporting Labour voters in many constituencies while returning right-wing Leavers to the

Conservatives (Cutts et al., 2020). This contributed to the collapse of the so-called Red Wall,

constituencies in the midlands, north of England and north Wales that traditionally voted Labour.

All the parties spent large sums on Facebook advertising during the short campaign, as

demonstrated in Table 7.2. The Conservatives spent considerably less than in 2017, £819,442.09

compared to £2,118,045.95. But the party took a very different approach to previous elections,

focusing heavily on the organic campaign in addition to paid advertising.

Party	Facebook	Twitter	Snapchat	Google	Total
Labour	£1,458,601.53			£732,635.64	£2,191,237.17
Conservatives	£819,442.09	£495.93	£3,809.68	£877,913.85	£1,701,601.55
Liberal Democrats	£1,130,367.60	£30.00		£72,805.82	£1,203,203.42
Brexit Party	£573,804.20	£61.40		£120,000.00	£693,865.60
Green Party	£97,730.10	£36.00			£97,766.10
SNP	£41,840.00				£41,840.00
Plaid Cymru	£17,237.20				£17,237.20

Table 7.2: Digital advertising spend by party in 2019 campaign
Source: The Electoral Commission

As the election began, the Conservatives hired a pair of consultants to lead the digital campaign. New Zealanders Sean Topham and Ben Guerin were still in their twenties but already seasoned political campaigners. Topham had interned for the Conservatives on the successful 2015 digital campaign, and they had jointly led the 2019 digital campaign that helped re-elect Australia's Liberal Party.

Guerin described the approach they used to convince Australian voters, saying, "The best social media strategy is water dripping on a stone. You've got to be pushing the same consistent message day in, day out. The challenge is to find a variety of content to do so" (Workman and Hutcheon, 2019, para 35). The success of the campaign was to overturn assumptions that the Conservatives just did not get social media (McDowell-Naylor, 2018; Ritchie, 2021)

The pair created hundreds of quickfire posts that dominated Facebook users' feeds. There were endless variations on the themes of "Back Boris", "Get Brexit Done", or attacking Jeremy Corbyn. They referenced internet culture and created deliberately poor-quality, humorous, or quirky posts, sometimes using fonts such as Comic Sans to drive engagement. When used in the Australian election, this style of content was especially appealing to voters of the Baby Boom generation and was thus branded "Boomer Memes". Some commentators, including the BBC's Political Editor Laura

Kuenssberg, called this strategy "shitposting". They defined this technique as creating poor quality or outrageous content that goes viral across the internet, from hyper-engaged political users to people less interested in politics (Southern, 2019). This is a useful definition of the activity but describing it as shitposting also created its own backlash, as it is not how some internet users employ the term (Hern, 2019b).

By generating large amounts of organic content, the Conservatives could test successful messages that could be supported through digital ad spending, chiefly through Facebook and Google. But the campaign was dogged by allegations of untruthfulness. Some Twitter users were outraged when, during the head-to-head televised debate between Johnson and Corbyn, the Conservatives renamed the party's press office Twitter page to masquerade as an apparently impartial fact-checking service, Factcheck UK (Waterson, 2019). The party also built a fake Labour manifesto site and another that claimed to show the cost of a Corbyn government based on figures that Full Fact branded "largely meaningless" (Full Fact, 2019). They bought Google ads for searches such as "the Labour Party" and edited videos to give misleading impressions. One featured Labour's then Brexit spokesman Sir Keir Starmer apparently failing to answer a question. Another was of backbencher Jess Phillips seeming to criticise Labour's manifesto when in fact, the footage was several weeks old, and she had been discussing manifestos in general (Walsh, 2019). An analysis by the anti-disinformation campaign group, First Draft of 6,749 paid ads posted by the Conservative Party between December 1st and December 4th found that 88% (5,952) contained misleading claims (Dotto, 2019).

The Labour Party, which spent the most on paid advertising during the campaign, was strongly influenced by the success of its 2017 digital campaign. It focused on promoting videos created for the organic campaign, either by the dedicated digital team in Labour's Southside offices or by Jeremy Corbyn's own communications team. These were often external commissions produced by the campaign group Momentum, which had successfully used comedy sketch videos to reach voters

in 2017. Labour's digital approach was widely praised during the campaign, with many commentators noting the reach of its videos, especially on Twitter (Courea, 2019). Its apparent dominance of social media led to the party declaring victory in the digital campaign the day before polling day (Labour Party, 2019a). The following day's results punctured this moment of hubris. In a wide-ranging post-election report by *Labour Together*, a cross-party commission that sought views from the different wings of the Labour movement, digital campaigning was criticised as lacking innovation, professionalism, and capacity. Noting the importance of message carriers in improving the virality of digital political communication, the report said, "Labour's supporters online spent too much of the campaign talking to themselves rather than reaching out to convince swing voters to support Labour" (Labour Together, 2020, p14).

Labour was aware of the dangers to its digital campaign. Just before the election, an unpublished internal report was prepared by the Leader of the Opposition's digital campaign team that warned:

> We continue to be severely understaffed - a team of 2.6 people dedicated to social media… Our team is much smaller than social media teams in Labour (8), Momentum (6) and Bernie Sanders (16)… We would benefit from much greater lead-in times for Jeremy interventions, visits, and policy announcements. Currently, we seriously lack the lead-in time to produce highly shareable content such as Facebook News Videos and human stories… We also need greater input from polling/focus groups to guide our content strategy. Without it, we risk creating content which dissuades rather than persuades our target groups. (Labour Party, 2019b, p13)

In addition to the core Leader of the Opposition's digital team, there were also three videographers, a scriptwriter, an influencers' manager, an editor, two copywriters, and three campaign photographers. This team was responsible for creating much of the party's content during the campaign.

7.2 Findings: Party accounts' Facebook posts

Most of the political parties increased the number of posts they made on Facebook in comparison with 2017; only the Green Party (2017 *n*=156, 2019: *n*=89) and the SNP (2017 *n*=207, 2019 *n*=162) posted fewer times. As Figure 7.1 shows, the Conservatives posted the most often to both the party and Boris Johnson's accounts.
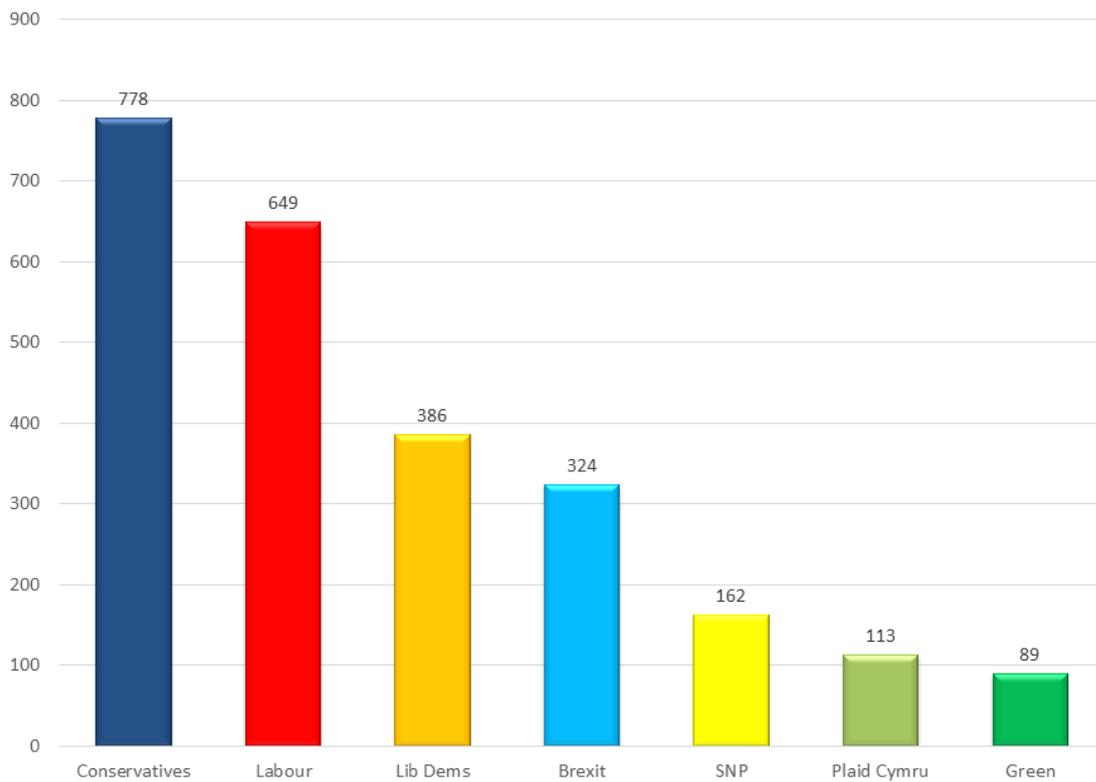

Figure 7.1: Party Facebook posts, 2019 campaign (*n*=2,501)

The Conservative Party account was exceptionally prolific throughout the short campaign, but the volume of posts reached a peak on election day when it posted 49 times, as shown in Figure 7.2.
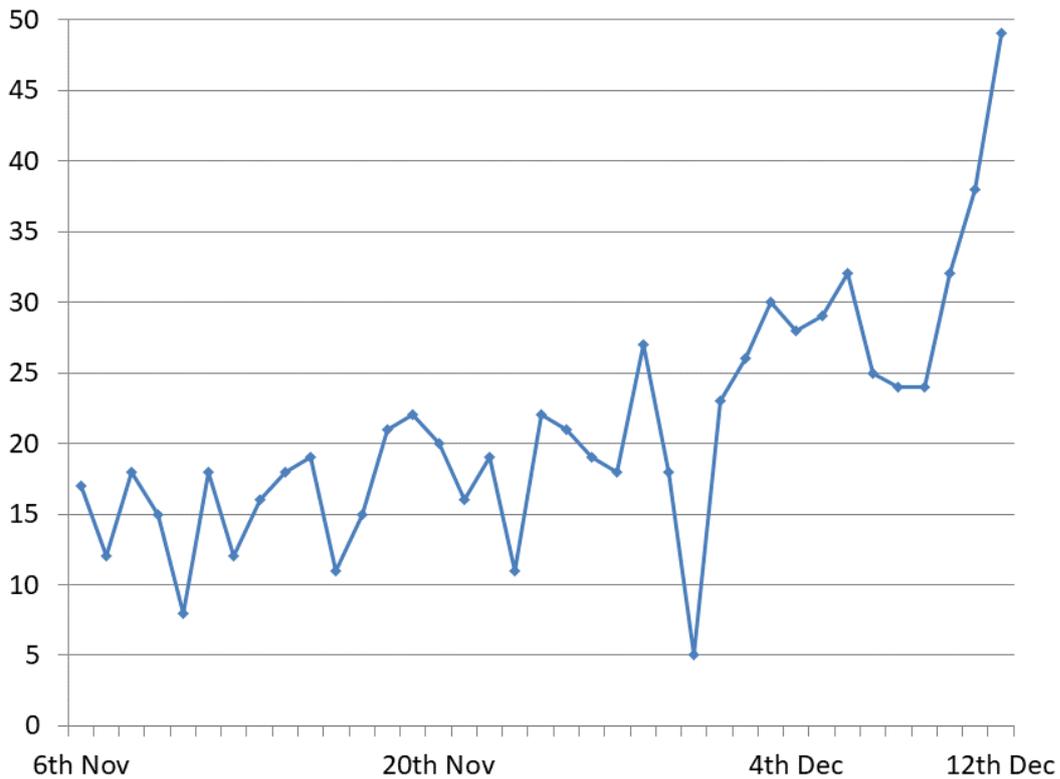
Figure 7.2: Conservatives' Facebook posting frequency, 2019 campaign (*n*=778)

As Table 7.3 demonstrates, all the parties continued to add new likes to their Facebook accounts.

But the growth was smaller both in overall numbers and in percentage terms than in 2017. While

Labour once again saw the largest increase, it was smaller than during the 2017 short campaign

(2017: 310,841, 2019: 43,920). None of the parties achieved growth that was comparable with 2017.

This may suggest that the party accounts are approaching a point of market saturation.

Name	Likes on 06/11/19	Likes on 12/12/19	Change figure +
Labour	1,050,525	1,094,445	43,920 (4.18%)
Conservatives	689,930	711,828	21,898 (3.17%)
Brexit Party	154,833	160,657	5,824 (3.76%)
Lib Dems	205,377	211,193	5,816 (2.83%)
SNP	297,644	302,598	4,954 (1.66%)
Green Party	311,335	315,954	4,619 (1.48%)
Plaid Cymru	34,897	36,235	1,338 (3.83%)

Table 7.3: Increase in likes for party Facebook accounts*,* 2019 campaign
Source: CrowdTangle (2021)

7.3 Findings: Leaders' Facebook posts

Facebook was a key tool to reach voters for both Conservative and Labour Party leaders. As Figure 7.3 demonstrates, their combined posts make up more than 80% of the sample of 1,449 posts. For other party leaders, it was of far less importance. While Nigel Farage regularly posted, as the campaign wore on, his posts became less focused on policy or campaigning and became more a travelogue of events he attended or even jokes. Notably, the new Plaid Cymru leader Adam Price made far less use of Facebook than his predecessor, Lianne Wood. For him and many other smaller party leaders, organic Facebook posting appeared of limited value in 2019.
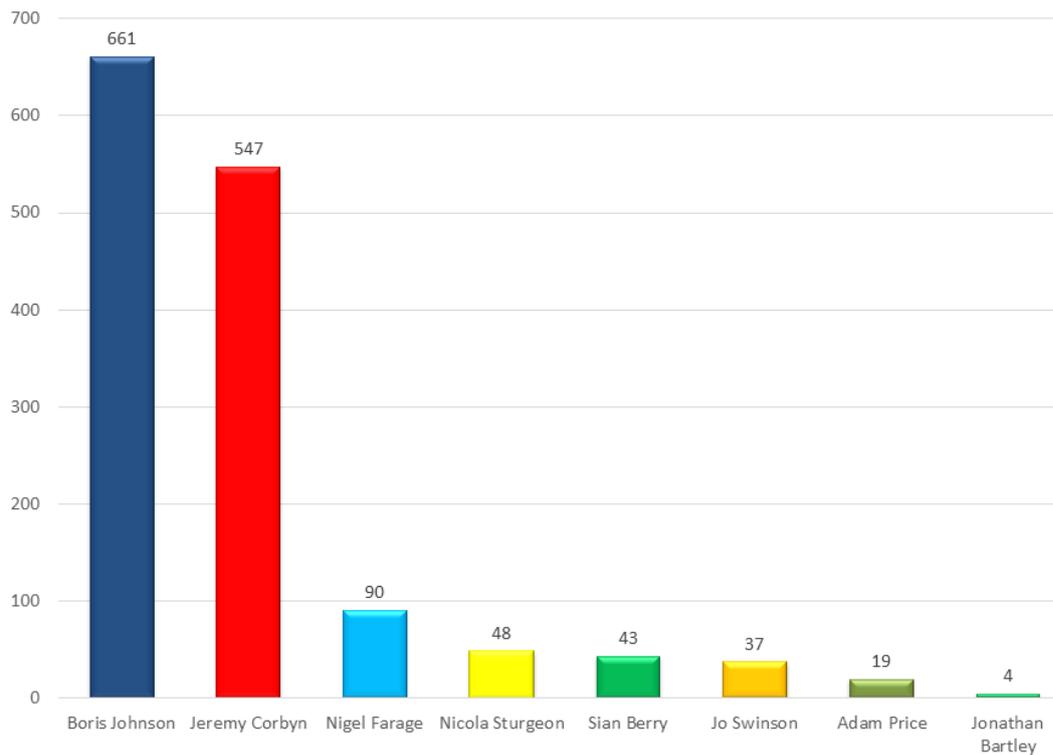
Figure 7.3: Leader Facebook posts, 2019 campaign (*n*=1,449)

As with the party accounts, there was far less growth in the leaders' accounts in the 2019 short campaign when compared with 2017. As Table 7.4 shows, Jeremy Corbyn's account was again the largest and the one that saw the most growth, but on a far smaller scale than in the previous election (2017: 281,106; 2019: 87,623). Both Nigel Farage and Nicola Sturgeon recorded account growth of less than one per cent, again indicating that their accounts may have hit a ceiling in support. While there was double-digit growth for both Swinson and Price, they both started from relatively weak initial positions.

Name	Likes on 06/11/19	Likes on 12/12/19	Change figure +
Jeremy Corbyn	1,501,854	1,589,477	87,623 (5.83%)
Boris Johnson	749,491	784,659	35,168 (4.69%)
Nicola Sturgeon	306,386	309,264	2,878 (0.94%)
Jo Swinson	16,306	18,567	2,261 (13.87%)
Nigel Farage	903,992	905,308	1,316 (0.15%)
Adam Price	3,383	3,725	342 (10.11%)
Sian Berry	8,563	8,793	230 (2.69%)
Jonathan Bartley	11,070	11,206	136 (1.23%)

Table 7.4: Increase in likes for leader Facebook accounts, 2019 campaign
Source: CrowdTangle (2021)

7.4 Findings: What they were trying to achieve

This section will analyse the Facebook strategies for party and leader accounts to determine the approaches to Facebook campaigning during 2019. Building on the analysis of 2015 and 2017, it will draw out comparative themes between the three elections.

7.4.1 Findings: Facebook strategies for party accounts

In the 2019 campaign, as in 2017, the Conservatives sought to avoid running on the party's record in office. Despite having been in power for more than nine years, and Boris Johnson having been Foreign Secretary in Theresa May's administration, the change in leadership allowed the party to present itself as a fresh force in politics, unencumbered by previous policy. As Table 7.5 shows, just 2.06% of the Conservatives' posts were in defence of the government's record. Johnson even managed to indicate that all along, he had been against some of the key economic policies of the coalition, including austerity (Partington and Grierson, 2019).

Strategic Function	Cons (*n*=778)	Labour (*n*=649)	Lib Dems (*n*=386)	SNP (*n*=162)	Green Party (*n*=89)	Plaid Cymru (*n*=113)	Brexit Party (*n*=324)	Total (*n*=2,501)
Amplify media coverage	123 (15.81%)	87 (13.41%)	102 (26.42%)	26 (16.05%)	31 (34.83%)	40 (35.40%)	36 (11.11%)	445 (17.79%)
Attack on government record		56 (8.63%)	1 (0.26%)	11 (6.79%)		6 (5.31%)	24 (7.41%)	98 (3.92%)
Attack on media			2 (0.52%)	1 (0.62%)				3 (0.12%)
Attack on party policy	74 (9.51%)	16 (2.47%)	20 (5.18%)	8 (4.94%)	1 (1.12%)	2 (1.77%)	28 (8.64%)	149 (5.96%)
Attack on politician	92 (11.83%)	58 (8.94%)	40 (10.36%)	11 (6.79%)	1 (1.12%)	4 (3.54%)	5 (1.54%)	211 (8.44%)
Canvassing	53 (6.81%)	37 (5.70%)	21 (5.44%)	25 (15.43%)	10 (11.24%)	3 (2.66%)	88 (27.16%)	237 (9.48%)
Celebration of historical achievement	6 (0.77%)	13 (2%)						19 (0.76%)
Coalition speculation	18 (2.31%)			1 (0.62%)				19 (0.76%)
Defence of government record	16 (2.06%)			3 (1.85%)				19 (0.76%)
Fundraising	2 (0.26%)	7 (1.08%)	7 (1.81%)	3 (1.85%)	7 (7.87%)		5 (1.54%)	31 (1.24%)
Leadership	135 (17.35%)	13 (2%)	27 (7%)	14 (8.64%)	4 (4.49%)	2 (1.77%)	4 (1.24%)	199 (7.96%)
Personalisation	4 (0.51%)		1 (0.26%)	2 (1.24%)		2 (1.77%)	1 (0.31%)	10 (0.40%)
Policy outline or discussion	157 (20.18%)	188 (28.97%)	116 (30.05%)	13 (8.03%)	19 (21.35%)	29 (25.66%)	56 (17.28%)	578 (23.11%)
Reaction to news event	5 (0.64%)					1 (0.89%)	1 (0.31%)	7 (0.28%)
Tactical voting			3 (0.78%)	2 (1.24%)	2 (2.25%)	3 (2.66%)	44 (13.58%)	54 (2.16%)
Voting	93 (11.95%)	174 (26.81%)	45 (11.66%)	42 (25.93%)	14 (15.73%)	21 (18.58%)	32 (9.88%)	421 (16.83%)
N/A			1 (0.26%)					1 (0.04%)
Total	778 (100%)	649 (100%)	386 (100%)	162 (100%)	89 (100%)	113 (100%)	324 (100%)	2,501 (100%)

Table 7.5: Strategic function of party accounts, 2019 campaign

The ability to connect to voters with discussions around policy (23.11%) was of paramount

importance for most of the parties in the 2019 election (range: SNP 8.03% to Liberal Democrats

30.05%). For the Conservatives, this was mainly concerned with breaking the Brexit logjam, and

many of the posts were variations on the key message of "Get Brexit Done". The Conservatives also

posted more extensively than competitors on themes connected to leadership (range: Brexit Party

1.24% to Conservatives (20.18%). These posts often riffed on the idea of "Back Boris" to get Brexit done or reflected the Conservatives' claim to have an "Oven Ready Deal" on Brexit.

Unlike in the previous two elections, all the parties amplified sympathetic media coverage (range: Brexit Party 11.11% to Plaid Cymru 35.40%). Although the smaller parties again made more extensive use of earned media to support their campaigns, this time, the Conservatives (15.81%) and Labour (13.41%) also used the technique widely. Attacks on other parties' policies (range: Green Party 1.12% to Conservatives 9.51%) and rival politicians (range: Green Party 1.12% to Conservatives 11.83%) were also common to all parties. The Conservatives heavily used attacking styles to critique Labour's policy positions and the character of Jeremy Corbyn and his top team. As in previous elections, all the parties used canvassing posts to show their politicians on the campaign trail (range: Plaid Cymru 2.66% to Brexit Party 27.16%) and voting-related posts to motivate supporters (range: Brexit Party 9.88% to Labour 26.81%). Labour's digital campaign posted 174 times (26.81%) about voting procedure, either urging users to register to vote or attempting to motivate people to turn out on polling day. While there was some discussion of tactical voting by all the smaller parties, it was heavily discussed by the Brexit Party (13.58%). This was especially true in the later parts of the campaign as the party aimed to draw Leave supporters away from Labour.

7.4.2 Findings: Facebook strategies for leader accounts

As Table 7.6 demonstrates, the main party leaders used their Facebook accounts far more extensively than ever before. Boris Johnson (n=661) and Jeremy Corbyn (n=547) were by far the most prolific, with teams dedicated to producing content for social media. At the other end of the scale, Green Party co-leader Jonathan Bartley barely used his account at all (n=4).

Strategic Function	Johnson (n=661)	Corbyn (n=547)	Swinson (n=37)	Sturgeon (n=48)	Bartley (n=4)	Berry (n=43)	Price (n=19)	Farage (n=90)	Total (n=1,449)
Amplify media coverage	30 (4.54%)	91 (16.64%)	3 (8.11%)	11 (22.92%)		17 (39.54%)	4 (21.05%)	15 (16.67%)	171 (11.80%)
Attack on government record		96 (17.55%)		2 (4.17%)			2 (10.53%)	3 (3.33%)	103 (7.11%)
Attack on media		5 (0.91%)						2 (2.22%)	7 (0.48%)
Attack on party policy	2 (0.30%)	9 (1.65%)	1 (2.70%)	1 (2.08%)			1 (5.26%)	3 (3.33%)	17 (1.17%)
Attack on politician	4 (0.61%)	44 (8.04%)	4 (10.81%)	9 (18.75%)				8 (8.89%)	69 (4.76%)
Canvassing	117 (17.70%)	71 (12.98%)	8 (21.62%)	3 (6.25%)		8 (18.61%)	3 (15.79%)	33 (36.67%)	243 (16.77%)
Celebration of historical achievement	8 (1.21%)	13 (2.38%)							21 (1.45%)
Defence of government record				2 (4.17%)					2 (0.14%)
Fundraising		8 (1.46%)		1 (2.08%)	1 (25%)				10 (0.69%)
Horse race				1 (2.08%)					1 (0.07%)
Leadership	270 (40.85%)	32 (5.85%)	1 (2.70%)	3 (6.25%)	2 (50%)			4 (4.44%)	312 (21.53%)
Personalisation	10 (1.51%)	6 (1.10%)	2 (5.41%)			2 (4.65%)	1 (5.26%)		21 (1.45%)
Policy outline or discussion	158 (23.90%)	75 (13.71%)	11 (29.73%)			3 (6.98%)	4 (21.05%)	5 (5.56%)	256 (17.67%)
Reaction to news event	16 (2.42%)	4 (0.73%)	1 (2.70%)				1 (5.26%)		22 (1.52%)
Tactical voting					1 (25%)	3 (6.98%)	1 (5.26%)	10 (11.11%)	15 (1.04%)
Voting	46 (6.60%)	92 (16.82%)	6 (16.22%)	15 (31.25%)		10 (23.26%)	2 (10.53%)	7 (7.78%)	178 (12.28%)
N/A		1 (0.18%)							1 (0.07%)
Total	661 (100%)	547 (100%)	37 (100%)	48 (100%)	4 (100%)	43 (100%)	19 (100%)	90 (100%)	1,449 (100%)

Table 7.6: Strategic function of leader accounts, 2019 campaign

Given Bartley's lack of use of Facebook, there is less common ground among the leaders' accounts

than the party accounts. However, all but Bartley used their accounts to amplify media coverage

(range: Johnson 4.54% to Berry 39.54%), to show canvassing activity (range: Sturgeon 6.25% to

Farage 36.67%), and to motivate voters (range: Johnson 6.60% to Sturgeon 31.25%). There was less

tendency to attack rivals using the leaders' accounts, with only Jeremy Corbyn's postings reaching

double figures, although proportionally, it was only 8.04% of his Facebook usage. Corbyn's attacks were focused on the personality and trustworthiness of Boris Johnson. He also extensively critiqued the Conservatives' record in government (17.55%). While there was plenty of use of Facebook to talk about policy by all the leaders, bar Sturgeon and Bartley (range: Farage 5.56% to Swinson 29.73%), there was little critique of the policies of others. As with the Conservatives' party account, Johnson focused his posts on themes about leadership (40.85%) and policy (23.90%). Reflecting Topham and Guerin's "water dripping on stone" strategic approach, these repeated the critical messages of backing Boris and getting Brexit done.

7.5 Findings: Style and Tone

As with the previous two elections, the most used rhetorical styles during the 2019 campaign were persuasion, attacking and motivational, as shown in Table 7.7. All the parties used persuasion extensively to ask voters to back their policy positions (range: Labour 51.16% to Plaid Cymru 73.45%). Attacking was also used by all parties, although it was more often used by the Conservatives than the party's competitors (range: Green Party 4.49% to Conservatives 34.96%). This was often deployed against Jeremy Corbyn, whose personal poll ratings had dropped from the highs after the 2017 election. All also used motivation (range: Plaid Cymru 2.66% to Labour 20.03%). The Conservatives also made some use of humour (1.80%), especially towards the end of the campaign, as they used popular memes, such as pointing Spider-Man or Lord of the Rings' Boromir, to carry their key messages.

Style	Conservatives (*n*=778)	Labour (*n*=649)	Lib Dems (*n*=386)	SNP (*n*=162)	Green Party (*n*=89)	Plaid Cymru (*n*=113)	Brexit Party (*n*=324)	Total (2,501)
Anger		5 (0.77%)						5 (0.20%)
Approval	6 (0.77%)	2 (0.31%)						8 (0.32%)
Attacking	272 (34.96%)	165 (25.42%)	100 (25.91%)	38 (23.46%)	4 (4.49%)	23 (20.35%)	75 (23.15%)	677 (27.07%)
Celebration					1 (1.12%)	2 (1.77%)	1 (0.31%)	4 (0.16%)
Commemoration			1 (0.26%)	1 (0.62%)		1 (0.89%)	1 (0.31%)	4 (0.16%)
Condolence	2 (0.26%)							2 (0.08%)
Gratitude	1 (0.13%)	4 (0.62%)	1 (0.26%)	1 (0.62%)		1 (0.89%)		8 (0.32%)
Humour	14 (1.80%)	4 (0.62%)		6 (3.70%)	1 (1.12%)		1 (0.31%)	26 (1.04%)
Information	4 (0.51%)							4 (0.16%)
Motivational	54 (6.94%)	130 (20.03%)	24 (6.22%)	28 (17.28%)	25 (28.10%)	3 (2.66%)	52 (16.05%)	316 (12.64%)
Persuasion	416 (53.47%)	332 (51.16%)	260 (67.36%)	88 (54.32%)	58 (65.17%)	83 (73.45%)	194 (59.88%)	1,431 (57.28%)
Pride	9 (1.16%)	7 (1.08%)						16 (0.64%)
Total	778 (100%)	649 (100%)	386 (100%)	162 (100%)	89 (100%)	113 (100%)	324 (100%)	2,501 (100%)

Table 7.7: Rhetorical style of party accounts, 2019 campaign

The leaders' accounts also tended to rely upon persuasion as a rhetorical style, as shown in Table 7.8 (range: Corbyn 47.72% to Johnson 89.41%). Corbyn also made considerable use of attacking styles (35.10%), as did Sturgeon (27.08%) and Price (31.58%). Despite Johnson's reputation for jokes, there wasn't much use of humour in his account (1.21%); Corbyn's had some more lightness of touch (3.29%), mainly due to the use of Momentum's sketch videos.

Style	Johnson (*n*=661)	Corbyn (*n*=547)	Swinson (*n*=37)	Sturgeon (*n*=48)	Bartley (*n*=4)	Berry (*n*=43)	Price (*n*=19)	Farage (*n*=90)	Total (*n*=1,449)
Anger		2 (0.37%)							2 (0.14%)
Apology				1 (2.08%)					1 (0.07%)
Approval	2 (0.30%)						1 (5.26%)		3 (0.21%)
Attacking	8 (1.21%)	192 (35.10%)	5 (13.51%)	13 (27.08%)			6 (31.58%)	18 (20%)	242 (16.70%)
Celebration				2 (4.16%)		2 (4.65%)			4 (0.28%)
Commemoration				1 (2.08%)					1 (0.07%)
Condolence	4 (0.61%)	6 (1.10%)							10 (0.69%)
Disapproval	1 (0.15%)								1 (0.07%)
Gratitude	9 (1.36%)	4 (0.73%)		1 (2.08%)					14 (0.97%)
Humour	8 (1.21%)	18 (3.29%)	1 (2.70%)	2 (4.16%)		1 (2.33%)		4 (4.44%)	34 (2.35%)
Information	8 (1.21%)	1 (0.18%)	1 (2.70%)			1 (2.33%)			11 (0.76%)
Motivational	17 (2.57%)	52 (9.51%)	4 (10.81%)	4 (8.33%)	1 (25%)	6 (13.95%)		10 (11.11%)	94 (6.49%)
Persuasion	591 (89.41%)	261 (47.72%)	26 (70.27%)	24 (50%)	3 (75%)	32 (74.42%)	11 (57.90%)	58 (64.44%)	1,006 (69.43%)
Pride	11 (1.66%)	11 (2.01%)				1 (2.33%)			23 (1.59%)
Rejection	1 (0.15%)								1 (0.07%)
N/A	1 (0.15%)						1 (5.26%)		2 (0.14%)
Total	661 (100%)	547 (100%)	37 (100%)	48 (100%)	4 (100%)	43 (100%)	19 (100%)	90 (100%)	1,449 (100%)

Table 7.8: Rhetorical style by leader accounts, 2019 campaign

As with previous campaigns, there was some clustering of tone around positive and negative, with only the Conservatives and the Brexit Party recording any strongly positive posts. The Conservatives, Labour, and Liberal Democrats were the only parties to feature strongly negative posts, as can be seen in Table 7.9.

Tone	Cons (*n*=778)	Labour (*n*=649)	Lib Dems (*n*=386)	SNP (*n*=162)	Green Party (*n*=89)	Plaid Cymru (*n*=113)	Brexit Party (*n*=324)	Total (*n*=2,501)
Strongly positive	2 (0.26%)	0	0	0	0	0	2 (0.62%)	4 (0.16%)
Positive	497 (63.88%)	475 (73.19%)	286 (74.09%)	121 (74.69%)	84 (94.38%)	90 (79.65%)	246 (75.93%)	1,799 (71.93%)
Neutral	4 (0.51%)	0	0	0	0	0	1 (0.31%)	5 (0.20%)
Negative	262 (33.68%)	161 (24.81%)	98 (25.39%)	41 (25.31%)	5 (5.62%)	23 (20.35%)	75 (23.15%)	665 (26.59%)
Strongly Negative	13 (1.67%)	13 (2%)	2 (0.52%)	0	0	0	0	28 (1.12%)
Total	778 (100%)	649 (100%)	386 (100%)	162 (100%)	89 (100%)	113 (100%)	324 (100%)	2,501 (100%)

Table 7.9: Tone of party accounts, 2019 campaign

7.6 Findings: What they talked about

The 2019 election was called to break the deadlock over Brexit, and while all the parties did discuss it (22.71%), there was a very large difference between the parties as to how often they posed on the issue (range: Labour 2.01% to Brexit Party 37.96%). As shown in Table 7.10, Labour's Facebook account barely engaged with policy on Brexit at all. Even when Labour did discuss it, it chose to run posts mocking claims that the party was split and its Brexit policy unclear.

