Platform Speech: Journalists and Political Campaigners Reflect On Facebook and Disintermediation in Three UK General Elections

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In the summer of 2007, then-shadow leader of the UK House of Commons, Theresa May, answered questions from users of a new political blog, ConservativeHome.com. Asked how Parliament's website might be improved, a politician not known for innovative thinking around digital offered a few generalities but then zeroed in on something of fundamental importance. "The internet makes it much easier for politicians to communicate directly with voters," May 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" (ConservativeHome.com, 2007).

Fast-forward ten years, and Prime Minister May is preparing to call a snap election. Aides place a podium in front of the television cameras in Downing Street, sparking frenzied speculation on social media from journalists, constitutional experts, political observers, and citizens about the content of her speech – a real-time conversation among political insiders and outsiders unimaginable a decade earlier. During the following election campaign, as well as those before it in 2015 and after it in 2019, politicians spoke directly to voters in increasingly sophisticated ways, using digital platforms to shape their campaign messages.

This article aims to explore the evolution of political communication on Facebook across these three British general elections – all won by the Conservative Party – along with the impact on journalists of the disintermediation afforded by the social media platform. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with key campaigners and leading political journalists in Britain, this exploratory study documents the changing strategies employed to directly reach and engage voters through social media and their implications for journalists' gatekeeping role in a democracy.

Literature Review: UK Politics and Social Media

The relationship between British politicians and the nation's press has long been combative, from members of the "Fourth Estate" holding executive power to account in the 1700s (Hampton, 2009) to more contemporary guidance for political reporters from a former Times deputy editor "Always ask yourself why these lying bastards are lying to you" (Heren, 1978, p26). However, as social media forms emerged in the 2000s and matured throughout the 2010s, British political actors realised they no longer needed to subject themselves to such hostility. They could curate their audiences and circumvent journalistic interventions that dilute, critique, and fact-check. Using social media, politicians could frame messages to their liking and leave journalists little option but to follow their lead in setting the terms of the debate.

Although Britain's major political parties have had an online presence offering limited interactivity since the 1990s (Bowers-Brown and Gunter, 2002), it was Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign and the digitally savvy political consultants who led it, several of whom subsequently decamped to the UK (Ross, 2015) – that opened their eyes to the possibilities of "Web 2.0". Contemporary campaigns are underpinned by data interpreted via sophisticated analytics, using organic advertising that relies on social media interactions alongside data-led paid advertising targeting specific demographics (Dommett, 2019). In the UK, David Cameron's 2015 re-election and the 2016 European referendum were among the first to use data effectively (Ross, 2015; Shipman, 2016; Worcester et al., 2015), and to use paid Facebook advertising to target persuadable voters.

Maintaining clarity in this environment is not easy. The top-down message discipline of the broadcast era is impossible in modern campaigning, where strategy is formulated in response to continually changing quantitative data (Chadwick and Stromer-Galley, 2016). Political communication in a social age is simultaneously more targeted, because of vastly increased data gathering, and more distributed, thanks to widened participation in political debate via social platforms (Stromer-Galley, 2014). As Chadwick (2013) has shown, digital technologies are embedded into the communication strategies of political actors,

disrupting both media and political practice. Jungherr (2016) similarly suggested four key areas of campaign activity that benefit from digital tools, including identifying optimal resource allocation and developing an effective online presence; both are evident in political activities identified in the present study.

Election campaigning on social media has attracted voluminous scholarly attention (see, among many others, Bruns et al., 2016; Persily and Tucker, 2020; Stier et al., 2018). To take just one example of direct relevance here, Bossetta's (2018) study of the 2016 US election showed how a platform's network structure, functionality, and algorithms affected political actors' strategy in using social platforms, including Facebook and Twitter (now rebranded X but still referenced as Twitter here for the sake of clarity). Around the world, scholars have explored social media's role in agenda-setting in a Swiss election (Gilardi et al., 2022), the connection between Facebook performance and electoral success in Hungary (Bene, 2018), Twitter use by India's prime minister in the run-up to electoral victory (Rao, 2020) and more. However, nailing down consistent or predictable effects has proved challenging (Dimitrova and Matthes, 2018).

In addition, a growing number of longitudinal studies have, like this one, sought to understand how the use of social platforms evolves over multiple campaigns in democracies, including Australia (Bruns and Moon, 2018), Denmark (Jensen and Schwartz, 2022), Sweden (Larsson and Moe, 2015), and the UK (Lilleker et al., 2016). The latter study, which traces activity to 2014, the year before the current work picks up, finds increasing experimentation and innovation but also uncertainty about interaction and the ability to manage it.

