Elite Tweets: Analysing the Twitter Communication Patterns of Labour Party Peers in the House of Lords

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Abstract

The micro-blogging platform Twitter has gained notoriety for its status as both a communication channel between private individuals, and as a public forum monitored by journalists, the public, and the state. Its potential application for political communication has not gone unnoticed; politicians have used Twitter to attract voters, interact with constituencies and advance issue-based campaigns. This article reports on the preliminary results of the research team's work with 21 peers sitting on the Labour frontbench. It is based on the monitoring and archival of the peers' activity on Twitter for a period of 100 days from 16th May to 28th September 2012. Using a sample of more than 4,363 tweets and a mixed methodology combining semantic analysis, social network analysis and quantitative analysis, this paper explores the peers' patterns of usage and communication on Twitter. Key findings are that as a tweeting community their behavior is consistent with others, however there is evidence that a coherent strategy is lacking. Labour peers tend to work in ego networks of self-interest as opposed to working together to promote party policy.

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Introduction

Political communication scholarship has devoted considerable attention to the impact of participatory web platforms on the practice of politics. Perhaps the most significant are social tools, known as social networking sites (SNS), which "enable individuals to construct a member profile, connect to known and potential friends, and view other members' connections… enabl[ing] multiple and overlapping connections between varieties of distinct social spheres" (Papachrissi, 2011: 304-5). SNS, to a greater extent than other forms of mass media accentuate the potential for the individual to manage their sociality while strategically constructing a public identity (Goffman, 1959; de Certeau, 1984). These developments are suggested to lead to a blurring of boundaries between professional and personal, both in terms of information and content that is made public as well as interaction across different spheres of an individual's life.

The use of the Twitter social network has accelerated exponentially and is argued to have a global significance due to its reach and ease of use for almost any communicational purpose. Twitter replicates the Short Message Service (SMS) feature popularized by mobile phone users. However, rather than privately sending a short private message to one or a small number of other users, Twitter enables anyone to message a global audience. While it would be ridiculous to claim anyone's message will be read by everyone, the potential exists for reaching a wide audience with a single tweet if an individual is well-connected. Connections are formed through following or being followed by other Twitter users who can read, respond to and share the tweets of those they follow; though many Twitter users' tweets are publicly readable. Twitter usage has evolved from simply offering a means for an individual to deliver a 140 character statement to their followers, and the evolution of Twitter is due to innovations developed by its user community. By using the '@' sign a message can be public as well as directed at another user by following the '@' with a username (@DrDGL for example). The use of hashtags '#' was also added to permit related messages to be collected together and be easily found using the Twitter search engine, many academic conferences now use hashtags such as #ICA2013 to build a buzz around the physical event; equally tweets around television programmes (Strictly Come Dancing is #scd) or events of social and political significance (#Leveson for example) are collected using a hashtag popularized only through common usage. Twitter has also evolved from a personal communication tool. It is now a means by which many elite actors or business providers promote themselves, brands promote new products or special offers, campaigners build support, even bus companies providing travel information tweet alongside citizens sharing their thoughts and interesting links. Twitter is thus seen as having the potential as an agenda-setting tool for a range of commercial, social and political organisations.

The major benefit of Web 2.0 platforms is that they are networked: elite actors increasingly use social media to build a social network among which they can

share content and gain influence. Social networks can accelerate dissemination of content due to the general network effect (Hendler and Golbeck, 2008). In the case of Twitter, the popular re-tweet function enabling any individual to disseminate another's message to their followers, specifically facilitates accelerated dissemination. However, offline status and influence does not naturally confer upon an individual wide online reach. Hindman (2009) argues that the top ten bloggers in the USA are also offline agenda setters, however he does not note how many offline agenda setters failed to make an impact through the use of weblogs or other social tools. In recent years we have also noted the rise of pure online players, such as the Huffington Post, or at the UK level Guido Fawkes, both of whom established a reputation online first. Therefore the extent to which elite figures can build a network to extend their reach is an interesting question. The composition of a network is crucial for truly accelerated dissemination, in particular reaching influential individuals. Politicians, in particular, use social media to gain traction for their messages within traditional media reports; this is because social media have become a popular means for monitoring politicians (An et al, 2011; Erickson & Lilleker, 2012). If the politician's online activities are interesting enough to newspaper, television, or radio journalists they might redistribute messages online using their respective platforms, paraphrase them or use them as a general source (Vergeer et al, 2011). Some argue the agenda setting potential is in process of being realized, suggesting "news no longer breaks, it tweets" (Solis 2010).