Policy	Cons (*n*=778)	Labour (*n*=649)	Lib Dems (*n*=386)	SNP (*n*=162)	Green Party (*n*=89)	Plaid Cymru (*n*=113)	Brexit Party (*n*=324)	Total (*n*=2,501)
Animal welfare	4 (0.51%)							4 (0.16%)
Austerity		8 (1.23%)	1 (0.26%)	3 (1.85%)				12 (0.44%)
Brexit	273 (35.09%)	13 (2.01%)	132 (34.20%)	12 (7.41%)	4 (4.49%)	11 (9.74%)	123 (37.96%)	568 (22.71%)
Broadband	4 (0.51%)	5 (0.77%)						9 (0.36%)
Business	11 (1.41%)	5 (0.77%)	4 (1.04%)	1 (0.62%)	1 (1.12%)	1 (0.89%)	2 (0.62%)	25 (1.00%)
Childcare	4 (0.51%)	2 (0.31%)	8 (2.07%)					14 (0.56%)
Civil rights			7 (1.81%)					7 (0.28%)
Crime	14 (1.80%)	5 (0.77%)	7 (1.81%)		1 (1.12%)	2 (1.77%)	1 (0.31%)	30 (1.20%)
Defence	26 (3.34%)	2 (0.31%)	4 (1.04%)	8 (4.94%)		2 (1.77%)	12 (3.70%)	54 (2.16%)
Deficit	1 (0.13%)							1 (0.04%)
Devolution		1 (0.15%)				5 (4.43%)		6 (0.24%)
Disability rights		2 (0.31%)	1 (0.26%)					3 (0.12%)
Economy	6 (0.77%)	8 (1.23%)	1 (0.26%)		1 (1.12%)	3 (2.66%)	2 (0.62%)	21 (0.84%)
Education	2 (0.26%)	15 (2.31%)	13 (3.37%)			2 (1.77%)		32 (1.28%)
Electoral reform						4 (3.54%)	20 (6.17%)	24 (0.96%)
Employment	17 (2.19%)	4 (0.62%)	2 (0.52%)					23 (0.92%)
Energy			1 (0.26%)					1 (0.04%)
Environment	12 (1.54%)	24 (3.70%)	32 (8.29%)	2 (1.24%)	33 (37.08%)		2 (0.62%)	105 (4.20%)
Fishing							1 (0.31%)	1 (0.04%)
Foreign affairs			5 (1.30%)					5 (0.20%)
Fox hunting		1 (0.15%)						1 (0.04%)
Health	21 (2.70%)	107 (16.49%)	5 (1.30%)	6 (3.70%)		12 (10.62%)	16 (4.94%)	167 (6.68%)
Housing	1 (0.13%)	18 (2.77%)	6 (1.55%)					25 (1.00%)
Immigration	27 (3.47%)		5 (1.30%)	2 (1.24%)			6 (1.85%)	40 (1.60%)
LGBT rights		5 (0.77%)	2 (0.52%)	1 (0.62%)		1 (0.89%)		9 (0.36%)
Mental health		5 (0.77%)	11 (2.85%)			1 (0.89%)		17 (0.68%)

Nationalisation		2 (0.31%)						2 (0.08%)
Pensions	16 (2.06%)	19 (2.93%)		2 (1.24%)		1 (0.89%)		38 (1.52%)
Rail transport		15 (2.31%)	3 (0.78%)	1 (0.62%)	2 (2.25%)	3 (2.66%)		24 (0.96%)
Religion	1 (0.13%)	4 (0.62%)						5 (0.20%)
Rural affairs						2 (1.77%)		2 (0.08%)
Scottish independence	4 (0.51%)		1 (0.26%)	7 (4.32%)				12 (0.48%)
Security	9 (1.16%)		2 (0.52%)					11 (0.44%)
Social care		7 (1.08%)				2 (1.77%)		9 (0.36%)
Spending	6 (0.77%)	1 (0.15%)		1 (0.62%)			2 (0.62%)	10 (0.40%)
Sport	1 (0.13%)		1 (0.26%)					2 (0.08%)
Tax	100 (12.85%)	22 (3.39%)		1 (0.62%)			1 (0.31%)	124 (4.96%)
Terrorism	1 (0.13%)							1 (0.04%)
Transport	4 (0.51%)	4 (0.62%)					2 (0.62%)	10 (0.40%)
Tuition fees	1 (0.13%)	3 (0.46%)		1 (0.62%)	1 (1.12%)		3 (0.93%)	9 (0.36%)
Welfare	1 (0.13%)	1 (0.15%)	2 (0.52%)	1 (0.62%)	2 (2.25%)	2 (1.77%)	2 (0.62%)	11 (0.44%)
Welsh independence						8 (7.08%)		8 (0.32%)
Youth issues		2 (0.31%)	1 (0.26%)					3 (0.12%)
Multiple policies	126 (16.20%)	143 (22.03%)	64 (16.58%)	71 (43.83%)	27 (30.34%)	35 (30.97%)	19 (5.86%)	485 (19.39%)
No stated policy	85 (10.93%)	196 (30.20%)	65 (16.84%)	42 (25.93%)	17 (19.10%)	16 (14.16%)	110 (33.95%)	531 (21.23%)
Total	778 (100%)	649 (100%)	386 (100%)	162 (100%)	89 (100%)	113 (100%)	324 (100%)	2,501 (100%)

Table 7.10: Policies referenced by party accounts, 2019 campaign

As in the previous elections in the sample, the parties chose to campaign on policies they were putting to the electorate rather than countering their opponents' messaging. The Green Party returned to campaigning most actively on policies associated with the environment (37.08%), unlike in 2017, when it wanted to highlight a range of policies rather than fight a single-issue campaign. Labour once again chose to fight on health policy (16.49%), both on the fate of the NHS under any future Conservative government but also on the NHS's poor performance due to the impact of

austerity on health system funding. The Labour campaign also covered some of the party's other

core messages, such as free broadband (0.77%) and the future of private train operators (2.31%). As

the *Labour Together* report on the campaign makes clear, there was an extensive range of policies

that the party wanted to promote but not a clear central message for the campaign. The report

concluded: "The number of policy announcements created doubts about their deliverability and the

media strategy meant policies didn't have time to land and left candidates poorly briefed" (Labour

Together, 2020, p12). This was the opposite of their Conservative rivals' "water dripping on stone"

approach. There also remained hundreds of posts with no reference to policy (21.23%).

Where multiple policies were mentioned in a single post, there was again broad engagement with

Brexit (range: Labour 22.38% to Liberal Democrats 84.38%). All the parties chose to discuss the

economy, employment, health, rail transport, and tax, as demonstrated in Table 7.11.

Policy	Conservative (*n*=126)	Labour (*n*=143)	Lib Dems (*n*=64)	SNP (*n*=71)	Green Party (*n*=27)	Plaid Cymru (*n*=35)	Brexit Party (*n*=19)
Animal welfare		1 (0.70%)					
Austerity	2 (1.59%)	26 (18.18%)	1 (1.56%)	12 (16.90%)	3 (11.11%)	6 (17.14%)	
Brexit	81 (64.29%)	32 (22.38%)	54 (84.38%)	58 (81.69%)	18 (66.67%)	12 (34.29%)	12 (63.16%)
Broadband	2 (1.59%)	9 (6.29%)		3 (4.23%)		2 (5.71%)	
Business	14 (11.11%)	3 (2.10%)	6 (9.38%)				
Childcare	1 (0.79%)	15 (10.49%)	3 (4.69%)	3 (4.23%)			
Civil rights			1 (1.56%)				
Crime	44 (34.92%)	6 (4.20%)	1 (1.56%)	4 (5.63%)		8 (22.86%)	1 (5.26%)
Debt	1 (0.79%)		1 (1.56%)				
Defence	13 (10.32%)	4 (2.80%)		4 (5.63%)			4 (21.05%)
Deficit	8 (6.35%)						
Devolution						3 (8.57%)	
Disability rights		3 (2.10%)					
Economy	17 (13.49%)	16 (11.19%)	26 (40.63%)	2 (2.82%)	5 (18.52%)	5 (14.29%)	3 (15.79%)
Education	39 (30.95%)	27 (18.88%)	29 (45.31%)	4 (5.63%)		2 (5.71%)	2 (10.53%)
Electoral reform					2 (7.41%)	2 (5.71%)	
Employment	6 (4.76%)	74 (51.75%)	3 (4.69%)	5 (7.04%)	3 (11.11%)	11 (31.43%)	1 (5.26%)
Energy		17 (11.89%)	8 (12.5%)	5 (7.04%)	3 (11.11%)	7 (20%)	3 (15.79%)
Environment	18 (14.29%)	55 (38.46%)	37 (57.81%)	10 (14.09%)	21 (77.78%)	16 (45.71%)	
Fishing	1 (0.79%)		1 (1.56%)	1 (1.41%)			5 (26.32%)
Foreign affairs						3 (8.57%)	
Foreign aid							1 (5.26%)
Fox hunting	2 (1.59%)						
Health	55 (43.65%)	80 (55.94%)	10 (15.63%)	19 (26.76%)	2 (7.41%)	6 (17.14%)	2 (10.53%)
Housing		40 (27.97%)	8 (12.5%)		2 (7.41%)	8 (22.86%)	1 (5.26%)

Immigration	33 (26.19%)		1 (1.56%)	2 (2.82%)	1 (3.70%)		1 (5.26%)
LGBT rights		6 (4.20%)		3 (4.23%)			
Media		2 (1.40%)				2 (5.71%)	1 (5.26%)
Mental health		11 (7.69%)	27 (42.19%)	3 (4.23%)			1 (5.26%)
Nationalisation	5 (3.97%)	11 (7.69%)	1 (1.56%)				
Pensions		13 (9.09%)		2 (2.82%)			
Rail transport	2 (1.59%)	2 (1.40%)	1 (1.56%)	1 (1.41%)	1 (3.70%)	6 (17.14%)	1 (5.26%)
Rural affairs						2 (5.71%)	
Scottish independence		1 (0.70%)	2 (3.13%)	51 (71.83%)			
Security	5 (3.97%)						
Social care		13 (9.09%)		3 (4.23%)		8 (22.86%)	
Spending	21 (16.67%)	4 (2.80%)	3 (4.69%)	2 (2.82%)			
Sport	2 (1.59%)						
Tax	45 (35.71%)	17 (11.89%)	4 (6.25%)	4 (5.63%)	2 (7.41%)	3 (8.57%)	3 (15.79%)
Terrorism	1 (0.79%)	1 (0.70%)					
Transport		16 (11.19%)		3 (4.23%)	3 (11.11%)	7 (20%)	
Tuition fees	5 (3.97%)	25 (17.48%)		3 (4.23%)	1 (3.70%)		
Welfare		12 (8.39%)		7 (9.86%)	1 (3.70%)	3 (8.57%)	1 (5.26%)
Welsh independence						8 (22.86%)	
Women's rights		6 (4.20%)	1 (1.56%)		1 (3.70%)		
Workers' rights		13 (9.09%)		4 (5.63%)		1 (2.86%)	
Youth issues		3 (2.10%)	2 (3.13%)	1 (1.41%)			

Table 7.11: Posts with multiple policies referenced by party accounts, 2019 campaign

The nationalist parties often used multiple policy posts to discuss independence for Scotland and Wales. The SNP mentioned Scottish independence in 71.83% of its multiple policy posts; Plaid Cymru discussed Welsh Independence in 22.86% of the posts in the sample.

7.7 Findings: How they communicated

Video was the most important format for political communication on Facebook for the parties, bar the Conservatives and the Brexit Party (range: Conservatives 22.75% to Green Party 51.69%), as shown in Table 7.12. While the Tories did post some videos, often linked to Johnson's campaign trail activity, the need to keep driving content through the Facebook account meant that the party also extensively used image and text posts and infographics. For the parties with large election budgets, the use of graphic design to create compelling, shareable content was important. Material that fitted into the image and text content category was published by all the parties (range: Plaid Cymru 7.08% to Brexit Party 53.09%), but it was the Brexit Party, Conservatives, and Labour who used it the most often. Infographics were also widely used (range: Brexit Party 1.54% to Labour 14.95%), and the smaller parties extensively used linked articles, using earned media to bolster paid media (range: Brexit Party 0.93% to Plaid Cymru 39.82%).

Media type	Cons (*n*=778)	Labour (*n*=649)	Lib Dems (*n*=386)	SNP (*n*=162)	Green Party (*n*=89)	Plaid Cymru (*n*=113)	Brexit Party (*n*=324)	Total (*n*=2,501)
Animation	32 (4.11%)	49 (7.55%)	38 (9.85%)	6 (3.70%)			17 (5.25%)	142 (5.68%)
Audio			2 (0.52%)		5 (5.62%)	1 (0.89%)	2 (0.62%)	10 (0.40%)
Composite image	5 (0.64%)	9 (1.39%)		2 (1.24%)			1 (0.31%)	17 (0.68%)
Facebook link		5 (0.77%)			2 (2.25%)		1 (0.31%)	8 (0.32%)
GIF		6 (0.93%)	9 (2.33%)	3 (1.85%)			2 (0.62%)	20 (0.80%)
Image	43 (5.53%)	12 (1.85%)	1 (0.26%)	4 (2.47%)		1 (0.89%)	1 (0.31%)	62 (2.48%)
Image and text	248 (31.88%)	141 (21.73%)	62 (16.06%)	10 (6.17%)	12 (13.48%)	8 (7.08%)	172 (53.09%)	653 (26.11%)
Infographic	97 (12.47%)	97 (14.95%)	16 (4.15%)	4 (2.47%)	8 (8.99%)	4 (3.54%)	5 (1.54%)	231 (9.24%)
Linked article	123 (15.82%)	110 (16.95%)	123 (31.87%)	37 (22.84%)	11 (12.35%)	45 (39.82%)	3 (0.93%)	452 (18.07%)
Photograph	37 (4.76%)	26 (4.01%)	11 (2.85%)	27 (16.67%)	5 (5.62%)	3 (2.66%)	6 (1.85%)	115 (4.60%)
Poll	1 (0.13%)							1 (0.04%)
Text only	12 (1.54%)	9 (1.39%)		1 (0.62%)			1 (0.31%)	23 (0.92%)
Twitter link	3 (0.39%)							3 (0.12%)
Video	177 (22.75%)	185 (28.51%)	124 (32.12%)	68 (41.98%)	46 (51.69%)	51 (45.13%)	113 (34.88%)	764 (30.55%)
Total	778 (100%)	649 (100%)	386 (100%)	162 (100%)	89 (100%)	113 (100%)	324 (100%)	2,501 (100%)

Table 7.12: Media type by party account, 2019 campaign

Political advertising was again a crucial part of the make-up of the Facebook posts for the party accounts, especially for the better-funded parties (range: Plaid Cymru 23.01% to Brexit Party 75%), as demonstrated in Table 7.13. All used clips of broadcasters' content, but some of the smaller parties made proportionally heavier use of them (range: Brexit Party 4.63% to Plaid Cymru 29.20%). Facebook lives were still used by most of the parties, although only the Brexit Party made very extensive use of them (8.03%). Senior Brexit Party figures held daily question and answer sessions on Facebook Live throughout the campaign.

Media source	Cons (*n*=778)	Labour (*n*=649)	Lib Dems (*n*=386)	SNP (*n*=162)	Green Party (*n*=89)	Plaid Cymru (*n*=113)	Brexit Party (*n*=324)	Total (*n*=2,501)
Broadcaster's content	56 (7.20%)	54 (8.32%)	78 (20.21%)	24 (14.82%)	25 (28.09%)	33 (29.20%)	15 (4.63%)	285 (11.40%)
Crowdfunding site					2 (2.25%)			2 (0.08%)
Digital publisher's article	2 (0.26%)	2 (0.31%)	3 (0.78%)			11 (9.74%)		18 (0.72%)
Election result						1 (0.89%)		1 (0.04%)
Facebook frame	2 (0.26%)	2 (0.31%)		1 (0.62%)		1 (0.89%)		6 (0.24%)
Facebook live	7 (0.90%)	12 (1.85%)	6 (1.55%)	3 (1.85%)	5 (5.62%)		26 (8.03%)	59 (2.36%)
Facebook page	5 (0.64%)	5 (0.77%)			2 (2.25%)		1 (0.31%)	13 (0.52%)
Facebook poll	1 (0.13%)							1 (0.04%)
Film meme				1 (0.62%)				1 (0.04%)
Film screengrab		1 (0.15%)						1 (0.04%)
Newspaper article	98 (12.60%)	58 (8.94%)	36 (9.33%)	5 (3.09%)	6 (6.74%)	7 (6.20%)	3 (0.93%)	213 (8.52%)
Party election broadcast	11 (1.41%)	4 (0.62%)	2 (0.52%)	2 (1.24%)	3 (3.37%)	3 (2.66%)	6 (1.85%)	31 (1.24%)
Party photographic content	37 (4.76%)	24 (3.70%)	11 (2.85%)	27 (16.67%)	5 (5.62%)	3 (2.66%)	6 (1.85%)	113 (4.52%)
Party's audio content					1 (1.12%)			1 (0.04%)
Party's text content	52 (6.68%)	16 (2.47%)	63 (16.32%)	31 (19.14%)		21 (18.58%)	2 (0.62%)	185 (7.40%)
Party's video content	25 (3.21%)	34 (5.24%)	26 (6.74%)	20 (12.35%)	12 (13.48%)	4 (3.54%)	20 (6.17%)	141 (5.64%)
Political advert	435 (55.91%)	326 (50.23%)	150 (38.86%)	45 (27.78%)	25 (28.09%)	26 (23.01%)	243 (75%)	1,250 (49.98%)
Twitter	24 (3.09%)	2 (0.31%)		1 (0.62%)				27 (1.08%)
UGC	3 (0.39%)	5 (0.77%)	1 (0.26%)		2 (2.25%)	2 (1.77%)		13 (0.52%)
Voter registration site	2 (0.26%)	15 (2.31%)	1 (0.26%)	1 (0.62%)				19 (0.76%)
Website (other)	17 (2.19%)	87 (13.41%)	9 (2.33%)	1 (0.62%)	1 (1.12%)	1 (0.89%)	2 (0.62%)	118 (4.72%)
YouTube link	1 (0.13%)							1 (0.04%)
N/A		2 (0.31%)						2 (0.08%)
Total	778 (100%)	649 (100%)	386 (100%)	162 (100%)	89 (100%)	113 (100%)	324 (100%)	2,501 (100%)

Table 7.13: Media source by party account, 2019 campaign

All the leaders posted broadcast clips during the campaign, but far less frequently than the party accounts (range: Swinson 2.70% to Bartley 25%), as shown in Table 7.14. Like the Conservatives' account, Boris Johnson's account used political adverts to persuade his followers to back his vision for Brexit. While all the leaders published party video content (range: Farage 4.44% to Bartley 25%), Jeremy Corbyn made considerable use of video produced on the campaign trail (13.89%). Labour tried to build on the template established in the 2017 election of campaign events being filmed and turned into posts on Facebook. This, along with pieces to camera, proved effective in 2017, but the logistical challenges of a winter election, and Corbyn's waning popularity, meant that in 2019 this had less impact than in 2017. Corbyn's account remained popular on Facebook, although his popularity on Twitter outstripped all else. His team began to screenshot Corbyn's tweets, especially the pithy and pointed ones, to post them on Facebook too.

Media source	Johnson (*n*=661)	Corbyn (*n*=547)	Swinson (*n*=37)	Sturgeon (*n*=48)	Bartley (*n*=4)	Berry (*n*=43)	Price (*n*=19)	Farage (*n*=90)	Total (*n*=1,449)
Broadcaster's content	32 (4.84%)	59 (10.79%)	1 (2.70%)	9 (18.75%)	1 (25%)	10 (23.26%)	7 (36.84%)	5 (5.56%)	124 (8.56%)
Digital publisher's article		6 (1.10%)	1 (2.70%)	2 (4.17%)				2 (2.22%)	11 (0.76%)
Election result				2 (4.17%)					2 (0.14%)
Facebook frame	1 (0.15%)								1 (0.07%)
Facebook live	5 (0.76%)	11 (2.01%)	1 (2.70%)	1 (2.08%)		1 (2.33%)		24 (26.67%)	43 (2.97%)
Facebook page		3 (0.55%)						1 (1.11%)	4 (0.28%)
Film screengrab			1 (2.70%)						1 (0.07%)
Newspaper article	15 (2.27%)	65 (11.88%)	3 (8.11%)	3 (6.25%)		6 (13.95%)		12 (13.33%)	104 (7.18%)
Party election broadcast	6 (0.91%)	3 (0.55%)				1 (2.33%)		3 (3.33%)	13 (0.90%)
Party photographic content	112 (16.94%)	71 (12.98%)	7 (18.92%)	10 (20.83%)		5 (11.63%)	5 (26.32%)	13 (14.44%)	223 (15.39%)
Party's text content	93 (14.07%)	12 (2.19%)	14 (37.84%)	3 (6.25%)		2 (4.65%)	3 (15.79%)	13 (14.44%)	140 (9.66%)
Party's video content	49 (7.41%)	76 (13.89%)	2 (5.41%)	4 (8.33%)	1 (25%)	6 (13.95%)	3 (15.79%)	4 (4.44%)	145 (10.01%)
Political advert	317 (47.96%)	128 (23.40%)	3 (8.11%)	9 (18.75%)		8 (18.61%)		12 (13.33%)	475 (32.78%)
Snapchat			1 (2.70%)						1 (0.07%)
Twitter	9 (1.36%)	93 (17%)		4 (8.33%)	1 (25%)	2 (4.65%)		1 (1.11%)	110 (7.59%)
UGC	20 (3.03%)	11 (2.01%)	2 (5.41%)			1 (2.33%)	1 (5.26%)	1 (1.11%)	36 (2.49%)
Union video		1 (0.18%)							1 (0.07%)
Voter registration site	1 (0.15%)	2 (0.37%)		1 (2.08%)					4 (0.28%)
Website (other)	1 (0.15%)	6 (1.10%)	1 (2.70%)		1 (25%)	1 (2.33%)			10 (0.69%)
Total	661 (100%)	547 (100%)	37 (100%)	48 (100%)	4 (100%)	43 (100%)	19 (100%)	90 (100%)	1,449 (100%)

Table 7.14: Media source by leader account, 2019 campaign

When the parties posted articles and clips, as Table 7.15 shows, they frequently turned to stories

published by the broadcasters, the BBC (range: Labour 20.77% to SNP 50%), ITV (range: SNP 3.33%

to Brexit Party 22.22%), and Sky News (range: Conservatives 3.13% to Liberal Democrats 21%). Notably, the Conservatives and the Brexit Party did not use any clips from Channel 4. The broadcaster's relationship with the Conservatives had deteriorated after Boris Johnson refused to appear on a climate change-themed leaders' debate and was replaced by a melting ice sculpture. The Conservatives posted a Facebook film of the cabinet minister Michael Gove attempting to gain entry to ITN's studios to appear on the debate but being politely and firmly turned away by the managing editor of Channel 4 News, Ed Fraser.

Publisher	Cons (n=158)	Labour (n=130)	Lib Dems (n=118)	SNP (n=30)	Green Party (n=32)	Plaid Cymru (n=51)	Brexit Party (n=18)	Total (n=537)
BBC	38 (24.05%)	27 (20.77%)	38 (32.20%)	15 (50%)	14 (43.75%)	18 (35.29%)	7 (38.89%)	157 (29.24%)
Business Insider		1 (0.80%)						1 (0.19%)
Channel 4		3 (2.31%)	6 (5.09%)	2 (6.67%)	3 (9.38%)	7 (13.73%)		21 (3.91%)
City AM	3 (1.90%)	1 (0.80%)						4 (0.75%)
Daily Express	27 (17.09%)						2 (11.11%)	29 (5.40%)
Daily Mail	16 (10.13%)							16 (2.98%)
Daily Mirror		16 (12.31%)	1 (0.85%)					17 (3.17%)
Daily Post						1 (1.96%)		1 (0.19%)
Daily Record				2 (6.67%)				2 (0.37%)
Daily Telegraph	26 (16.46%)	1 (0.80%)						27 (5.03%)
EU Parliament TV					1 (3.13%)			1 (0.19%)
Euronews		1 (0.80%)						1 (0.19%)
Evening Standard	1 (0.63%)	1 (0.80%)						2 (0.37%)
FE News			1 (0.85%)					1 (0.19%)
Financial Times	1 (0.63%)	1 (0.80%)						2 (0.37%)
Good Morning Britain	2 (1.27%)						1 (5.56%)	3 (0.56%)
gov.uk	2 (1.27%)	15 (11.54%)	1 (0.85%)	1 (3.33%)				19 (3.54%)
Health Cuts		1 (0.80%)						1 (0.19%)
Huffington Post	1 (0.63%)		2 (1.70%)					3 (0.56%)
Independent	4 (2.53%)	14 (10.77%)	13 (11.02%)		4 (12.5%)	1 (1.96%)	1 (5.56%)	37 (6.89%)
ITV	10 (6.33%)	10 (7.69%)	11 (9.32%)	1 (3.33%)	2 (6.25%)	2 (3.92%)	4 (22.22%)	40 (7.45%)
Ivan Lewis	1 (0.63%)							1 (0.19%)
IWA						2 (3.92%)		2 (0.37%)
LBC	1 (0.63%)	2 (1.54%)	1 (0.85%)		1 (3.13%)		2 (11.11%)	7 (0.48%)
Left Foot Forward						1 (1.96%)		1 (0.19%)
Liverpool Echo		1 (0.80%)						1 (0.19%)

Manchester Evening News	1 (0.63%)							1 (0.19%)
Metro	1 (0.63%)				1 (3.13%)			2 (0.37%)
Nation Cymru						7 (13.73%)		7 (0.48%)
New European			1 (0.85%)					1 (0.19%)
New Statesman	2 (1.27%)	1 (0.80%)				1 (1.96%)		4 (0.75%)
NME		1 (0.80%)						1 (0.19%)
Pink News			1 (0.85%)					1 (0.19%)
Politics Home	1 (0.63%)		1 (0.85%)			1 (1.96%)		3 (0.56%)
Reuters TV	1 (0.63%)							1 (0.19%)
Scottish Parliament TV				4 (13.33%)				4 (0.75%)
Senedd TV						2 (3.92%)		2 (0.37%)
Sky News	5 (3.17%)	11 (8.46%)	21 (17.80%)	1 (3.33%)	3 (9.38%)	4 (7.84%)	1 (5.56%)	46 (3.18%)
Talk Radio			1 (0.85%)					1 (0.19%)
The Guardian	2 (1.27%)	19 (14.62%)	17 (14.41%)	2 (6.67%)	1 (3.13%)	1 (1.96%)		42 (2.90%)
The Simpsons		1 (0.80%)						1 (0.19%)
The Spectator	1 (0.63%)							1 (0.19%)
The Sun	7 (4.43%)							7 (0.48%)
The Times	3 (1.90%)			1 (3.33%)				4 (0.75%)
This is Lancashire		1 (0.80%)						1 (0.19%)
Times Educational Supplement			1 (0.85%)					1 (0.19%)
Unite to Remain			1 (0.85%)		1 (3.13%)			2 (0.37%)
Unknown				1 (3.33%)	1 (3.13%)			2 (0.37%)
Wales Online						3 (5.88%)		3 (0.56%)
Worcester News	1 (0.63%)							1 (0.19%)
Yorkshire Post		1 (0.80%)						1 (0.19%)
Total	158 (100%)	130 (100%)	118 (100%)	30 (100%)	32 (100%)	51 (100%)	18 (100%)	537 (100%)

Table 7.15: Media publisher by party account, 2019 campaign

The use of attack ads by the parties remained popular with the bigger and better-funded campaigns, as shown in Table 7.16. Labour relied heavily on videos attacking Boris Johnson and Conservatives (25.54%). Videos produced by the parties ranged from highly polished campaign promos to pieces to camera and policy explainers. Labour again made the most of some of its high-profile supporters to produce celebrity endorsements from stars, such as the comedian Rob Delaney.

Video style	Cons (*n*=208)	Labour (*n*=231)	Lib Dems (*n*=171)	SNP (*n*=73)	Green Party (*n*=51)	Plaid Cymru (*n*=52)	Brexit Party (*n*=132)	Total (*n*=918)
Attack ad	25 (12.02%)	59 (25.54%)	15 (8.77%)	6 (8.22%)			14 (10.61%)	119 (12.96%)
Campaign promo	47 (22.60%)	37 (16.02%)	19 (11.11%)	28 (38.36%)	10 (19.61%)	14 (26.92%)	26 (19.70%)	181 (19.72%)
Campaigning	15 (7.21%)	9 (3.90%)	7 (4.09%)				14 (10.61%)	45 (4.90%)
Celebrity endorsement		14 (6.06%)						14 (1.53%)
Endorsement (non-celebrity)		5 (2.17%)				1 (1.92%)		6 (0.65%)
Interview	38 (18.27%)	15 (6.49%)	43 (25.15%)	1 (1.37%)	15 (29.41%)	14 (26.92%)	8 (6.06%)	134 (14.60%)
Leader statement	17 (8.17%)	21 (9.09%)	22 (12.87%)	17 (23.29%)	7 (13.73%)	5 (9.62%)	37 (28.03%)	126 (13.73%)
Other politician statement	13 (6.25%)	15 (6.49%)	11 (6.43%)	5 (6.85%)	11 (21.57%)	2 (3.85%)	14 (10.61%)	71 (7.73%)
Policy explainer	17 (8.17%)	34 (14.72%)	34 (19.88%)		1 (1.96%)	4 (7.69%)	14 (10.61%)	104 (11.33%)
TV clip		1 (0.43%)						1 (0.11%)
TV debate	27 (12.98%)	13 (5.63%)	20 (11.70%)	16 (21.92%)	7 (13.73%)	12 (23.08%)	5 (3.79%)	100 (10.89%)
TV report		1 (0.43%)						1 (0.11%)
UGC	1 (0.48%)							1 (0.11%)
Undercover video	1 (0.48%)							1 (0.11%)
Video diary		1 (0.43%)						1 (0.11%)
Voxes	7 (3.37%)	6 (2.60%)						13 (1.42%)
Total	208 (100%)	231 (100%)	171 (100%)	73 (100%)	51 (100%)	52 (100%)	132 (100%)	918 (100%)

Table 7.16: Video style by party account, 2019 campaign

The leaders' accounts, as shown in Table 7.17, focused heavily on the leader's character using clips, interviews, and statements to provide an insight into their perspectives and campaigns. Leader statements were the only video style employed by all the party leaders (range: Berry 15.79% to Swinson 100%). Interestingly, Jonathan Bartley was the only party leader to try and engage with the new kid on the social media block, TikTok.

Like the Labour Party account, Jeremy Corbyn's own account also heavily featured attack ads (15.77%). His office commissioned many of their own videos from the campaign group Momentum, who made a series of comic sketch videos attacking the Conservatives and Corbyn's political opponents. Corbyn's account also featured endorsements from supporters talking about the difference a Labour government would make to their lives.

Video style	Johnson (*n*=143)	Corbyn (*n*=260)	Swinson (*n*=5)	Sturgeon (*n*=17)	Bartley (*n*=2)	Berry (*n*=19)	Price (*n*=9)	Farage (*n*=35)	Total (*n*=490)
Attack ad	2 (1.40%)	41 (15.77%)		1 (5.88%)					44 (8.98%)
Campaign promo	29 (20.28%)	26 (10%)		4 (23.53%)		5 (26.32%)		3 (8.57%)	67 (13.67%)
Campaigning	26 (18.18%)	17 (6.54%)				1 (5.26%)		4 (11.43%)	48 (9.80%)
Celebrity endorsement		18 (6.92%)							18 (3.67%)
Endorsement (non-celebrity)		20 (7.69%)					1 (11.11%)		21 (4.29%)
Interview	14 (9.79%)	30 (11.54%)		2 (11.77%)		6 (31.58%)		1 (2.86%)	53 (10.82%)
Leader statement	53 (37.06%)	47 (18.08%)	5 (100%)	6 (35.29%)	1 (50%)	3 (15.79%)	5 (55.56%)	26 (74.29%)	146 (29.80%)
Other politician statement		14 (5.39%)				3 (15.79%)			17 (3.47%)
Parody		1 (0.39%)							1 (0.20%)
Policy explainer	5 (3.50%)	8 (3.08%)							13 (2.65%)
TikTok					1 (50%)				1 (0.20%)
TV clip		7 (2.69%)							7 (1.43%)
TV debate	12 (8.39%)	21 (8.08%)		4 (23.53%)		1 (5.26%)	3 (33.33%)	1 (2.86%)	42 (8.57%)
Video diary		5 (1.92%)							5 (1.02%)
Voxes	2 (1.40%)	5 (1.92%)							7 (1.43%)
Total	143 (100%)	260 (100%)	5 (100%)	17 (100%)	2 (100%)	19 (100%)	9 (100%)	35 (100%)	490 (100%)

Table 7.17: Video style by leader account, 2019 campaign

Following changes to the Facebook algorithm in 2018 (Biteable, 2019), videos lasting longer than three minutes tended to perform better on news feeds than shorter clips. The algorithm also sought to prioritise videos watched for at least one minute. Yet, for all the parties bar Plaid Cymru, most videos were 60 seconds or less in duration, as shown in Table 7.18. While there were some videos of more than three minutes, as in 2017, they tended to be Facebook Lives or clips of speeches (range: Liberal Democrats 4.14% to Brexit Party 21.37%)

Duration	Cons (*n*=207)	Labour (*n*=229)	Lib Dems (*n*=169)	SNP (*n*=73)	Green Party (*n*=51)	Plaid Cymru (*n*=50)	Brexit Party (*n*=131)	Total (*n*=910)
30 seconds or less	99 (47.83%)	59 (25.76%)	76 (44.97%)	15 (20.55%)	15 (29.41%)	3 (6%)	55 (41.99%)	322 (35.39%)
31-60 seconds	41 (19.81%)	60 (26.20%)	61 (36.10%)	25 (34.25%)	21 (41.18%)	8 (16%)	21 (16.03%)	237 (26.04%)
61-90 seconds	17 (8.21%)	34 (14.85%)	21 (12.43%)	20 (27.40%)	3 (5.88%)	12 (24%)	18 (13.74%)	125 (13.74%)
91-120 seconds	10 (4.83%)	25 (10.92%)	2 (1.18%)	3 (4.11%)	4 (7.84%)	7 (14%)	2 (1.53%)	53 (5.82%)
121-180 seconds	14 (6.76%)	23 (10.04%)	2 (1.18%)	3 (4.11%)	2 (3.92%)	13 (26%)	7 (5.34%)	64 (7.03%)
181 seconds or more	26 (12.56%)	28 (12.23%)	7 (4.14%)	7 (9.59%)	6 (11.77%)	7 (14%)	28 (21.37%)	109 (11.98%)
Total	207 (100%)	229 (100%)	169 (100%)	73 (100%)	51 (100%)	50 (100%)	131 (100%)	910 (100%)

Table 7.18: Video duration by party account, 2019 campaign

There was minimal sharing by the party accounts, as demonstrated in Table 7.19. Only the Conservatives (5.27%) and Labour Party (9.40%) shared many posts from other users, usually the party leader. Most posts were not reposted again, but Labour (22.80%), Liberal Democrats (22.28%), and Conservatives (19.79%) did have a proportion of repeated posts. However, there was no repeat of the 2017 Labour campaign, where there were more reposts than original posts.

	Cons (*n*=778)	Labour (*n*=649)	Lib Dems (*n*=386)	SNP (*n*=162)	Green Party (*n*=89)	Plaid Cymru (*n*=113)	Brexit Party (*n*=324)	Total (*n*=2,501)
Original	737 (94.73%)	588 (90.60%)	385 (99.74%)	156 (96.30%)	86 (96.63%)	111 (98.23%)	316 (97.53%)	2,379 (95.12%)
Shared	41 (5.27%)	61 (9.40%)	1 (0.26%)	6 (3.70%)	3 (3.37%)	2 (1.77%)	8 (2.47%)	122 (4.88%)
Post	624 (80.21%)	501 (77.20%)	300 (77.72%)	145 (89.51%)	82 (92.14%)	103 (91.15%)	302 (93.21%)	2,057 (82.25%)
Repost	154 (19.79%)	148 (22.80%)	86 (22.28%)	17 (10.49%)	7 (7.86%)	10 (8.85%)	22 (6.79%)	444 (17.75%)

Table 7.19: Sharing by party accounts, 2019 campaign

7.8 Findings: Engagement

As with the previous two elections, there was no causal connection between Facebook engagement and electoral performance. The Labour Party again had the most interactions and engagement of any of the political parties, as shown in Table 7.20, and yet lost 59 seats. While total interactions were slightly ahead of the Conservatives, it is revealing that the number of shares was larger. While these data do not reveal the motivation for sharing (approval, disapproval, mocking, etc.), it shows that Labour's content activated the action of sharing more regularly.