Recent work in the UK has sought to understand the emotional appeal of Facebook in driving political engagement and virality (Gerbaudo et al., 2019), particularly after the successful use of targeted Facebook advertising by the Conservatives in the 2015 general election and its effective deployment by and on behalf of Labour in 2017, helping fuel stronger-than-expected results for the opposition party (McLoughlin

and Southern, 2021). In the 2019 election, researchers identified coordinated attempts by political activists and supporters of both main parties to promote campaign messages (Nizzoli et al., 2019), with the Conservatives especially keen to engage voters on issues traditionally viewed as Labour Party strengths, such as health care (Power and Mason, 2023). Both parties also used Facebook image posts to attack their opponents (Famulari, 2021).

However, little work has been done to compare the three UK general election campaigns of the late 2010s, a gap this study seeks to address. This article explores the differing perspectives of two groups crucial to surfacing political information during election campaigns: party workers and their affiliates, and political journalists. Findings demonstrate a clear difference in approach between campaigners seeking to persuade voters to support them and journalists watching social media for news. The interview data suggest a more nuanced and sophisticated approach to digital campaigning has developed over recent campaigns than has been reflected in other single-platform studies.

Literature Review: Gatekeeping and Disintermediation

The concepts of disintermediation and reintermediation (Katz 1988; 2003) have had a long history in communications theory, relating to the moments when a new information provider bypasses an existing one. The idea of the disintermediation of political communications is conceptually straightforward: some political actors are highly active on social media, curating and speaking directly to their audiences, thus 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 politicians speak to an integrated digital public sphere is incorrect. Audiences are constructed, and while information may flow easily between highly engaged individuals, it may have to travel a considerable distance to reach the persuadable. A politician may have a large social media following, but not all those followers are fellow citizens – or even real people at all (Cole, 2018).

These and other novel challenges disrupt how political communication has worked for centuries, with

political actors needing news outlets to take up their messages and convey them to voters. That system had many benefits for journalists, not least making it easy to obtain stories. Their privileged access to politicians, spin doctors, and party workers provided a steady stream of sources. In the UK, the Lobby system of daily briefings delivered the official lines to take. The overtly aggressive approach championed by some editors notwithstanding, generations of complaisant Lobby hacks were happy to take the information they were fed and regurgitate it, even at the price of becoming instruments of government propaganda (Barnett and Gaber, 2001).

As early as 1999, however, Blumler and Kavanagh perceived that political communication had entered a new age of media abundance, with an opportunity to increase active citizenship and wrest control over political messages from the media. In the UK, as elsewhere, journalistic gatekeepers have increasingly found themselves side-lined by other actors. Early Web 2.0 tools such as blogs, followed by the explosion in social media, empowered those outside the Westminster Village to cover and critique political actions, policies, personalities – and journalists. The digital grassroots revolution equalised power relationships in a way unmatched by other forms of disintermediated communication, such as stump speeches or constituency meetings (Sánchez Medero, 2021).

Also in 1999, Chircu and Kauffman argued the growth of internet shopping could be analysed through a cycle of intermediation, disintermediation, and reintermediation phases. A traditional market might rely on intermediaries to sell a product, but these could be disrupted, forcing them to either change or leave the market altogether, enabling new entrants to assume the intermediary role. While Chircu and Kauffman (1999) analysed this model through the lens of electronic markets, this principle can also be considered in relation to political communication via social media. Legacy media gatekeepers who previously served as intermediaries with political audiences are now being sidestepped. Political actors, opinion leaders, and other influencers speak directly to audiences, which aligns with the two-step flow communications theory (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Katz, 1957). Importantly, changes to the disintermediation/reintermediation cycle also create changes in 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 (Dijck et al., 2018).

The design of platforms and the affordances they create are not neutral in this process. As this study suggests, political actors choose to engage and utilise platforms that afford the most impact with the audiences they want to reach - for example Facebook for persuadable voters or Twitter for hyper-engaged politics fans (Bossetta, 2018; Enli and Skogerbø, 2013). The platforms can act not only as mediation devices but also as gatekeepers through algorithmic effects or design decisions. For example, the current owner of Twitter, Elon Musk, decried the Lords and Peasants design of the previous Blue Tick accreditation system, arguing that it privileged the speech of a particular political class (Musk, 2022). The redesign of the system has now privileged a different group of users (Fishman et al., 2023).