The often discussed potential of Twitter is predicated on the notion of Twitter users being newsworthy. However, in a political context, research suggests Twitter tends to build upon mediated events; Twitter users comment on leader debates, for example, so providing personal reflections as opposed to original information (Bruns, 2010; Larsson & Moe, 2011). Furthermore, many argue that Twitter acts as an echo chamber, accelerating ideas from a single user or group out through retweeting (An et al, 2011). There is therefore some debate whether Twitter acts an agenda setting device and an application for advancing issue-based campaigns or whether certain elite figures are able to set the agenda and Twitter is one means for them reaching out to news organizations (Morozov, 2011). Research is divided over this. Grant et al argue that "Twitter is becoming, ever more, the political space in Australia in which ideas, issues and policies are first announced, discussed, debated and framed" (Grant et al, 2010: 599). In Germany, Twitter was used as a tool for informing supporters as well as journalists, defining the messages for the day and setting the agenda of a campaign (Jungherr, 2009). Yet, elsewhere Twitter appears to be a forum for sharing insights about news as opposed to making news (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011).

Research also tends to show that Twitter is less often used for maintaining social contacts and connecting to friends, rather it appears to be the broadcasting and sharing information functions that are most exploited (Verweij, 2011: 682), particularly among elite actors who seek to make news. Usage among political candidates or elected representatives highlights that a mixture of partisan campaigning, personal promotion and anecdote is appropriate (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011). The impacts for politicians are also a matter for discussion. One

issue is that politicians appear to operate within ideologically homogenous or partisan networks (Adamic & Glance, 2005), reflecting concerns about the emergence of online cyberghettoes (Sunstein, 2007). However, this is not the case when looking at the agenda setting potential of Twitter. Verweij (2011: 690) argues that journalists and political actors inhabit the same Twitter networks in order to find news or make or spread news. Broader questions are asked regarding the impact on public engagement and empowerment (Graham, 2013) or what Twitter can tell us about political engagement and voting behavior. Some claim that tweets' sentiment, positive and negative emotions associated with a politician expressed through tweets, corresponds closely to voters' political preferences (Tumasjan et al, 2011), though the methodology underpinning these findings was strongly contested (Jungherr et al, 2010).

This article focuses on the question of elite groups' use of Twitter, their adaption and adaptation to this communication tool, and the extent that we can detect strategic and co-ordinated use within a group of homogenous and partisan political actors. Our case study involved the Labour party front bench of the House of Lords, twenty-one of whom were using Twitter alongside their political role. The House of Lords is Britain's upper chamber, members are largely appointed by the Queen on recommendations from the party leaders of the day, however once appointed they remain in the chamber for life. Although they work along party lines there are a number of crossbenchers as well as the Lords Spiritual, senior bishops who eschew party lines. The Lords are unable to make or block policy entirely, they act as scrutinizers who debate and recommend amendments to legislation put forward by the lower house, the House of Commons. However the Lords as a chamber tend to be seen as an anachronism and so tend to be marginalized from the mainstream news agenda. The Labour front benchers are actively attempting to counter this notion. Through a proactive media management strategy, utilizing a weblog (www.labourlords.org.uk), aggregated Labour Lords Twitter feed (@LabourLordsUK), as well as contacts with journalists and attention capturing activities, the Labour Lords seek to extend the critical message of the Labour party on the programme of the coalition government. It is within this context that we investigate the extent that these political actors are using Twitter as a strategic tool, while also reflecting on the conditions that may make Twitter effective for a seldom-studied but important group of political actors.

Methods and Data

The researchers identified 21 individual Labour Party Lords with Twitter accounts as candidates for the study. The accounts were tracked from 20th June to 28th September 2012 using an online data-collection service (http://ifttt.com), which collected all tweets send by the sample and stored them in text format. The data comprised some 4,363 tweets sent by the 22 individuals over the two and a half month study period. Variables recorded included the Twitter ID of the sender of the tweet, the time and date, the content of the message, and any recipients, links or communicative functionality used in the message.

The raw twitter data were subjected to an additional level of analysis. A content analysis survey instrument was constructed in SNAP, and a team of research assistants from Bournemouth University were employed to record additional qualtitative information about each tweet. The researchers recorded the presence of functionality (@ mentions and #hashtags) as well as the target of those functions. Message content was coded according to its purpose (political, personal,) and the scale of the issue under discussion (local, national, regional or international). Any hyperlinks embedded in tweets were noted and analysed according to the target of the link (personal page, political resource, journalistic resource). The researchers also made a determination about the formality of the tone of the message, using a Likert-style scale to rate Tweets according to the care used in sentence construction, grammar and other formal rules of language. All 4,363 cases, along with the variables added by the human research assistants, were exported to SPSS for further analysis. There were numerous inter-coder reliability checks made during the course of the project, these produced a cumulative Krippendorfs alpha of .824 which is very high for a team of coders.

