The Social Media Campaign: Mobilisation and persuasion.

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This was the fifth UK General Election campaign at which the Internet has played a part, and given the proliferation in social media use since 2010 many commentators expected it to play a key role, and yes, some predicted it would be the first social media election (e.g. BBC, 2015; Channel 4, 2015). But whereas in previous elections such claims may have been comfortably dismissed as hype, we might argue that there was some substance to them this time around. There are at least two reasons for this. Firstly, because of the sheer reach of social media, with well over half of the UK population using social media in 2015, compared to 34% in 2010 (Channel 4, 2015). Social media now matches TV when it comes to consuming news, and has risen considerably in reach since 2010 (Newman, Levy and Nielsen, 2015). The 2015 Reuters Institute Digital News Report showed that half (49%) of under-35s use social networks like Facebook and Twitter to access political news compared with around a quarter (26%) four years ago (Newman, Levy and Nielsen, 2015). Furthermore, Newman (2015) argues that "the web itself has changed fundamentally over the last five years – with a new emphasis on mobile, social and visual media". Here, the ubiquity of smartphones and tablets has made them the primary gateway for information and news about politics in 2015 for many people, with reportedly more than half of traffic to online election stories from such devices (Newman, 2015). Equally significant is the growth in social discovery, where users are accidentally exposed to political content through their social media feeds and networks. Of course, much of the content which circulates on social media maybe remediated from major news outlets, the big news brands, but this also makes social media news feeds a battleground for NGOs, pressure groups and, of course, political parties.

Another reason for taking social media seriously as a key election battleground in 2015 was the money being spent on it. If following the money is a good barometer of the perceived effectiveness of a campaigning tool, then 2015 was a breakthrough year for Facebook. With comfortably the biggest campaign budget, the Conservative Party led the way here, reportedly spending £100,000 a month on Facebook ads by February 2015 and considerably more during the campaign itself. The bulk of this money was being spent on collecting vast amounts of voter data - particularly in the key marginals - and then delivering micro targeted Facebook ads to target voters (see Anstead, 2015). In this sense, micro-targeting is entirely in line with what the major parties have increasingly been doing in recent elections through huge canvassing databases such as Mosaic (Fisher et al, 2011). It is about spending money on delivering targeted messages - delivered over phone, leaflet and increasingly in 2015, Facebook.

In this sense, it should therefore be apparent that considering social media in isolation of other media is increasingly misplaced. From a campaign perspective,

social media is now deeply integrated into party campaign strategy. This is because election campaigns are highly professionalized and strategic in their design and execution. In practice, the professionalization of election campaigning sees parties using the entire hypermedia environment, mainstream news outlets, social media as well as face to face forms of communication.

While hypermedia campaigning (Howard, 2006) and the exploitation of every medium and communication technology explains campaign communication strategy, the strategic design of a party election campaign draws heavily on lessons from the world of corporate marketing (Lilleker et al, 2006). Key policy promises, key campaign messages and the design of communication as well as the selection of a medium is tailored to maximise the impact on potential supporters (Lilleker, 2013).

Whilst we may see contemporary election campaigning as highly strategic and professionalised, does this mean that it is engaging, mobilising or even inspiring? In this chapter we explore the use of social media, alongside other 'mundane' internet tools such as email, by UK political parties for campaigning purposes during the 2015 general election. With particular focus on mobilisation and persuasion, we examine some of the continuities and changes that 2015 brought compared to previous elections in terms of the online campaign.

Firstly, we document party attempts at gamification and micro rewards as a means of mobilizing supporters, including how the parties emulated campaigning groups such as Avaaz and 38 degrees in terms of fundraising through email. Then we examine how the parties used social media in 2015 to mobilise and persuade. Here, we ask to what extent do parties exploit social media through posting and responding to the comments of their followers? Do parties gain a significant following, and what kinds of followers emerge in terms of their behaviours? Then, what links can we make between online voice share and electoral success?