Other studies have tracked changes to journalistic output in response to Facebook's algorithmic modifications, notably by increasing video content production (Tandoc and Maitra, 2017). This led to concerns that an external agent was influencing journalistic content. Cornia et al. (2018) also looked at the coping strategies of a dozen news publishers in six countries 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 risk, private sector legacy news organisations continued investing in Facebook distribution, which they saw as still generating audiences that furthered their editorial ambitions and commercial objectives. That said, 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).

By the period considered in this study, it was clear digital technologies had been fundamentally disruptive (Bennett and Pfetsch, 2018); while politician and journalist discourse may still take place on the front pages of newspapers, the discussion of policy increasingly takes place in atomised locations and disintermediated forms. Contemporary political activity is networked among candidates, supporters,

parties, and the media (Kreiss, 2010; Williamson, 2010).

These changes have also forced scholars to rethink the notion of journalists as political gatekeepers (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009; Vos and Heinderyckx, 2015). The idea of the journalist deciding what information passed through a metaphorical gate and into public consciousness dates to the mid-20th century (White, 1950), and the ongoing evolution of gatekeeping theory has encompassed the organisational nature of the activity (Barzilai-Nahon, 2009), the levels of influence on the journalistic gatekeeper (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009; Shoemaker and Reese, 2013), and the pressures created by newer and more participatory media forms (Bruns, 2005; Hermida, 2013). Some scholars suggest the entire role is being rendered redundant (Bro and Wallberg, 2014; Tandoc and Vos, 2016).

In short, social media have fundamentally changed the role of journalists in political campaigns and how political actors conceive of campaigning itself. Its use has become normalised: a general election campaign without a social media strategy is now unthinkable. To explore the integration of social media in the UK general elections of 2015, 2017, and 2019, this study addresses the following overarching research question: How did UK political actors use Facebook as a disintermediation tool for organic or viral campaigning during the 2015, 2017, and 2019 General Elections? It does so by considering three more focused RQs:

RQ1: What did British political actors see as social media's impact on UK campaigns in these three elections?

RQ2: How did the use of Facebook for political campaigning evolve over the three election periods?

RQ3: How did the disintermediating capabilities of social media affect the relationship between political campaigners and journalists over the three election periods?

Method

This exploratory study draws on semi-structured interviews with political campaigners and journalists covering the 2015, 2017, and 2019 UK general elections. These interviews shed light on the motivations,

strategies, and role conceptions of political strategists and journalists in an era of communication disintermediation. Semi-structured interviews provide more rigour than unstructured interviews but more flexibility for the researcher to pursue interesting responses (Wilson, 2014). They are so widely used that they have been described as “the central resource through which the social sciences – and society – engages with the issues that concern it” (Brinkman, 2020, p424).

Interviewees were identified using a purposive sampling technique that included background research, snowball sampling, and the recommendations of colleagues as people with expertise in the field. The 12 political interviewees had significant current or recent experience with UK digital campaigning at a national level for one of the two main British political parties, the Conservative Party and the Labour Party. The nine journalists had significant experience reporting on Westminster or leading newsgathering teams for national print, broadcast or digital outlets. All interviewees were provided with participant information and consent forms before their interviews. Four interviewees requested anonymity: one Labour and one Conservative party digital campaigner, one senior political producer for a national broadcaster, and one senior political correspondent for a digital publication.

Interviews lasted an average of 42 minutes, and most interviews were recorded using Zoom. Two interviews were conducted by phone, with quotes hand-written and interview transcripts created immediately after the call. Where there was recorded audio, Otter.ai was used to transcribe the interviews. Transcripts were read multiple times by the lead author and then coded thematically in line with grounded theory, which enables themes to emerge from the data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

Findings: The Impact of Social Media on UK Political Campaigns

All agreed social media has had a significant impact on political communication. All nine journalists interviewed felt they had to monitor social media to find stories and stay current with the day's debates. BBC Political Editor Chris Mason described it as “effectively, a news wire,” adding: “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.”

Several journalists highlighted practical ways their jobs had changed. For instance, obtaining reactive quotes has become easier; when something happens, sources respond online, eliminating the need for “ringing up half a dozen people to get their initial reaction,” Mason said. There are obvious dangers, however. “Journalists got stuck watching accounts,” said Sir Craig Oliver, a former Director of Communications at Number 10 Downing Street and senior BBC News executive. “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.” Another Conservative political strategist agreed journalists can fixate 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.”