Social network graphs were produced from the data to reveal communicative networks in the twitter behaviour of the sample. The team created Node and Edge tables using the presence of @ mention links between Lords in the study group. For example, if Lady Basildon sent a tweet mentioning Steve Bassam (SteveTheQuip), that relationship would be registered as an out-degree link from Lady Basildon and an in-degree link to Steve Bassam. The team created separate Node and Edge tables to reflect other relationships, for example between members of the study sample and journalists, and between members of the sample and popular hashtags. If two Lords used the same hashtag when tweeting, this would show up as two in-degree links to that hashtag. Our analyses of journalistic targets and hashtags are one-way only. Node and Edge tables were imported into network visualization software Gephi and used to create network graphs. The network of tweeting Labour Lords was subject to further analysis of network density, clustering and average path length, to assess the coherency of the network when communicating with outside audiences (journalists and other twitter users).

We also compared the discourse within the Lords' tweets around two issues, collected around hashtags, to the official statements by party ministers posted to the main party website. In order to compare word use we ran the text of the statement and the tweets through Wordle, this creates a map of the popular words used. We then extracted the key terms pertaining to the issue (excluding from the tweet data Twitter names, hashtags, hyperlinks and other extraneous text). This allowed us to ascertain whether the Labour Lords acted as a mouthpiece for the party or developed and independent and distinct line on policy.

Overall findings
The overall distribution of tweets by user is shown in figure 1. We observe a high degree of skewness in the volume of twitter activity across the sample of Lords members, with the most active 4 users accounting for 73% of all activity

recorded during the study period and one user, Steve Bassam, accounting for 49% of all tweets. The presence of natural breaks in the data suggest at least three groups according to intensity of twitter usage. One group at the tail end of the graph tweeted less than 30 times over the period under study. A second intermediate group tweeted from 40 to 150 times over the course of the study, while a final group of heavy users tweeted over 200 times. The mean for the Lords sample is 1.98 tweets per day, which compares closely with other studies that found a mean twitter usage for all active users across the platform of 1.85 posts per day (Bennett, 2012)[1]. The overall distribution of tweets is consistent with other studies of internet communication patterns that describe a 'long tail' of moderate- to low-intensity contributors with a small group of super-users at the head (Mayfield, 2006; Hindman, 2009).

Figure 1 about here please

We found that on the whole, the Labour Lords tweeted on a range of topics, both public and personal, as shown in figure 2. More than 65% of the tweets recorded in the analysis pertained to political issues, suggesting that the Lords are using twitter primarily to communicate about politics. General political issues (not specifically related to Lords or Labour Party campaigns) comprised 20.1% of the sample. A further 45.6% of the sample consisted of party political messages, either promoting Labour policy or attacking the coalition. Family and personal life was the next most frequently tweeted topic (10.5%) followed by non-political general interest messages (10.1%) and sports related content (5.6%). Charity activity accounted for 1.2% of tweets in the sample. An additional 6.8% of tweets in the sample could not be categorized due to lack of context and were recorded as unknown/other: for example replies such as '@DrDGL yes'. The data reveal that the overall distribution of topics varies across the sample, with variations in the frequency that Lords tweet about certain topics. It is somewhat surprising that political messages made up the bulk of the content posted to twitter. Other studies suggest that for the overall twitter userbase, politics is less frequently discussed. This data suggest that our sample is somewhat unique in its tactical use of twitter to blend professional and personal issues, specifically using it as a platform to advance political arguments and ideas. The extent to which the Labour Lords' use of twitter reflects strategic coordinated action is discussed in the next section.

Figure 2 about here please

The researchers wished to further test whether Lords tweeted about different topics at different times in the day, perhaps reflecting a distinction between 'work' tweets and 'personal' tweets. The time (GMT) that each tweet was sent was extracted and used to construct the graph shown in figure 3. Colored bars represent the subject of the tweet, while the height of bars represents the average daily volume for that time of day. Peak activity occurs from between 9am and 11am, with consistent levels of activity from midday until 10pm, before activity drops over night. While tweet volume varies throughout the day, the

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[1] http://www.mediabistro.com/alltwitter/how-often-do-i-tweet_b19170

proportion of tweets focused on political and personal topics remains consistent. It appears that the Lords maintain an overwhelming focus on political themes at all times of day, even if the overall intensity of activity varies.

Figure 3 about here please

Analysis and Discussion

Twitter as a strategic tool for political communication
We have established that the peers of the Labour frontbench use twitter to discuss personal and political issues, but that they do so with varying levels of intensity: some tweeted less than once per day during the observation period, while others tweeted many times per day. However this type of power-law distribution is common in online social networks: as a group, the Labour Lords tweet at a similar rate to the overall twitter userbase. On the other hand, the subject of Labour Lords' tweets is disproportionately skewed towards politics when compared with average users. If the Lords are using twitter to discuss politics, to what extent are they strategic in their use of the platform to advance their collective political agenda? Our analysis focuses on three possible communicative objectives to examine the strategic use of the Twitter tool among the frontbench Labour Lords. Firstly, we discuss mediatization and suggest that in order to be effective, Lords' Twitter usage cannot simply consist of broadcasting partisan messages, but must also conform to the social norms of the platform. Secondly, we discuss the network effect and the extent that this facilitates influencing the public and political agenda. Thirdly, we outline the importance of coherent framing of messages and how communication hubs might function to increase visibility and reach. Prior to exploring our data we conceptualize each of these notions in turn, drawing on recent academic literature.