Our chapter reports data from two sources. Firstly, data on social media use by parties and the stratification of user behaviour was provided by SoTrender, a data gathering and analysis company. The data reported covers the six week period of the UK election campaign, including election day itself, 26th March 2015 to 7th May 2015. The data records the number of items posted by the political parties and the number of shares, likes and comments each item earned. As such, our focus in this chapter is the online activities of the *parties*, not candidates.

The second data source is a specially commissioned survey performed by Opinium research during March 2015 which asked respondents about their online and offline political participation, including social media based activism as well as the forces of mobilization. The survey, to a representative sample of the UK population, gained 2037 valid responses. The Opinium survey data is used to explain the links between forms of participation, and the extent that parties and other political organisations mobilise their supporters to undertake both offline and online forms of participation.

Campaigning online: the journey to 2015

Whilst election campaigns in the UK have become increasingly sophisticated, strategic and professionalized in the last 30 years, when it comes to the adoption of digital technologies, UK parties have been relatively slow to innovate. While simple websites appeared for the 1997 election, these were populated with shovelware – essentially, content created for offline campaign materials such as leaflets – which was reconfigured for online distribution. The evolution of the political party websites, from huge spaces with an archive of press releases and information to lean campaign-oriented machines, took considerable time (Lilleker et al, 2015). Similarly parties' adoption of mechanisms to encourage greater engagement and interaction was a slow and halting process. E-newsletters, for example, were widely used by parties but were criticised for being simply informational and offering no means for feedback (Jackson & Lilleker, 2007). As parties have adopted social media it was suggested that even up to the last election, they occupied a space between the informational web, Web 1.0, and the interactive web, Web 2.0 (Lilleker & Jackson, 2011). The party space of Web 1.5 sees the utilisation of social media platforms, with many options open to their followers and visitors to interact with one another and, theoretically, the party. But parties invariably eschew interacting themselves and largely invite visitors to donate or sign-up rather than involving them in the campaign (ibid.).

The campaign of Barack Obama in 2008 demonstrated the value of a more relational approach and had some impact on the conduct of campaigns in the UK in 2010 (Lilleker & Jackson, 2011). Here, the three major parties, Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats, each created an intraparty space for supporters to connect with one another and become involved in small tasks related to the campaign, though these remained geared more towards donating than campaigning. These developments gave some hint that campaigns might become more inclusive and interactive, though they did not have the same impact as that of Obama. The Obama campaigns, building on developments within the Democrat Party (Kreiss, 2012) and broader progressive movement in America (Karpf, 2012), sought to empower online political activists and channel their activism into supporting his campaign. Analysed from a relationship marketing approach this involved converting those whose interest was piqued into firstly latent and then connected supporters, bringing them into the Obama social network, and then encouraging them to be brand advocates and then active campaigners (Lilleker & Jackson, 2013).

The broader trend here lies in the shift in repertoires of political participation amongst citizens witnessed in many western democracies. Broadly speaking, it is driven by partisan dealignment (see Evans, 2003) and disengagement from electoral politics (Hay, 2007). In practice these processes have led to a move away from 'traditional' forms of participation such as attending political meetings, election canvassing or writing to one's MP towards more non-conventional forms of participation such as signing an online petition, boycotting certain brands, or sharing a political story on

social media (Bennett, 2014). Whilst this shift in participation predates social media, the affordances of digital technologies are permitting shallower, effortless forms of engagement often referred to as clicktivism (Morozov, 2012) but which might also act as a pathway to greater engagement with civic society (Gil de Zuniga et al, 2010). The key, it seems, for political campaigners is to use these changing political participation repertoires to their advantage, and moreover, to meld the old and new forms of participation by facilitating clicktivists to engage with parties and their campaign in offline settings too.