Several journalists raised concerns about the temptation for journalists to repeat misinformation, or even disinformation, from social media. The Brexit referendum produced “all sorts of shit on social media. It was lying on an industrial scale,” said Oliver, adding that the Leave campaign knew that evoking an image of massive waves of new immigrants to the UK “was gold dust. It didn’t matter to them that it wasn’t true.” And the pace of social media leaves little time for verification. “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,” explained *Guardian* Media Editor Jim Waterson. “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.”

Many journalists highlighted the need to be engaged and engaging on social media, expressing an

underlying concern about the level of abuse that could result. “You will see a lot more calling out of journalists now from MPs for asking the wrong questions,” a senior political journalist for a digital publication said. “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.”

Nor is there necessarily any accountability for what is said on social media, journalists said. “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’,” said the Deputy CEO of BBC News, Jonathan Munro. “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.”

Interviews reflected a division between journalists and political actors regarding the platforms they considered important. Journalists, particularly older ones, thought Twitter was vital for their jobs; political campaigners rated Facebook more highly. “Covering politics at Westminster, Twitter is the main platform, both in terms of newsgathering and indeed as, bluntly, a brand builder,” the BBC’s Chris Mason said. But their younger, digital-native colleagues highlighted 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,” said Joey D’Urso, who covered the 2019 campaign activity on digital media for the BBC. “But they might then post it on Facebook, or they might know someone who sent it through WhatsApp. [Twitter] is the first point in a distribution network.”

British political campaigners were even less enamoured with Twitter and convinced that in the UK, it was a place mainly for Westminster gossip. One who worked on the Corbyn election campaigns described it as a tool useful if you wanted to “make headlines, insert yourself into the news agenda.” But “one million views on Twitter was not important. One million views on Facebook was exciting.” Facebook was seen as by far the better platform for communicating with, and ideally persuading, voters.

Giles Kenningham, now a political communications consultant and one-time head of communications for the Conservative Party, said that with half the UK population on Facebook, and spending considerable time there, “it’s a no-brainer.” He said those high levels of engagement could not be matched by Twitter, which he described as “much more an army of supporters with key messages, shaping, breaking stories, and using it for rapid rebuttal.” A political campaigner from the opposite end of the political spectrum agreed. Momentum’s head of digital during the 2019 campaign, Emil Charlaff, said that “the bubbles are more pronounced” on Twitter, adding: “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 the public.”

More broadly, political campaigners viewed social media as an essential weapon but not a magic bullet. They pointed to the importance of having a clear message on policy, a solid leadership vision, a good ground operation, and competent media performers among the top campaign team. The ability to convert “persuadable” swing voters to backers is crucial, Oliver said: “You need to work out how you get people to change their views.” Social media can actually be a distraction from these key goals, “a platform on which to say shocking things.”

Nonetheless, data delivered through social media use were seen as invaluable in enabling campaigners to identify potential supporters and establish a route to communicate with them. A digital strategist for the Conservatives gave an example from the 2015 campaign:

> *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.” … 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.*

A Labour strategist agreed that while strong content that “people spontaneously want to share because it’s good and they identify with it” was of greatest value, targeted advertising also mattered. Steve Howell, Labour’s deputy director of communications under Jeremy Corbyn, said: “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."

Findings: Evolution of Facebook Campaigning Over Time

Interviewees unanimously agreed that the use of social media, particularly Facebook, in election campaigning evolved through the three elections studied here. They extensively discussed the most recent campaign but had the benefit of longer-term hindsight about earlier contests.

There were several innovations in 2015. For instance, both parties extensively used videos, especially attack ads, for the first time. One Conservative strategist said message discipline was a crucial element in 2015, especially on the economy. "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." However, not everyone was convinced of the brilliance, given the Brexit results little more than a year later. As one doubter, Theresa May's former spokesman Joey Jones said:

> *I'm a little bit sceptical because I think all those people who 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.*

Success on Facebook patently did not equate to success at the ballot box, either, as Labour digital strategist Matthew McGregor pointed out. The party's digital team had "tremendous success in the space they were trying to have success in" in 2015, which was recruiting and mobilising supporters to share digital content, donate to the campaign, and volunteer. But their opponents were more successful where it counted: reaching "persuadable voters with persuasive content."