Twitter Strategies and Personalised communication
If Twitter is becoming part of political communication strategy, one would expect usage to conform to the theoretical principles of mediatization. Mediatization describes the way that political communication has adjusted to the norms of media (Swanson & Mancini, 1991), in particular television but this can also be applied to social media (Lilleker & Jackson, 2011). This perspective on mediated politics considers how the affordances of particular media might shape the communication patterns of political speech. Twitter is an important platform for the dissemination of news and information, and in that way has been found to serve the needs of journalists (Davis, 2010). Following authoritative sources on Twitter provides journalists the opportunity to capture 'scoops' and because the 140 character limit ensures brevity and enables quoting or paraphrasing, sources can often provide a quotable 'soundbite' to accompany a story (Vergeer et al, 2011). Equally, through hyperlinks, a Twitter user can deliver a short message as well as link to a more developed article, their own post on a weblog, a speech or a similar artifact from another individual or organization they support. Politicians, for example, might use Twitter in this manner to promote official communication from their own party (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011). Conforming to the methods for promoting any statement, for example by

delivering a short, pithy 'soundbite' or linking to a more developed press release is one way in which Twitter can be employed to aid news management.

However, social media tools are not just simply news management tools, even if gaining attention from journalists is a key objective for usage. Strategic usage of Twitter may require conforming to the observed behavioral rules of the Twitter community. Retweeting, using hashtags and being responsive to other users' messages are the established norms for the platform. These are conventions that necessitate a more interactive strategy than many politicians are often comfortable with (Stromer-Galley, 2000; Larsson & Moe, 2011; Erickson & Lilleker, 2012). Aside from conventions in usage, there are also conventions in content; arguably although Twitter facilitates broadcasting it is not the right way to gather followers and become embedded within a network. It is argued that "users are able to develop a news service far more personalised than possible with any mainstream media diet" (Grant et al, 2010: 597), and therefore will choose news sources that are relevant as well as interesting. From an e-representation perspective it appears a combination of personal, locally-focused politics and service-oriented tweets appear to be of interest and earn the user a larger following (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011).

For many elected politicians, particularly in the UK and US, where there is a strong link to a geographic area, promoting their work in the legislature that links to the region they represent is unproblematic. Maintaining a balance between the professional and the personal is more difficult. Several scholars have remarked on the blurring between professional and personal identities in electronically mediated environments (Andrejevic, 2004; Lüders, 2008; Papacharissi, 2009). It is argued that there is a potential impact on the network position and influence of an individual from balancing the personal and private, in particular offering personal views on a range of political and social events that can stimulate interest within the Twitter community as well as among journalists and other influential newsmakers, such as bloggers. These arguments suggest a connection between user behavior and their reach into the online network.

It is argued within many of the reports on the strategic use of Twitter that the individual user can build the community they want, by strategically following others in the expectation they will follow them back. This is not strictly true. Reciprocal following is not a given, and it is difficult to ensure one is followed by the right 'influentials'. Collecting a large number of followers functions as a form of social capital on Twitter as a numerical score of one's importance, popularity or influence. Following and interacting with key individuals is also suggested to be one way for creating an identity. One can observe the flow of social capital among elite networks of well-known personalities through "public displays of connection" (boyd & Heer, 2006: 73). Mentions, possibly as a retweet, but also other forms of directed messages, prefaced by the @ symbol and an individual's user name, is a marker of a tie between users (Gilpin, 2011: 234). Gilpin moves on to argue that identity is constructed "through a combination of associative patterns and communication content" (Gilpin, 2011: 238).

We can observe the extent to which mediatization effects the way that the Lords in our study sample communicate on twitter by evaluating their usage of specific Twitter functions (@ mentions, hashtags, and hyperlinks). Table 1 below shows how the Labour Lords made use of that functionality when discussing specific topics. Mentions were used by the study sample in 63.1% of all tweets, with hashtags (16.6%) and hyperlinks (14.8%) less frequently used.

Table 1 about here please

Depending on the topic under discussion, the Lords used each of the communication functions with differing levels of regularity. The presence of @ mentions was higher than average when discussing family or personal life, suggesting that Lords were communicating directly with family and friends on the Twitter platform. Hyperlinks and hashtags were used less frequently than average for personal tweets. The high degree of @ mention tweets in the uncategorized 'other' category is consistent with them being simply replies to other Twitter users that were unclassifiable. Consequently, these messages likely relate to communication with friends and family of the sender.