Party	Total interactions	Reactions	Comments	Shares	Seats won
Labour	3,252,085	1,838,148	479,997	933,940	203 (-59)
Conservatives	3,001,783	1,802,405	603,291	596,087	365 (+47)
Brexit Party	908,862	596,422	170,806	141,634	0 (0)
SNP	508,583	314,674	78,194	115,715	48 (+13)
Liberal Democrats	232,977	135,533	66,514	30,930	11 (-1)
Green Party	62,260	39,201	9,556	13,503	1 (0)
Plaid Cymru	37,404	24,702	4,898	7,804	4 (0)

Table 7.20: Engagement by party, 2019 campaign
Source: CrowdTangle (2021)

Labour also dominated the list of the top ten most engaged with posts, as demonstrated in Table 7.21. The Conservatives only had a single post in the top ten, a graphic thanking people for their support on polling day. Labour's most engaged with posts were often those attacking Boris Johnson personally or the Conservatives' campaign approach. A montage clip of Boris Johnson struggling to win voters over to his side, taken from the BBC programme *Question Time,* was posted more than once by Labour, hence its appearance twice in the top ten. The actor Steve Coogan's endorsement of Labour was again one of the most engaged with posts, replicating the success of his previous interventions in 2015 and 2017.

	Party	Description	Total interactions	Likes	Shares	Comments
1	Labour	Boris Johnson's lies attack ad	93,743	30,878	55,259	7,606
2	Labour	Question Time clip Johnson disastrous night	49,447	18,156	26,281	5,010
3	Labour	Steve Coogan on supporting Labour	48,224	26,975	18,752	2,497
4	Conservatives	Thank you for voting infographic	47,431	37,473	6,918	3,040
5	Labour	On this day NHS set up photograph	46,127	23,354	20,127	2,646
6	Labour	Annie's rape video story	42,647	30,926	9,656	2,065
7	Labour	Question Time clip Johnson disastrous night	40,165	17,300	18,337	4,528
8	Labour	Personal manifesto link	37,853	20,928	5,945	10,980
9	Labour	Election ads untruthful BBC link	35,738	12,363	22,094	1,281
10	Labour	Polling station finder link	30,941	18,770	10,277	1,894

Table 7.21: Most engaged with posts by party, 2019 campaign
Source: CrowdTangle (2021)

Table 7.22 shows Labour's videos were also watched more frequently than the other political

parties. Despite having a similar number of owned videos to the Conservatives, Labour secured over

nine million more views to their videos, with videos achieving an average of 139,793 views. The

Conservatives earned an average of 91,940 views per video. Both Labour and the Conservatives

were far ahead of the third most viewed, the Brexit Party. The Liberal Democrats performed

exceptionally poorly. Each of the party's videos was watched, on average, just 5,789 times.

Party	Owned videos	Views
Labour Party	188	26,281,059
Conservatives	186	17,100,774
Brexit Party	127	5,007,149
SNP	117	3,986,415
Liberal Democrats	179	1,036,279
Green Party	45	629,730
Plaid Cymru	43	291,848

Table 7.22: Total video views by party account, 2019 campaign
Source: CrowdTangle (2021)

Jeremy Corbyn's personal popularity among his supporters helped drive high levels of engagement with content released via his named Facebook account, as shown in Table 7.23. Not only were there far more interactions with his account than with Boris Johnson's, his closest rival, but the level of shares was more than four times greater than Johnson's.

Name	Total interactions	Reactions	Comments	Shares
Jeremy Corbyn	5,943,550	3,956,054	513,370	1,474,086
Boris Johnson	3,888,132	2,812,720	728,331	347,081
Nigel Farage	830,215	600,244	133,458	96,513
Nicola Sturgeon	303,014	222,546	35,419	45,049
Jo Swinson	17,989	11,030	5,911	1,048
Sian Berry	4,703	3,874	223	606
Adam Price	3,657	2,698	338	621
Jonathan Bartley	776	535	182	59

Table 7.23: Engagement by leader, 2019 campaign
Source: CrowdTangle (2021)

Material released via Corbyn's account dominated the leader's top ten most engaged Facebook posts, as demonstrated in Table 7.24. The endorsement of Labour's health policy by the comedian Rob Delaney was the most engaged with post of the campaign, during which he explained his personal experience of NHS care during his son's terminal illness. Only two posts in the top ten were from other leaders: Boris Johnson's *Brexit Actually* video, a pastiche of a scene from the romantic comedy *Love Actually*, and a photographic post of Brexit Party leader Nigel Farage holding up a bottle of wine called Corbin.

	Name	Description	Total interactions	Likes	Shares	Comments
1	Jeremy Corbyn	Rob Delaney on the NHS video	181,884	46,627	130,472	4,785
2	Jeremy Corbyn	60-second challenge video	155,152	64,141	71,720	19,291
3	Jeremy Corbyn	5% taxpayer video	120,795	64,416	49,066	7,313
4	Boris Johnson	Brexit, Actually	92,939	41,318	31,500	20,121
5	Jeremy Corbyn	Talking to both sides of Brexit Twitter image	85,874	65,912	17,095	2,867
6	Jeremy Corbyn	Grenfell attack Twitter image	82,590	51,668	28,521	2,401
7	Jeremy Corbyn	Dreaming of a Labour government photograph	75,241	60,700	4,988	9,553
8	Jeremy Corbyn	Health communism Twitter image	65,957	47,906	15,738	2,313
9	Nigel Farage	Corbin wine photograph	63,942	49,685	6,925	7,332
10	Jeremy Corbyn	Blame Ali video	62,991	22,769	37,113	3,109

Table 7.24: Most engaged with posts by leader, 2019 campaign
Source: CrowdTangle (2021)

The Labour digital team focused on producing persuasive content that could go viral and influence its target voters. According to a report from the Leader of the Opposition's office, prepared at the end of the campaign for Labour's National Executive Committee, its content reached millions of people who had never previously engaged with Corbyn's accounts. The digital team claimed that in the final 28 days of the campaign, Corbyn's Facebook content appeared 325 million times in front of 37.4 million unique people. In total, 865,000 unique people shared Corbyn's content on Facebook, including 6,247 people in Stoke, 5,501 in Derby and 4,403 in Sunderland. 436,000 of these people (50.4%) had not previously interacted with Corbyn's page (Labour Party, 2019c). The difference in the number of total shares in Table 7.24 is because one is unique users, and the other is the aggregated total.

While hailing the success of the team based in the Leader of the Opposition's office, it suggested that the party was wasting money by not paying enough attention to its organic success. The report claimed that "in the final 28 days of the campaign JC's Facebook page organically reached 77.7% of the people Labour paid to target through the page, including 64.4% and 41.7% of the 1.3m and 1.9m people Labour targeted on 11 and 12 December respectively" (Labour Party, 2019c, para 4). It also warned that while the organic campaign run using Corbyn's account was more successful than in 2017, the official party account performed poorly, with video views just half of those achieved in 2017.

Data from CrowdTangle in Table 7.25 confirm that analysis. Corbyn's videos were by far the most viewed, achieving an average viewer rate of 399,774 per video. By comparison, on average, Boris Johnson's videos were viewed 114,707 times.

Name	Owned videos	Views
Jeremy Corbyn	93	37,178,954
Boris Johnson	136	15,600,130
Nigel Farage	19	1,650,929
Nicola Sturgeon	14	1,386,744
Adam Price	5	19,815
Jo Swinson	1	5,365
Jonathan Bartley	1	1,026
Sian Berry	0	0

Table 7.25: Total video views by leader account, 2019 campaign
Source: CrowdTangle (2021)

It is clear from the list of the top ten most viewed videos in Table 7.26 that Corbyn and the campaign group Momentum, who were making many of the videos for the Labour leader, were the most successful in delivering video content to supporters. The most popular video of the campaign, a montage of news reports on the impact of austerity, was released the day before polling day and achieved viral success. The only video from the official Labour Party account to make the top ten is an attack ad on Boris Johnson's honesty about the details of his Brexit deal.

Video	Account	Shares	Video Views	Minutes Viewed
Montage of Inequality	Jeremy Corbyn	241,000	11.6m	10.9m
Nicky Morgan Car Crash	Momentum	118,000	8.4m	11.1m
Rob Delaney on our NHS	Jeremy Corbyn	137,000	7.1m	6.1m
60 Second Challenge	Jeremy Corbyn	74,000	4.3m	2.5m
Boris Johnson's Lies	Labour Party	46,000	4.0m	3.8m
Liz Truss housing interview	Momentum	56,000	3.9m	4.0m
Tories making stuff up	Momentum	56,000	3.4m	1.8m
Brexit, Actually	Boris Johnson	33,000	2.7m	N/A
Gogglebox Reacts	Jeremy Corbyn	31,000	2.7m	2.7m
Nurses challenge Johnson	Momentum	25,000	2.7m	1.5m

Table 7.26: Top 10 videos on Facebook across Labour, Jeremy Corbyn, Conservatives, Boris Johnson, and Momentum.
Source: The Labour Party

The final thing to note on engagement is the blizzard of activity on the Jeremy Corbyn account on polling day, when the account posted 70 times compared to 58 times for the Labour account, 49 times for the Conservatives, and 45 times for Boris Johnson's. Corbyn's team aimed to drive supporter turnout through a range of posts that tried to capture the party leader's vision for the UK, as well as policy explainers, satirical takes, and youth-focused celebrity endorsements from people such as Dua Lipa and Stormzy.

The party claimed that on Facebook, Corbyn reached 14,230,353 users, gained 10,535,826 organic video views, and delivered 35,830,598 organic page impressions. This was along with 272,000 shares, 186,000 comments and 1,270,000 likes. On Twitter, Corbyn gained 537,216 retweets on polling day, with 2,306,466 likes and a 7.8% engagement rate, with 130,121,482 organic impressions.

Corbyn's team claimed he had more likes and retweets on polling day than either Labour's official account or Boris Johnson's had achieved in the entire campaign (Labour Party, 2019c).

7.9 Comparing the elections

The data from the three election campaigns show a clear development in digital campaigning by the political parties. As shown in Figure 7.4, the Labour Party, Conservatives, and Liberal Democrats published far more frequently in 2019 than in previous elections. Under Theresa May in 2017, the Conservatives did not campaign heavily on Facebook. Thus, the change to 2019 was marked. While the SNP posted less in 2019 than in 2017, there was still an increase on 2015. The Green Party posted less often in 2017 and 2019 than in 2015, as did Plaid Cymru. The Brexit Party posted more often in 2019 than UKIP in 2015 or 2017.
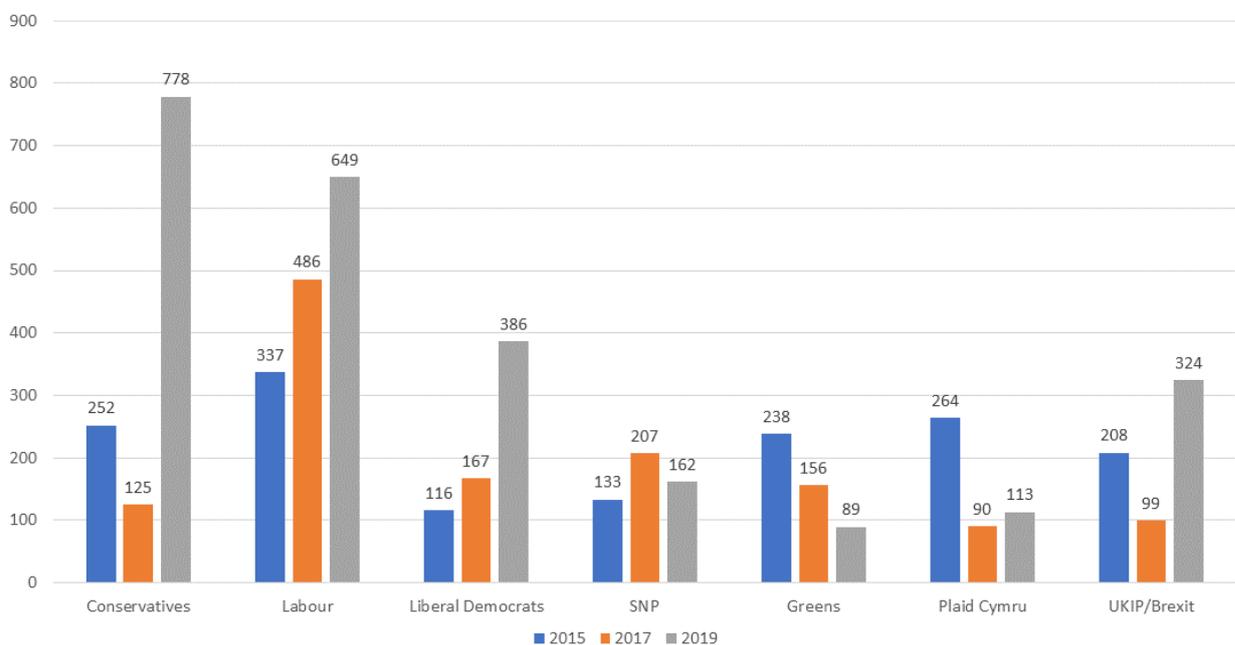
Figure 7.4: Party posts by election (*n*=5,379)

The pattern of posting behaviour is not dissimilar for the main parties' leaders, as seen in Figure 7.5. The Conservatives and Labour leaders posted more frequently in 2019 than in earlier elections. For

other party leaders, enthusiasm generally waned over time; 2015 marked a high point for the

Greens, UKIP/Brexit, and Plaid Cymru.
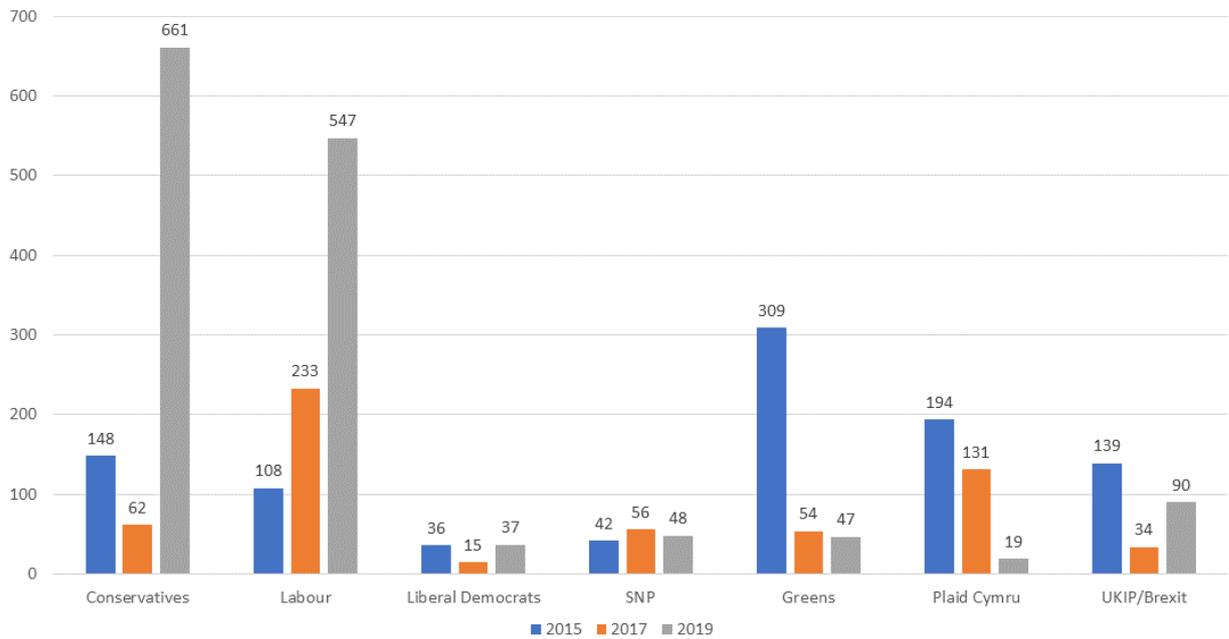
Figure 7.5: Leader Facebook posts by election (*n*=3,010)

The increase in activity for Labour and Conservatives reflects the growing professionalism of the

parties' digital campaigns. As the interviews in Chapter Eight with party workers show, the two main

parties took digital campaigning more seriously as time passed. They devoted more resources to it,

including hiring dedicated staff to produce content for social media consumption. Under Jeremy

Corbyn and Boris Johnson's leaderships, video and photography taken during campaign events were

used to create promotional content for distribution through social media.
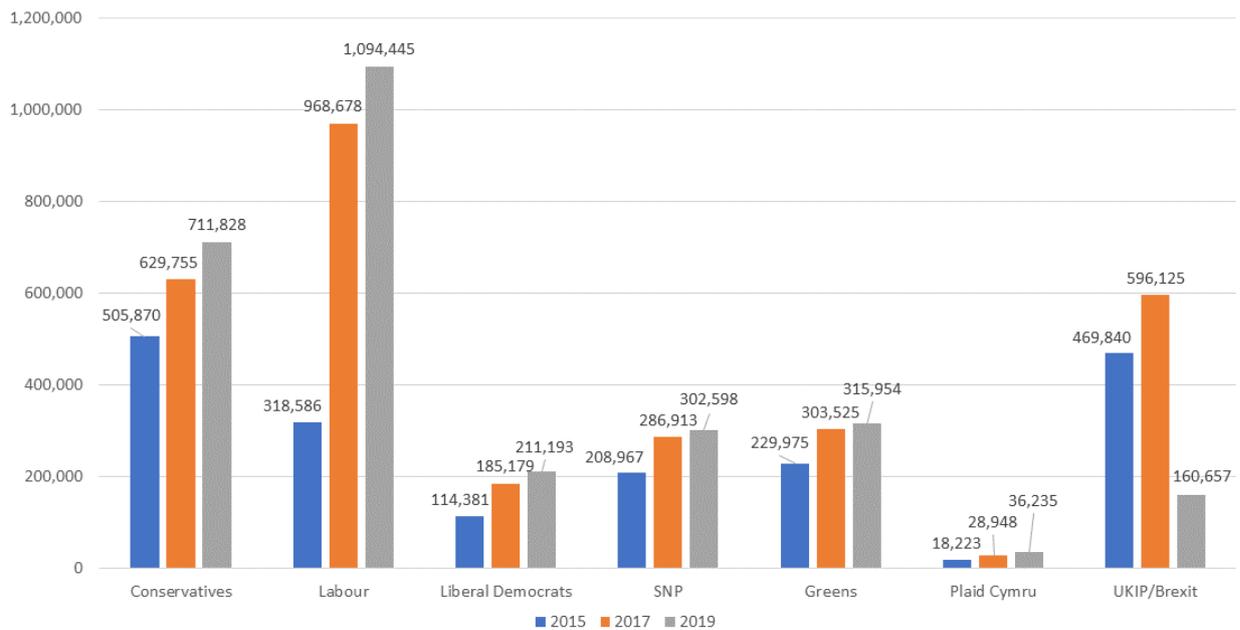
Figure 7.6: Likes for party accounts on polling day, all campaigns

The likes for all accounts increased through the study period, as seen in Figure 7.6. The Conservatives made substantial gains in likes to both party and leader accounts ahead of the 2015 election. Labour made large gains ahead of the 2017 election. But the large percentage increases in likes during the short campaigns slow over time. While UKIP's likes increased between 2015 and 2017, the increase during the short campaign was slight. The same is true of the SNP. By 2019, growth in likes during the campaign is under 5% for all parties. However, there continues to be considerable percentage growth for new party leaders, no doubt reflecting greater public awareness of their role as they fight their first general election campaign. In 2019, the Brexit Party launched a new Facebook page, hence the relative drop from UKIP's 2017 position.

Persuasion was the most-used rhetorical style across all parties and all leaders in all elections. Attacking was generally the second most-used style, but many parties relied heavily on motivational posts asking supporters to do something. This was usually to donate money, help canvass supporters, or go and vote. Leaders' accounts tended not to be so aggressive in attacking opponents. But there are exceptions, notably Nigel Farage's use of the attacking rhetorical style in 2015

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(33.09%) and Jeremy Corbyn's use in both 2017 (26.18%) and 2019 (35.10%). These results reflect a strong personal style defined in opposition to their chief opponents, in these cases, the Conservatives. Leaders' accounts also tended to be defined by increased use of personalisation for strategic purposes. This was more often used by the leaders' accounts than the party accounts but still remained small as a percentage of the overall leaders' posts (2015: 3.79%, 2017: 2.22%, 2019: 1.10%). Findings suggest that leaders' potential to take a different strategic approach from their parties was not effectively maximised. The leaders had an opportunity to use their own accounts to promote their personal brand and leadership style. Results clearly show that, as a cohort, they failed to do this strategically.

The political parties rarely engaged with each other in their Facebook posts, but the campaign in isolation on topics closely aligned with their election key messages. This is particularly notable on the issue of Brexit in 2017 and 2019. The Conservatives' Facebook posts reference Brexit frequently (2017: 36.8% single-policy posts, 63.64% multiple-policy posts; 2019: 35.09% single-policy posts, 64.29% multiple-policy posts). In comparison, the Labour Party barely mentions the issue (2017: 0% single-policy posts, 10.95% multiple-policy posts; 2019: 2.01% single-policy posts, 22.38% multiple-policy posts). Conversely, the Labour Party makes significant reference to health and the NHS in its campaigning throughout (2015: 26.71% single-policy posts, 68.96% multiple-policy posts; 2017: 7.82% single-policy posts, 55.72% multiple-policy posts; 2019: 16.49% single-policy posts, 55.94% multiple-policy posts). The Conservative Party does campaign on health policy but at a significantly lower rate (2015: 1.98% single-policy posts, 9.52% multiple-policy posts; 2017: 0% single-policy posts, 21.21% multiple-policy posts; 2019: 2.70% single-policy posts, 43.65% multiple-policy posts).

Many Facebook posts did not reference policy, as shown in Figure 7.7, suggesting that parties failed to maximise voter support through social media engagement. While the proportional rate of posts without a policy reference declined for most parties from 2015 to 2019, the Labour Party and the

Brexit Party failed to mention a policy in more than 30% of their posts in 2019. These data suggest that some parties missed key engagement opportunities afforded them by Facebook campaigning.
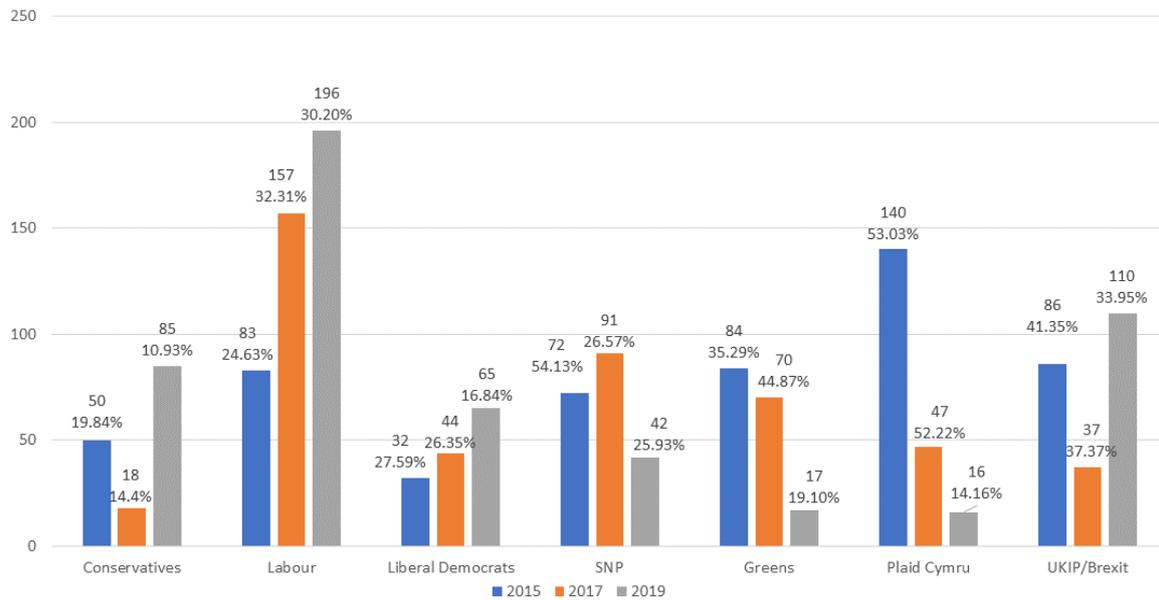
Figure 7.7: No policy stated posts by party, all campaigns (*n*=1,542)

Viral videos and attack ads became prominent during the 2015 campaign as parties began exploiting new technology to create content and target smartphone users. By the time of the 2017 and 2019 campaigns, attack ads were among the most-watched videos. Some of these, including the videos created by Momentum for Jeremy Corbyn, were sophisticated, high-concept pieces of work that required scripting and actors to carry the core message to viewers.

However, not all videos required substantial production effort. Clips of both broadcast interviews and televised election debates were often used but were edited to remove context, such as questions or rebuttals by other participants. In some cases, such as the Conservatives' editing of a Good Morning Britain interview with Sir Keir Starmer, this selective presentation led to content that seemed designed to mislead the viewer.

In general, media used in Facebook posts became increasingly polished and reflected increased media production value across the three elections. Music, graphics, and slow-motion video were all used. Momentum's entry into British politics led to a rapid evolution in video quality, with humour becoming more critical in 2017. But Momentum found that by 2019, while sketch videos still had an impact, other formats, such as montage videos, had also become popular. Longer videos that performed better on Facebook Watch were deployed, and aggregate video views grew substantially. It is essential to underline that most videos individually were not heavily watched, but the main parties tried to create hits that would go viral and carry messages beyond their core supporters.

Some of the most popular videos featured celebrity supporters of the Labour Party. These delivered large amounts of views and engagement, especially those featuring the comic actor Steve Coogan. In all three elections, the party tried to leverage the personal popularity of its supporters; it wanted to persuade the fans of the singer Dua Lipa, or snooker champion Ronnie O'Sullivan, or actors Coogan and Martin Freeman, to act on their endorsements and vote for Labour. Given the subsequent electoral performance of the party, it is unclear whether these endorsements persuaded wavering voters to support Labour, bolstered existing supporters, or indeed had no effect at all.

Different video formats evolved through the election period in response to changes in Facebook's technology. From 2017, Facebook Lives were used widely to engage users in live events, such as speeches or policy launches. Following changes to Facebook's algorithm that favoured longer videos, Labour had begun to create more videos with durations above three minutes, although party workers admitted it was difficult to sustain some videos for durations of that length. While the main parties increasingly tried to create bespoke video content, the less well-funded parties were more likely to link to material produced by the media to amplify their policy positions, gain credibility with voters, and bolster supporters.

While attack ads delivered a large number of video views from 2017 onwards, some of the most engaging posts were often positive in tone. For example, an infographic that thanked supporters for voting attracted the most user engagement of any post during the Conservatives' entire 2019 Facebook campaign. But overall, the account that delivered the most engagement was Jeremy Corbyn's from 2017 onwards. As the interviews with party workers in the following chapter demonstrate, Corbyn used social media to circumvent the gatekeeping activity of the press. While political campaigners were split over the success of this strategy, it was clearly pursued with vigour.

7.9.1 Conclusion

The received wisdom at the start of the 2019 General Election campaign was that the Labour Party understood organic digital campaigning and the Conservatives did not; that Labour could run cheap, high-impact campaigns and that the Conservative Party had to buy its way to success through paid advertising. Findings in this chapter show that the actual campaign overturned those assumptions.

The Conservatives spent more on Google advertising than on Facebook, where they were far outspent by Labour, which spent the most on digital advertising of any party in 2019 (see Table 7.2). Findings show that Labour's campaign achieved very high levels of engagement through Jeremy Corbyn's Facebook account, but the video views from the party's main account dropped back from the highs of 2017. The Conservatives in 2019 brought personality and internet-savvy humour to bear on a disciplined Facebook campaign that relentlessly delivered its key messages. Although combative, Labour failed to tie its online and offline campaigns together; the party trialled too many messages (See Chapter Eight) and seems to have been misled by high levels of supporter engagement on social media (Labour Together, 2020). Labour ultimately failed in tackling either policy confusion over Brexit or Corbyn's poor polling performance on leadership issues.

As with the previous elections in the dataset, a little less than a quarter (23.11%) of the party

account posts discussed policy. More than a fifth (22.71%) of all the single policy posts focused on

Brexit. This was mainly driven by the Conservatives, but both the Liberal Democrats and Brexit Party

also posted extensively on the issue. This reflects both the Conservatives stated strategy of "water

dripping on stone" (Workman and Hutcheon, 2019, para 35), and evidence from the literature that

repeated exposure to messages aids knowledge acquisition by social media users (Boukes, 2019).

The Labour Party again tried to campaign on issues where it polled more strongly, health was again

the most important single policy area (16.49%) and featured on more than half (55.94%) of the

party's posts with multiple policies referenced. As the interviews in the next chapter show, political

campaigners sought to capitalise on social media users' support and identification with bread-and-

butter issues to drive the virality of political messages and help expose the politically disengaged to

positive policy messages. This strategy was most effectively deployed by Corbyn's account, where

the three most engaging posts were positive policy-related videos (see Table 7.23). In contrast, the

Labour party account saw the most success with attack ads (see Table 7.24). But in both cases, it

was video content that drove user engagement, in line with findings from other studies such as Kite

et al., 2016.

Unlike the other two campaigns studied in this thesis, the 2019 General Election does not conform

to Jungherr's (2016b) Twitter hypothesis that opposition parties post more often than governing

ones. In this case, posts by the Conservatives and Boris Johnson outnumbered those of their

competitors. However, findings here as in other years do support the proposition that parties will

post more frequently as the campaign gets closer to polling day and that they will repeat messages

aimed at mobilising voters (Gerbaudo et al., 2019). The growth in follower numbers documented

here suggests that the political accounts may have reached market saturation by the time of the

election. As Liadeli et al. (2022) suggest in their meta-analysis of brands' social media engagement,

there may be a point at which growth in overall numbers of social media followers becomes a less important driver motivating audience action, which requires a more sophisticated and integrated marketing strategy.

Findings from 2019 also indicate that the smaller parties, such as Green Party and Plaid Cymru, were posting less often on Facebook than in earlier years. It is unclear from this study whether this results from fatigue with Facebook or a lessening of the perceived value the parties derive from the social network. More research could be conducted to understand whether this was a strategic decision or one connected to resource allocation.

Both the main parties professionalised their campaign teams between 2017 and 2019, bringing on board new staff and consultants to help produce the content that would drive their digital campaigns, (see Chapter Eight). But the Conservatives' understanding of how to drive virality in content, even content that appeared amateurish, helped their key messages to land with voters in support of both the air and ground wars. The eccentric charm of Boris Johnson's campaigning and public speaking style also helped the party deliver content such as the pastiches of *Love Actually* and *73 Questions* that were engaging and on-message.

However, while the campaign relentlessly promoted key messages, it only generated news stories when the digital team acted provocatively. This led some commentators and journalists to believe that it was not having an impact. The development of understanding of digital campaigning by both journalists and party activists will be examined in the next chapter.

Chapter 8 Qualitative interviews with journalists and campaigners

This chapter will examine the results of interviews with political journalists and campaigners, highlighting their thoughts and concerns about how social media impacts the relationship between political actors and journalists. The chapter is a split into four parts. The first two parts consider the impact on journalism and political campaigning respectively of social media use. The third part captures the interviewees' reflections on the three general elections campaigns. The final section traces links between the practice of journalists and campaigners and the communications theories that underpin the conceptual framework of this thesis.

Name	Role
Tom Baldwin	Former Director of Communications for Ed Miliband
Emil Charlaff	Head of digital media at Momentum
Conservative respondent one	A senior party worker on the digital campaign
Joey D'Urso	Former BBC and *Buzzfeed* reporter covering media and politics
Daniel Finkelstein	Conservative peer and columnist at *The Times*
Steve Howell	Former Deputy Director of Communications for the Labour Party
Joey Jones	Former Deputy Political Editor, Sky News, and spokesperson for Theresa May
Journalist respondent one	A senior television news political producer
Journalist respondent two	A senior digital journalist covering politics
Giles Kenningham	Former Director of Communications at the Conservative Party
Labour respondent one	A senior party worker on the digital campaign
Chris Mason	Political Editor, BBC News (Political correspondent at the time of interview)
Kate McCann	Political Editor, Talk TV (Political correspondent at Sky News at the time of interview)
Matthew McGregor	Former Labour Party digital advisor and aide to the Obama 2012 campaign
Jonathan Munro	Interim CEO, BBC News (Head of Newsgathering at the time of interview)
Paul Nicholson	Content manager at Momentum
Sir Craig Oliver	Former Director of Communications for David Cameron
Laura Parker	Former Private Secretary for Jeremy Corbyn and National Organiser for Momentum
Anthony Simon	Former head of digital at 10 Downing Street
Jim Waterson	Media Editor, *The Guardian*
Esther Webber	UK correspondent, *Politico* (Editor of Red Box at *The Times* at the time of interview)

Table 8.1: Interviewees and their roles.
Note: quotes are attributed to the role at time of interview

8.1 The impact on journalism

Perhaps it is not surprising that almost all the people interviewed for this chapter believed there had been significant impacts on journalism because of increased social media use in political communication. For all the journalist respondents, the need to monitor social media, to find stories and be in touch with the day's debates was paramount. A typical view was expressed by the BBC's Chris Mason, who said, "I think it's pretty much impossible in political journalism to not be lurking on Twitter, even if you've decided, perfectly reasonably, because you don't fancy a headache seven days a week, that you're not going to have much of an outward broadcasting presence on it". The need to be engaged and engaging on social media was identified by many journalist respondents, as was an underlying concern about the level of abuse that they, or their colleagues, encountered.

Several journalist respondents highlighted the practical ways that their jobs had changed. Mason pointed out one benefit was greater ease in seeking reactive quotes: "The positive is that people are much more accessible. So when some story breaks, and in the past, you would be involved in this process of ringing up half a dozen people to get their initial reaction… now they do it for you because something happens, and they respond". Esther Webber, Editor of *The Times*' Red Box pointed to Twitter being the primary means of communication, rather than calling a potential contributor on the telephone. "That's been the day-to-day impact for me," she said. "I've had at least two op-eds this week that I've arranged by Twitter". Jim Waterson, Media Editor of *The Guardian*, described a potential ethical dilemma that faces journalists who spend large chunks of their day on Twitter. "You sometimes have to ask which master you're serving," he said. "Are you serving your employer who gives you the income and freedom to do that? Are you providing free content to Twitter in order to get more content for your employer? Like, which comes first?".