Perhaps most important was that the 2015 campaign – unlike the two that followed – provided plenty of time for digital campaigners to plan a strategy: roughly two years, one Conservative strategist said, "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."

That 2017 campaign took Labour in a new direction. Having fought two party leadership campaigns in two years, Jeremy Corbyn had learnt to use social media to get his messages across to supporters, adroitly circumventing the traditional Westminster Lobby, which he saw as hostile. Those techniques would now be applied to a general election campaign. Kate McCann, political editor of Times Radio, said Corbyn used social media "to great effect" in 2017. "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," she said.

Several journalists pointed to 2017 as a turning point in digital politics. Many factors come into play during an election, but it was undeniable that "social media sentiment was overwhelmingly pro-Labour," as the BBC's D'Urso put it. "There was a massive social media noise around Labour policies." The party did much better on Election Day than expected, albeit not well enough to command a majority in Parliament.

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 stop innovating in a fast-changing political environment. Several interviewees pointed to stagnation in Labour's approach to digital. They also suggested the Tories had been forced to innovate to address their shortcomings. In 2019, the Conservatives ran a campaign focusing on the virality of core messages – notably "Get Brexit Done" – and flattering comparisons of Johnson to Corbyn, capitalising on what one strategist described as "the very unique personality and charisma of Boris Johnson, who's just an asset."

Labour, in contrast, struggled to engage voters beyond its base. A Labour campaign strategist said the party made a mistake in going down "the microtargeting route completely," a mistake the Conservatives avoided. Politico's Senior UK correspondent Esther Webber agreed Labour was super-serving a small

proportion of the electorate, which failed to translate into impact on polling day. “It was very much about hammering home messages to people who were already on board with them,” she said, “not necessarily doing enough to reach beyond their own core metropolitan base.”

Former Corbyn aide Laura Parker agreed. “The organic sharing, which in 2017 had been really extraordinary, seemed to me to plateau,” she said. “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”.

Findings: From Gatekeeping to Disintermediation

Findings so far have shown that Britain’s main political parties gained sophistication in using Facebook to communicate with potential voters throughout the 2015, 2017, and 2019 general election campaigns. Interviews suggest political actors were aware this evolution represented a fundamental challenge, and likely an irrevocable change, to journalists’ gatekeeping role. In basic terms, “it allows them to bypass us in a way that they don't really need us anymore,” as one senior digital journalist put it. “Politicians don't need us as much to access the public, so they're less likely to give us access to them.”

With political journalists already treating social media as “an official primary source” for newsgathering, political communicators quickly realised that it also was a direct communications tool “with the outside world,” as the BBC’s Mason said. “You can bung it out directly yourself. In that sense, you can cut out the middleman.” Other interviewees highlighted the declining power of political journalists to control the flow of information, acknowledging social media accounts with substantial followers could force stories onto the agenda, and political journalists would then follow the lead of sources they might not previously have considered. Mason put it this way:

> *Does that mean 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 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.*

Another broadcaster, Times Radio's McCann, declared there is "still a huge demand for vetting," though admitted the value of impartial political journalism had risen at precisely the time that many citizens were losing trust in broadcasters' impartiality, as mandated by Ofcom (2021). The BBC's Jonathan Munro agreed: "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."

Some political strategists agreed the Westminster Lobby of political reporters remained "really influential" – and therefore remained needed. As one Labour strategist put it:

> *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 … 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.*

However, although other political strategists also highlighted the changing relationship between campaigners and the press, they placed greater emphasis on the benefits of disintermediation. Former No. 10 communications director Sir Craig Oliver admitted that speaking directly to voters was a key driver of their approach to social media from the start, ultimately convincing his boss David Cameron – who saw social media as "a playground for narcissists" and liked to say that "too many tweets make a twat" – of the benefits of going "above and beyond the journalists [to] deliver your message unmediated."

Political campaigners also enjoyed the ability all social platforms gave them to retain control of their message, sidestepping media gatekeepers, particularly in the overtly ideological British press. Most newspapers "want to reassure their readers that their worldview is correct," said Oliver. "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."

Interviewees pointed to the importance of using video on social media to address supporters directly.

Appearances on legacy broadcast news shows could be edited and turned into social media clips and then assessed for effectiveness through analytics. “Whenever we put out a video, we know within the first 10 minutes if it's going to do well, based on the shares per minute,” said Paul Nicholson, head of content at the campaign group Momentum. “If it's 10, we're happy. Five or lower, it’s a failure. Twenty, it's a success”. But there’s a catch, as Tom Baldwin, who served as Labour’s Director of Communications under Ed Miliband, warned, “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”.