When the Lords discussed general interest topics, news and politics, the use of hyperlinks was increased, suggesting that the Lords saw its function to direct readers to more information about a topic from an external source. Hashtags, which connect a tweet thematically to other tweets by way of a short one-word message preceded by the # symbol, were most frequently used when discussing sports and charity topics, possibly as a means to connect with wider communities of interest (fans of a particular team or supporters of a particular social cause).

Interestingly, when discussing Lords politics, the usage of all three functionalities is lower than average. It appears that compared to other topics, Lords' political issues are not as readily suitable to take advantage of these additional features of communication offered by Twitter. The use of @ mentions may be lower when discussing Lords' politics than other topic areas because the Lords have less individuals to target with the messages. They may tweet to one another about party messages, but this circle may not extend widely or they may lack awareness of individuals who would be interested in a specific party message. The under-use of hashtags is surprising – we would expect that hashtag usage for party political messages would mirror that of non-party general interest news stories. Surely the Labour Lords would wish to make use of hashtags to rally constituents around particular issues or campaigns. And finally, the low usage of hyperlinks to enrich party messages is unusual, considering the expected strategic objective of channeling audiences back to official party messages or resources. In summary, we find that mediatization is observed for all types of messages that Lords post on Twitter with the exception of Party messages, indicating potential lack of strategic fit between specific Twitter functionality and the usage by Lords of the tool as a party platform.

Twitter Networks and agenda setting

It is suggested that Twitter, like all social media tools, is about community formation (Java et al, 2011). Networked media, such as Twitter, (Ito, 2008) lead to networked publics (boyd, 2011) who then shape the architecture of information flows. This argument links to a broader strand of research on networked society within digital environments which suggests that while individuals shape content they also adjust their behavior to suit the network (Mitchell, 1995) in order to build a following. Building a following can be based purely on developing content that is interesting to an intended audience, or by strategically following similar users in the hope they will respond in kind. A Twitter following can be visualized as a network with various degrees. The first degree would be direct followers, the second degree followers of followers and so on; the logic being that if any individual's followers retweet their tweet the reach will be extended out through the network. The so-called network effect relies on the prevailing interactive tendencies common among the users of social tools (Anderson, 2007). The networking function of Twitter facilitates making connections with allies, building a support network that aid in the counteraction of opposition forces and enables reaching out to other mediators: setting the agenda through uptake of messages by traditional media journalists and bloggers.

Developing a following, however, is often reliant on offline status. Twitter serves as a new outlet for speakers already belonging to an elite, or at least affiliated with prominent positions in mainstream media or political life in general (Larsson & Moe, 2011). It is likely that the followers of any political figure mirror the network of supporters that exist also in the offline environment in terms of reinforcing their arguments and extending their reach through retweets and hashtag use. Within online environments these can appear as small world networks, a group of individuals that function closely together, within a network that is closed to outsiders and that propagate ideas that do not correspond with those who are central to a broader network (Watts & Strogatz, 1998). Politicians may generally exist in small world networks. Analysis of Twitter use by members of the German Reichstag shows that the network of politically vocal twitter users consists of users who for the most part communicate with only a relatively limited number of users. Evidence suggests politicians tend to operate in close proximity to one another and work in networks that are self-referential. These networks act as both gate-openers (extending reach) but also gatekeepers (limiting access) to wider networks (see for discussion Jurgens et al, 2010).

The fact that research on politician's use of Twitter shows they exist within tight-knit networks where "a very small number of highly interconnected users" operate (Jurgens & Jungherr, 2011) is unsurprising as this would replicate their offline communication patterns. However, the problem with small world, or closed, networks is that they have limited ability to reach beyond that community. Studies have shown that many social networks are populated with groups that can be described as publics: groups of individuals who share a collective identity, common interests and goals (Livingstone, 2005). The formation of publics can be strategic or accidental, dependent upon the purpose and means of formation. In addition, social media contains a number of elite networks which operate as "a form of colloquy, an ongoing discussion of

interested professionals who congregate to discuss specific topics of interest and collectively negotiate definitions, applications, norms, and professional identities" (Gilpin, 2011: 245). Elite networks can be closed or open, although the intention is to share thinking with a wider network through their contacts. Politicians who join Twitter and become active users can form small-world networks, link into wider publics or form elite-networks; each suggests a focus on developing different relationships with a range of other users in order to influence the agenda of the public sphere.

Twitter users voluntarily enter what Andrejevic (2006) referred to as the digital enclosure, or "the process whereby activities and transactions formerly carried out beyond the monitoring capacity of the Internet are enfolded into its virtual space" (p. 35). His argument captures the dangers of the use of tools such as Twitter, where the activities of elite actors may be constantly monitored by opponents (or journalists) waiting for anything that will represent a departure from expected norms of behavior. Given that appearing to deviate from the party line is a cardinal sin in politics, it is unsurprising that research has shown that in the case of electoral candidates, their networks are largely disconnected and maybe even ideologically homophilous (McPherson et al., 2001).