Some political actor respondents highlighted the danger that this might lead to journalists not seeking stories from a more comprehensive range of sources. Sir Craig Oliver, a former BBC News executive and Director of Communications at 10 Downing Street under David Cameron, said, "Journalists got stuck watching accounts. They don't get out and about and cover stories. It has meant that journalists, more and more often, don't get stories right. Journalism has lost its way and its capacity". The concern that journalists have become over-reliant on social media was echoed by Anthony Simon, a former head of digital communications at 10 Downing Street, who said, "I think there's more and more briefing off the record now. Because anything that can be said in the open goes directly on social media". Conservative respondent one was damning in an assessment of how political journalism has reacted to the greater use of social media:

> You're watching it evolve in real-time on Twitter, which is kind of exciting and sort of interesting, up until you realise that it's led to a rise of misinformation and gossip and things being out there before they can be retracted. And it doesn't feel to me a lot like political journalism really adds much value. It feels like in a lot of cases, it makes it worse, not better. (Conservative respondent one, 2020)

Few journalists would agree it is their job to make the lives of political campaigners easier. The most important driver for them is uncovering a story for publication. Webber pointed to a growing sophistication in the political class, which has made it tougher to get stories. "There was a sort of golden age of Twitter when not everyone was so used to it," she said. "And now it's a bit harder to find people stepping out of line, and politicians tend to have a quite coordinated, disciplined message, which is good for them but not much good for us". Tom Baldwin, former Director of Communications for Ed Miliband, also pointed to the fundamental story-generating drive of political journalism. "I've never taken too seriously the idea that they have some formal role in democracy," he said. "They're trying to get stories. They're trying to make a living". Jonathan Munro, the BBC's Head of Newsgathering, also warned against over-stressing the importance of social media. "Although social media has absolutely galloped away in terms of its importance and its profile over

the last ten years, broadcast media is still very, very important in getting the brand recognition out there," he said. "It's more powerful on the telly than it is on your phone".

8.1.1 Use of platforms

There was a clear division between journalists and political actors regarding the platforms they considered important in their work. Journalists thought Twitter was vital for doing their jobs, whereas political campaigners rated Facebook more highly. There was also a division between younger and older journalists. The younger tended to take a more nuanced view of the merits of Twitter when compared to Facebook. Mason's comments were typical of journalists who have begun using social media during their careers. "I think covering politics at Westminster, Twitter is the main platform, both in terms of newsgathering and indeed as, bluntly, a brand builder for participants on it," he said. Sky News's Kate McCann echoed that view. "I use Twitter as a kind of alert system. It's good for seeing if something is happening immediately," she said. Journalist respondent one, a senior political producer working for a large broadcaster, said, "The government announces policy on Twitter now. Often when the prime minister has something to say, there'll be a press release sent to my inbox, but also, at the same time, there'll be a video that goes out on social media".

But Joey D'Urso, a young reporter who covered the 2019 digital election for the BBC, took a slightly different view, pointing to the importance of Facebook groups for finding stories, especially given the relative size of the user bases for Twitter and Facebook. He also outlined the hybrid nature of news dissemination on social media:

> Twitter is the first point; it's where you're mainly speaking to a load of insiders and political journalists, but they might then post it on Facebook, or they might know someone who sent it through WhatsApp. It's the first point in a distribution network. So even though it can feel

like a Westminster bubble thing, it helps get stuff out there in a second-order way. (D'Urso, 2020)

Many journalist respondents expressed conflict about the paradox of Twitter. On the one hand, it's fast-paced and information-rich. But there can be a narrowness of perspective. Daniel Finkelstein, a columnist for *The Times* and a Conservative peer, said:

> I find using Twitter is a constant tussle between allowing your perspective to be influenced by what you know is a sample biased both in its views and temporally, that is very much biased towards the moment as against perspective. On the other hand, the fact is that you're using something that has a huge amount of reach, with both your peers and readers, and a big audience, and is a great source of information. So if the thought ever occurs to me to turn off social media, which it sometimes does because it can be very irritating, I remember how useful it can be to read, and I gain a lot of intellectual sustenance from it. (Finkelstein, 2020)

8.1.2 Misinformation on social media

Among the concerns expressed by respondents was the temptation for journalists to repeat misinformation, or even disinformation, from social media. "During the Brexit referendum, there were all sorts of shit on social media. It was lying on an industrial scale," Oliver said. "They (the Leave campaign) knew that saying that Turkey was joining the EU and 80 million Turks would have access to the UK was gold dust. It didn't matter to them that it wasn't true". Journalist respondent two pointed to the growth of fact-checking as an antidote to lying but warned any fact-check might lack the virality of the original social media post. "The difficult thing is once it's out and been retweeted 2000 times, your story maybe gets retweeted, if you're lucky, a few hundred times," they said. "It's difficult to counterbalance". *The Guardian's* Waterson pointed to the speed of publication on social media as an impediment to the gold standard journalistic practice of at least double-sourcing any new information:

> You'd start putting a call in to double source. But then one of the other journalists would have just stuck it up on Twitter… so you'd end up with this bizarre situation where the pool was already polluted because, by the time you'd even tried to double-source anything,

everyone else had already seen the other journalists' tweet it, while all the MPs were also hooked to their phones watching it… At least there used to be a few stops. Now there's no friction on how it spreads around. (Waterson, 2020)

Munro, from BBC News, suggested that exacting standards are a bulwark against misinformation. "The best antidote to fake news is real proper journalism. It's not shouting from the rooftops about fake news. It's just doing our job to an even higher standard than ever before on any platform," he said.

However, when pressed on whether dirty tricks or misinformation is published during political campaigns, many of the political actors struggled to reference anything worse than the Conservatives renaming their press office Twitter account in the 2019 campaign. "That was an absolutely ludicrous fuss," Finkelstein said. "It was completely obvious what they'd done. Everyone got on their high horse about it. And I thought it was actually fine". Conservative respondent one agreed, saying, "It'd be really stretching it to suggest that's beyond the pale. It's kind of impish". D'Urso suggested there was an urge to find state actor interference or malevolent influence on campaigns, but the explanation was often more humdrum. He pointed to a BBC story (D'Urso, 2019) he wrote about people pretending to be bots that were being used to rig the election. "People wanted that story to be real," he said. "But I think the vast majority of what was driving the conversation was ordinary people, partisans and from all walks of life".

8.1.3 Dangers for journalists

While all the journalist respondents pointed to abuse as being unpleasant, at the very least, several also pointed to the difficulties they face if social media users suspect they know a reporter's political beliefs. Journalist respondent two suggested it has had a chilling effect on their reporting. "I'm a

reporter, so I don't like expressing my opinion anyway," they said. "But you second-guess tweeting

certain things sometimes because you just can't be bothered with the reaction and the abuse that

you might get". McCann said Sky News has changed its journalistic practice to avoid encouraging

abuse:

> The way I use social media has always been that you shouldn't be able to tell what I think. It
> becomes more difficult when you are either a commentator or a journalist that strays into
> the area of commentary. There are some journalists, political journalists on The Spectator,
> who will do straight news stories, but they will also write comment. And Sky has explored
> doing that in the past, but it does make it really difficult. And so they have essentially
> stopped asking their political journalists to write very expressive, viewpoint-driven content.
> (McCann, 2020)

Journalist respondent two also suggested that the aggressive responses to journalists on social

media were, in part, being fuelled by political actors:

> You will see a lot more calling out of journalists now from MPs for asking the wrong
> questions... and you see a lot of support for that position, and they know it. It does make life
> more difficult. But it's not a very healthy position to be in, is it? When you have a politician
> saying journalists are asking the wrong questions and rabble-rousing. (Journalist respondent
> two, 2020)

The BBC's Munro pointed to the problems newsroom managers face in protecting staff. "If it was on

party leaflets, or on-the-record press conference briefings, you would immediately ring up the party

chairman, chief whip, or whomever, and say this is completely unacceptable," he said. "Now, who

the hell are you ringing up? All these people who do this are not even necessarily party workers.

They're just party supporters".

Conservative respondent one warned there was a danger that journalists become fixated on new

developments and miss the deeper story. "The Westminster press still want to see the shiny thing.

They still like the gossip, they still like the kind of smart Alec stuff, and that's totally fine. That's

currency in terms of Westminster journalism," they said. "But it's not really where digital

campaigning has been for a long time". Mason echoed that theme:

> The danger is that people perhaps assume that (follow-up questions are) not necessary
> because 'oh, look, they've tweeted about it'. Well, yeah, they have, but that's not subject to
> any scrutiny, and it's not subject to any inquiry because you're just swallowing what they've
> sent you, which is fine as an off-the-top-of-their-head instant reaction but shouldn't stand in
> the way of proper journalistic scrutiny. (Mason, 2020)

For *The Times'* Finkelstein, the problem with social media, and particularly Twitter, is that journalists

become obsessed with the cut-and-thrust of comment in the Westminster village and mistake it for

broader public opinion. He cited an ongoing Twitter controversy that involved him but had no real

importance in the real world as "a constant reminder to me of the difference between the life that

you can live on Twitter, that you can get sucked into on Twitter, but actually that can also be a

perspective error".

McCann also suggested that political campaigners use video on social media to control broadcasters'

access to sources and limit their ability to question political figures. She pointed to the practice of

political actors releasing videos of statements and subsequently refusing to take part in broadcast

interviews, something she attributed to communications policy in Downing Street under Boris

Johnson:

> And then you are in a problematic situation because, as a broadcaster, if you don't broadcast
> that, then you're not going to get access to the prime minister's words that day. But if you
> do, you are setting a precedent where you are broadcasting content which has had no
> journalistic input, and so there's no scrutiny of it… It means we get more access on a more
> regular basis than we would if we weren't taking that content with this administration. But it
> also does pose some questions which are difficult ethically. (McCann, 2020)

8.1.4 The Future of Journalism

When considering what the future might hold, many respondents were downbeat, especially about

newspapers. "It's difficult not to be pessimistic about the future for journalism," Oliver said. "There

are less people paying for it in the broad mainstream titles. But we shouldn't get too romantic about the past. Most newspapers were campaign papers".

Others, notably respondents from the campaigning group Momentum, were more positive. Emil Charlaff, head of digital media at Momentum, said:

> I think journalists definitely still have a role. We talked about the clipping videos; those are often dependent on a sharp journalist holding a politician to account. It's just being delivered in a different format. But also, having a voice that people recognise often makes a difference. Weirdly, we've been clipping videos of Piers Morgan during the pandemic, which has been quite contentious because, obviously, we don't like Piers Morgan, we don't support a lot of his views. But he's been doing a very good job of holding the government to account. ... So, if he's saying things that we can use to make points against the government's response, then he's helping us reach an audience that we couldn't otherwise. So journalists do still have their own audience that they can tap into. Maybe they're just finding different ways to reach them. And also, we have journalist outriders on the left, people like Owen Jones or Ash Sarkar, who are very influential. They carry huge amounts of weight and support amongst the left. (Charlaff, 2020)

Waterson, from *The Guardian*, said it is absurd to be reluctant to treat discussions on social media as seriously as stories in traditional media:

> I still find it baffling that we pretend that Twitter is not the main public sphere for most of UK politics and media… There'll probably be dozens of breakfast radio shows in the land this morning talking about the *Express* front page, which sells 250,000 copies, and not about that tweet that has got the whole of Westminster talking. And frankly, it's not looking inward to say that the tweet is probably more influential than the *Express* front page, and you should be discussing that instead. (Waterson, 2020)

For some respondents, the pessimism about the future of media did not reflect the reality that good journalism continues to be published. Joey Jones, a former spokesperson for Theresa May, said:

> I think that the enduring things are pretty much the same and the journalists that I rate, whose material I consume on Twitter, are the same ones that I would consume on any other media, broadly speaking. They are fast, they don't have to be first all the time, but they're fast, they're well-sourced, they're thought sufficiently reflective, that they are not just mouthpieces for something. They will take a step back even in the heat of a volatile situation. (Jones, 2020)

8.2 Impact on political campaigning

The political campaigners viewed social media as an essential weapon in their armoury, but all were wary of suggesting it was a magic bullet. They pointed to the importance of having a clear message on policy and a vision for the country, a good ground operation, and competent media performers among the top campaign team. Oliver, who was a key figure in the campaign to re-elect David Cameron in 2015, pointed to the necessity of converting swing voters to backers: "You need to go to people who are persuadable; you need to work out how you get people to change their views". That point was echoed by former Labour digital advisor Matthew McGregor, who also suggested that social media, and especially Twitter, could distract campaigners from the critical task of persuading voters to support them:

> I think Twitter is a problem for political campaigns in this country, whether you're in them or reporting on them. It is the extent to which it has accelerated cycles, de-nuanced issues, and increased scandal politics, gotcha politics, fuck-up politics, whatever you want to call it. It's really damaging to the health of our campaigns. And I personally think that campaigns are a vital part of healthy democracies… Obviously, it's not the entirety of a campaign. We knocked on six million doors in 2015. It's unprecedented for a political party to have that level of activism. But the thinking of the campaign's leadership and the political strategy of a campaign is really dominated by media cycles, and media cycles are now dominated by Twitter cycles, and Twitter cycles are inherently toxic, short-term and unhealthy. (McGregor, 2020)

Tom Baldwin, who was Ed Miliband's Director of Communications, agreed that Twitter could have a negative campaign impact but also pointed to its potential benefits in persuading users, as seen in the example of Donald Trump. "It's a platform on which to say shocking things," he said. "But the success of using Twitter isn't explained by the metrics or how many clicks and shares you're getting. It's actually about the ultimate political impact. And Trump's political impact from his tweets went way beyond Twitter".

For Giles Kenningham, the former Conservative Party Director of Communications, the best types of

attack content on social media work with the grain of the audience's existing views. He pointed to

the 2015 impact of the characterisation of Ed Miliband as beholden to Alex Salmond:

> The SNP/Labour thing was definitely a game-changer. It's one of the defining moments of
> the 2015 election. The opportunity cost was huge to Labour. They didn't deal with it at the
> start; it was a monkey on their back. And the reason why we used it was that it was coming
> up unprompted on the doorstep. It'd come up in focus groups. And that's the really key
> thing when things come up unprompted. (Kenningham, 2017)

8.2.1 Use of platforms

Strikingly, the political campaigners pointed to the importance of Facebook as a means to

communicate with and persuade voters, as opposed to Twitter, which was widely viewed as a place

for Westminster gossip. As Anthony Simon, former head of digital communications at 10 Downing

Street, said:

> Twitter, for people in the political and comms world, I think, is the place of choice where
> people will go to engage with others in the same world. And that, I think, is the slight
> danger. It's a bit of an echo chamber in that it's a very good way of hearing others in that
> political world or from journalists' media world. But as David Cameron once said, Twitter is
> not the same as the rest of the country. (Simon, 2020)

Kenningham made a similar point:

> More and more people are consuming their news through social media, through Facebook.
> Half the population is on Facebook, spending on average 35, 40 minutes a day on there. So
> it's a no-brainer. You have to be on those platforms. And then something like Facebook is
> incredibly important because, in that time period, there's high levels of engagement. I mean,
> you contrast that with Twitter. Twitter's much more an army of supporters with key
> messages, shaping, breaking stories, and using it for rapid rebuttal. (Kenningham, 2017)

This view of the importance of Facebook was not something that was restricted to right-wing

campaigners. Momentum's Charlaff also believed Facebook has a greater impact than Twitter:

> Facebook is our biggest platform and has traditionally been the most effective one for reaching the public too. We've had quite a big audience on it. But I think the bubbles are more pronounced on Twitter, from the research I've seen at least. And I mean, also, just looking at the results of the last election, we had a huge impact on Twitter that didn't really seem to translate to a lot in the real world. I think we're viewing Twitter more these days as a way to talk to our supporters than to reach into the public. (Charlaff, 2020)

Labour respondent one (2020) also said there was extra value in persuasion through Facebook engagement rather than mere cheerleading on Twitter. "You can put something on Twitter to make headlines, insert yourself into the news agenda," they said. "We would send tweets to Lobby journalists pointing up videos and send them transcripts. But one million views on Twitter was not important. One million views on Facebook was exciting".

8.2.2 Benefits for political campaigners

Many political campaigners pointed to the ability to retain control of their own social media while avoiding the framing and gatekeeping effects of traditional media. "Don't forget that most newspapers are campaign papers. They want to reassure their readers that their worldview is correct," Oliver said. "Social media allows campaigns to go above and beyond a newspaper's filtering of the story through their own prism. Social media allows you to tell it straight. You can keep hitting the themes you know from your research work". Campaigners also pointed to the data-driven importance of digital media in identifying potential supporters and establishing a route to communicate with them. Conservative respondent one said that in 2015, Facebook advertising helped drive engagement and identify swing voters:

> We served Facebook ads that said, 'the Tories are cutting income tax for 26 million people; click here to find out how much you've saved'. And you got taken to a really spartan landing page ... And that was just unbelievably powerful for us and enabled us to gather about a million email addresses also tied to postcodes, which enabled us to identify which of the voters lived in our target constituencies. And speak to them in a different way about their specific local issues. And I guess give them more focus and attention because they were the guys that were ultimately going to decide the election. (Conservative respondent one, 2020)

The prime importance of helping content spillover from engaged political users to the disengaged on

Facebook was also highlighted by political campaigners. Momentum's Emil Charlaff outlined the

importance of driving engagement beyond those who already supported the Labour Party:

> It's really important for Momentum to be talking to the public, not just to be talking to a small group of already informed people on the left. It's really finding ways to communicate dense, complicated political ideas to people who generally aren't that interested in politics, people who view politics as like watching the World Cup once every few years. That's the level they engage with it on, they engage during elections and we have a very small window to capture their attention. A lot of what we've done as an organisation has been finding out how to cut through to people, how to reach those people and how to engage with them, how to get their attention. (Charlaff, 2020)

Respondents also pointed to the importance of using video on social media to address supporters

directly. Former BBC and Buzzfeed reporter Joey D'Urso said:

> The way in which politicians use Prime Minister's Questions in the age of social media is different to how they used to. The journalists were saying, 'Why do they go on these rambling speeches?' And the answer is they could clip them for a minute to put up on social media, and they do really well. Corbyn would basically do minute-long rants about how bad the Tories were, which looks a bit weird when you watch it live on TV, but in a one-minute social media clip, it does really well. (D'Urso, 2020)

Laura Parker, who was Corbyn's Private Secretary from 2016 to 2017, also said that using

broadcasters' clips was crucial:

> There was much better use, even from within Parliament, of clips from PMQs. And Jeremy didn't do a huge amount of work with the mainstream media. So his own clipping team was even more important. And of course, he wasn't getting much of a fair hearing from the mainstream media. So again, necessity is the mother of invention. (Parker, 2020)

But the ability to communicate directly with voters also brought challenges for political campaigners.

Labour respondent one pointed to the danger of communicating only with supporters rather than

the persuadable. "We ended up talking to members when we should have been talking to the

country, especially from 2015-18 and the second leadership campaign," they said. "But by 2019, we

were just talking to voters, and we were focused on creating the most viral content we could. So Jeremy PTCs (pieces to camera), human stories, and Facebook news stories". Oliver also emphasised the need to keep up a continuous narrative. "Everyone who works in communications at Downing Street quickly comes to understand that you have to fill the vacuum or have it filled for you," he said. "The increased speed means nuance and argument are lost. Where do people get the time to stop and reflect?". Journalist respondent one agreed that politicians' ability to curate a following on social media had dangers as well as benefits:

> Now you can have, for example, the Rebecca Long-Bailey story, she tweets this article, there's some criticism, then there's some discussion about whether she should take it down, then she's sacked. And then she writes this whole long Twitter thread about why she doesn't consider that she did anything wrong and her criticism of the way that it's been handled. So you have about four stories that occurred in the space of about five hours. (Journalist respondent one, 2020)

That type of Westminster Village story, one that affects a politician's career and standing but has little impact on the lives of the electorate, is often over-valued by journalists and campaigners, suggested Theresa May's former spokesman Joey Jones. He cited May's decision to roll back the use of digital communication when she entered Downing Street as another example. "An unwillingness to engage in modern technology wouldn't necessarily have been a disaster," he said, adding that many people, "certainly older voters who the Conservatives were speaking to, who they needed on side, they might not have dismissed her just because she doesn't do Twitter".

8.2.3 Organic campaigning vs. targeted advertising

There was significant debate among political campaigners about the importance of microtargeting on Facebook. Reflecting on the three campaigns, the political actors rejected the conventional wisdom that microtargeted advertising was vital to winning in 2015. On the contrary, Conservative respondent one, who worked on the campaign, said, "I think actually, weirdly, microtargeting has

been massively overhyped in the 2015 campaign". They suggested the 2015 Conservative campaign

was so effective because it placed digital communication in context, important but just one tool

among many:

> I think we'd always understood that 2015 only really worked because we bound digital campaigning onto what they were doing anyway. We moved some of it online, but most of it was kind of an exercise in augmentation, not a replacement. The Cambridge Analytica stuff on the back of Leave.EU and on the back of the Trump campaign, people started to think that was the only reason that they'd won. And people started to almost think of it as the equivalent of a magic cheat button. If you press it, it doesn't matter how good your candidate is or how good your message is; you have the technological solution. (Conservative respondent one, 2020)

Momentum's Charlaff also reflected that viewpoint:

> In terms of targeting, there was this big debate about Cambridge Analytica, like psychological profiling around the Leave.EU campaign and the referendum. And I've yet to be shown anything that convinces me either that they were doing that on a particularly sophisticated level or that was what ultimately made the difference. I think there were other bigger factors. And that's why I think the Tories were sensible not to get too far down that rabbit hole in this (2019) election. (Charlaff, 2020)

Steve Howell worked on both general elections contested under Jeremy Corbyn's leadership. In 2017

as Labour's Deputy Director of Communications and as a campaign consultant in 2019. He viewed

targeted advertising as a means to extend a campaign's reach to persuadable voters in swing

constituencies:

> The organic (campaign) is primary. If you haven't got really good content and you haven't got content that people spontaneously want to share because it's good and they identify with it, then there's no point at all in any of it. Organic is always primary. But in an election campaign where you're targeting particular demographics, particular geographies, to have the ability to put money behind content and make sure that it reaches the people you want it to reach, that's absolutely critical, too. You can't really have one without the other. And what I say to people is, if you take the 30 million-plus people who are on Facebook, by the end of the campaign, we were getting, four or five, six million people watching videos organically on Facebook, that's still only 20 to 25% of the total target group. And so how many people are in that other, say, 24 million? Are your key voters? So I think organic is primary because you have to have that content. But to have the money to be able to pay to get it beyond your organic reach is so important. It can't be stressed enough. (Howell, 2020)

Oliver, Cameron's former Director of Communication, pointed out that it is not always easy to differentiate between organic viral content and paid activity. He pointed out that many third-party single-issue campaigning organisations are closely connected to party operations. "Loads of the organisations in campaigns are fronts," he said. "Most campaigns are not organic in terms of persuading members to carry messages. It's organised people carrying messages". The view that political outriders, social media users with large online followings, were important message carriers was repeated by former Corbyn aide Laura Parker. "Other successes were the outriders, Owen Jones, Novara (Media) and then the army of online people. People like Rachael Swindon will get half a million shares with a tweet," she said. She added that supporter-generated content helped carry messages in the 2019 campaign and that, on occasion, Momentum would help supporters make and boost content. Conservative respondent one also reflected on the importance of supporters carrying messages and the challenge the Conservatives had in enlisting them, saying:

> In 2017, if I recall correctly, the most shared video was of doctors just basically filming pieces to camera, all cut together, saying, "Whatever you're doing in this election, do not vote Conservative". I gotta tell you, I watched that video, and they almost had me. I mean, that's great, great, great stuff, but it's really only stuff that you can make at best, at arm's length and in an ideal world, genuinely independently. Because it's compelling. It's real. It's emotive. It's persuasive. (Conservative respondent one, 2020)

8.2.4 Identifying what works

The more digitally engaged political campaigners, particularly those based in Momentum, pointed to the importance of using analytics to assess content performance online. "Whenever we put out a video, we know within the first ten minutes if it's going to do well, based on the shares per minute," said Momentum's Paul Nicholson. "If it's ten, we're happy. Five or lower, it's a failure. Twenty, it's a success". Tom Baldwin, Ed Miliband's former Direct of Communication, also underlined the importance of analysing the data and understanding how content connects with voters. But he cautioned against an over-reliance on any one tool:

I think the use of metrics is really important. And when people learn how to start using metrics, you gain the advantage, the same in sport. But then everyone else started doing it, and it became less important. And one of the problems with politics compared to sport is, sport tests itself and tests its theories every week. And we generally test them every three or four years, on average. And therefore, failure or bullshit takes a lot more time to work through the system. (Baldwin, 2020)

Momentum's campaigners also pointed to emotional engagement as a driver for the success of content. Humour was viewed as a successful but expensive tool. Nicholson said sketch videos worked well for Momentum during 2017, but there were downsides. "They worked really well at the beginning," he said. "But they can be very hit-and-miss, be very time-consuming, and cost a lot of money (to produce), for actors, all the rest of it". Former Labour advisor McGregor also suggested that lighter or humorous content could have an impact. "The less spin you put on something, the less you're trying to lecture, the more people will absorb it and be willing to listen to it because you're not being a politician to them," he explained.

Several campaigners said the spillover effect on Facebook was important for them, with the constant seeding of messages into Facebook enabling them to frame debates. Momentum's Nicholson said:

Facebook is ordinary people; that's what we're trying to get. We always compare it to when people go to the supermarket, they see the newsstand with the *Daily Mail* and all the newspaper headlines, and for five years, there have been headlines on there saying Corbyn is bad. They might not buy the paper, they may not read it, but that soaks in. And that's what we're trying to do with our videos. Even if they didn't watch the whole video, they see the headline saying Tory car-crash interview. Hopefully, that stuff seeps in through osmosis. (Nicholson, 2020)

That point was echoed by Conservative respondent one, who pointed to the measurable impact of Facebook content being shared organically - specifically ads before the 2015 election referencing Conservative tax cuts. "It gave us real outcomes," they said. "Even if you didn't click on those ads, and millions of people did, you were still seeing that the Tories were cutting income tax for 26

million people". Nicholson argued that carefully chosen content could persuade voters to reconsider their political positions. "My favourite shares are the ones that say, 'I don't normally agree with Corbyn or Labour or Momentum. But I agree with this.' And then you've reached someone, and they're showing that content to people who presumably feel the same way. So that's what we always aim to do".

8.3 The general election campaigns

Everyone interviewed for this thesis recognised that the use of social media in election campaigning evolved through the three elections. Although many respondents talked mainly about the most recent election, those who worked on digital campaigns had the clearest memories of 2015 and 2017.

8.3.1 The 2015 election

Interviewees viewed the campaign through the prism of both received wisdom – that the Conservatives won, at least in part, by using targeted Facebook advertising – and their knowledge of subsequent campaigns.

Conservative respondent one suggested that message discipline was one of the most important aspects of the campaign, especially around the key Conservative theme of the long-term economic plan. "Our stuff sometimes took a bit of a beating in the press for being quite focused, shall we say," they said. "Some people would say it was one-dimensional, it was dry, it was boring. But we were sticking to the plan and constantly sticking to this narrative and trying to find new and interesting ways to tell that story - but never veering away from the story".

As the coding results in Chapter Five demonstrate, it was true that more than a fifth of the

Conservative Party Facebook posts reference the economy. However, Theresa May's former

spokesperson, Joey Jones, was not convinced by claims it was a masterful campaign:

> I'm a little bit sceptical because I think all those people that held themselves up as messiahs and incredible campaigners were also the ones who were on the wrong end of the (European) referendum a year and a half later. They viewed themselves as being untouchable and that they knew what was going on, and then they were demonstrably caught with their pants down a short time afterwards. I guess my scepticism would suggest that a lot of people talk a good game about campaigns as though it's all seamless and logical and works according to a playbook. I think there's probably a bit more luck involved in it than that. (Jones, 2020)

Matthew McGregor, a Labour Party digital advisor in 2015, also pointed to the different strategic

goals of the main parties:

> The Labour digital team in 2015 had tremendous success in the space that they were trying to have success in, which is to say their primary focus was on recruiting and mobilising supporters to take action on behalf of the Party in the form of sharing digital content. Because we had no money to run advertising, we were reliant on organic shares. (We wanted people) to donate money to the Party. I think the Party raised over £3 million during the course of the election, which was unprecedented for the Labour Party. And to take action on behalf of the Labour Party offline by recruiting people to be volunteers, to turn off their computers and go and do something. On those terms, they were incredibly successful. The Conservative Party was incredibly successful in its terms, which was to use its advertising budget to reach persuadable voters with persuasive content. In a way, both parties were incredibly successful at the things they were trying to do. (McGregor, 2020)

Conservative respondent one suggested that some common characterisations of the election

developed after the vote, pointing to the lack of positive stories during the campaign. "In 2015,

people were very complimentary about us after the fact. But it's very revealing to me that you can

barely find a word of praise for what we were doing up until we got the win," they said. "And I'm

totally fine about that because one of Lynton's (Crosby. Election campaign director) big things is, you

don't talk to the press. You don't run process stories".

The 2015 election was also the first in the UK after smartphones had become ubiquitous. By 2015, two-thirds of British adults had a smartphone, and that year was the first when more people used a mobile phone to access the internet than a laptop computer (Ofcom, 2015d). *Guardian* Media Editor Jim Waterson pointed to digital campaigning as an idea whose time had come:

> There was a sort of meme that developed in 2015, which was that Ed Miliband's Labour got obsessed with Twitter and the fact that everyone on Twitter liked them, and therefore deluded themselves. And there's a lot of truth in that. But what that basically missed was that there was a transition to everyone being online the whole time. People had smartphones for a year or two, and they were still getting used to that. (Waterson, 2020)

The parties also made extensive used of viral videos, especially attack ads, for the first time in 2015. Attack ads have long been a feature of US election campaigns. Was former Obama aide Matthew McGregor responsible for importing them?

> I definitely did import some of those things and couldn't have done otherwise. They weren't all attack ads in the usual way. Because I worked on the (former US Republican presidential candidate Mitt) Romney stuff, I'm seen as a bit of a negative campaigner in some regards, but I always tried to make it a joke. I don't do negative campaigning. I do contrast campaigning, trying to present a contrast. But it's sort of a joke and not because I think slagging off your opponent might be tactically the right thing to do in a given moment. But it's a failure. If you get to that point, it's because you failed to set up the terrain of battle in the correct way. (McGregor, 2020)

Conservative respondent one also stressed the importance of laying the groundwork for the election campaign:

> The reason why I think we had an impact and did really well with digital in the 2015 campaign is because of that two-year run-up. We came in in 2013. We had two years to get everything in place. We didn't arrive with a fully formed master plan. We had time to test and measure and learn and make the case internally for the resources and the budgets that we needed. In 2017, we got called up the day before they called the election. (Conservative respondent one, 2020)

8.3.2 The 2017 election

Before the 2017 election, it had become clear that Jeremy Corbyn's campaign team would have a

quite different approach to social media than had been the case under Ed Miliband. Having fought

two leadership campaigns in two years, Corbyn had learnt to use social media to get his messages

across to supporters, circumventing the traditional Westminster Lobby. Those techniques would

now be applied to a general election campaign. Journalist respondent one said:

> He (Corbyn), very early on, started using YouTube to get his message out and putting things
> on Facebook. That started relatively early on in his leadership, but he used that during the
> 2017 campaign to great effect. We got used to Jeremy Corbyn; instead of doing the old
> regular interviews with the BBC or pooled interviews with Sky, he would literally just sit in
> front of the camera and give his message and just put it straight out there. So I did notice
> that was a definite strategy that Labour used to great effect. And the impetus for that was
> because they felt they weren't being treated fairly in the main arena. (Journalist respondent
> one, 2020)

Former Corbyn aide Laura Parker pointed to the importance of social media support during the

leadership elections in sustaining Corbyn and his top team in the face of hostility from the

Parliamentary Labour Party. "There was this massive support out there that physically manifested

itself in rallies," she said. "But the main thing was that whatever he did or said, Rachael Swindon and

Skwawkbox and JC4PM and Lambeth for Jeremy for Leader and Manchester for Corbyn all swung

into action".

For Tom Baldwin, though, this use of social media both to campaign and as a reservoir of support

posed dangers for the Labour Party:

> In 2017, Corbyn showed that he could use the alt-left army to insulate himself from
> traditional media. The attacks that they were making were actually to defend him against
> traditional media. But there's a terrible danger of being in this bubble when all you're
> hearing are supportive left voices, and you don't quite understand why everyone doesn't
> regard Jeremy as this sort of embodiment of all that's good in the world. (Baldwin, 2020)

Despite recognising the growing importance of social media, the communications team in the Leader of the Opposition's Office still believed that Corbyn's digital campaign team was underfunded, especially compared with the Labour Party team based at the Southside party headquarters. "In 2017, social media was still viewed as an add-on," Labour respondent one said. "We had three people, including a videographer in Jeremy's social media team. But we ran the most successful social media campaign, not just compared to the Tories but also the official Labour campaign". They also pointed out that despite the Conservatives' use of paid Facebook advertising in 2015, Corbyn's team relied heavily on an organic campaign to promote the Labour leader's campaign activity, attributing this to budget conflict with the party operation "2017 was a hostile environment for Facebook advertising," they said. "I believe we spent less than £30,000 promoting Jeremy's Facebook account out of a total digital campaign budget of £1.2 million. That was because of personalities and politics".

The Conservative peer and *Times* columnist Daniel Finkelstein accepted that his party's 2017 digital campaign was weak, but he pointed to the fact that Theresa May lacked support among voters for some of her policy positions:

> It (the Conservative party) was very poor, but it's come to recognise that there is a language for social media, just like there is for tabloid newspapers. And you have to speak it, and you have to have people who are willing to jump in on your side. Admittedly, and this is a very important thing, in 2015 and 2019, there were real people who supported the government's position, which there weren't in 2017. There was nobody who really supported Theresa May. Because social media relies on troops who are on your side, because it's a peer-to-peer mechanism, it doesn't work if you don't have enthusiasm. (Finkelstein, 2020)

Several journalists pointed to 2017 as a turning point in the coverage of digital politics. Former BBC reporter Joey D'Urso was among those convinced he was seeing a sea change in how political campaigns could be understood:

I was saying to people, this is a big deal. This is important, and I think it became clear, certainly in the aftermath, that the social media sentiment was overwhelmingly pro-Labour. And you know, it's impossible to prove if that swung people's votes. But I think what you can say is that Labour did better than was expected at the beginning of the campaign. Labour did surprisingly well. And there was a massive social media noise around Labour policies. And this wasn't just young people or hyper-connected engaged people; it was people in their 40s or people in their 30s with young children, who were a group that massively swung towards Labour in that election. … Really, among a mass audience of swing voters and swing seats, I think (social media) had an impact in 2017, but it's difficult to prove that. (D'Urso, 2020)

However, Sky News's Kate McCann suggested that while the campaign led to a change in the reporting of Corbyn's leadership, social media was also a chimaera that over-emphasised Labour's popularity:

Video became a big thing. Every Corbyn rally you went to, it was a sea of phones; it was like going to a gig. And that changed the way that it was reported. In a way, it was responsible for the way that election was reported because it was the first time we'd ever encountered a wave of instant reaction to a politician like that. And I think it led some people to believe that there was more to Corbyn's campaign than perhaps there was, ultimately. I think it gave a sense that he was much more popular and had much more of a chance than perhaps polling would have told you. (McCann, 2020)

For the BBC's Jonathan Munro, it was important that the corporation's reporting did not over-emphasise the process of an election at the expense of understanding the parties' policy positions. "If one of our purposes in an election is to make sure that our audiences are better informed about the choice they're making after having watched the coverage, how will coverage help of how the message is delivered?" he asked. "It is not, in most cases, going to shape the way someone votes. Because ultimately, we should be covering the choice, not the race. Or certainly more choice, less race".