Other strategists warned of additional downsides to the ability to communicate directly with voters. A Labour respondent pointed to the danger of reaching only existing supporters: “We ended up talking to [party] members when we should have been talking to the country,” they said. The rapid pace of social media and the need to maintain a continuous narrative – often with stories that have little impact on voters’ lives – also were problems. “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,” said Oliver. “The increased speed means nuance and argument are lost. Where do people get the time to stop and reflect?”

Journalists were even more articulate about the downsides of disintermediation. Times Radio’s McCann suggested political campaigners use video on social media as a deliberate strategy 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:

> *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.*

Journalists also cited the problems inherent in this lack of accountability by political actors. “You can completely make stuff up, and you can reach your followers directly without … anyone having to fact-check it,” one digital political correspondent said. The BBC’s Mason returned to the potential for even small political players to influence debates through social media:

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.

Discussion

The quotes above encapsulate the lessons about using social media in political discourse and its impact on political journalism and political campaigning, that leading British political communications strategists and journalists took away from the three general election campaigns.

Despite the widespread use of social media, journalists and campaigners remained conflicted about its effectiveness in persuading voters or attracting audiences, underscoring the need for our research. The interviewees all pointed to the need for activity, yet there was widespread uncertainty about its benefits. Both sets of interviewees pointed to concerns about gossip, triviality, and abuse. Yet those concerns were set aside and resources, including time and money, were devoted to building audiences on digital platforms. Interviewees demonstrated activity aligned with previous literature, including Chadwick's hybrid model, yet there was widespread concern about whether there was consistent value gained from platform speech.

Some topics generated different perspectives, while others yielded a surprising agreement between parties, journalists, and communications strategists. For example, all felt engaging on social media was vital. However, they differed over which platform to prioritise; journalists rated Twitter highly, while political campaigners focused on Facebook. Their preferences reflect their goals: political campaigners want to reach persuadable voters and appreciate the reach of Facebook, but journalists are more interested in content sourcing and distribution. Over time, both parties became more sophisticated in using Facebook for their purposes, though various interviewees suggested that Labour, in particular, did not put the lessons learned to optimal use.

Not surprisingly, campaigners and journalists also disagreed about the effects of disintermediation. Journalists were particularly attuned to the dangers, particularly the avoidance of fact-checking and scrutiny of political messages—including viral ones with the potential to reach many people very fast—during a campaign.

On the other hand, 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. Yet they also expressed, sincerely or not, regret that journalism had, as one communications specialist put it, "lost its way." Although it didn't stop them from trying to manipulate and bypass journalists, they seemed almost disappointed at how well they succeeded.

The journalists in this study, for their part, mostly continued to cling to the perhaps increasingly illusory belief that they serve an important 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 didn't 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.

Our study suggests that although campaigners believe social media platforms have a somewhat limited value – with audiences made up primarily of supporters rather than freshly persuadable voters – they

appreciate the benefits of these platforms as strikingly effective tools for disintermediation. At a conceptual level, then, this study offers evidence of a cycle of reintermediation, with social media influencers replacing the media in the two-step flow communications model. Findings indicate that these influencers are enabling political actors to control the framing of stories by creating an information flow that bypasses political reporters altogether. Their use of social media to communicate directly with voters thus further erodes the gatekeeping power of journalists, who in effect feel forced to cover whatever is trending. Both the topic and the frame have been set on social media, leaving the disintermediated political journalists to follow others' lead.

This study, of course, has many limitations. Although the Conservatives' on-the-ground strategy in 2019, in particular, was to meet with local journalists on trips outside London, only national-level journalists were interviewed here. Nor were communications strategists from the smaller parties included; follow-up work, including of the 2024 general election, should encompass the social media activities of parties that typically struggle to be heard in the mainstream media, such as the Greens and the Liberal Democrats, alongside those that have successfully used social media to force their way onto the agenda, such as The Brexit Party and its successor, Reform UK.

Nonetheless, this exploratory study provides unique longitudinal insight into the evolution of social media strategies by political actors in the UK, part of an increasingly disintermediated communications environment in which even experienced and savvy journalists struggle to enact their watchdog role or even see how they might effectively do so. The explosion in the use of AI technologies since the 2019 election studied here will make the challenges they face even more difficult, and the "lying bastards" and their lies even harder to identify.

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