Yet, a core aim for using Twitter is to not only be able to 'have voice' but also be heard, linking to the notion of social media as empowering. Huberman et al (2009) talk of the "hidden social network", the one that matters when trying to rely on word of mouth to spread an idea, a belief, or a trend. The influential members that constitute the hidden social network enable a group of actors to use a tool such as Twitter to replicate word of mouth in extending their reach. The network any individual is embedded within is key to gaining reach beyond the individual's network (Wasserman and Faust, 1994). Politicians may thus attempt to form or link with existing ego networks that offer connections to important network positions (Verweij, 2011: 690). In theory networked communities are non-hierarchical (Parks, 2011), yet given the extant hierarchies in society, and in politics, we hypothesize that this may not be the case and clear hierarchies may emerge contingent on real-world status. Alternatively, status within a network may be conferred upon an individual due to their behavior within the virtual community. Research suggests that social networking can enhance social capital (Ellison et al, 2011), we ask if it can also enhance the agenda setting capacity and so political capital of elite individuals who may be marginalized by the mainstream media and what network analysis can tell us about the position of individuals within virtual communities.

How expansive and coherent is the Lords' social network as expressed on Twitter, and how well do the Lords coordinate their activities on the social networking platform? We were able to visualise one part of the Labour Lords' Twitter network by counting the number of times members in the sample used the @ functionality to message another member of the group (figure 4). This network graph is incomplete because it shows only the connections between members of the House of Lords included in our study sample. Each Lord in the sample may have additional connections outside of the study group. However, given that our sample consists of 21 active Twitter-using Lords from the same

political party, a strong degree of interconnectedness is expected within the sample.

Figure 4 about here please

We find that interconnectedness with other Lords and centrality in the network is not dependent on pre-existing influence or size of following on twitter. In figure 4 we define network centrality as number of in-degree links pointing to a given member from the rest of the peer group. If being mentioned by other members of the peer group is a measure of influence, then members with a larger number of incoming messages could be considered the most influential. In-degree links are represented by the size and shade of the node labels. The four users with the highest in-degree connections are @LordPhilofBrum, @LabourRoyall, @Stevethequip and @StewartWood. Reciprocity in the network is low; @Ladybasildon is the second most prolific tweeter and the originator of the most @mentions to other members of the sample, but she has a low number of in-degree links. A number of Lords in the sample are not connected to the rest of the members at all; these are represented in light gray on the left side of the graph. Based on the low degree of reciprocity and the relatively low network density of the Labour Lords sample, we can conclude that based on the criteria of @ mention linkages, the network exhibits a low degree of coherency, indicating a lower capacity for strategically organized action.

How does the sample interact with other political actors beyond the immediate group of Labour peers? We further analysed the network, building from the assumption that @ mentions constitute an indication of a link between twitter users. Figure 5 shows the extended @ mentions from individuals in the sample to external media sources. We identify five distinct types of media actors contacted on Twitter by members of our sample: (1) traditional newspapers, (2) blogs, (3) individual journalists, (4) broadcasters, (5) Think-tanks and media research organizations, (6) labour party media platforms and (7) influential public figures and celebrities.

Figure 5 about here please

The Labour peers in the sample most frequently reached out to traditional newspapers and their own Labour Party news organs when directing @ mentions towards the media. More than half of the sample (14) of individual peers sent at least two messages to a newspaper, tending to converge on either the Guardian and the Telegraph. A similar number of Lords (11) sent two or more messages directed at a Labour Party news platform. A number of peers were also strategic in their communications, sending messages targeted at specific journalists (such as Vicky Beeching), bloggers (such as Guido Fawkes) and broadcast news programs such as BBC Newsnight. The majority of media mentions came from those members of the study sample that were already interconnected. The unconnected peers to the left of the graph sent few targeted messages to media platforms, suggesting their disengagement from the process of attempting to advance campaign issues through the traditional media via the twitter platform.

In addition to media mentions, hashtags are a more direct way of advancing an idea or topic on the Twitter platform. By appending the # symbol followed by a one-word message to a tweet, users can signal that their message is part of a widely shared discussion on that topic. If enough users of Twitter coordinate and converge around the same hashtag, that issue can become a 'trending' topic that will appear in a ranked list of other popular topics. Pareto principle and rich-get-richer dynamics generally lead to a vastly expanded audience for that topic, making the coordinated use of hashtags an important goal for campaigners and social groups.

In order to visualize the Labour Lords' use of hashtags, we employed the same methodology as above: we selected those hashtags used twice or more by members of our sample group, and counted each 'use' as a link between that individual and the hashtag. Although this differs from the above social network graphs because hashtags are abstract concepts rather than individual targets, we can conceive of each hashtag as a distinct 'node' in a network of other users. We are looking for evidence of shared use of hashtags among the Twitter sample, indicating network connectivity around a specific campaign or activity.