8.3.3 The 2019 election

If the impetus in digital campaigning had shifted from the Conservatives in 2015 to Labour in 2017, 2019 was a reminder that no party can cease to innovate in a fast-changing political environment. Many interviewees pointed to stagnation in Labour's approach to digital campaigning, while also suggesting the Conservatives had been forced to innovate to prevent a repeat of the shortcomings of 2017. As shown in Chapter Seven, that meant the Conservatives running a campaign focusing on the virality of core messages such as "Get Brexit Done" and flattering comparisons of Boris Johnson to Jeremy Corbyn. "It was definitely more organic than paid this time around, and it was the most reductive of all the campaigns," Conservative respondent one said. "But I think that's what they needed to do. They needed to make it about; we've got to get Brexit done. And, obviously, leaned into the very unique personality and charisma of Boris Johnson, who's just an asset".

By 2019, Laura Parker had moved from Corbyn's private office to become the national organiser of Momentum. She also pointed to the lack of innovation in Labour's digital campaigning in 2019. "The party was stale in 2019 relative to 2017. There was a failure to capitalise on 2017 when a lot of the Jeremy rally footage went quite viral," she said. "Momentum's films went bigger in 2019 by a factor of two than they had in 2017. But of course, the rest of the world had started to catch up a little bit".

The Times' Esther Webber suggested that Labour's problem in 2019 was that it was super-serving too small a proportion of the electorate. "It was very much about hammering home messages to people who were already on board with them. So not necessarily doing enough to reach beyond their own core metropolitan base," she said.

McCann also highlighted the importance of message discipline as a factor in 2019. She said Johnson's

team successfully grasped that a clear message was key:

> And it doesn't really matter how you communicate it, as long as you do it across platforms. And you repeat it. Like when we were going on campaign visits in the North, and there were people who had never voted Conservative before who were repeating their messaging, almost as if they had been briefed by the Tory Party. And I'd never seen anything like that before. … It was almost word for word. And it's that repetition everywhere he went; it was that repetition. It was on the side of a bus. It was on Twitter. It was on every video that they made. And I suppose that's how you sell a campaign, isn't it? Whereas I think the Corbyn campaign struggled with that, their manifesto had too much in it. They couldn't find it. They couldn't find a clear line, and they certainly couldn't communicate it. (McCann, 2020)

Labour's 2019 campaign consultant Steve Howell also pointed to the lack of clarity in his party's

digital messaging:

> There were a few jokes amongst a few of us about it on the comms side, about the tyranny of policy. Because in 2017, it was very much Seamus Milne who was calling the shots. And we were making decisions about announcements at relatively short notice, sometimes too short notice. Seamus came in for some criticism in 2017 for making very late calls on announcements. But in 2019, it was the exact opposite; it was like everything revolved around policy. And the whole grid was about fitting in all these different policy announcements that we had to slot in. And the effect of having too many key messages, no narrative, and so many policy announcements was the impression was created that we'd gone policy mad. Which, to some extent, was right. (Howell, 2020)

Several other interviewees also noted the failure to capitalise on the success of the 2017 digital

campaign. Labour respondent one said:

> After 2017 and with Labour having done so well, there was a bigger appreciation of social media, and that led to hiring a full-time videographer and a full-time social media executive. But Labour didn't reform the use of social media, and there wasn't enough investment. That meant that come 2019, the Tories were much better at social media. Labour stayed the same and fell back in some areas. But John McDonnell (Shadow Chancellor) went in to bat before the election and got more money for social media and creating better content. (Labour respondent one, 2020)

Former Corbyn aide Parker agreed:

The organic sharing, which in 2017 had been really extraordinary, seemed to me to plateau, which was partly about the party not investing enough in its staff. It was partly about the ongoing divide between the Southside party machine and Corbyn's office. It was also partly about the wider drop in Corbyn's popularity. If your model is based on organic rather than paid sharing, and you're not as popular as you were, it stands to reason you're not going to travel as far. (Parker, 2020)

Momentum's Emil Charlaff pointed to improvements in the Conservatives' organic campaign on

Facebook as an explanation for their success:

They didn't go down the microtargeting route completely, which Labour definitely did buy into, which I think was a mistake. Whereas the Tories were just buying masthead ads on YouTube and advertising to the whole population, which worked for them.… The Labour Party itself, I wasn't hugely impressed by. We did a lot of stuff for them. We made video content for them, which they put out. Most of that went out through Corbyn's channels rather than the Labour Party. But I don't think they were particularly ambitious or decisive. I don't think they had a good strategy about who they wanted to reach and how to reach them. I think their advertising money wasn't particularly well spent. They did a lot of micro-testing, including down to the line on election day, which I don't think was particularly effective. (Charlaff, 2020)

Several respondents referenced the Conservative digital campaign, pointing to the "water dripping

on stone" strategy and, additionally, the willingness of the Conservatives to be more aggressive

online. Journalist respondent one described it as a "street-fighting" approach, led by "some young

bucks" on the social media team:

Actually, they'd probably not been trained as journalists, matching the need to actually fact-check things and actually be honest about things. But what was interesting was when they got things wrong was how willing ministers were to back them up and not criticise. … The Tories just weren't that bothered that they got into trouble for what they'd done. They just thought, 'Okay, it's all part of the cut and thrust. Everyone's going to have moved on in two hours' time'. And that's sort of what happened. (Journalist respondent one, 2020)

Conservative respondent one suggested that this wasn't aggression as much as mischief-making and

that it marked a departure from previous practice:

Sean (Topham) and Ben (Guerin) were definitely more mischievous than we ever would have been. I think that probably reflects the way that digital campaigns may be going. To a certain

extent, I think they were definitely the right guys for the job, and every time I saw that campaign being criticised for being reductive, I just thought, 'this is criticism coming from people who just don't get it. This is actually being run really well'. (Conservative respondent one, 2020)

For *The Guardian*'s Jim Waterson, the use of memes and jokes by the Conservative campaign, such as using fonts derided by many, demonstrated that the party was developing a clear understanding of online culture:

I think the Comic Sans thing is genuinely funny. I've written some very negative articles about the personal behaviour of the people who were doing those Tory accounts and allegations of sexist bullying. But at the same time, they have a sense of humour, right? They were looking at people like me writing stories about how they were doing bad memes and then just decided to start putting it out. Can you imagine two 25-year-olds with access to the Tories' account just tweeting stuff in Comic Sans and waiting for a load of angry left-wing people to go, 'This is bizarre'? I mean, they're just messing. (Waterson, 2020)

Sky's McCann also thought that the use of jokes enabled them to access an audience that would not necessarily view Conservative Party messaging otherwise:

They were using Comic Sans, which is obviously an internet joke. And it's only going to appeal to a niche group of people. But for the people that saw it and thought it was funny, it got retweeted by accounts that would never have retweeted Tory messaging. And that was all they wanted. They didn't mind if it were taking the mick out of the font because their message was being repeated into loads of people's timelines. (McCann, 2020)

8.4 Perspectives on linking practice to theory

Some journalism respondents noted changes in their role as gatekeepers, selecting news stories and developing them for publication. The BBC's Chris Mason said of social media in general and Twitter in particular:

It's more useful value as a political journalist is actually as, effectively, a news wire. So in the old days, the Press Association or Reuters or AFP or whoever it might be would be the thing that you would keep an eye on, on your computer. And obviously, that's still the case. But increasingly, because it became this direct channel that people had as a communication tool with the outside world, or certainly within the political bubble, then it became this sort of

source of primary newsgathering … as an official primary source. So people who had verified accounts and you can trust were churning stuff out as an addition to what was emailed out. And you can bung it out directly yourself. In that sense, you can cut out the middleman. (Mason, 2020)

Mason's remarks and those of several other respondents pointed to a disintermediation of journalists in the process of political communication. They highlighted the declining power of political journalists to control the flow of information, acknowledging that social media accounts with substantial followers could force stories onto the agenda; political journalists would then follow up on leads from sources they might not previously have considered. Mason suggested this process could be challenging for political journalists:

Does that mean that the power and influence of mainstream broadcast journalism has diminished a bit? Well, I think the honest answer to that is 'yes'. I can't see how you could answer that any other way, given that people have this direct means of communication. But at the same time, our job as scrutineers of politics and the political process remains just as important, if not greater, because you still have to be asking those questions, seeking to hold people to account. But does it make it easier for politicians to avoid the scrutiny? …. The honest answer to that is 'yes'. (Mason, 2020)

For Sky News's Kate McCann, the gatekeeper's role is to add context and analysis to information, to make it useful and trustworthy for the audience. She pointed to the behaviour of political campaigners trying to ensure that journalists covered their stories in a particular way:

There is still a huge demand for vetting. And, you know, there are big questions about trust. … I think that the value of impartial political journalism has risen. The perception of how many political journalists are impartial has gone down. And it's happening at the same time that politicians think they can just do better without us. … The Conservatives realised that they needed to switch voters. That's why in the last election campaign, every visit we did was very focused on regional media; they would do every local radio station, they would go in person to speak to every local paper. And the national press that were with them would go on the visit but wouldn't necessarily get any face time with the prime minister, certainly not like the local media would. And the reason for that was because they understood the value of local media and the importance of getting a local paper or local radio station on board. … The one thing I will say, though, is that they are more bothered about what we say on broadcast than ever before. If they see anything or perceive anything to be incorrect or want it changed, they will be very quick to highlight that and to ask questions of it. So, they clearly do still care. I mean, they still watch. (McCann, 2020)

The BBC's Jonathan Munro made a similar point:

> With the BBC, ITV, Channel Four, Sky, the politicians need the validation of a brand to say, 'Yeah, this guy's telling the truth'. And of course, the downside of that is when they're not, we'll call them out for it. But they need the validation of that. The validation is an important function of what we do because it's implicit in the analysis of what we do… But I think if you erode the role of the interviewer, the analysts, the reporter, then you take away what is actually an opportunity for politicians to have their policy validated by analysis. (Munro, 2017)

Other respondents also highlighted the changing relationship between campaigners and the press. Sir Craig Oliver, Cameron's former communications director, was clear that speaking directly to voters was a key driver of his approach to social media from the start. "Cameron was against social media, (saying) 'too many tweets make a twat'. He thought it was a playground for narcissists," Oliver said. "I was able to persuade him that you can go above and beyond the journalists and deliver your message unmediated". Journalist respondent one agreed. "They use Twitter as a way of going directly to the public, and bypass us when they've got something specific they want to say," they said. "So it's a new tool in the armoury for them, and it allows them to get their message out unfiltered, they would say". The BBC's Chris Mason also made a similar but more nuanced point, saying that even those without large audiences of their own could seek to influence debates:

> I think there's a savviness amongst politicians that even if they don't have a vast number of followers, and those that do follow them may be vastly atypical of their electorate, then they will have lots of people in political journalism following them. And so it is a direct communication device through which they can get messages out that in the past they might have been forced to communicate via back channels and more subtle ways, whereas now they can just do it. They can just do it directly. (Mason, 2020)

However, several journalists warned of the limitations of this approach. Esther Webber of *The Times'* Red Box pointed to the need for politicians to keep briefing journalists to frame reporting. "When it comes to the papers, like papers being briefed that the prime minister is going to make a big speech, that is something you can only really do in the papers," she said. "You can't do that kind of informal

briefing online". Her *Times* colleague Daniel Finkelstein also suggested that political campaigners

might not have fully understood the potential of the tools at their disposal. "They are still

surprisingly quite Lobby journalist focused, even though the reach of those journalists they're

spending a lot of time on isn't as great as it was, and as maybe they think it was," he said. "So it's

made surprisingly little difference".

Journalist respondent two also pointed to issues related to access and fact-checking that are raised

by disintermediation:

> You can completely make stuff up, and you can reach your followers directly without us or
> other reporters or anyone having to fact-check it. … And I think the other thing is, it allows
> them to bypass us in a way that they don't really need us anymore. … And it means that
> politicians don't need us as much to access the public, so they're less likely to give us access
> to them. (Journalist respondent two, 2020)

While some political journalists appeared to feel in danger of being excluded from future

conversations, the political campaigners took a different tack. Former Miliband aide Tom Baldwin

believed that a decline in the quality of political journalism was a driver for audience disengagement:

> I think mainstream political journalists are no longer mediating. They're no longer judging
> and weighing things and trying to interpret. It's actually that they're pumping out primary
> information. … To some extent, the mainstream media and traditional political journalism
> have become a prisoner of social media. So competition for clicks, shares, and followers I
> think is distorting their capacity to do the thing that potentially mainstream journalism could
> do, which is to be the antidote to the worst excesses of social media. (Baldwin, 2020)

Former Corbyn aide Laura Parker said Labour's attempt to bypass political journalists had delivered

unintended consequences:

> I think the strategy of disengaging with the mainstream media was overly ambitious in
> thinking that you could completely replace it by doing the social media stuff because, I
> mean, the Westminster Lobby is really influential. And, of course, they were gunning for
> Corbyn from Day One. … It became a bit of a vicious circle thing then or a self-fulfilling
> prophecy, because obviously if you don't engage with people who anyway don't like you,

they're not going to like you any more when you don't engage with them, and on you go. The problem with this was that there wasn't sufficient systematic engagement or attempt to engage with mainstream media because, in social media, we were doing so well. (Parker, 2020)

Labour respondent one also thought there was still a place for the media in parties' communications strategies:

You still need the media. Ideally, you want a good comms strategy which would be multi-faceted. On the day of a policy launch, you'd want strong social media, op-eds, the Shadow Cabinet on broadcast, and you'd want people with human stories for broadcast. So it's not true that you don't need the media. Remember, lots of voters don't engage with social media. But it should be part of a multi-faceted comms strategy. Plus you want something on social media that's so good that it leaks into traditional media. (Labour respondent one, 2020)

Respondents also offered mixed views on regulation changes. Some, such as Conservative respondent one, wanted changes to ensure greater clarity around third-party advertising:

I think the major problem and the major loophole we need to close is the ability of third parties to advertise. I think what the parties themselves do is fine. But you know, I've worked within the machine. We knew what the rules were, and we stayed within those rules. … Where I think there are significant problems is, it's still too easy for third parties to run ads for a period of time saying things that are at best questionable and at worst untrue, to pockets of voters in places that matter and spread nonsense around. (Conservative respondent one, 2020)

Labour respondent one, though, pointed to issues with this approach. "What happens if a Labour Party member, who is a doctor, makes a passionate video about the NHS?" they asked. "Guido Fawkes would say that's Labour propaganda. Labour would say it's just a video".

Momentum's Charlaff also cited the need for clarity around third-party advertising:

So you can't do dark advertising anymore, but what you can do is set up a Facebook page… They (the Conservatives) had a number of these pages that seemed to be independent advocacy groups by groups of concerned parents but were actually coordinated by Tory campaign officers. And we actually looked into that, and we compared what they were

spending, and we were like, obviously, there is a connection here. And that kind of stuff isn't really on a lot of people's radars, let alone regulated. (Charlaff, 2020)

However, former Miliband aide Tom Baldwin was cautious about any changes that might infringe on the parties' ability to connect with voters. "If you could eliminate (paid) political ads entirely, I think it'd be healthy," he said. "But otherwise, I think it's going to become not only the primary item of political expenditure but almost the only item of expenditure for political campaigns. And in terms of regulating other parts, the non-paid bit, I'm much more wary of that because a viral video, arguably, is just good political communication".

On paid political advertising, Charlaff also saw a need for greater regulation:

> I think what first excited me about social media was that it was quite a democratic platform where anyone could make a piece of content and have it seen by millions of people. You didn't need lots of money; you didn't need an established audience. But as I've spent more time with it, as things have changed, I think that's less true. Now I think you can buy social media. So I think there should be a limit on spending on social media like there's a limit on anything else. It seems mad that TV advertising during elections is heavily regulated, but social media isn't at all. (Charlaff, 2020)

In contrast, *The Times'* Finkelstein was concerned about the possibility of unnecessary limits on freedom of speech for political campaigners:

> I am pretty leery about regulation of the content of it. But I do think as platforms Facebook and Twitter have got a responsibility on the accuracy of their information. And I think the ordinary rules of law - fraud, passing off, personality theft, ID theft, libel, slander - they all apply. Personally speaking, I think they that there should be an insistence upon a degree of ID as well. So, the normal anonymity that people use on Twitter I find very annoying because it encourages people to bad behaviour. So, I'm not sure I think there should be state regulation beyond the regulation that covers ordinary free speech. (Finkelstein, 2020)

The Guardian's Jim Waterson also pointed to the challenges of trying to pass legislation that regulates social media speech:

There is that risk of fighting the last war, and certainly, talking to politicians in the 2019 election, the influence of WhatsApp groups and closed Facebook groups was enormous. And so you could end up fining that bloke who puts a link on his page that's just wrong and offensive in public and ignoring the fact that 10,000 people are in a different corner of Facebook chuntering away about something far worse. (Waterson, 2020)

8.5 Conclusion

This chapter has captured the views of leading political campaigners and journalists on using social media in political discourse. Some topics generated significantly different perspectives, while others yielded a surprising amount of cross-party agreement. Both the political campaigners and the journalists agreed that it was vital to be engaged on social media, but they differed over the priority of the platform – journalists rated Twitter highly; political campaigners focused on Facebook. This is reflective of the findings of previous studies (Dagoula, 2019; Kelm, 2020). The political campaigners want to reach persuadable voters; the journalists are more interested in Twitter for sourcing and distribution.

As Broersma and Graham (2015) argue, embedding Twitter firmly into the practices of beat coverage has allowed journalists to reach the world from their desks, lessening the necessity for more traditional forms of shoe-leather journalism. While more senior journalists in this study were very reliant on Twitter, some younger journalists pointed to the importance of Facebook groups in sourcing stories and demonstrated a sophisticated awareness of the hybrid nature of media distribution (Chadwick, 2013; Neuberger et al., 2019; Langer and Gruber, 2021). But both groups raised concerns about the potential negative impact of journalists being overly concerned with gossip and commentary rather than deeper dive investigation. As McGregor and Molyneux (2020) argue, for journalists who incorporate Twitter into their reporting routines, the platform has become so normalised that tweets are deemed as newsworthy as headlines appearing to be from the Associated Press wire. In this study, some journalists highlighted the perceived danger in not subjecting social media statements to proper journalistic inquiry.

This perception of the dangers of the political actors bypassing journalists was referenced by several

senior journalists during the interviews. Mason, McCann, and Munro all pointed to changes in the

way journalists work and their perceived value by audiences, echoing many of the points made in

the significant body of literature that relates to changes in gatekeeping as a result of the shift to

digital. In addition to challenging the core assumptions of the theory, this work has identified new

gatekeepers, mechanisms, and channels (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008; Vos and Heinderyckx, 2015; Wallace,

2018). The semi-structured interviews in this study demonstrate an awareness of changes to both

practice and influence, connected with the disruptive pressures of digital journalism, that is

reflective of similar research conducted with journalists in the United States (e.g. Benham, 2020;

Walters, 2022).

There is, however, a recognition that while the journalist may no longer be a news gatekeeper,

journalists continue to play an important role in questioning authority, fact-checking, and helping

audiences separate spin and misinformation from the truth. But these roles are themselves not

unproblematic. For instance, as Walter et al. (2020) argue, there are limits to the impact of fact-

checking with the public, as the ability to correct misapprehensions with fact-checking is

substantially reduced by readers' beliefs, ideology, and knowledge. In general, the interviews in this

research demonstrate that journalists are continuing to reflect on their role in the democratic

process but that new role conceptions are not without challenges.

It is clear from the interviews that the political campaigners viewed as important both the ability to

speak directly to Facebook users and the capacity of journalistic intervention to boost the credibility

of a candidate's policy positions. Interviewees Charlaff, Parker, and Finkelstein all clearly referenced

the strategy of using journalistic outriders to signal or provide a boost for political position. Support

for this form of two-step flow communication is provided by other studies, As Sterrett et al. (2019)

have shown, people are more likely to rely on news on social media if it is shared by a public figure they trust than by one they do not; they also are more likely to share news from a trusted public figure and recommend it to friends or family. The political campaigners who were interviewed for this research agreed that this form of engagement was a desired outcome; the spillover effect on Facebook was key to reaching persuadable disengaged users. As the literature reviewed in Chapter Two suggests (e.g. Gil de Zúñiga and Valenzuela, 2011; Messing and Westwood, 2014; Valeriani and Vaccari, 2016), social media can facilitate exposure to political information via weak ties; platforms such as Facebook can drive engagement with political positions and may lead to more positive perceptions than more traditional forms of political communication, such as paid advertising. But the data from the interviews also demonstrated that while organic social media content was key to delivering engagement with political messages, digital content was seen as no substitute for a strong clear message delivered by a charismatic candidate.

The next chapter will provide a deeper exploration of both the qualitative and quantitative findings from this study and their relation to existing literature.

Chapter 9 Discussion

This chapter will critically discuss the data analysis findings presented in Chapters Five through Eight. It is divided into four sections. The first will consider what was learned during the research project in relation to research questions one through three. The second will examine how the findings link to the existing literature on digital political campaigning. The third section will consider how the results relate to the conceptual framework of the thesis and connect the findings to research question four. The concluding section will reflect on how the thesis extends existing scholarship in the field and contributes to knowledge.

9.0.1 Restating the research aims and questions

This research study aimed to understand how UK political campaigners used Facebook in the three most recent general elections and, more broadly, the impact of social media on the practice of political journalism in Britain. Through content analysis and semi-structured interviews, it sought to understand how digital campaigning has developed and whether the ability of political actors to communicate directly with voters has changed how political journalists understand their roles.

Each of the four research questions yielded two key findings:

RQ-1: In what ways did political actors use Facebook for organic or viral campaigning during the 2015, 2017 and 2019 UK General Elections? How did these develop and change over time?

- Political parties employed different strategies in different elections. For both the Conservatives and the Labour parties, the strategies became more sophisticated over time as the parties' digital teams learned lessons about effective approaches to delivering their campaign aims.

- Over the four years of the study, the main parties used increasingly engaging forms of media, especially video, to reach persuadable voters, motivate supporters, and attack

opponents. They increased the resources dedicated to both organic and paid advertising. They reduced the amount of redundant activity, such as building online games, that was not central to delivering the campaign's aims.

RQ-2: How do political campaigners view and understand Facebook as a communication tool for engaging voters? Has this understanding changed their perception of the role of journalists in providing access to audiences?

- Non-paid advertising on Facebook grew in importance for digital campaigners from 2015 to 2019, alongside growth in scepticism about the value of microtargeting. Political campaigners saw Facebook as a vital tool for engaging the electorate.

- Political campaigners continued to be interested in accessing large media audiences, especially if they can benefit from the reach and reputation of journalists.

RQ-3: How do political journalists view the impact of Facebook and other social media platforms on their gatekeeping role in sourcing news and communicating with audiences, including users and political campaigners?

- Journalists were highly invested in social media across all three campaigns, but chiefly Twitter rather than Facebook.

- Social media has profoundly impacted political journalism; journalists have incorporated it into their working practices. However, they are conflicted about its value, given the abuse they receive from other users and the quality of the information it generates. Journalists were also concerned about being bypassed as gatekeepers. They feared that politicians' access to social media audiences diminished their power to hold political actors to account.

RQ-4: To what extent can two-step flow and disintermediation be used to explain the changes we see in political communication and journalism because of social media?

- RQ-4: Political campaigners recognise the value of disintermediation but with reservations as they also seek to influence legacy media audiences. Through social media use during the campaigns studied here, they circumvented the gatekeeping activity of the media, especially by using political outriders to carry messages to supporters. However, Labour Party activists, in particular, were concerned that this two-step communication in 2019 meant the party spoke to existing supporters rather than the wider public.

- RQ-4: Political journalists are aware of disintermediation and recognise that some of their previous gatekeeping power has eroded. Nevertheless, they believe that the parties continue to need political journalism to reach the public and believe they have a role in vetting information and producing trusted coverage, which the parties still value.

9.1 What was learned

In this section, the headline findings of the study will be discussed in more detail. This section is divided into five parts that will consider the findings regarding Facebook use; organic campaigning; the benefits of social media and the concerns it raises; and finally, what was learned about the use of disintermediation, two-step flow, and gatekeeping, which provide the conceptual lens through which the study has been developed.

9.1.1 Facebook as a strategic tool for political campaigners

Considering both the results of the quantitative data analysis and the qualitative interviews, it is clear that the approaches of the Conservative and Labour parties to Facebook campaigning evolved

over the three campaigns. An increasingly sophisticated approach to video saw a range of different video styles employed to deliver messages to Facebook users. Clearly, the campaigners wanted these videos to be engaging: to persuade users to interact through likes, shares or comments so that there would be spillover to less politically engaged Facebook users. This deliberate drive for the spillover effect and the benefits the campaigners saw from it can be considered in terms of the two-step flow theory (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955). The campaigners sought to persuade Facebook users beyond their direct followers, a mechanism similar to the opinion leaders' influence on mass media content identified in two-step flow. The key difference is that there is no specific role for journalists or mass media in the contemporary process. Social media users have replaced them.

The quantitative data show that while mass media content is often highlighted to Facebook followers of political parties, particularly in the cases of the smaller parties, this media amplification is only one part of an overall message and far from the most engaging element. The CrowdTangle data clearly shows that the most engaging posts were based on content the parties created themselves or commissioned from third-party supporters. By making content that elicits a powerful emotional response, such as humour or anger, the parties intended to generate virality on the social network. This reflects the work of Valenzuela et al. (2017), which suggested that social media users are more likely to frame shared messages in moral or emotional terms.

Through the three elections, the Conservative and Labour parties demonstrated a wider variety of strategic approaches to using Facebook than the smaller parties. This is partly because of the greater resource they can bring to bear during a campaign. They were able to spend more on targeted advertising and hire people to work on the organic campaign, who created content to populate Facebook feeds. The smaller parties demonstrated some activity differences, but this seems to have partly been governed by each party leader's interest in social media rather than a strategic approach to digital campaigning. For example, UKIP and later Brexit Party leader Nigel Farage saw the value in

social media and used it effectively. Paul Nuttall appeared less interested, and the amount of Facebook use dropped during the campaign when he was UKIP leader.

The leaders have an opportunity to use their own accounts to promote their personal brand and leadership style. Was this potential to take different strategic approaches with party and leader accounts maximised? Data from these three elections suggest the general answer is "no," though there were exceptions. The content analysis and interviews with Labour campaigners demonstrate differences in approach between the Labour Party account and Jeremy Corbyn's account, especially during the 2017 campaign. Corbyn's account focused on the leader's character and policy ambitions. It sought to maximise coverage for real-life canvassing events that demonstrated his popularity. It also sought to provide a sharp dividing line between Corbyn and Prime Minister Theresa May by attacking her record and policies. This brought rewards in terms of the increased following for Corbyn's account, and the election result was closer than opinion polling at the start of the campaign predicted. However, when Corbyn tried to run a similar campaign two years later, he led Labour to its worst result since 1935 (Goes, 2020).

The interviews with party campaigners highlighted shortcomings in the 2019 campaign. Former Corbyn aide Laura Parker pointed to the crux of the problem: "If your model is based on organic rather than paid sharing, and you're not as popular as you were, it stands to reason you're not going to travel as far". Yet it was also true that in an election ostensibly called to break the Brexit deadlock in Parliament, Corbyn chose to campaign on a wide range of issues other than Brexit, and his personal account was engaged with far more than any other in the campaign. This reflects Hindman's (2009) point that engagement does not necessarily lead to influence. As the party campaigners made clear in their interviews, political impact requires an engaging leader, popular policy choices, and congruence between political messaging and ground game activity in canvassing and getting the vote out. As Baum (2011) argued, there is little point in just preaching to the choir.

This tendency to view certain parts of Facebook activity in isolation from broader political strategy also emerged in the policy areas that the posts reflect. The political parties rarely engaged with each other in their Facebook posts, instead campaigning in isolation on topics closely aligned with their key election messages. Many Facebook posts did not reference policy, as shown in Figure 7.7 above, suggesting that parties failed to maximise voter support through social media engagement. As Stromer-Galley (2000) makes clear, making use of a new technology carries an opportunity cost. When a party chooses to expend resources on one action, it lessens those available to an alternative activity. Unless parties ensure each technology they adopt contributes to maximising votes, they are wasting resources. This study suggests that considerable resources are being expended on digital campaigning that is not explicitly linked to getting supporters to the polls.

9.1.2 Organic campaigning

The organic campaign became increasingly important throughout the time frame of the study. While the success of the Conservatives' 2015 campaign is sometimes partly attributed to the growing sophistication in Tory Facebook campaigning, including the use of microtargeted messages (Ridge-Newman, 2020; Ross, 2015), political campaigners were sceptical about its value beyond a small number of clearly defined uses. Microtargeting was viewed as a valuable tool for extending the reach of campaign messages to some persuadable voters but not as a shortcut to election success; the organic campaign was considered to have primacy for the broader electorate. However, it is clear from the interviews with party workers that paid advertising did allow campaigns to communicate with hard-to-reach voters in key constituencies. Campaigners have learned to use multiple tools, including microtargeting, to develop an overall digital election strategy. However, at least during this study, they were still wrestling with the optimal mix.

While the 2017 campaign saw Labour embrace digital campaigning, 2019 overturned the assumption that the Conservatives were digital laggards (McDowell-Naylor, 2018; Ritchie, 2021). Both the quantitative and qualitative findings from this study indicate that the Conservatives' digital campaign was savvier than Labour's in 2019, with more explicit objectives aligned with a strategy for delivering them. The Tories also spent less on paid advertising than the Labour campaign. As interviewees such as Laura Parker and Steve Howell demonstrate, by 2019, the Labour Party's digital team had ceased to innovate and become stale. It is also clear that the conflict between different parts of the Labour Party organisation meant Corbyn's team relied more heavily on the organic campaign than would otherwise have been the case. Labour campaigners also felt 2019 lacked clear messaging, with too broad a policy diet and no strategy to neutralise the Conservatives' Brexit clarion call.

Political campaigners viewed social media as necessary but part of a more comprehensive strategy, even if they were unsure how best to execute it. They believed tightly focused campaigns that repeat a few key messages are clearer and more successful than those with too many messages or unclear policy positions. Several interviewees discussed social media as neither a magic bullet nor a cheat button but rather a tool supporting the air war and the ground campaign. The savvier among them saw that social media engagement alone was not considered enough to persuade voters to support a party without a credible candidate and precise policy positions.

These findings thus partially support the points made by Kreiss et al. (2018), who argue that campaigners should assess the strategic value of social media platforms and the content that they produce based on the personality characteristics of candidates in conjunction with the different audiences of the platform. They suggest that the platforms' affordances and the types of communication common among users of each platform should shape the messaging strategies of the parties. This study found that the parties' approach to social media campaigning grew in

sophistication across the three elections. The Conservative and Labour parties, in particular, sought

to engage users on specific platforms in ways they felt would lead to organic content spreading

virally through the network. For example, the parties in 2019 created video content for Facebook

that would encourage engagement – liking, sharing and commenting – but also met some of the

criteria for maximising algorithmic virality, such as duration. However, the understanding of platform

strengths clearly continued to evolve. For example, the Labour Party in 2019 shared short

provocative statements by Jeremy Corbyn on Twitter that went viral, then failed to generate as

much interest when screen-grabbed and copied to Facebook.

9.1.3 Benefits of social media

Social media have profoundly impacted political journalism, with leading political journalists such as

the BBC's Chris Mason and Sky News' Kate McCann believing it essential to be on Twitter. Journalists

are highly invested in Twitter as a social medium. On the other hand, political campaigners believe

Twitter's use and impact are more limited; they are much more interested in using Facebook to

persuade voters. Among the interviewees for this study, the political campaigners generally

suggested that Twitter was less useful in engaging ordinary voters but could be helpful when they

wanted to influence journalists or existing supporters. This reflects findings of previous studies that

have also noted Twitter is often used to influence the behaviour of these groups rather than to reach

persuadable voters (Dagoula, 2019; Dubois and Gaffney, 2014; Kelm, 2020). For the political

campaigners, metrics are increasingly important, and campaign teams used data-led methodologies

to shape their strategic approaches. For instance, both Labour's Tom Baldwin and Momentum's Paul

Nicholson pointed to the use of metrics as helping some parties obtain an electoral advantage.

However, they suggested it was only a temporary effect as everyone else would eventually catch up.

Several of the journalists pointed to the positive impacts of social media in the routine functions of

their work; for instance, the ability to source reactive quotes from Twitter has made the repetitive

work of quote-chasing easier. These findings align with other studies examining how journalists use Twitter to source (von Nordheim et al., 2018) and share news (Rudat and Buder, 2015). Some journalists also use Twitter to source and commission opinion-led editorial content. Journalists following large numbers of accounts are exposed to a wide range of opinions and can selectively invite people to comment on stories or, as Webber (2020) suggests, even writing op-eds to expand on their thinking.

Several respondents, both journalists and campaigners, were concerned about the amount of time journalists devote to social media. Some political journalists' online activity raised questions about the benefits for their employers, with respondents questioning whether heavy social media use produced any strategic advantage. However, some younger, digitally savvy journalists who use Twitter to find professional sources and Facebook groups to find stories defended the practice, recognising the importance of two-step communication and the hybrid media environment (Chadwick, 2013) in driving audiences to stories.

Some journalists also pointed to another benefit stemming from the increasingly coordinated nature of government communications, with promotional material simultaneously released to the press and social media. Journalists felt this synchronicity made the production element of their job easier but also created a challenge because it meant they had to find a way to add value to government information. Merely saying something is happening is no longer enough, as highly engaged audiences will get that information from social media without journalistic mediation.

However, some journalists expressed concern that politicians are using video content generated for social media to avoid scrutiny. They pointed to a tendency to release clips of politicians filmed by the parties themselves. When this practice is accompanied by a refusal to make the politician available for an interview, the journalists face an ethical dilemma around using the material handed to them. I

know from my past experience as an editor of television news programmes that public service broadcasters have traditionally been unwilling to allow interviews to be aired when they have not had editorial control. Some journalists suggested that pressure from party communications teams risks undermining this safeguard. Not only did they see applying scrutiny and holding the powerful to account as one of their primary roles, but they also believed the parties gained trust by allowing their positions to be scrutinised.

9.1.4 Concerns about social media

Many journalists interviewed had a conflicted relationship with social media, especially Twitter. They valued access to immediate information but also disliked the impact of abuse from other social users, which they saw as chilling their ability to express themselves on social platforms freely. While much of this stems from the number of people who are hostile in disputing a story, some journalists are also concerned that politicians decrying stories is a form of bullying and encourages other social media users to engage in more extreme and abusive behaviour. Some journalists spoke of not wanting to express opinions and policing their social media postings to avoid abuse. However, none of the interviewees could offer simple solutions to make social media discourse less abusive.

As suggested above, social media have made some routine journalistic tasks easier. However, journalists who have relied on social media to source gaffe stories find that political actors are increasingly sophisticated and more likely to delete controversial posts or even whole posting histories. While journalists can still find foolish or controversial posts from politicians' social media history, some journalist respondents felt such finds had become rarer. Zappavigna (2022) argues that Twitter's affordances around quoted speech give users a mechanism for demonstrating affiliation through parody. The findings from journalists that political actors are becoming more aware of the dangers posed by extensive social media archives may indicate a changing praxis.

While the use of social media has eased some of the tasks of newsgathering, the speed with which

information travels on social media puts pressure on journalists to publish before ensuring

information has been sufficiently checked, as *Guardian* Media Editor Jim Waterson explained. Some

journalists said they still tried to double-source stories but risked being scooped by competitors if

they took too long to publish. At the same time, journalists and political campaigners were

concerned about the amount of mis/disinformation on social media. They recognised the

importance of journalists being able to vet information before publishing it to their audiences.

A related concern raised in this study was that while faster communications generate more stories in

shorter cycles, journalists do not have time to consider their reports in depth. Several respondents

worried about the speed of social media communication, saying there was no time to reflect and

that nuance was being lost. They said more profound questions and investigations might be ignored

for the sake of minor breaking news, which both journalists and political campaigners suggested may

be detrimental to political journalism in the long term. This finding aligns with the argument by

Karadimitriou et al. (2022), who point out that despite the affordances provided by the digital media

revolution for newsrooms, journalists in many Western democracies increasingly find it challenging

to devote time to their watchdog role; only those at the most generously funded legacy news

organisations have the resources to devote extensive periods to investigations. Journalists and

political campaigners in the present study perceived the danger that rigorous reporting might be

sacrificed due to the pressure to deliver more political commentary.

Another concern journalists and political campaigners shared was that Westminster gossip and froth

led journalists to mistake social media noise for voters' concerns. Some political campaigners, such

as former 10 Downing Street digital communications chief Anthony Simon, also believed that rising

social media use had the unexpected effect of increasing the amount of off-the-record briefing,

misinformation, and gossip being published. However, campaigners and journalists struggled to identify serious abuses committed by the political parties, with Conservatives defending campaign stunts in the 2019 election and some on the left expressing grudging admiration. Some political campaigners also warned that campaigns are increasingly dominated by media cycles, which in turn are fuelled by Twitter cycles. The result is that journalists spend too much time dealing with minutiae and gossip rather than exercising news judgement or analysing trends and stories, interviewees said.

Political campaigners also recognised that key events, such as Prime Minister's Questions, can be exploited through social media and legacy media. Video clips appeal to social media users, and speeches masquerading as questions in Parliament have gone viral. Jeremy Corbyn used this technique effectively throughout his leadership of the Labour Party. While some journalists think such speeches look odd to a live audience, clips of them can reach large numbers on social media who would not usually watch live coverage of Parliament. However, political campaigners worried that these forms of polemical content only spoke to their supporters rather than the broader electorate. Looking back on the 2019 election, several Labour respondents expressed concern that their social content was only reaching the party faithful and that they had not done enough to reach persuadable voters in key constituencies, a point also highlighted in the post-election review, *Labour Together* (2020).

9.1.5 Disintermediation, two-step flow, and gatekeeping

The data elicited through the interviews suggested that both political campaigners and journalists were aware of the process of disintermediation of news organisations. The concepts of disintermediation and reintermediation (Katz, 1988; 2003) relate to points when a new information provider bypasses an existing one. As outlined in Chapter Three, this is a transformative process

consisting of intermediation, disintermediation, and reintermediation (Chircu and Kaufman, 1999). It

changes the relative position and competitive advantage of different providers within a media

system (Jungherr et al., 2020), with both platforms and their users exerting influence in a

contemporary information environment (van Dijck et al., 2018).

Some political campaigners in this study from both sides of the Chamber, including Cameron's Sir

Craig Oliver and Miliband's Tom Baldwin, recognised and valued the ability to bypass Lobby

journalists; indeed, they flagged it as a key driver in their social media strategies from the start.

However, some respondents, such as Momentum's Laura Parker, suggested that complete

disintermediation of the press was unrealistic, seeing direct-to-voter communication as one tool in a

range of different options. Some political campaigners, although not all, suggested that Jeremy

Corbyn's approach was overly optimistic and that a deliberate strategy of alienating some political

journalists resulted in a failure to seize opportunities to communicate with audiences. In describing

the 'Platform Party', which emerges in a social media age as platforms disintermediate existing social

and economic relationships, Gerbaudo (2019) shows that the process will create new digital

intermediaries:

> "The disintermediation/reintermediation introduced by digital platforms revolves around a
> series of key elements: their dependence on data and information generated by users as
> expressed in the term 'user-generated content'; their high degree of personalisation; their
> aggregative logic which allows, for example, people with similar interests to know each other, or
> producers and consumers in a certain location to connect, or advertisers to target a niche
> market; the partially closed or 'enclosed' character of such systems, as a means of harnessing
> 'network effects'" (Gerbaudo, 2019, p193).

This pattern of disintermediation/reintermediation can be observed in the present study through

Labour's electoral communication strategy. By seeking to cut out the Lobby, Labour came to

prioritise message dissemination through outriders who would carry its messages via social media to

their curated followings. The party's communications strategists explicitly strove to achieve a

spillover effect through repeated exposure of the politically disengaged to party content through

social media, thus helping to drive awareness of Labour's policy agenda and electoral aims.

As the interviews with party workers demonstrate, Corbyn tried to use social media to circumvent

the gatekeeping activity of the press. While political campaigners were split over the success of this

strategy, it was clearly pursued with vigour. During the 2017 and 2019 campaigns, Labour put

significant resources into policy explanation and discussion. The quantitative data and qualitative

interviews show that the party wanted to pursue a strategy of bypassing the Lobby. However, not all

the campaigners were confident this was the right approach. There was residual concern that the

explicit disintermediation strategy risked alienating the Westminster press, even as Corbyn tried to

define himself in opposition to large parts of it.

Some political campaigners, particularly from Momentum, also recognised the importance of

influence and credibility in promoting messages, an idea in line with the concept of two-step

communication. Campaigners cited television presenter Piers Morgan, *Guardian* columnist Owen

Jones, and Novara Media's Ash Sarkar as influential in either passing messages to their networks or

adding credibility to political positions. Several campaigners pointed to the importance of the

spillover effect on Facebook from these high-profile communicators. However, even in this hybrid

news environment, newspapers still set the agenda in a way that Twitter does not, according to the

Guardian's Waterson. In general, journalists were reluctant to believe that social media has as much

influence as traditional news sources.

As previous studies have shown, two-step flow communication on social media can have a

significant influence on voting habits, either through elite politicians sharing information with their

followers (Choi, 2015; Velasquez, 2012) or through opinion leaders sharing content within their

networks (Harrigan et al., 2021; Weeks et al., 2017). While in many cases, these are journalists (Xia,

2020) or informed activists/commentators within a media system (Walter and Bruggemann, 2020), as Papakyriakopoulos et al. (2020) show, this is not always the case. Their research demonstrates that political communication on German Facebook pages is powered by the behaviour of hyperactive users, those who post, like and comment beyond the range of regular activity. As they become opinion leaders, their comments become more popular than other users. Similarly, Nisbet and Kotcher (2009) argue that the impact of opinion leaders does not rely on formal status but on their ability to alert followers to matters of interest. More broadly, while social media users are more likely to engage with political information shared by close connections, they trust opinion leaders' posts (Anspach (2017); Turcotte et al., 2015). The present study demonstrates that political campaigners not only recognise the benefits of having outriders carrying their political messages, but they are also explicitly targeting this spillover effect in their communication strategies during election campaigns.

However, several political campaigners also suggested a need for caution when considering who influences election campaigns. They pointed to front organisations that can be used as message carriers, appearing independent but actually acting as extensions of party campaign activity. Some political campaigners were also beginning to reflect on the limitations of social media influence. Momentum, for instance, was concerned by the failure to translate Twitter influence into real-world impact, identifying problems in using political influencers to convince voters who were not engaged in political debate. However, they recognised that real experience captured on camera with emotional resonance is persuasive; both Emil Charlaff and Paul Nicholson pointed to the impact of the 2019 Rob Delaney video, in which he discussed his son's NHS treatment, as an excellent example of achieving positive influence. This finding reflects evidence from previous studies that have suggested social media users are more likely to frame shared messages in terms of moral or emotional responses to content (Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan, 2013; Tellis et al., 2019; Valenzuela et al., 2017).

Journalists were also aware that it was increasingly possible to cut out the middleman, recognising that they had ceded some control over the political agenda to accounts with large followings who could force stories onto news pages. Journalists acknowledged that their ability to gatekeep stories had been reduced, changing the power dynamic among themselves, political actors, and the audience. This finding aligns with previous studies that have considered the changing role of gatekeeping (Tandoc and Vos, 2016; Vos and Heinderyckx, 2015; Walters, 2022). However, despite their acknowledgement of disintermediation, journalists also pointed out that parties still want to access large media audiences, and campaigners remain focused on influencing the reporting of Lobby correspondents. As Peterson-Salahuddin and Diakopoulos (2020) argue, understanding the affordances of social media platforms and their associated algorithms leads journalists to renegotiate their traditional understanding of editorial practices. As the world transforms around them, journalists' conceptualisation of their roles and working practices in providing trusted information to readers continue to evolve. The changing nature of this understanding of journalistic role conception was demonstrated throughout the interviews carried out in this study.

Although the interview data seem to show that journalists still retain some gatekeeping influence over what becomes news, the interviews also highlighted journalists' awareness that they no longer had a monopoly on gatekeeping. Stories go viral on social media and force journalists to respond because their virality creates news value. While journalists know that political campaigners can bypass them, there was a surprising amount of agreement between political campaigners and journalists that their old structural relationship had value, even if the power dynamic has changed.

9.2 Key take-aways on digital campaigning in the UK

Jungherr's 2016 analysis of the four areas of campaign activity where digital tools are employed is

helpful in interpreting the quantitative data from this study:

1. Organisational structures and work routines

2. Presence in information spaces online

3. Support in resource collection and allocation; and

4. Symbolic uses (Jungherr, 2016)

The Facebook posts analysed here reflect these uses, especially the last three. It also is clear from the interviews that the parties view digital campaigning as important and, as previously highlighted, Facebook as the key social media tool in persuading voters to support them.

While UK campaigners in the 2010s made some use of Facebook to appeal for funds, this was very different to the US presidential campaign fundraising outlined by Kreiss (2009; 2011) and Stromer-Galley (2014). The most frequent fundraising appeals came from Labour in 2017, posting 24 times. However, even that is only 4.94% of the party's posts in the campaign. The Facebook posts of all parties across all three elections were heavily focused on promoting campaign themes and persuading voters. While significant numbers of posts attacked rival politicians and their policies, the press characterisation of social media accounts as dumbed-down platforms for abusing one's rivals was not valid (Gilholy, 2022). Instead, the parties were more heavily focused on touting their own strengths, seeking to motivate Facebook users to engage with the democratic process by encouraging voter registration early in the campaigns and then getting the vote out on election day. In many ways, this was a remarkably positive use of social media to communicate with voters.

It is also worth considering how media content created by the parties matched the requirements of viral media identified by Jenkins et al. (2013). Their Facebook posts were available to users in easily consumable formats, and, as the Conservatives' 2019 campaign shows, a steady stream of material helped generate user engagement. However, the tendency of parties to campaign on issues that were already important to their supporters limited their relevance to other potential audiences. As

the interviews demonstrate, when campaigners generated engagement with audiences beyond their core supporters, they thought it was an achievement. This suggests that the content was not explicitly designed to achieve virality in the ways in which Jenkins et al. (2013) describe. Content tends to be more widely viewed when audiences engage emotionally with the material, as seen with Momentum's sketch videos or Labour's Delaney video.

Notably, the party leaders' Facebook accounts differed from the party accounts. Leaders' accounts were more likely to highlight leadership traits or experience and to make some limited use of personalisation as they sought to define themselves to the electorate. However, it was surprising that there was not even more use of personalisation in the leaders' accounts. They made little attempt to promote themselves or to give the public a sense of their life behind the scenes of the campaign. While the potential to create this type of humanising content depends on the leader's personality and willingness to put their personal life on public display, its omission does appear to be a lost opportunity. As seen with Hillary Clinton's 2016 Snapchat "Chillin' in Cedar Rapids" (Rogers, 2015), this kind of content can jar if it does not seem emotionally truthful. However, it can also pay dividends if voters believe that a leader is someone who understands them, their lives, and their concerns.

Also worth highlighting in the context of the development of digital campaigning, as outlined in Chapter Two, is that as campaigns grew in sophistication, they made increased use of interactive tools to engage voters. Yet notable by their absence in the dataset were efforts to take advantage of the interactive nature of social media to interact with voters. Only two leader accounts, both from smaller parties – those of Plaid Cymru's Leanne Wood and the Green Party's Natalie Bennett – regularly engaged with other social media users in the comments.

As noted above, many posts across all three elections lacked policy references, reflecting a patchy approach to voter maximisation and motivation around policy. The data suggest that Labour in 2017 and the Conservatives in 2019 pursued the goal of using new technology to maximise the number of voters who will support the party, as Stromer-Galley (2000) argued. However, other accounts seemed to squander opportunities to engage and convert voters, raising the question of whether the parties' digital technology approaches have genuinely matured. I would anticipate that the impact of the Conservatives' 2019 campaign and Labour's post-election review *Labour Together* (2020) would lead to changes in digital campaigning. One might hypothesise that future campaigns will focus more on key messages, be more repetitive, and try harder to engage persuadable voters rather than focus on core supporters.

9.3 Theorising the findings

This thesis has used the two-step flow theory (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955) as a mechanism for understanding the purposes of political campaigning on Facebook, alongside gatekeeping (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009; White, 1950) as a useful conceptual framework for understanding the changing nature of the power dynamic between political campaigners and journalists. It also considered disintermediation/remediation (Chircu and Kauffman, 1999; Katz, 1988; 2003) as a potential explanation for the changes in the relationship between political actors and those who report on them. It is clear from the data presented in this study that significant changes are underway, and those changes are unlikely to be complete.

While the data show that political actors' disintermediation by political journalists is at least partially a function of social media use, it has also become clear that political campaigners think there is a limit to the value of those platforms. Because the audiences of political accounts tend to be made up of supporters, disintermediated communication risks only speaking to those who would already vote

for the party; political actors believe this effect to be more marked on Twitter than on Facebook. The example of the Labour Party, which has achieved high levels of virality with content on social media that has not been translated into electoral support, has prompted caution among political campaigners regarding the value of disintermediated communication in the UK. On the other hand, the use of political supporters to influence audiences, regardless of whether they are traditional journalists or political influencers, are examples of remediation. The data produced by the interviews clearly show that political campaigners saw the value of cultivating these commentators and using them to reach audiences.

The concept of influencing voters through two-step communication directly applies to social media campaigning. Outriders and organisations supporting the political parties' aims are essential to modern digital campaigning. The political campaigners understand this and recognise these political influencers' value for their supporters. Some, but not all, of these influencers are journalists, although they are usually commentators or opinion journalists rather than reporters. Others are supporters with large social media followings, activists or campaigners rather than professional journalists. The political parties see value in interactions with these people as their roles as opinion leaders can help spread persuasive messaging.

While social media are diminishing the gatekeeping role of journalists, platforms such as Facebook or Twitter offer journalists significant power to affect the political debate. Their influence on audiences remains a valuable resource that political campaigners want to access. Despite widespread reports of declining trust in the media (see Arguedas et al., 2023; Edelman, 2023), journalists increasingly see their role as generating trust in information among audiences. They believe they can provide fact-checking and verification in a way that social media cannot and that doing so is vital for generating reader trust. Political campaigners value this capability, too, although they include more nuance and caveats. Some campaigners, on both the left and the right, see

different parts of the media as inherently biased, so they assume that those parts will never support them nor bring added value to campaigns.

These findings thus highlight tensions. Political campaigners value journalists, their influence, and their audiences and yet also want to bypass them. They value journalists who support them but also want to influence the audiences of those journalists who do not support them. They want to create content on social media which will persuade voters to support them but fear that they are only providing reassurance and bolstering existing supporters. The creation and dissemination of digital media content are becoming more expensive as digital campaigning has become more professionalised. Yet, if it is not designed to maximise votes, there must be questions about the value of expending resources on digital campaigning. This is especially true when considered alongside the opportunity cost of being prevented from doing something else that might have a positive impact. But not enthusiastically campaigning digitally may also have a price, as the Conservatives' perilously weak 2017 campaign demonstrated.

9.4 Extending understanding of digital political campaigning on Facebook

This thesis took a longitudinal approach to study the changes in digital political campaigning during an unusual time in British political life. A general election is typically held every four to five years, but the instability created by the European referendum led to a period of three general elections in just four years. At the same time, digital political campaigning was becoming more important to the political parties as more people engaged with political content via their smartphones.

Analysing the datasets of political Facebook posts and qualitative interviews has provided a unique insight into the content of political Facebook campaigns and the motivations of those who produced and directed them. It has also helped illuminate the impact these changes are having on political

journalism. I believe this study has extended the understanding of digital political campaigning by analysing the tools and techniques used, the strategies employed, and the policies promoted. It has also helped illustrate some of the shortcomings of those campaigns and how parties acted to address them.

This study has extended existing knowledge of how parties used Facebook to campaign and has countered the inclination in political communication research to focus on Twitter as a platform for engaging voters. It is clear from this research that while Twitter remains a key platform for political journalists, campaigners do not hold it in such high regard. They view Facebook as more critical for reaching persuadable voters and influencing them. This is an important finding and helps justify the study's research aims.

Not surprisingly, campaigners and journalists also disagreed about the effects of disintermediation. Journalists were particularly attuned to the dangers, especially in the avoidance of fact-checking and more general scrutiny of political messages – including viral ones with the potential to reach many people very fast – during an election campaign. Conversely, campaigners were generally pleased by the ability to circumvent journalistic scrutiny and reach voters directly – even if their strategies for doing so during the three election campaigns studied here varied considerably, as did their ultimate success in translating that reach to turnout at the polls. Although it did not stop them from trying to manipulate and bypass journalists, they seemed almost disappointed at how well they succeeded. However, they also expressed, sincerely or not, regret that journalism had, as Oliver put it, "lost its way."

For their part, the journalists in this study mostly continued to cling to the perhaps increasingly illusory beliefs that they are trusted by audiences and serve an essential role in democracy: verifying information and holding power to account. They certainly recognised what the communications

strategists were doing, but few of these seasoned journalists at major national news outlets offered

an effective counter-strategy. Several said that investigation, "vetting," and analysis were more

important than chasing "shiny things" on social media – but they did not say they were ready to

abandon the chase. Instead, it was hard to argue with the charge from many of the political

strategists interviewed here that political journalists in the UK were failing to live up to their own

standards or to fulfil their normative role in a democratic society. Instead, they were allowing

themselves to be sucked into the fast pace and gossipy nature of social media when their time would

be much better spent – and their value much more evident – if they focused on reporting.

Chapter 10 Conclusion

This concluding chapter is divided into six sections. The first two draw on the findings and discussion to consider what the research means for election campaigning using Facebook and, more broadly, political journalism in the UK. The third section considers some of the study's limitations, and the fourth suggests avenues for future research. Finally, there is a section of personal reflection and a concluding summary.

10.1 What do the results mean for research into political campaigns

This research tracked the changes in political campaigning on Facebook through the UK 2015, 2017, and 2019 general elections and the consequent implications for political journalism. A quantitative content analysis of Facebook activity and a series of semi-structured interviews led to the conclusion that political party campaigning on Facebook grew in sophistication and capacity during the study period. The Conservative and the Labour parties increased resourcing for digital campaigning, hiring staff and commissioning persuasive content. Smaller parties consistently linked to sympathetic media coverage, perhaps because of a lack of resourcing to produce large quantities of original media content. The results indicate that the parties were aware of the importance of getting social media users to influence potential voters in their networks; this two-step approach to political communication enabled campaigners to disintermediate political journalists and bypass at least some of their gatekeeping power, as discussed in the previous chapter.

This study took a novel approach to applying one of the older media theories, two-step flow (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955), and updating it for the social media age, substituting personal contact with digital engagement through social media. It has demonstrated that political parties use opinion leaders to help distribute their messages through social media while encouraging engagement that will lead to message spillover from those actively engaged by political communication to those less

interested. This activity demonstrates that political campaigners see the value in disintermediating journalists and speaking directly to the electorate. In terms of two-step flow communication, they are, at least to some extent, now replacing the mass media and journalists with social media influencers. The political actors seek to control the framing of stories through this disintermediation. By eroding the gatekeeping power of journalists, they can use social media to bypass political journalism and communicate directly with voters. This, in turn, can force political journalists to cover stories trending on social media, where the story's framing has already been set.

For their part, while recognising that their gatekeeping power has been eroded, political journalists consider they still have a role to play in distributing trusted information. Journalists continue to believe that their roles as gatekeepers can be supported through the distribution of verified information, fact-checking material, and upholding high standards of normative journalistic behaviour. While the audiences for legacy media have declined in print and broadcast, they are still sizable – particularly for outlets such as the BBC – and are further boosted by substantial digital audiences that journalists believe are of value to political campaigners. They seek to protect these audiences by producing what they see as trusted content. However, this study has clearly shown that journalists remain over-invested in Twitter at the expense of Facebook, which political campaigners see as the more important platform for reaching voters.

The methodological approach of this study – taking a census of accounts' Facebook activity over three elections, recording and analysing changes through content analysis, and triangulating those data with semi-structured interviews with political actors who worked on the campaigns alongside leading political journalists has produced a unique study – will provide a significant addition to the literature. When considered with two-step flow theory, disintermediation, and gatekeeping, these contributions to scholarly work will inform future debate and research by scholars working in the

field and help redefine some of these classic theories as researchers examine how political communication is being updated through digital campaign strategies.

10.2 What do the results mean for those working in politics and journalism

As discussed in Chapter Nine, the data suggest that the parties were not taking advantage of all the opportunities for voter maximisation through Facebook. A substantial proportion of posts in the datasets did not contain policy references, and sometimes there seemed to be no strategic purpose for posting. In reviewing the parties' Facebook output during the three elections, it is clear that most, if not nearly all, posts need to contain a policy reference or call to action to have an explicit reason for existing. Voters need to either be persuaded to back a party's positions or to identify with the party's mission. Both positive and negative campaigning can work. For example, Labour had great success with a 2019 video decrying the Conservatives' history of austerity policy. It was successful because it allowed supporters to signal what they were against and demonstrate what they were for. Merely posting photographs of politicians on the campaign trail is much less engaging and does not provide this kind of opportunity for persuasion or identification.

It is clear that negative campaigning can drive virality, for example, with the Conservatives' use of attack ads in 2017 to characterise their opponents negatively. In a series of attacking posts, the Conservatives labelled Corbyn soft on terrorism and the then-shadow home secretary Diane Abbott as innumerate. These attack ads can go viral, delivering millions of video views, and the negative framing can make a lasting impression on voters (Bond et al., 2012). But users also want the opportunity to demonstrate their positive support for a party's objectives and to show their sense of identification with it, as can be seen through the high levels of engagement with positive posts about voting.

This study suggests that campaigners should also consider the number of election themes they want to support in Facebook posts. The Conservatives' 2019 campaign shows the value of a few messages that are often repeated, as does Labour's 2017 campaign. Repeating the messages can give the parties the greatest opportunity to get a message across to the largest number of voters. Repeating the message but changing posts, rather than just reposting, will keep users from becoming bored or Facebook marking content as engagement bait (Meta, 2018). Parties should aim for engaging content that promotes likes, shares, or comments to benefit from the spillover effect. As the interviews make clear, shares with framing text supporting the views of the party are viewed favourably by campaigners.

The political parties should also carefully consider the strategic purpose of any posted content. Labour under Jeremy Corbyn spent too much time speaking to supporters and providing them with positive, bolstering content. The party did not put enough time or effort into locating persuadable voters in swing constituencies, instead building large majorities in seats it had already won. For example, in 2015, Rupa Huq, MP for Ealing Central and Acton, had a majority of 274; in 2017, this rose to 13,807. While the rise added to the safety of Labour's seat, it didn't return another Member of Parliament. The lesson that the party needed to persuade voters in marginal constituencies was not applied in 2019. The party must be more strategic in its approach during the next general election. It must combine bolstering content reinforcing its message and motivating supporters with persuasive material for voters living in target constituencies. While the engine for this will be the organic campaign, it is clear that paid advertising also is required to boost content to reach voters who might not otherwise see the parties' messages.

Throughout the three elections, there are a surprisingly large number of instances when a political party has referenced a policy area once or twice and then not revisited the theme during the rest of

the campaign. This is pointless. Any Facebook post's audience is a fraction of the total audience that

can be reached throughout a campaign. There is little point in wasting resources on creating

marginal content. The key is voter maximisation (Stromer-Galley, 2000), which is best achieved

through repetition and engagement in social media campaigns. It is clear from the success of the

Conservatives in 2019 that future campaigns will emphasise the volume of content, message

discipline and repetition, and perhaps some digital-native humour and mischievousness where a

candidate has the confidence to be self-deprecating.

The data also suggest that while there have been some attempts through the elections to use the

party and leader accounts differently, there is an opportunity to segment audiences further. For

example, the Conservatives tended not to use leader accounts to attack other politicians, preferring

to run more positive posts through the accounts of David Cameron, Theresa May and Boris Johnson.

There is more opportunity to differentiate between party and leader, with leaders' accounts used to

personalise the leader and emphasise leadership qualities. Party accounts already are more likely to

focus on policy explanation and attacking opponents. Appropriate cross-promotion between the two

can maximise the impact of a multi-faceted message.

It is clear that journalists need to think again about how they cover political campaigns. Journalists

use Twitter as a news source and a distribution channel, as well as a form of entertainment. This

poses risks for journalists, including the potential to be deceived by Twitter interactions into

misjudging the relative popularity of political campaigns. It is clear from the interviews that

journalists recognise such risks but are not maintaining an appropriate critical distance from Twitter.

Given that the campaigners are much more focused on Facebook than on Twitter, it is also clear that

journalists should pay more attention to how the parties are campaigning on Facebook. This is not to

say that attention to Facebook will have any greater predictive power about election outcomes; it

clearly won't. But the policy areas that the parties choose to emphasise on Facebook will give insight

into the areas where campaigners believe the electorate to be persuadable. Avoiding gossip on Twitter may also afford political journalists more time to consider and cultivate other news sources rather than chasing the latest controversy on social media.

A final point in this section: It is essential for campaigners and journalists not to drink the Kool-Aid. In a pressured campaign environment, it is easy to believe that social media provides an insight into voter motivation or replaces weighted polling. It is not. Relatively small fractions of the electorate can significantly impact social media, producing enthusiasms and controversies irrelevant to most voters. While social media can give a sense of the qualitative impact of a campaign, for example in Labour's 2017 campaign, it is not a replacement for quantitative tools.

10.3 Limitations of the research

Despite the triangulated nature of the research and the attempt to provide comprehensive answers to the research questions, this study has several limitations. This study was limited to Facebook. But analysing different social media platforms would also generate results worthy of investigation. While Twitter is the preferred platform of political journalists, Instagram and TikTok might also be investigated, particularly given their popularity among young potential voters. While the single-platform focus on Facebook has delivered tangible benefits for this study, a wealth of data is available through other platforms too. The decision to limit this study to Facebook was strategic and something I believe to be an overall benefit. Still, it does limit the ability to take a comprehensive view of social media campaigning.

As outlined above, interview respondents were identified through my contacts, media experience, and research into recent political campaigns. The goal was to provide a snapshot of the nature of relationships between political actors and the media in the second half of the 2010s. Qualitative interviewing does not aim to create a statistically representative sample, such as a survey might

provide. But interviews do yield insight into the interactions of national politicians and Westminster-based journalists. Some of the contributors are known to me personally. While those relationships have helped me secure access and insight from interviewees, I recognise that this professional relationship may have affected the selection process. As such, I have tried to ensure a broad sample of experts in the field, as outlined in Chapter Four.

A more comprehensive representation of political parties would have strengthened the quality of the interview data, which has come only from political actors in the Conservative and Labour parties. A Liberal Democrat voice would have been helpful, especially to reflect on the 2015 election. That said, it is also the case that most campaign coverage focuses on the fortunes of the Conservative and Labour parties as the likely future government. They are also the parties with the most resources invested in digital campaigning. While it would have been beneficial to hear from some smaller party campaigners, it was essential to examine the motivations of the two main political parties in detail.

It would also have been helpful to have had a gender balance among interviewees and greater ethnic diversity, particularly among the political campaigners. The interviews with campaigners were occasionally anonymised, and I do not intend to reveal details that might lead to their identification. Still, it is the case that many people working at senior levels on political campaigns are white, middle-aged men; they were over-represented not only in the pool of potential interviewees but also among those agreeing to participate in the study. Some senior women work in political communication and journalism, however; the data would have been strengthened, and their views and experiences better represented, had more of them agreed to participate on the record.

Three datasets were selected: the UK General Elections of 2015, 2017, and 2019. Many more examples could also be analysed, such as the 2010 General Election or the European Union referendum of 2016. However, the decision was taken to limit the research to the three election

campaigns to develop a longitudinal approach that charted the development of the field through a period of rapid change. By selecting similar campaigns, it has been possible to demonstrate change over time, rather than taking a more piecemeal approach to analysing different types of elections, for example, comparing parliamentary elections with referenda. This is a rapidly evolving area, with clear differences between the election campaigns of 2015 and 2019. There will no doubt be more by the time of the next election. As such, it is difficult to draw general rules about the nature of digital campaigning. For example, in 2015, the Conservative campaign won plaudits for using data and targeted campaign messages. In 2017, Labour had some success with a more organic approach. These two strategies run counter to one another. Thus, the approach taken in the study is phenomenological, analysing what happened and how social media tools were used.

The quality of the data analysis is dependent on the accuracy of the dataset. While I believe the dataset to be both substantial and an accurate reflection of what was posted during the election campaigns, there is the potential for errors to creep in. For example, there may have been occasions when posters deleted content before it was captured. By capturing data at the time of publication during the 2017 and 2019 campaigns, the study has ensured the highest possible quality of those datasets. But although the 2015 dataset was mostly captured during the campaign, some posts were captured afterwards. This delay may have increased the possibility of errors. That said, while no dataset is perfect and no analysis yields identical results, a comparison with the 2015 dataset outlined in Usher (2015) is broadly in line with the dataset used here.

The intercoder reliability testing revealed some weaknesses in the reliability of two of the domains used in the dataset, strategic function and rhetorical style. It is clear that these domains were more subjective than others, which were more often empirically testable in nature and allowed coders to make clear-cut decisions. The differences in rhetorical style meant assessing a post as persuasive or motivational could be a matter of interpretation and sometimes fine-line choices. Nonetheless,

there was enough agreement within the domain's coding to have a reasonable level of confidence in the results. Strategic function was the domain with the lowest level of agreement. For example, an attack post might be both an attack on a politician and an attack on party policy; the coder would have to make a subjective choice as to which was the most important. While tentative conclusions were possible, especially when triangulated with the qualitative interview data around strategy and motivations, it might be useful to revisit this domain for future studies and perhaps to rewrite some definitions to make them clearer, allowing for improved replicability.

Reflecting on the project, I also think it would have been helpful to have undertaken interviews after each election, possibly using a more ethnographic approach that would have considered practices in newsrooms and campaigns at the time of each campaign. This would have provided more robust data for the earlier elections, as the more recent 2019 election clouded the memories of some respondents. Most of the interviews also took place during the Covid-19 pandemic, severely curtailing the ability to interview respondents on location. While interviewing respondents on Zoom has many administrative advantages, it does not create a relaxed and informal atmosphere that is likely to prompt interviewees to be expansive and indiscreet.

I decided not to include Northern Ireland's political parties in this analysis, as the parties I chose to analyse were in line with those invited to national television election debates from 2015 onwards. But the use of Facebook in electoral contests in Northern Ireland may well be a subject of future research, especially given suggestions of increased support for a border poll on Irish unification (Moriarty, 2021).

10.4 Avenues for future research

While this study has tracked the evolution of digital political campaigning in past elections in the United Kingdom, there are several areas where fruitful research might be considered. Firstly, one might look at how political influencers impact voter choice decisions and understand how parties might use them in the future. This would align with the development of the two-step communication theory on social media and would lead to a greater insight into how political parties use outriders to carry political messages that either bolster or persuade. More research would be required to consider how these influencers impact voter decisions and understand how parties might use them in the future. More research would also be needed to establish the differences in effect by platform and to understand whether social media posts are sufficiently shared across organic campaigning to reach a substantial audience of persuadable voters.

Notably, significant resources were being devoted to digital campaigning, yet the activity's value was far from clear. Like the apocryphal quote about spending on advertising, it may be that half the money being spent on Facebook campaigning is wasted, but no one is sure which half it is. In 2017, the Conservatives were the most sceptical party in recent times about social media campaigning – and performed below expectations on polling day. While this study does not establish a causal link between those two facts, more research is required to put an exact value on both organic and paid digital campaigning and demonstrate how it might be used most effectively to ensure voter maximisation.

At the time of writing, speculation is growing about the next election date, which must be held by January 2025 (UK Parliament, 2022). The approaches employed in analysing the past three election campaigns on Facebook might be applied to the next election. Research could be targeted to see whether there was greater use of engaging content aimed at persuadable voters or whether the parties continue to use social media for bolstering rather than persuasion. It would also be possible

to create a hypothesis about the next digital election campaign's style based on the previous three and test it during the campaign. A hypothesis might be that the parties will use more persuasive and engaging video content, that the campaign will be more repetitive with just a few key messages repeated consistently, and that the parties will aim to maximise the number of voters persuaded to support the party with less time given to motivating the party faithful. This research might be developed into a strand of research that takes place at every general election and tracks developments over time.

It would also be helpful to conduct a comparative analysis with Twitter or other social platforms to understand how the political parties use them differently. One might also hypothesise that as digital campaigning develops in sophistication, the parties will put more effort into segmenting audiences on different platforms and tailoring content for them. This could be tested at future elections and analysed to see if differences or trends emerge. For instance, Twitter tends to be viewed as more combative, so future studies could explore whether the parties alter the tone or thrust of their messaging on different platforms. It should also be noted that since the acquisition of Twitter by Elon Musk, some journalists and activists have been exploring other platforms, such as Mastodon, Blue Sky, and Post. By the time of the next general election, the Westminster Village may have settled on a Twitter replacement or decided nothing else fulfils that role. During the 2019 General Election, none of the political parties used TikTok to campaign. This will change by the next election, and the parties will have to consider how best to use the visual, video-led nature of the medium. Content repurposed from elsewhere is unlikely to be as engaging as material specially designed for the platform.