Figure 6 shows the results of a social network visualization of hashtag use by our study sample. The size and shade of node labels indicates the quantity of in-degree links. We observe a wide variety of hashtag topics, organized around three primary strategic uses: (1) advancing specific Party slogans or ideas, such as the anti-Legal Aid Reform campaign using #LASPO; (2) commenting on news stories of wider national and international interest, for example via the #leveson and #olympics hashtags; and (3) drawing attention to a charity of interest such as #Globalhunger and #help2gether.

Figure 6 about here please

Table 2 summarises the network analysis of the three visualizations produced above, the Lords @ mention network, the network extended to include mentions directed at the media, and the network extended to include popular hashtags used by the peers. The overall density of the Lords twitter network is low and compares to the density observed in other studies of the online interactions among complete strangers. For example, Russo and Nov (2010) studied the photo-tagging behaviour of randomly selected and unrelated users of Flickr, and found a mean network density of .227, based on the trail of comments left by users on one anothers' photos. On the other hand, studies of politicians' use of social media suggests that low-density networks might be a normally-occurring phenomenon. For example, Hemphill et al found a clustering coefficent (transivity) of .229 when examining the @ mention network of members of the U.S. Congress, characterizing this as 'low' compared to other social network studies with clustering coefficents in the range of 0.3 to 0.6. Our study of Lords @ mention behaviour prior to adding media mentions or hashtags, falls squarely into this normal range.

A more interesting feature of the social network analysis is the difference in network characteristics between the Lords media mention graph and the hashtag graph. On average, nodes in the hashtag network are more isolated from one another (lower average degree). The network density is very low, with few hashtags shared between Lords users. Consequently, the average shortest path calculated for the Lords hashtag graph is longer, indicating that an observer would have to make a greater number of hops between twitter user accounts to move from one issue to another in the network. We can also compute the clustering coefficient to determine the extent to which nodes are embedded in the network[2]. In its hub-and-spoke shape, the Lords hashtag usage graph more closely resembles an ego network than a small-worlds network, which would be characterized by a shorter average path and higher clustering coefficient (see Gu et al, 2013).

Table 2 about here please

Twitter, debate framing and communication hub formation
One would expect that credibility online would match offline status, however this need not be the case. Twitter is used in a variety of ways by politicians, from an essentially one way channel for information provision from official to citizen, to a space in which genuine mutual discourse takes place (Otterbacher, 2012: 73). One may find that variations in communication style also determine popularity within a network. Social media are argued to empower the individual above the organization (Ward & Southern, 2010). Twitter, in particular, allows politicians to circumvent traditional media and continuously campaign throughout the year (Vergeer et al, 2011). Twitter thus facilitates individual impression management but popularity may be more a function of being controversial than toeing the party line. Yet, in electoral politics, keeping on message has become a core directive of the professionalized campaign (Lilleker & Negrine, 2004).

Politicians throughout the democratic world have begun to embrace social media tools as a way to connect with their constituents, circumventing the mediation offered by traditional mass media channels (Keane 2009a; Posetti 2010; Westling 2007). While much research has focused on which groups social media empowers, results generally are inconclusive. It is argued that "Twitter also offers a space not available in the mainstream media for minor parties to connect with an audience" (Grant et al, 2010: 597), though the potential for fringe parties is often under-utilized (Verheer et al, 2011). These inconsistencies may indicate the importance of party, and a critical mass of users, in encouraging usage. Similarly social media is argued to have the potential to change the style of political communication, developing a more interactive and accessible polity. Yet, most research notes that interaction among politicians is limited (Koc-Michalska & Lilleker, 2013) and the minority of politicians who are interactive do just enough to get constituents to identify with them, without having to yield much control over communication (Otterbacher, 2012: 84).

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[2] Matthieu Latapy, Main-memory Triangle Computations for Very Large (Sparse (Power-Law)) Graphs, in Theoretical Computer Science (TCS) 407 (1-3), pages 458-473, 2008

Political parties in particular attempt to harness Twitter through combining the forces of their elected members and supporters to disseminate a consistent frame around an issue or policy. In fact, this was one core aim for the Labour Lords communication strategy. It is argued that delivering a consistent message, with a consistent frame, is a powerful persuasive tool as this can have a direct cognitive impact on receivers and will lead to a coherent message being disseminated via other mediators (Reese et al, 2001). A consistently personalized and emotional framing of the Haiti earthquake, largely delivered via social media, is argued to have had a significant impact on the mobilization of receivers from across the developed world (Muralidharan et al, 2011). Equally, framing social spaces as having specific characters, led directly to uptake; this suggests that framing can have a direct impact upon behavior (Robards, 2012). Framing has seldom been applied to social media, the above being exceptions, and never within the context of political communication. Our analysis thus examines the extent to which strategic use of Twitter conforms to the notion of building a coherence frame within a political party in order to win support.