The extent to which parties and leaders use Facebook's interactivity and engagement tools to engage directly with voters also merits ongoing scrutiny. Interaction in comments has long been seen as having value for political campaigns. Yet this study found little evidence of commenting by

the Facebook accounts, despite a couple of exceptions from Leanne Wood and Natalie Bennett. Further research might analyse how and when comments are used to engage with users and whether this use varies among social media platforms.

10.5 Personal reflection

I began work in the mid-1990s as a journalist, initially working as a reporter in local newspapers before moving into broadcast news. I worked as an editor of national news programmes for ITN through some of the most turbulent times in British politics in recent memory, including working on the response to the 9/11 attacks and the wars in Afghanistan and then Iraq. In my career as a television journalist, I have produced daily political discussion programmes, overseen newsgathering and reporting of general elections, and edited large-scale live programmes on presidential and general elections. This exposure to the political process, election campaigning, and the interpersonal relationships between politicians and those who cover politics proved fascinating to me, both at the time and subsequently. I worked with political reporters and presenters of political shows to explore and explain political processes and decision-making, as well as the impact of policy, through television programmes made for a mass audience. This proved exciting and challenging, but as I transitioned from news journalism into academia, I knew I wanted to explore some of the changes to political campaigning and communication in greater depth.

The research contained in this thesis began with a Ph.D. proposal submitted in the autumn of 2014. The nature of part-time study means that this work has been occupying me for more than seven and a half years. A considerable change in my personal and professional lives has marked this period. As I reflect upon the changes to my practice as both a journalist and an academic that this project has occasioned, it is clear that I have gained a greater insight into the discipline of academic research. As a journalist, I had limited awareness of research methodologies and their application. If I were now

to write on academic research, I would do so from a position of greater knowledge and authority, which in turn would provide more insight into the lines of inquiry I pursue. It is also the case that as a broadcast journalist for much of my career, I found it hard to move beyond the presentation of data to its analysis and evaluation. I have been used to presenting the facts and allowing the audience to draw their own conclusions. As an academic, I am learning that it is not only reasonable for me to offer opinions founded on data but that it is essential.

It is clear to me that journalists working on the political beat have embedded social media into newsgathering, story verification, and distribution, but at least until the recent change in ownership at Twitter, this process has remained firmly fixed on the Twitter platform. This research has shown that journalists may be missing stories and opportunities to understand the motivation and objectives of political campaigns by not engaging more deeply with content produced by the parties on Facebook. It seems to me there is a place for greater specialisation and expertise in digital politics – something the BBC experimented with during the 2019 election campaign with the deployment of Joey D'Urso to the digital political beat, though the corporation has not subsequently developed in-house expertise in the field.

It is perhaps not surprising that the element of this work that has brought me the greatest satisfaction is that which is closest to my journalistic background, interviewing and presentation of data. It is a long time since I was a reporter, having become an editor of television news programmes in the early noughties, and even longer since I worked with written quotes for newspaper articles. But it was a pleasure to conduct interviews and draw key quotes from them. While I have learnt much during my doctoral research about building robust quantitative datasets and analysing them to reveal trends, I think my future research will undoubtedly centre on elite interviewing as one of my preferred methodologies. As a reporter, I learned the value of giving my sources free rein to share

their views, which provided depth to both my stories and my own understanding, and that approach also serves researchers well. I found that despite being restricted to conducting interviews on Zoom during the pandemic, I could still draw out interesting reflections from contributors by allowing them the space to discuss themes and some questioning to ensure that their views were subject to challenge. This has led to some of this research's most interesting and significant findings.

Finally, this is the most extended piece of sustained writing I have ever conducted. While I first envisaged the Ph.D. proposal as a book idea, I had never written a book before. Learning to write in a sustained way, developing different themes and ideas in discrete sections of the thesis, has been both an iterative and revelatory process for me. This process has helped me to hone the clarity of my writing and to see the importance of linking ideas and evidence. It has undoubtedly improved my writing style and will certainly strengthen my journalism in future projects.

10.6 Concluding summary

This thesis has sought to illustrate the changing nature of political campaigning on Facebook and to show how it reduces the ability of political journalists to gatekeep stories. The research findings have demonstrated the gulf between political journalists and political actors in their approaches to digital communication, showing that both groups have incorporated social media into their working lives. The study has also demonstrated how using disintermediation and two-step communication is, to some extent, circumventing political journalists and allowing campaigners to speak directly to voters, passing on their message unfiltered. This has allowed a novel application of the long-standing idea of two-step communication, updating the concept for the social media age in the specific context of election campaigns.

This research analyses how political parties used their Facebook accounts and those of their leaders during the past three elections. It has sought to understand the policy areas of note and how the parties used digital media formats to promote their campaigns. It has triangulated these insights with those gained through interviews with current and former political practitioners to understand the motivations and strategic intents of the campaigns, as well as their limitations and learnings. The resulting picture of an evolving area of political practice with an ongoing impact on political journalism shows that party team structures have evolved, staff members with new areas of expertise have been hired, and analytics have been examined for insight. For journalists, social media has been firmly embedded in newsgathering and distribution. Still, the focus for many remains on Twitter rather than other forms of social media, including Facebook. By using a conceptual lens that incorporated disintermediation, two-step communication, and gatekeeping, this study has tracked the changes in practice and sought to explain the strategic motivations and impacts of social media campaigning with particular reference to the changing praxis in political journalism through the late 2010s.

Ultimately, the data acquired for this study may be helpful to future researchers and as a record of how digital campaigning developed through a particularly chaotic political period in the mid to late 2010s. I hope my reflections and findings will also be helpful and of interest to those considering future digital campaigns or planning journalistic coverage. In the final analysis, reporting on elections is vital to provide high-quality, trusted information that allows voters to make informed decisions about their democratic choices. I hope this research contributes toward this goal.

Appendix One: Participant information sheet one

Title of study:

The use of disintermediated and social media by political actors and its impact on the agenda setting functions of political journalism

We would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether you would like to take part it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

What is the purpose of the study?

The study is to establish how social media has changed political communication and look at whether the changing nature of the relationship with political journalists has implications for the functions of a free press in scrutinising and holding to account the activity of politicians and political parties.

Why have I been invited?

Interviewees have been invited to take part if they meet one of the following criteria:

- A significant track record in political journalism at national or international level.
- Managerial and editorial responsibility for the work of political journalists.
- Current or recent experience and/or responsibility for digital campaigning within a major political party
- Current or recent experience of communications within a major political party or department of state.
- Responsibility for news coverage at a social media company.

Do I have to take part?

Participation in the project is voluntary, and you can choose not to participate in part or all of the project. You can withdraw at any stage of the project without being penalised or disadvantaged in any way.

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

What will happen if I take part?

- A single recorded interview will take place lasting up to 30 minutes
- The information will be recorded as a semi-structured audio interview and will be transcribed for use in publication of the final dissertation.
- Quotes from the interviews will be published in relevant chapters of the dissertation when considering the impact of political campaigning and the analysis of digital political activity and political journalism.

What do I have to do?

Answer the interview questions, either in person, via video-conference, or over the phone, as fully as possible. There are no further requirements.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

Relevant quotations from the interview will be taken out and published as part of the dissertation. The choice of quotation and its placement will be at the researcher's discretion.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Contributing to further knowledge about the changing nature of political communication and coverage

What will happen when the research study stops?

Once the study is complete it will be published as part of a PhD dissertation, which will be available to academic researchers. It may also be published in book form for a wider audience.

Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

- Access to the unedited information will only be given to the lead researcher
- Audio and transcribed interviews will be kept on a password protected hard drive, not permanently attached to an internet connection
- Data will not be shared other than in the form of publication

What will happen to results of the research study?

The results of the study will be published as a PhD and, potentially, a book. It is also possible that summaries of the study and information generated by it may be published either in digital or print form in academic or trade journals, national press or as part of future radio or television programmes.

What will happen if I do not want to carry on with the study?

You are free to withdraw from the study at any point up to publication without any form of penalty.

What if there is a problem?

If you have any problems, concerns or questions about this study, you should ask to speak to a member of the research team. If you remain unhappy and wish to complain formally, you can do this through City's complaints procedure. To complain about the study, you need to phone 020 7040 3040. You can then ask to speak to the Secretary to Senate Research Ethics Committee and inform them that the name of the project is: *The use of disintermediated and social media by political actors and its impact on the agenda setting functions of political journalism*

You could also write to the Secretary at:
Anna Ramberg
Research Governance & Compliance Manager
Research & Enterprise
City, University of London
Northampton Square
London
EC1V 0HB
Email: Anna.Ramberg.1@city.ac.uk

City holds insurance policies which apply to this study. If you feel you have been harmed or injured by taking part in this study you may be eligible to claim compensation. This does not affect your legal rights to seek compensation. If you are harmed due to someone's negligence, then you may have grounds for legal action.

Who has reviewed the study?

This study has been approved by City Department of Journalism Research Ethics Committee

Further information and contact details

If you need further information, please contact the researcher, Matt Walsh
matthew.walsh@city.ac.uk

Or his supervisor Professor Jane Singer jane.singer.1@city.ac.uk

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

Appendix Two: Participant information sheet two

Full title of Project: The use of disintermediated and social media communication by political actors and its impact on the agenda-setting and gate-keeping functions of political journalism

Name, position and contact address of Researcher: Matt Walsh, Senior lecturer: journalism, School of Journalism, Media and Culture, Cardiff University, 2 Central Square, Cardiff, CF10 1FS.

Please tick as appropriate **YES NO**

1. I have read and understand the Participant Information Sheet.

2. I agree to take part in the above study.

3. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time.

4. I understand I will not be identified at any part of the dissertation.

Include the following statements if appropriate, or delete from your consent form:

5. I agree to the interview/focus group being recorded.

6. I understand that I may be quoted in the dissertation.

7. I would like my quotes to be anonymised.

Signed ……………………………………………………………………………………….. Date: …………………………

Participant information sheet

Title of study:

The use of disintermediated and social media by political actors and its impact on the agenda setting functions of political journalism

We would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether you would like to take part it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

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Why have I been invited?

Interviewees have been invited to take part if they meet one of the following criteria:

1. A significant track record in political journalism at national or international level.

2. Managerial and editorial responsibility for the work of political journalists.

3. Current or recent experience and/or responsibility for digital campaigning within a major political party

4. Current or recent experience of communications within a major political party or department of state.

5. Responsibility for news coverage at a social media company.

Do I have to take part?

Participation in the project is voluntary, and you can choose not to participate in part or all of the project. You can withdraw at any stage of the project without being penalised or disadvantaged in any way.

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

What will happen if I take part?
· A single recorded interview will take place lasting up to 30 minutes
· The information will be recorded as a semi-structured audio interview and will be transcribed for use in publication of the final dissertation.
· Quotes from the interviews will be published in relevant chapters of the dissertation when considering the impact of political campaigning and the analysis of digital political activity and political journalism.

What do I have to do?
Answer the interview questions, either in person on over the phone, as fully as possible. There are no further requirements.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?
Relevant quotations from the interview will be taken out and published as part of the dissertation. The choice of quotation and its placement will be at the researcher's discretion.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?
Contributing to further knowledge about the changing nature of political communication and coverage

What will happen when the research study stops?
Once the study is complete it will be published as part of a PhD dissertation, which will be available to academic researchers. It may also be published in book form for a wider audience.

Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?
· Access to the unedited information will only be given to the lead researcher
· Audio and transcribed interviews will be kept on a password protected hard drive, not permanently attached to an internet connection
· Data will not be shared other than in the form of publication

What will happen to results of the research study?
The results of the study will be published as a PhD and, potentially, a book. It is also possible that summaries of the study and information generated by it may be published either in digital or print form in academic or trade journals, national press or as part of future radio or television programmes.

What will happen if I do not want to carry on with the study?
You are free to withdraw from the study at any point up to publication without any form of penalty.

What if there is a problem?
If you have any problems, concerns or questions about this study, you should ask to speak to a member of the research team. If you remain unhappy and wish to complain formally, you can do this through City's complaints procedure. To complain about the study, you need to phone 020 7040 3040. You can then ask to speak to the Secretary to Senate Research Ethics Committee and inform them that the name of the project is: *The use of disintermediated and social media by political actors and its impact on the agenda setting functions of political journalism*
You could also write to the Secretary at:
Anna Ramberg
Research Governance & Compliance Manager
Research & Enterprise
City, University of London
Northampton Square
London
EC1V 0HB
Email: Anna.Ramberg.1@city.ac.uk
City holds insurance policies which apply to this study. If you feel you have been harmed or

injured by taking part in this study you may be eligible to claim compensation. This does not affect your legal rights to seek compensation. If you are harmed due to someone's negligence, then you may have grounds for legal action.

Who has reviewed the study?

This study has been approved by City Department of Journalism Research Ethics Committee

Further information and contact details

If you need further information, please contact the researcher, Matt Walsh

matthew.walsh@city.ac.uk

Or his supervisor Professor Jane Singer jane.singer.1@city.ac.uk

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

Matt Walsh

April 2020

Political professionals semi-structured interview guide:

1. Tell me the key ways in which you use social media in the course of your professional work?

a. What types of social media platform?

b. Do you use peer-to-peer communication as well as direct to public communication?

2. How does social media fit into your strategies for communicating with voters, journalists and other key constituencies?

3. Do you find feedback from social media users to be a useful resource?

4. What would you say are the key objectives of organic social media communication as opposed to paid advertising?

5. How do audience and platform considerations affect the way you tailor your social media messages?

6. Reflecting on the campaigns of 2015, 2017 and 2019, what differences in strategic approach do you see during this time? Can you give examples?

7. Are there particular examples of successful social media strategy or tactics that stand out for you during election campaigns, whether from your own party or a competitor?

a. And failures?

8. To what extent has the use of social media changed the way you interact with journalists?

a. How has your reliance on journalists for reaching voters, or particular groups of voters, changed because of social media?

b. What challenges do social media pose for your interactions with journalists?

9. Do you believe that political communication on social platforms would benefit from greater regulation in the future?

a. What practices would you consider to be unethical?

Matt Walsh

May 2020

Journalists semi-structured interview guide:

1. Tell me the key ways in which you use social media in the course of your professional work?

a. What types of social media platform?

b. Do you use peer-to-peer communication as well as direct to public communication?

2. How does social media fit into your strategies for communicating with readers and other key constituencies?

3. Has the use of social media changed the way you interact with political professionals? If so, how?

a. How has political professionals' reliance on journalists for reaching voters, or particular groups of voters, changed because of social media?

b. What challenges do social media pose for your interactions with readers, political professionals or other key constituencies?

4. What challenges does the use of social media by political professionals raise for journalists?

5. How do you fact-check or otherwise verify the information put out on social media by political professionals?

6. Do you think social media affect your agenda in planning your political coverage? If so, in what ways? If not, why not?

7. Reflecting on the campaigns of 2015, 2017 and 2019, what differences in strategic approach do you see during this time? Can you give examples?

8. Are there particular examples of successful political social media strategy or tactics that stand out for you during election campaigns?

a. And failures?

9. Reflecting on the way social media have affected political reporting, can you give examples of positive or negative impacts on your work?

10. Do you believe that political communication on social platforms would benefit from greater regulation in the future?

a. What practices would you consider to be unethical?

Appendix Three: Application for Approval of Research

Section A: Student Details

Please indicate the degree that the proposed research project pertains to:

PhD

Please answer all of the following questions, circling yes or no where appropriate:

1. Title of project

> The word is out: a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the use of disintermediated communication by political actors and the impact on the agenda-setting and gate-keeping functions of political journalism.

2. Name of student researcher (please include contact address and telephone number)

> Matt Walsh
>
> Matt.walsh@northampton.ac.uk
>
> 07866 464738

3. Name of research supervisor

> Professor Michael Bromley

4. PLEASE ATTACH A DESCRIPTION OF THE PROPOSED RESEARCH PROJECT

The ways in which political actors communicate with electorates are changing and having unpredictable impacts on political journalism. Increasingly Facebook, Twitter and Snapchat are the places in which political campaigns are won and lost. But as politicians begin to curate their own audiences, how do political journalists ensure fairness, balance and accuracy in their coverage? It has become axiomatic to say elections have moved into a post-truth environment and that the echo-chamber effect means increasing polarisation of opinion, but what does that mean for the democratic process? This project will undertake a quantitative analysis of the use of social media focusing on three case studies; the UK's 2015 & 2017 General Elections and the US Presidential election campaign of 2016. It will also feature a

range of qualitative interviews with political actors and political journalists.

5. Does the research involve the use of subjects/participants?   Yes

If yes, to section B

If no, go to section C

Section B: Risks to Participants

1. Approximately how many subjects/participants are planned to be involve	20

2. How will participants be identified, approached and recruited, and by whom?

> The participants have been identified by virtue of either their position in political life – ie an MP
> a party worker – or because they are a political journalist or oversee the work of political
> journalists, or are senior figures with responsibility for news and current affairs within social
> media companies. They are being recruited by me, either by an initial approach via email or soci
> media.

a. What are your recruitment criteria?

(*Please append any relevant recruitment material/advertisement/flyer*)

> 1. A significant track record in political journalism at national or international level.
>
> 2. Managerial and editorial responsibility for the work of political journalists.
>
> 3. Current or recent experience and/or responsibility for digital campaigning within a majo
>   political party
>
> 4. Current or recent experience of communications within a major political party or
>   department of state.
>
> 5. Responsibility for news coverage at a social media company.

PLEASE CONSULT SECTION E OF THE DEPARTMENT OF JOURNALISM ETHICS POLICY FOR DEFINITIONS OF HIGH RISK RESEARCH

3. Will the research involve the participation of minors (under 18 years of age) or those unable to give informed consent?   No

a. If yes, will signed parental/carer consent be obtained?   N/A

4. Is there any risk of physical or psychological harm to the subjects/participants?

                                                                                                                                No

If yes,

a. Please detail the possible harm?

b. How can this be justified?

c. What precautions have to be taken to address the risks posed?

5. Is it necessary for all subjects/participants and/or their parents/carers to receive an information sheet describing the aims, procedure and possible risks of the research, as well as providing researcher and supervisor contact details?   Yes

If yes, Please append the information sheet which should be written in terms which are accessible to your subjects/participants and/or their parents/carers

6. Will all subjects/participants be required to sign a consent form, stating that they fully understand the purpose, procedure and possible risks of the research?   Yes

If yes, please append the information sheet which should be written in terms which are accessible to your subjects/participants and/or their parents/carers

7. What records will you be keeping of your subjects/participants? (e.g. research notes, computer records, tape/video recordings)?

> Yes.
>
> Research notes will include contact details for participants and notes taken during interview.
>
> Interviews will be recorded using an audio recorder and kept on an external hard drive.
>
> They will be transcribed using an online tool and transcripts also kept on an external drive.

8. What provision will there be for the safe-keeping of these records?

> Audio records will be kept digitally in a password protected file on an external hard drive, not ke permanently plugged into an internet connection. Transcriptions will also be stored in the same way.

9. How will you protect the anonymity of the subjects/participants? *(Please state not applicable if necessary)*

> At the moment no interviewee has asked for anonymity and my strong preference is that interviews be on the record and for publication. However anonymous interviews are a feature o political life and it is possible that party workers, in particular, might ask for anonymity. In that case I anticipate referring to them as Respondent 1, 2, etc, and giving a brief description of thei

> qualification to comment on the issues as part of the appendices.

10. What provision for post research de-brief or support will be available should subjects/participants require? *(Please state not applicable if necessary)*

N/A

NOTE: If an external organisation (for example, a school, a company, a charity) is to be approached to take part in a project, a letter of approval from that organisation is required before any research can begin.

Section C: Risks to Researcher

1. Is there any risk of physical or psychological harm to yourself?   No

If yes,

a. Please detail the possible harm?

b. How can this be justified?

c. What precautions have to be taken to address the risks posed?
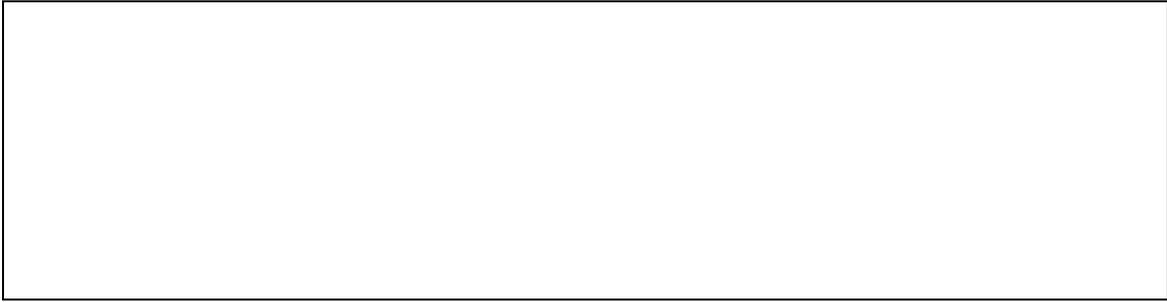
Please provide additional details of research here if necessary

Signature of student researcher -- Date ------------------

Section D: Ethical Approval

To be completed by Research Supervisor

Please mark the appropriate box below:

      Ethical approval granted

      Refer to the Department of Journalism Research Ethics Committee

      Refer to the University Senate Research Ethics Committee

Signature -- Date -------------------

Section E: Ethical Approval

To be completed by an additional member of staff for secondary approval .

Please mark the appropriate box below:

      Ethical approval granted

      Refer to the Department of Journalism Research Ethics Committee

      Refer to the University Senate Research Ethics Committee

Signature Matt Walsh   Date 13/06/18

Section F: Ethical Approval

To be completed by the Department of Journalism Ethics Representative in cases where issues have arisen with approval (Please read this ethics release form fully and pay particular attention to any answers on the form where bold items have been circled and any relevant appendices.)

Ethical approval granted

Signature --   Date --------------------

Ethics ETH1920-1368: Mr Matt Walsh (Low risk)

Date Created 07 Apr 2020
Date Submitted 08 Apr 2020
Date of last resubmission 09 May 2020
Date forwarded to
committee
05 May 2020
Academic Staff Mr Matt Walsh
Student ID 140054364
Category Doctoral Researcher
Supervisor Prof Jane Singer
Project The use of social media and disintermediated communication by
politicians and the impact on the agenda-setting functions of political
journalism
School School of Arts and Social Sciences
Department Journalism
Current status Approved

Ethics application

Risks

R1) Does the project have funding?
No
R2) Does the project involve human participants?
Yes
R3) Will the researcher be located outside of the UK during the conduct of the research?
No
R4) Will any part of the project be carried out under the auspices of an external organisation, involve collaboration between institutions, or involve data collection at an external organisation?
No
R5) Does your project involve access to, or use of, material that could be classified as security sensitive?
No
R6) Does the project involve the use of live animals?
No
R7) Does the project involve the use of animal tissue?
No
R8) Does the project involve accessing obscene materials?
No
R9) Does the project involve access to confidential business data (e.g. commercially sensitive data, trade secrets, minutes of internal meetings)?
No
R10) Does the project involve access to personal data (e.g. personnel or student records) not in the public domain?
No
R11) Does the project involve deviation from standard or routine clinical practice, outside of current guidelines?
No
R12) Will the project involve the potential for adverse impact on employment, social or financial standing?
No
R13) Will the project involve the potential for psychological distress, anxiety, humiliation or pain greater than that of normal life for the participant?
No
R15) Will the project involve research into illegal or criminal activity where there is a risk that the researcher will be placed in physical danger or in legal jeopardy?
No
R16) Will the project specifically recruit individuals who may be involved in illegal or criminal activity?
No
R17) Will the project involve engaging individuals who may be involved in terrorism, radicalisation, extremism or violent activity and other activity that falls within the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act (2015)?

No

Applicant & research team

T1) Principal Applicant

Name

Mr Matt Walsh

T2) Co-Applicant(s) at City

T3) External Co-Applicant(s)

T4) Supervisor(s)

Prof Jane Singer

Prof Howard Tumber

T5) Do any of the investigators have direct personal involvement in the organisations sponsoring or funding the research that may give rise to a possible conflict of interest?

No

T6) Will any of the investigators receive any personal benefits or incentives, including payment above normal salary, from undertaking the research or from the results of the research above those normally associated with scholarly activity?

No

T7) List anyone else involved in the project.

Project details

P1) Project title

The use of social media and disintermediated communication by politicians and the impact on the agenda-setting functions of political journalism

P1.1) Short project title

P2) Provide a lay summary of the background and aims of the research, including the research questions (max 400 words).

The research aims to understand the ways in which politicians and political parties use social media to communicate directly with voters. It is specifically focused on Facebook and Twitter use during the UK general elections of 2015, 2017 and 2019. The research will also aim to understand the strategic intentions in using social media by political actors and the impacts that leading political journalists have felt as a result of this new form of digital direct communication.

P4) Provide a summary and brief explanation of the research design, method, and data analysis.

There are two parts to the research project:

1. Collection and analysis of social media data published by political party leaders and official party accounts. This data has been collected over a number of years and is stored on an external hard drive. None of this data is private and has all been published to public social media accounts. The data has been codified and analysed for trends in activity and themes.

2. Qualitative interviews with leading political journalists and senior party communications workers. These interviews will be recorded and transcribed - this information will be kept on an external drive not linked to the internet. I anticipate that most interviews will be on the record, but it is possible that some will be done on a non-attributable basis.

P4.1) If relevant, please upload your research protocol.

P5) What do you consider are the ethical issues associated with conducting this research and how do you propose to address them?

I consider the research to offer very few ethical issues. The quantitative data has all been published into the public domain and has been gathered in line with the platforms terms and conditions.

The qualitative interviews raise more issues but even then these are relatively low risk. The interviews are with senior journalists or political communications professionals who are used to being interviewed and having their opinions and views published. I will seek written consent for publication of the interviews and will keep the raw audio and transcriptions of the interviews on a separate hard drive that is not accessible from the internet. Should an interviewee wish to contribute on the basis of anonymity I will ensure that there quotes are not attributed to them, but I would provide an agreed identifier as to their seniority and expertise. For example, "A senior press officer with the Conservative party".

P6) Project start date

The start date will be the date of approval.

P7) Anticipated project end date

30 Jan 2022

P8) Where will the research take place?

Interviews will take place remotely via phone or video-conferencing software until after the coronavirus outbreak.

P10) Is this application or any part of this research project being submitted to another ethics

committee, or has it previously been submitted to an ethics committee?
No

Human participants: information and participation

The options for the following question are one or more of:
'Under 18'; 'Adults at risk'; 'Individuals aged 16 and over potentially without the capacity to consent';
'None of the above'.

H1) Will persons from any of the following groups be participating in the project?
None of the above

H2) How many participants will be recruited?
30

H3) Explain how the sample size has been determined.
Sample size has been identified via discussion with supervisor.

H4) What is the age group of the participants?
Lower Upper
21

H5) Please specify inclusion and exclusion criteria.
Interviewees have been invited to take part if they meet one of the following criteria:
1. A significant track record in political journalism at national or international level.
2. Managerial and editorial responsibility for the work of political journalists.
3. Current or recent experience and/or responsibility for digital campaigning within a major political party
4. Current or recent experience of communications within a major political party or department of state.
5. Responsibility for news coverage at a social media company.

H6) What are the potential risks and burdens for research participants and how will you minimise them?
There are few potential risks to participants, given that it is discussion of their professional roles. I will discuss how I will use their contributions and seek written permission to use their interviews.

H7) Will you specifically recruit pregnant women, women in labour, or women who have had a recent stillbirth or miscarriage (within the last 12 months)?
No

H8) Will you directly recruit any staff and/or students at City?
None of the above

H8.1) If you intend to contact staff/students directly for recruitment purpose, please upload a letter of approval from the respective School(s)/Department(s).

H9) How are participants to be identified, approached and recruited, and by whom?
I have identified contributors through their public profile and through their responsibilities in political campaigns. I will approach them through a written request for an interview in the first place, with a follow-up phone call should it be necessary.

H10) Please upload your participant information sheets and consent form, or if they are online (e.g. on Qualtrics) paste the link below.

H11) If appropriate, please upload a copy of the advertisement, including recruitment emails, flyers or letter.

H12) Describe the procedure that will be used when seeking and obtaining consent, including when consent will be obtained.
I will obtain consent from interviewees. I will send a copy of the participant information sheet and consent form when I arrange the interviews. Ideally consent will be obtained before the interview takes place, but if not I will request the signed copy in a follow up email after the interview.

H13) Are there any pressures that may make it difficult for participants to refuse to take part in the project?
No

H14) Is any part of the research being conducted with participants outside the UK?
No

Human participants: method

The options for the following question are one or more of:
'Invasive procedures (for example medical or surgical)'; 'Intrusive procedures (for example psychological or social)'; 'Potentially harmful procedures of any kind'; 'Drugs, placebos, or other substances administered to participants'; 'None of the above'.

M1) Will any of the following methods be involved in the project:
None of the above

M2) Does the project involve any deceptive research practices?
No

M3) Is there a possibility for over-research of participants?
No
M4) Please upload copies of any questionnaires, topic guides for interviews or focus groups, or equivalent research materials.
M5) Will participants be provided with the findings or outcomes of the project?
Yes
M5.1) Explain how this information will be provided.
On successful completion of the project I will contact interviewees and direct them to the digital version of the thesis.
M6) If the research is intended to benefit the participants, third parties or the local community, please give details.
M7) Are you offering any incentives for participating?
No
M8) Does the research involve clinical trial or clinical intervention testing that does not require Health Research Authority or MHRA approval?
No
M9) Will the project involve the collection of human tissue or other biological samples that does not fall under the Human Tissue Act (2004) that does not require Health Research Authority Research Ethics Service approval?
No
M10) Will the project involve potentially sensitive topics, such as participants' sexual behaviour, their legal or political behaviour, their experience of violence?
No
M11) Will the project involve activities that may lead to 'labelling' either by the researcher (e.g. categorisation) or by the participant (e.g. 'I'm stupid', 'I'm not normal')?
No

Data

D1) Indicate which of the following you will be using to collect your data.
Interviews
Audio/digital recording interviewees or events
D2) How will the the privacy of the participants be protected?
Any other method
D2.1) Provide details of 'any other method' used.
The interviews will be arranged on the basis of being on the record. Should an interviewee request quotes be used in a non-attributable form I will remove identifying characteristics from the text.
D3) Will the research involve use of direct quotes?
Yes
D5) Where/how do you intend to store your data?
Password protected computer files
Storage on encrypted device (e.g. laptop, hard drive, USB
D6) Will personal data collected be shared with other organisations?
No
D7) Will the data be accessed by people other than the named researcher, supervisors or examiners?
No
D8) Is the data intended or required (e.g. by funding body) to be published for reuse or to be shared as part of longitudinal research or a different/wider research project now or in the future?
No
D10) How long are you intending to keep the research data generated by the study?
For five years following graduation.
D11) How long will personal data be stored or accessed after the study has ended?
For five years following graduation.
D12) How are you intending to destroy the personal data after this period?
Deletion of digital data.

Health & safety

HS1) Are there any health and safety risks to the researchers over and above that of their normal working life?
No
HS3) Are there hazards associated with undertaking this project where a formal risk assessment would be required?
No

Attached files

Matt Walsh

April 2020

Political professionals semi-structured interview guide:

1. Tell me the key ways in which you use social media in the course of your professional work?

a. What types of social media platform?

b. Do you use peer-to-peer communication as well as direct to public communication?

2. How does social media fit into your strategies for communicating with voters, journalists and other key constituencies?

3. Do you find feedback from social media users to be a useful resource?

4. What would you say are the key objectives of organic social media communication as opposed to paid advertising?

5. How do audience and platform considerations affect the way you tailor your social media messages?

6. Reflecting on the campaigns of 2015, 2017 and 2019, what differences in strategic approach do you see during this time? Can you give examples?

7. Are there particular examples of successful social media strategy or tactics that stand out for you during election campaigns, whether from your own party or a competitor?

a. And failures?

8. To what extent has the use of social media changed the way you interact with journalists?

a. How has your reliance on journalists for reaching voters, or particular groups of voters, changed because of social media?

b. What challenges do social media pose for your interactions with journalists?

9. Do you believe that political communication on social platforms would benefit from greater regulation in the future?

a. What practices would you consider to be unethical?

Matt Walsh

May 2020

Journalists semi-structured interview guide:

1. Tell me the key ways in which you use social media in the course of your professional work?

a. What types of social media platform?

b. Do you use peer-to-peer communication as well as direct to public communication?

2. How does social media fit into your strategies for communicating with readers and other key constituencies?

3. Has the use of social media changed the way you interact with political professionals? If so, how?

a. How has political professionals' reliance on journalists for reaching voters, or particular groups of voters, changed because of social media?

b. What challenges do social media pose for your interactions with readers, political professionals or other key constituencies?

4. What challenges does the use of social media by political professionals raise for

journalists?

5. How do you fact-check or otherwise verify the information put out on social media by political professionals?

6. Do you think social media affect your agenda in planning your political coverage? If so, in what ways? If not, why not?

7. Reflecting on the campaigns of 2015, 2017 and 2019, what differences in strategic approach do you see during this time? Can you give examples?

8. Are there particular examples of successful political social media strategy or tactics that stand out for you during election campaigns?

a. And failures?

9. Reflecting on the way social media have affected political reporting, can you give examples of positive or negative impacts on your work?

10. Do you believe that political communication on social platforms would benefit from greater regulation in the future?

a. What practices would you consider to be unethical?

Appendix Four: Codebook

Domain	Label	Definition
1 – Date	01/01/2010 (example)	The date on which the post was published
2 – Media linked?	Media linked?	Does the post contain any form of media either as an embed or as a link?
	Linked	The post contains a link to media from another source
	Embedded	The post contains embedded media
	No media attached	The post is purely text and contains neither links on embedded media
3 – Presented media	Presented media	The type of media presented to the user that is included in the post, either through embedding or linking
	Animation	A post that uses moving computer-generated graphics to illustrate the meaning of the post. Can be anything from simple text animations to fully realised animated films.
	App	A post that contains a link to download software for smartphones
	Audio	A post that contains audio to stream or download
	Cartoon	A post that contains a satirical drawing
	Composite image	The media is an image that has been composited from others.
	Facebook link	The media is a link to a Facebook page
	GIF	The media is a GIF (Graphic Image File)
	Image	The media is an image, e.g. a screengrab or a PNG of a newspaper front page but not a photograph
	Image and text	The media is an image with text added
	Infographic	The media is a graphic. It could be as simply as merely words on a background or could be a complex graphic explainer
	Instagram link	A post that contains a link to an Instagram page
	Linked article	Linked article. Will sometimes contain a tease (usually image and text) generated by publisher
	Photograph	The media is a photograph
	Poll	The media is a poll
	Snapchat link	A post that contains a link to a Snapchat page
	Text only	The media is purely text
	Twitter link	The media is a link to a Twitter page
	Video	The media is a video
	N/A	Not applicable
	Other (write in)	Other form of media to be specified by the coder
4 – Media source	Media Source	The origin of the media referenced in the social media post
	App store	Software that be downloaded for smartphones from relevant app stores
	Broadcaster's content	A video clip created by one of the broadcasters.
	Crowdfunding site	A fundraising website
	Digital publisher's article	Material created by a digital publisher – does not include digital material on newspaper websites.
	Election result	Results of an election race
	Facebook frame	A post that contains a Facebook frame for users to download and add to their profile picture
	Facebook live	Video material transmitted live using the Facebook live function.