Our analysis focuses on the extent to which we can detect coherent framing of partisan issues between the Labour Lords and the main party and the extent that the Lords can become focal points for communication around an issue due to their offline status and expertise. According to Entman (1993) "To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text". In order to determine the main themes embedded the tweeting Lords' messages and therefore assess framing, it was necessary to undertake a deeper investigation into the overall and individual messages sent out. The high quantity of data collected (4363 tweets or the equivalent to 860 pages of text) made traditional textual content analysis difficult. Therefore, instead of manually coding all the tweets to identify the frames, we used Wordle, an online-based Java applet that analyses the frequency of individual words within a body of text.. This enabled us to identify the most frequent words within public statements on policy made by the UK Labour party and compare those with the content of the Lords' tweets, in order to identify emerging thematic clusters and the people driving the conversations related to them.

Due to the diversity of political issues advanced by the Lords (discussed in the previous section on use of hashtags, we chose to focus on the two most widely tweeted political issues: #laspo (56 tweets) and #lordsreform (48 tweets). LASPO is a reference to the Legal Aid Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, which the Labour lords opposed. LASPO basically denied automatic rights to free legal support for those on low incomes where they were bringing the case before a court, for example divorce or civil claims. Lords Reform centred on making the upper chamber more accountable with suggestions for making some or all elected.

For a better understanding of the extent to which Twitter discourses aligned with the Labour Party frames, we also identified official Labour statements with regards to the two issues. The statement opposing LASPO was by Sadiq Khan Labour spokesperson for Justice; the statement broadly supportive of Lords'

reform but arguing the time was not right was by Labour Leader Ed Miliband. Both were posted within the policy section of the main Labour website and so can be deemed official party policy. A comparison between the word clouds thus obtained, supported by an in-depth analysis of the texts submitted followed.

Tables 3 & 4 about here please

We observe that in the case of LASPO Sadiq Khan uses some highly emotional language, describing the reforms as an 'onslaught' and 'vandalism', and those who would lose the right to financial support as both 'victims' and 'sufferers'. Terminology one might assume would be fertile to be converted into tweets to develop these frames. However, the most commonly used terminology within Lords' tweets are procedural descriptors and none replicated the terminology in Khan's speech. In contrast, Ed Milibands supportive statement on Lords Reform is largely descriptive with the terms 'election', 'proportion' and 'democratic' setting out the party position. The Lords, however, use #lordsreform to attack the coalition leaders.

As graphically portrayed in Figure 6 only a few Lords employed these hashtags. Largely they also focused on their own messages rather than those of the party. These data reinforce the notion of them working within ego networks, focusing on their own interests and promoting their own arguments as opposed to offering a coherent opposition argument shared with their colleagues in the lower chamber of the UK parliament. One could suggest that the nature of the different discourses is due to the constraints of Twitter as opposed to extended speeches or statements. However, it is a convention for either the original speaker or their supporters to tweet key sections of speeches and statements so acting as cheerleaders (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011). Equally much of the rich and dense language could be synthesized into 140 characters to repeat key phrases. Thus, it appears that rather than technology impeding this behavior it is the lack of a co-ordinated communication strategy and the personalized conventions of Twitter that lead to divergence in argumentation and presentation between the party and their frontbenchers in the upper chamber.

Conclusions

The Labour Party members of the House of Lords that we studied are enthusiastic adherents of twitter: They are using the platform to tweet both political and personal messages, and they are doing so at a comparable rate to the twitter user base as a whole. This is noteworthy considering the age distribution of Lords included in our sample compared to the overall Twitter user base. The Labour Lords make frequent use of the @ mention, hashtag and embedded hyperlink facilities of twitter. Therefore there is a strong sense of mediatization in terms of adhering to the conventions of Twitter. However, this is weakest when promoting their political activities in the Lords. Here they seek to be agenda setters but are least likely to message other users, use hashtags or include hyperlinks.

However the mediatization practices may actually impede upon the strategic use of Twitter. Twitter is an anarchic forum that sees many users combining personal and professional messages. The Lords are largely adhering to those practices and so working outside of the political network within which they work offline. They choose what to tweet about, how to interpret policy initiatives and how to respond to coalition policy; this mirrors their offline work but online they perhaps have greater freedom in expressing their own thoughts. The instantaneous practice or developing a cognitive response, typing it and tweeting means it is harder for a party to impose its will. Therefore, within the context of party politics, Twitter may not be a tool parties should encourage their elected (or unelected) members to use if the objective is to have as many as possible pushing a party message out into the online environment. Many politicians may mirror the activities of this group, working in their personal ego networks, offering their own thoughts and intertwining the political with the highly personal and trivial. This begs the question whether elite tweeting should be left to the individual as opposed to organizations attempting to direct and co-ordinate tweeting and building a chorus line of cheerleaders; it appears that the independence of the political actor is more sovereign than ever when they have control over the send button.

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