	Facebook page	A link to a Facebook page
	Facebook poll	An embedded native poll in Facebook
	Film	A clip from a feature film
	Film screengrab	A still taken from a feature film
	Instagram	A post on Instagram
	Letter	Digital representation of a letter
	Members' interest register	Media that references the Parliamentary Register of Members' Financial Interests
	Website (other)	A website that does not fit into any of the primary definitions.
	Newspaper article	Material published by a newspaper. Can include digital stories as well as clippings from a paper.
	Newspaper video	Video material published by a newspaper
	Party's audio content	Audio material created by the political party
	Party Election Broadcast	Party Election Broadcast. A film made by the party or its representatives specifically intended for publication on one of the allocated PEB slots on a broadcast channel.
	Party's photographic content	A photograph that has either been created by a political party or politician or to which they have the right to use through a subscription to a digital agency
	Party text content	A text post published on social media, or a politician or political party's own blog or a similar web-based platform that is not owned by an external media organisation. The poster can be assumed to have total editorial control of the content
	Party's video content	Video material created by the political party
	Petition site	A website which hosts political petitions
	Political advert	A political advert created to persuade users of a specific political viewpoint. It's likely to be mixed media.
	Reddit	A post on the website Reddit
	Snapchat	A post on Snapchat
	Storify	A post on the now-defunct website Storify
	Twitter	A post on Twitter
	UGC	Material created by political actors themselves, in most cases, will be video, especially behind-the-scenes video or mobile phone footage. Might also include material reshared from supporters.
	Union video	A video created by a trade union
	Voter registration site	A website where users can register to vote
	YouTube	Video-sharing website. In most cases, YouTube itself is not the creator of the content and the media source will refer to them rather than YouTube
	N/A	Not applicable
	Other (write in)	Other form of media source to be specified by the coder
5 - Publisher	Write in	Who published the media?
6 - Location	Write in	Is there a location mentioned in the post?
7 – Rhetorical style	Rhetorical style	The ways in which language and imagery are used to convey meaning
	Acceptance	Assent to a situation
	Anger	Strong reaction to an unfair or unjust situation
	Approval	Belief that something is good or fair
	Attacking	Criticise
	Celebration	Giving praise and appreciation
	Certainty	Firm conviction

	Commemoration	To remember a person or mark an event with respect
	Condolence	Sympathy or sadness
	Disapproval	Belief that something is wrong or unfair
	Gratitude	Thanking for support or activity
	Humour	Mocking
	Information	Seeking to provide information or context
	Motivational	Ask for action – particularly donations or votes
	Neutral	Facts presented in a neutral manner
	Persuasion	Seek to influence
	Pride	Satisfaction in prior achievement
	Rejection	Dismissive of concept or proposal
	Uncertainty	Qualms or misgivings over concept or proposal
	N/A	Not applicable
	Other (write in)	Other form of media source to be specified by the coder
8 – Discourse tone	Discourse tone	Five-point scale of positivity or negativity of a post
	Strongly positive	High level of approval, crowing, certainty
	Positive	Approving
	Neutral	Neither negative nor positive. Factual or informational
	Negative	Disapproving
	Strongly Negative	High level of disapproval. Barracking, likely caricaturing.
9 – Strategic function	Strategic function	Defines the overall purpose and function of the post
	Amplify media coverage	Boosting a story by pushing it to party supporters
	Attack on government record	The record of the government in office. Also applies to previous governments, e.g. Labour 1997-2010 or devolved governments
	Attack on media	Criticism of media organisations
	Attack on party policy	Criticism of policies of opponents
	Attack on politician	Attack on individual's record or character rather than policy
	Canvassing	Tactics connected to canvassing for votes
	Celebration of historical achievement	Praise for an event or action in the past
	Coalition speculation	Speculation or offers of deals connected to post-election coalition building
	Defence of government record	The record of the government in office. Also applies to previous governments, e.g. Labour 1997-2010 or devolved governments
	Fundraising	Activity connected to political fundraising and donations
	Personalisation	A post designed to make the politician more relatable
	Horse Race	Posts connected to polling and predictions
	Leadership	Both speculation about the future leadership of a party and the demonstration of leadership often includes televised leader debates.
	Local election campaigning	Policies or campaigning for local or regional elections in the UK
	Policy outline or discussion	Policy promises or policy discussion
	Reaction to news event	Commentary on a development in the news, usually a breaking or unpredicted story

	Tactical voting	Posts connected to encouraging tactical voting behaviour among voters.
	Voting	Policies or issues connected to voting, including extending the franchise, registering to vote or getting out the vote
	N/A	Not Applicable
	Other (write in here)	Other form of strategic function to be specified by the coder
10 – Policy area	Policy area	The policy area to which the content most closely aligns
	Animal welfare	Policies connected to the treatment of domesticated animals
	Arts	Policies connected to the arts or culture
	Austerity	Policies or issues aimed at cutting the deficit or which have an impact through cuts in public spending
	BAME rights	Policies connected to Black, Asian or ethnic minority communities
	Banking	Policies connected to the banking industry
	Borrowing	Policies or issues connected to public sector borrowing
	Broadband	Policies connected to the roll-out or take-up of broadband Internet connection
	Business	Policies or issues designed to encourage business or which have an impact on business (not usually taxation)
	Brexit	Policies or issues connected to the UK's departure from the European Union
	Child health	Policies or issues designed to impact child health or demonstrate historical impact on child health
	Childcare	Policies or issues connected with childcare
	Civil rights	Policies connect to the rights and freedoms of the population
	Copyright law	Policies connected to laws that protect the rights of media creators
	Crime	Policies or issues designed to impact crime or showing the impact of crime on people
	Cybersecurity	Policies connected to ensuring the safety of Internet users when online
	Defence	Policies or issues connected to defence matters, including spending and overseas conflict but not domestic terrorism
	Deficit	Policies or issues connected to the deficit
	Devolution	Policies or issues connected to the devolution of power to the Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly and the Northern Ireland Assembly
	Disability rights	Policies or issues connected to people with disabilities
	Economy	Policies or issues connected to the economy, including the deficit
	Education	Policies or issues connected to education, including higher education but not student tuition fees
	Electoral reform	Policies associated with a change to the voting system
	Employment	Policies or issues connected to jobs but not the wider economy
	Energy	Policies or issues connect to energy

	Environment	Policies or issues connected to environmental issues
	Fishing	Policies or issues connected to the fishing industry
	Foreign affairs	Policies or issues connected to international relations
	Foreign aid	Policies or issues connected to the UK's spending on aid to other countries
	Fox-hunting	Policies or issues connected to fox hunting
	Housing	Policies or issues connected to housing
	Immigration	Policies or issues connected to immigration
	LGBT rights	Policies or issues connected to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans communities
	Media	Policies or issues connected to publishers of news and entertainment content in all its formats
	Mental health	Policies or issues connected with mental health
	Nationalisation	Policies or issues connected to taking services into public ownership
	Health	Policies or issues connected with the NHS and health but not mental health or child health
	Pensions	Policies or issues connected with pensions or pensioners unless there's a policy area with greater primacy
	Rail Transport	Policies or issues connected with travel by rail
	Religion	Policies or issues connected to religion, not including religious or political inspired violence
	Royalty	Policies or issues connected to the monarch and/or the royal family
	Rural affairs	Policies or issues connected with living and working in the countryside
	Scottish independence	Policies or issues connected with Scottish independence
	Security	Policies or issues connect to security, whether national security or in combating terrorism
	Social Care	Policies or issues connected to social care, not including the NHS
	Spending	Issues connected to government spending, past spending or future spending
	Sport	Policies or issues connected to sport
	Tax	Policies or issues connected to taxation
	Terrorism	Policies or issues connected to terrorism or political violence in the UK
	Transport	Policies or issues connected to transport
	Tuition fees	Policies or issues connected to student higher education tuition fees.
	Welfare	Policies or issues connected to welfare spending where other areas do not have greater primacy
	Welsh independence	Policies or issues connected with Welsh independence
	Multiple	Where more than one area of policy is referenced. First will be the primary issue addressed. Subsequent policy areas are also mentioned.
	Youth issues	Policies or issues connected to young adults – teenagers to early twenties – where there is no other area of greater primacy
	Women's rights	Policies or issues connected to women's rights, such as equality of treatment, where there is no other are of greater primacy
	Workers' rights	Policies or issues connected to workers' rights, employment issues, improving conditions for workers and so forth.

	N/A	Not applicable
	No stated policy	No policy is referred to in the media or the post text.
	Other (write in here)	Other policy area to be specified by the coder
11 – Video style	Video style	If there is a video, what is the video's function?
	Attack ad	The video is an attack ad which disparages an opponent or their policies
	Campaigning	The video is designed to demonstrate the parties canvassing activity or elicit support for their campaign
	Campaign promo	A promotional film likely to have higher production values, encompassing the campaign overall
	Celebrity endorsement	The video is of a famous individual providing support for the party or its policies
	Endorsement (non-celebrity)	The video is of an individual providing support for the party or its policies
	Film clip	The video is a clip from a feature film
	Parody	The video is a parody or pastiche of another format
	Focus group	The video is of a focus group
	Interview	The video is of an interview with a political actor but not an interview clip that was recorded for use as a sound bite
	Leader statement	The video is of a statement (e.g. speech, press conference, sound bite) made by a party leader
	Other politician statement	The video is of a statement (e.g. speech, press conference, sound bite) made by a politician who is not the party leader
	Policy explainer	The video seeks to explain a party policy position, often through the use of graphics
	TV clip	The video is a clip from a television programme but not from a televised debate
	TV debate	Clip from a televised debate
	TV report	A report from a TV news bulletin
	UGC	Content created by users, likely to be smartphone material or behind the scenes in nature
	Undercover video	User-generated video, likely to be mobile or shot clandestinely
	Video diary	The video uses the conventions of a video diary. E.g. creator speaking directly to the camera and reflecting on circumstances
	Voxes	The video is of members of the public being interviewed
	N/A	Not applicable
12 – Video length	Video length	If the post contains a video what is its duration?
	30 seconds or less	Duration of the video
	31-60 seconds	Duration of the video
	61-90 seconds	Duration of the video
	91-120 seconds	Duration of the video
	121-180 seconds	Duration of the video
	181 seconds or more	Duration of the video
	N/A	Not applicable. Also may include videos where duration has not been captured; in most cases, reshares
13 – Repost	Yes	The post is a resubmission of a previously published post
	No	The first publication of the post
14 – Shared from other user	Yes	The post was originally made by another social media user and has been shared by the user

	No	The first publication of the post

Appendix Five: Interview guides

Political professionals' semi-structured interview guide:

1. Tell me the key ways in which you use social media in the course of your professional work?
   a. What types of social media platform?
   b. Do you use peer-to-peer communication as well as direct-to-public communication?
2. How does social media fit into your strategies for communicating with voters, journalists and other key constituencies?
3. Reflecting on the campaigns of 2015, 2017 and 2019, what differences in strategic approach do you see during this time? Can you give examples?
4. Are there particular examples of successful social media strategies or tactics that stand out for you during election campaigns, whether from your own party or a competitor?
   a. And failures?
5. What would you say are the key objectives of organic social media communication as opposed to paid advertising?
6. How do audience and platform considerations affect the way you tailor your social media messages?
7. To what extent has the use of social media changed the way you interact with journalists?
   a. How has your reliance on journalists for reaching voters, or particular groups of voters, changed because of social media?
   b. What challenges do social media pose for your interactions with journalists?
8. Do you find feedback from social media users to be a useful resource?
9. Do you believe that political communication on social platforms would benefit from greater regulation in the future?
10. What practices would you consider to be unethical?

Journalists' semi-structured interview guide:

1. Tell me the key ways in which you use social media in the course of your professional work?
   a. What types of social media platform?
   b. Do you use peer-to-peer communication as well as direct-to-public communication?
2. (How does social media fit into your strategies for communicating with readers and other key constituencies?)
3. What challenges does the use of social media by political professionals raise for journalists?
4. Reflecting on the campaigns of 2015, 2017 and 2019, what differences in strategic approach do you see during this time? Can you give examples?
5. Are there particular examples of successful political social media strategies or tactics that stand out for you during election campaigns?
   a. And failures?
6. Has the use of social media changed the way you interact with political professionals? If so, how?
   a. How has political professionals' reliance on journalists for reaching voters, or particular groups of voters, changed because of social media?
   b. What challenges do social media pose for your interactions with readers, political professionals or other key constituencies?
7. Reflecting on the campaigns of 2015, 2017 and 2019, what differences in strategic approach do you see during this time? Can you give examples?
8. Are there particular examples of successful political social media strategies or tactics that stand out for you during election campaigns?
   a. And failures?
9. Reflecting on the way social media have affected political reporting, can you give examples of positive or negative impacts on your work?
10. How do you fact-check or otherwise verify the information put out on social media by political professionals?
11. Do you think social media affect your agenda in planning your political coverage? If so, in what ways? If not, why not?
12. Do you believe that political communication on social platforms would benefit from greater regulation in the future?
13. What practices would you consider to be unethical?

Appendix Six: Example interview transcript

The text below is the transcript of one of the semi-structured interviews. The example included is

with the former BBC digital and Buzzfeed reporter, Joey D'Urso (D'Urso, 2020).

Matt Walsh
Okay, so just to begin with, just tell me a little bit about how you use social media, in your professional life, and any platforms that are particularly important for you.

Joey D'Urso
Yeah. I certainly use Twitter to get people to read my stuff, basically, as a platform to put myself out there. In terms of finding stories or finding how parties are using social media. I think Facebook is far more relevant. I think you look at the proportion of the British public that's on Facebook. It's very large. I found, certainly in the 2019 election, it was where I found lots of stories, where I found case studies. No, certainly within the Westminster political journalism bubble, Twitter is the big one.

Matt Walsh
How does it fit into your strategies for communicating with readers? Would you say that Twitter is what drives people just or more Facebook?

Joey D'Urso
I think it sort of depends on the outlets. I worked at the BBC, which has the massive inbuilt advantage of having a huge TV and radio and a website that people go to, you know, they wake up and open the BBC app. So, after that, I then worked at BuzzFeed, which is a huge amount of the stories you have to get from your own Twitter feed, basically. So that's, you know, it's a really relevant one. And I think also Twitter can work, as I did some work on this during the election, on Twitter as the first point, you know, it's where you're mainly speaking to a load of insiders and political journalists, but they might then post it on Facebook, or they might know someone who sent it through WhatsApp, so it's sort of the first point in a distribution network. So even though it can feel like a Westminster bubble thing, it helps get stuff out there in a second-order way. And I found that during the 2019 general election, lots of stuff that was doing really well on Facebook was actually screenshots of tweets. So Jeremy Corbyn would tweet a sort of bullet point, this is my policy on childcare. And then Lily Allen put it on her Instagram story with her 2 million followers or people in Facebook groups around the country with screenshot tweets and put it there. So Twitter, I think there's often a sort of misperception, Twitter is a sort of bubble thing for elites and journalists and insiders, but actually, it's often where stuff starts to reach a mass audience.

Matt Walsh
Okay. And let's talk a little bit more about that in action, because I think that's the main one you've covered, is 19?

Joey D'Urso
Yeah, I mean, I did do 2017. And that was almost where I got into all this, because it became clear as the campaign got on, you know, I was following all this pro-Corbyn social media stuff and, you know, I was saying to people, you know, this is a big deal. This is important, and I think it became clear, certainly in the aftermath, I'm not saying that, you know, I particularly called it or anyone did individually, but it certainly became clear in the aftermath of that, but this was a big deal, and that

the social media sentiment was overwhelmingly pro-labour. And you know, it's always impossible to prove if that's swung people's votes. But I think what you can say is that Labour did better than was expected at the beginning of the campaign. Labour did surprisingly well. And there was a massive social media noise around Labour policies. And this wasn't just sort of young people or hyper-connected, engaged people, it was people, you know, the sort of age group, people in their 40s, or people in their 30s, with young children was a group that massively swung towards Labour in that election. And I think, you know, sort of school groups or there's a really interesting case study around the National Union of Teachers, and their school cuts campaign, which was massively viral, and that sort of thing. Really, you know, among a mass audience of swing voters and swing seats, I think, you know, I think it had an impact in 2017 but difficult to prove that.

Matt Walsh
So, is there anything that when you look back on that 17 election, is there a particular kind of strategy or tactics that stood out for you as being particularly successful or vice versa being particularly poor?

Joey D'Urso
Well, I think a lot of it was. I think with all the stuff you've always got the tactics or the strategies of politicians; you can't sell people some stuff that they don't want to buy, right? In 2017, Labour was pushing a series of policies that were very popular. You know, there's lots of research saying the public is actually quite left-wing on lots of economic policy. And Labour push those things quite successfully upon schools and universities and NHS, and that really caught on. I think, in 2019, the key thing was that Jeremy Corbyn was very unpopular. And that sort of overrides everything right? You can have the best social media campaign in the world, you can have the best policies that people love, but ultimately, if your leader is very unpopular, as demonstrated by every bit of polling imaginable, you know, Boris Johnson also wasn't particularly popular, but he was certainly more popular than Corbyn and that overrode everything over any sort of social media strategy you can have. Interesting groups of voters, you've got the Red Wall, which everyone talks about the sort of old, traditional Labour voters in the north of England who voted Tory having never done so before. That's massively important and I think then, because being pro-Brexit overrode being anti-Tory for lots of those people, think another massively important group of voters is the sort of Lib Dem Tory swing voters in southern England who are remain generally very pro-Remain. And there again, people who don't like Brexit but dislike Corbyn sort of trumped disliking Brexit. And you know, Lib Dems did pretty badly and then in lots of those areas, people voted Tory despite voting Remain in 2016, despite in many circumstances may be feeling quite passionately about Remain. I think Jeremy Corbyn's unpopularity is just a massive deal which overrode social media strategies, and I think Labour in many ways, had a very good social media strategy. It was professionally run. Lots of the policies were individually popular. But I think also Labour had this issue of sort of credibility in 2019. The individual policies were popular, but people didn't really believe that the overall package and Corbyn as a figurehead would sort of deliver them, particularly when you've got Brexit and Labour's policy on Brexit, which people didn't understand. So I think the Tories had this incredibly simple message of get Brexit done, which you can argue that Brexit isn't done and it won't be done anytime soon. But I think that really worked with people. But I think in 2017, you know, the Tories' leader was more unpopular. That message was less clear and the Labour policies managed to cut through on social media in a way they didn't in 2019.

Matt Walsh
What about challenges for journalists covering politics on social media? Are there particular challenges that journalists have to be aware of?

Joey D'Urso

Yeah, one thing that kept coming up in my reporting in 2019 was the issue of sort of foreign interference and sinister things and bots and malevolent campaign behaviour. People wanted that story to be real and the Tories did the Factcheck UK thing, which was pretty dodgy. There was stuff about foreign interference and Labour, the Reddit thing, which I'm sure you are familiar with, but I think the vast majority of what was driving conversation was ordinary people, partisans and from all walks of life. I did a couple of stories about this about Facebook groups and Facebook influencers. The BBC article which I wrote with Mariana Spring, a BBC article: Facebook influencers that you've never heard of. People running Facebook groups, pro-Labour. What we divided into three types of people pro-Labour, pro-Remain and pro-Brexit. And these groups, these sort of ecosystems, were pushing partisan messaging. And one thing I found was, you know, we talk about fake news, misinformation and often these things aren't necessarily, they might have some misleading things. For example, some of the pro-Remain groups are overwhelmingly talking about "release the Russia report", "Tory corruption" and this and that and these things are true often, or a pro-Brexit group talking about EU funds and they're not false and they're from legitimate news outlets often but they create a sort of ecosystem in which you only get one side. And you know, this is like if you look at the sort of examples of right-wing Matteo Salvini is a brilliant example, his Facebook feed will be migrants stealing people's purses or, you know, rapes by migrants in Italy and these individual news stories will be true, but you're only seeing one type of news story and it creates a completely unbalanced picture. Whereas if you watch a BBC news bulletin or flick through a newspaper, even if it is The Guardian or The Times that has a political slant, you'll see a much more rounded view of what's going on.

Matt Walsh

And, I guess for journalists who are covering those sorts of issues the temptation is to think that and well, you know, I'm thinking back to the story you did about the people pretending to be bots, you know, you get those stories where people are doing stuff that looks like it's an in joke amongst a particular group of people, but if you're on the outside looking in, it can look like something else completely different.

Joey D'Urso

Yeah. Just talking to and interviewing lots of these people, and from all different political stripes, you know, they're intelligent people who are funny and witty and read stuff. And like, I think there's a sort of perception that these people are sort of mindless idiots sharing stuff, but actually, they kind of create their own worlds they, you know, that the bots thing, it's a lot of pro-Brexit people who basically sort of taking the piss out of, you know, liberal media people who are getting hyped over Russian bots, you know, and the same is the case on you know, pro-Remain commentators winding up pro-Brexit ones, the internet is like steeped in. Like, if you look at Reddit, if you look at any part of the internet, and people make jokes all the time, and I think there's often this tendency to take everything incredibly seriously when lots of other people aren't really operating in that world. And then they like winding people up? And I think that's why it's often so hard to cover because you don't know whether something's a joke or you don't know something's a sort of sinister campaign. And of course, also, you know, a lot of the reporting I've done is based on, basically, this is ordinary people. This isn't some sinister, malevolent foreign influence, but the reason that everyone cares about this story is that in 2016, there was sinister foreign influence from the Russians in the US election, and that might well happen again, and that could have happened to the UK election to a lesser extent and you know, this is real, this question of foreign interference and bots and sinister plots, but just I think ordinary people are just as important as anything outside of that.

Matt Walsh

Okay, and I suppose one of the things that's quite interesting with the coverage of the 19 election was that broadcasters and newspapers, perhaps to a lesser degree, had been a little bit caught flat-footed by the 2017 election. They hadn't really seen that the social media campaign was going to be serious and would have influence. And then, when 2019 came along, they were all kind of desperate for it to be perhaps more important than it actually turned out to be.

Joey D'Urso

That's a fair assumption. Yeah, that's something I thought about a lot in the wake of the result, but I basically think this organic campaign was massively important, and I think overegged was a sort of party strategies in the ads, the ad library, which Facebook released. And I basically think it's not that interesting, really. I mean, I think parties advertise to people that spend money on it. They've always done that. They target them to different groups. But I think there's maybe a bit too much sort of hype over that. And, you know, the Labour Party is targeting people in swing seats, to say that their policy is better on the NHS. I mean, of course, they are. And it's sort of my view that there isn't stuff out targeting, and we don't know what, how people target. We don't know the criteria, we know that it's reaching mainly older men or whatever, but we don't know that. That could be because we're reaching people who like garden centres or because they're, you know, trying to target UKIP supporters who are mainly older. We have no idea about any of that, which is a massive question for the platforms. I think about why they don't tell us the targeting criteria. But I think there's also because the Facebook ad library gives you the sort of free sort of journalistic resource without really doing any hard work. You know, it's like, oh, what's in the ad library? So there are lots of stories about that. But I think they didn't really tell you that much. They told you the policies that the parties are campaigning on, stuff that we knew they were campaigning, meanwhile, there's some sort of swirling sea of... if I was doing research like yours, what I'd be really interested to talk to is people inside the party, were they reaching out to those organic influencers? Were they looking in Facebook groups, a couple of people said to me during the campaign, you know, that I was in some local Facebook groups that were really partisan in one way or the other. And it was like our people from the party sort of, I didn't really find any evidence of that, but it might have been going on and it's really interesting if it is because that's much more influential than potentially the ad campaigns. But yeah, it was a huge, you know, people always fight the last war and with 2017 stuff, I think, also, because, before the ad library, these ads were a total mystery. So it was really journalistically interesting what they were, but there's some good stuff the Bureau of Investigative Journalism did, showing the ads are targeted in different places in 2017, obviously, in 2019, but we sort of knew that.

Matt Walsh

Okay, good. So thinking about the way that social media has affected your reporting, can you give me any examples of positive or negative impacts on your work?

Joey D'Urso

Yeah, it's a massive positive in that you can just put stuff out there in a way that someone who writes on the website and 15 years ago, no one would have been broadcasting on TV as a young journalist. So, it's great. It's a massive audience for stuff, which is great. I think, you know, certainly, as a BBC journalist, you get a lot of backlash, particularly during election times. So, accusations of bias and that sort of thing that's often quite difficult to navigate. I mean, it's hard for me to really assess how you know, I only know using social media as a tool to both do and share my journalism, so it's hard to even think what it would be like to not do that. But I mean, in terms of a hindrance, I think I think there's a danger that you get too obsessed with it. And, you know, you sort of spend all

day refreshing Twitter and the same bunch of people talking to each other. And I found during the election, I tried to spend as little time as possible looking at Twitter and just use it as a broadcast tool because, during a general election, there's always a story of the day that takes up everyone's time. And unless you're tasked with covering it by your boss, it can just sort of drain your time. And I try as hard as possible to get out there. I spent a lot of time in Hastings we just sort of picked at random because it was an interesting swing seat and an easy day trip from London. But I went there three or four times and interviewed people about that and how the online election was I did a few stories about Hastings and to sort of gain deep knowledge in one community like that was really interesting and helpful, not I know what someone said on the Today program that everyone's talking about all morning. I think it can just drain journalistic energy and resources.

Matt Walsh
And what about fact-checking or verifying information that's put on social media by politicians or political parties? What sort of things do you have to think about if you're looking at that verification?

Joey D'Urso
Yes, I did some stuff for BBC Reality Check. Not really since about 2018, and I didn't do it during the last election, but I did bits of it before that… Yeah. One thing I mean, I think that sort of like straight debunks often don't really. I mean, I actually did the sort of story about Joe Swinson and that viral misinformation which sort of article which we sort of traced it back, and we looked at how the misinformation spread, and we interviewed some of the people who had helped it spread and that I think, potentially has a more of an impact than saying this thing's not true because that doesn't necessarily engage people and people don't. It's not that interesting. If you click on a story saying this thing isn't true, and also there's a danger that if you debunking can like reinforce false, which again, I'm not the expert on, but there's a danger if you say, you know, the classic 350 million pounds a week if you go around saying this isn't true, all you do is embed the false thing into people brains. And you know, there was that whole hoo-ha with the Tory Factcheck UK thing which, you know, you could argue now when they're trying to instil trust in government messaging wasn't particularly helpful, but I don't want to talk loads about fact-checking, not really my area.

Matt Walsh
Okay, so what then about regulation on social media too? Is it all wild west out there? Should there be more oversight regulation in terms of social media communication from parties?

Joey D'Urso
Yeah, I think it is a bit of a wild west. And I'm thinking a lot about this organic stuff. And you know, I mean, some really interesting examples around 2017. I wrote an article on how parties spent money on Facebook in the 2017 election. And so Corbyn and Snapchat, you know, they're sort of, you know, about this example, they sort of spent loads of money on Snapchat in a day in the last day of the 2017 campaign and reached millions of people and no one sort of knew that was happening. And you can spend like £20,000 or some sort of tiny sum when you think about a national election campaign and just reach a huge number of people. I think that's one of the things about social media campaigns, you reach massive numbers of people with quite small sums of money compared to old-fashioned forms of advertising. Yeah, it's the wild West I mean, you know, the Tories did that fact-checking thing which everyone agreed was not on, and there's nothing much that anyone could do about it. And certainly, these groups are total wild west and you see stuff shared, that's totally false. And it's just too big. Facebook can't keep on top of everything that's going on. There's too much stuff happening every day, particularly in private groups that are really hard for researchers and

journalists to get into. I mean, you know, I think they are beefing up those measures a bit now with Coronavirus, but it's a wild west. I certainly agree with that.

Matt Walsh

And I suppose in terms of the overarching thing, I mean, I guess one of the things I'm interested in is this idea that political journalism's normal functions of fact-checking, of agenda setting, of leading the conversation for their audiences, is all slightly being swept away by direct to consumer communication from the political parties. I mean, do you think that that's true? Or do you think that's a bit of a naive description? Again, thinking that if you go back 20 years parties would talk to political journalists about stories, they'd brief stories to the journalists, and the journalists do a certain amount of media mediation, right? You know, they check whether or not these things are right, they speak to opposing points of view, and then they publish it to their audience. Is that process being reduced now as a result of politicians being able to speak directly to their own curated audiences from Twitter or Facebook or whatever it might be? Does it reduce the importance of that journalistic function?

Joey D'Urso

Yeah, I think there is a bit of that. And I think about the Tories and the reality of the claim about hospitals, which was misleading. It basically said that you know, 40 new hospitals, and they are actually upgrades, so whatever, and that was all over their Facebook advertising, that was all over their leaflets, and, you know, there's not much anyone could do and yes, a journalist at the BBC would do an article breaking down and saying "Actually no". BBC output would give that context, but that's a lot less relevant when people are just on Facebook now with these memorable slogans and you know, it's not just the Tories, either, Labour will criticize some of their, you know, misleading messaging as well, like, all that sort of detail and fact-checking is can be sort of skipped. And I think people are clever enough, people rarely do lie It's never like, you know, it's always just, you know, massaging the figures or stuff that politicians have always done using a real rather than a nominal figure to make a list of stuff. That's a bit fiddly to debunk. And that you just saw, yeah, that journalistic scrutiny step is being skipped.

Matt Walsh

And what about, you're somebody who's spent a lot of time kind of covering cultures on the internet, I suppose in all cultures on social media, do you think that those are really understood and taken seriously by mainstream media? I mean, I think that I guess BuzzFeed always prided itself on doing exactly that. But do other people?

Joey D'Urso

What do you mean by cultures?

Matt Walsh

Well, I suppose, you know, it's that sort of thing of people understanding what's that joke on Reddit and people not necessarily understanding, that you come in from the outside, you're not in on the jokes, you don't necessarily understand exactly what they're referencing. A classic example, I suppose, is the New Zealand shooter manifesto, right? Where there's the whole manifesto, you know, which references a whole bunch of sort of running themes and memes that people that who were on 4chan would have understood, and if you were outside of that kind of culture, wouldn't have made sense to you.

Joey D'Urso

Yeah, I completely agree. And I think it's not just about the dark corners of the internet. I mean, you've got, you know, all the FBPE people who ordinarily would have been not massively engaged in politics, you know, fairly mild-mannered about things and became sort of radicalized by Brexit, and you know, just furious about this result and became sort of online. You know, "Release the Russia report", or, you know, all perfectly valid opinions to have, but people in this sort of angry echo chamber and exactly the same on the pro-Brexit or the pro-Corbyn side of things. So, I think, yeah, they've been sort of subcultures or online communities after Brexit because it was such a divisive, big deal. You know, I grew up under the Tony Blair years when I remember people talking about politics very much like, you know, the Iraq war, but I don't feel like politics was sort of present in people's lives in the same way. I have teenage cousins now who are really engaged and interested in. Because politics is a bigger deal because of Brexit. And online communities are much bigger and much more, you know, it's not just some sort of someone in his basement on Reddit. It's like, you know, your aunt who's FBPE or your uncle who's really pro-Brexit and that these communities are just much bigger now, much more normal and mainstream, and I think also that online politics or online was often associated with sort of techies and nerds and now it's just not. The most active Facebook communities were older people in ordinary British towns and, you know, younger people, techie people, tend to use Facebook a lot less. Yeah, there's communities and stuff, but I was thinking it was always going to be a sort of fairly small proportion of the population that sort of hyper-engaged sort of the people who might shoot up a school or whatever, or get radicalized, that's a tiny minority population. But the sort of people who have been radicalized by Brexit and exist in online communities is massive, millions and millions of people.

Matt Walsh
Yeah, yeah. I mean, it's like my father, who spends a lot of time discussing politics on the Yachting Monthly message board. Which is not really a place you would expect a lot of politics to be discussed. But they get into it there.

Joey D'Urso
But I think that's what generally, you know, the election, we saw lots of groups and stuff that weren't normally political became political because an election is one of those times when, you know, most people don't really pay attention to politics apart from elections, basically. So non-political places become really political.

Matt Walsh
Okay, great. So that's pretty much the questions I had sketched out here. Is there anything that I should have asked you that I didn't? So, the things that you thought I was going to ask but didn't?

Joey D'Urso
I think I mean, one example of something that I wrote, I think in 2017, was about the way in which politicians use Prime Minister's questions in the age of social media, which is different to how they used to and like, the journalists were saying, "Why do they go on these rambling speeches?" And the answer is they could clip them for a minute to put up on social media, and they do really well. Corbyn would basically do minute-long rants about how bad the Tories were, which looks a bit weird when you watch it live on TV, but in a one-minute social media clip, it does really well. So that's an example of how politicians use social media, use the existing politics in a different way because of social media. I can send you the link to that article if it'd be interesting,

Matt Walsh

Yeah, that would be great. Yeah, one of the things I'm doing is the quantitative side of all this stuff, and, you know, just sort of kind of going through all the stuff that they did in elections, and all the Facebook communication, or the Twitter communication and all that stuff. And you can really see that there's this whole thing of, you know, we want the credibility of something being on a broadcaster, but without any of the annoying questions that they're going to ask. PMQs is used in exactly the same way. They're trying to take those clips that show credibility. And so you know, here's Jeremy, really putting it to the man as it were, but with without any of the annoying stuff around the outside. Yeah, and, you know, also, you know, it's sort of, you know, like at Prime Minister's Questions, you know, here's somebody asking the question, but not allowing the Prime Minister's response, which is not what you were doing in broadcasting, obviously, it means completely different things. Not journalistic. It's propagandistic. And it's also really interesting to use. It's kind of like those elements of authority that sit around broadcasts

Joey D'Urso
Or how about, you know, Joe Rogan is the podcaster whose interviews are like massively popular? I mean, it's quite interesting. Definitely, you know, he's been accused of fostering far right whenever it's a softball interview style, it basically just lets people talk. And I think people have kind of become used to that or like, if you watch YouTube and stuff, that's often how lots of interviews are, and its often the kind of nicer listen or watch, unlike the Today programme where someone's trying to nail someone, but then it's not scrutiny in the same way. And I think then people hear the sort of broadcast interviews and think, "Oh, why are they being so horrible to my favourite politician". But, you know, you kind of need that in a democracy.

Matt Walsh
Okay, brilliant. Well, listen, thank you very much for that, Joey.

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