In the UK at least, NGOs have led the way in harnessing the low-threshold forms of activism that social media offers, but we are seeing political parties campaign and communicate increasingly like NGOs. A small but important aspect of this is extending a campaign's reach by making everything shareable. Through network effects, the act of sharing via social networks can act as a powerful endorsement and increase the number of people who might see communication from the campaign, often through accidental exposure. Content that is liked or shared also gives the campaign access to user data – an increasingly valuable commodity in contemporary campaigns (Anstead, 2015). Therefore, while there are normative debates on whether liking or sharing is simple and meaningless clicktivism or evidence of a deeper engagement (Morozov, 2012; Lilleker, 2015), ether way the actions are useful for the organisation whose content is clicked.

Mobilizing through email and social media

The 2015 contest witnessed a continuation of the move towards harnessing the power of social networks to mobilize existing supporters and draw in new ones. Party websites largely conformed to a template of a splash screen encouraging visitors to sign up and leave data on their interests, as well as donating to or joining the party, backed up by a range of manifesto style pages outlining policy and personnel (Ridge-Newman & Mitchell, 2016). Beyond party websites, one innovation – led by the Conservatives – was to introduce gamification into the campaign. In recent years gamification has been led by the commercial sector where aspects of gaming - including micro rewards – are applied to motivate consumers to do the promotional work of the company. The Conservative Party tried to emulate this by operating a points scheme, *Share the Facts*. Those who signed up got points when they shared posts, and when others clicked or commented on their posts. Every fortnight the top twenty point scorers on their leaderboard would win a prize (see Jackson, 2015). Such an initiative was designed to convert supporters into online active campaigners and to get the key campaign messages out through a credible source - everyday people - rather than solely through the central party machine.

The same could be said for party attempts to communicate to supporters through email. While considered a mundane internet tool, email is deeply integrated into internal party mobilizing practices (see Nielsen, 2010) and remains a very important technology for external communication too. This is because it is a push medium: it is

intrusive and hard to ignore. It is also easy to evaluate its success through the click-through and other data it sends. Email addresses are therefore highly sought after by parties and getting hold of email addresses becomes part of the campaigning strategy itself.

Comparing the party emails from 2015 to previous elections, we can see a change in both tone and function. In previous elections emails appeared much like an e-newsletter: a general list of updates, information, persuasive messages and links; with few if any opportunities to get involved. In 2015, firstly, we saw emails personalized – addressed to the recipient by name throughout the email. Then secondly, emails were invariably action oriented. Like the emails of campaigning organizations such as Avaaz or 38 Degrees, each email would be social media enabled and have a simple message and call for action: watch a video (then share it), donate (then share), participate in campaigning, sign a petition (and share), indicate voting preferences (and share) or choose from a list of reasons why you are voting (and share). Party emails also adopted a range of persuasive techniques borrowed from the NGO sector to urge supporters to carry out their calls for action (see Jackson, 2015).

Taking this email from the Labour party from the last week of the campaign (DATE) requesting supporters to donate as an example, we see two such persuasive tropes. Firstly, the use of a very precise fundraising figure, implying very clear costings, then the provision of a very short timeframe suggesting an urgency to act.

If we don't raise the final £39,161 for our Get Out the Vote effort by midnight tonight, we risk handing a last-minute victory to the Tories in the seats this election will be decided.

Furthermore, social norms are then applied, by telling the reader that 7490 people have already donated in the last 48 hours. As Jackson (2015) suggests, this implies that the recipient will not be alone if they donate. Rather, they are following the lead of many others like them, and thus compliance is seen as something normal. The recipient is offered a range of "quick" donation buttons to press, ranging from £3 to £20. For the smaller parties in particular, crowdfunding through email and social media was a clear strategy, though it appeared Labour raised the most money through such means (Mason, 2015).

There are two further observations to be made here. The first is how remarkably similar the party emails are to those of NGOs – using the same persuasive techniques, focusing on one call for action and making the barriers to participate as low as possible. And the second is how similar the party emails are to *each other*. We looked at 49 emails during the campaign from Labour (10), Conservatives (11), LibDems (10), UKIP (12) and the Greens (6); and there was a remarkable consistency throughout the cases. An explanation here comes from the software used by parties and campaign groups. As McKelvey and Piebiak (2014) document,

the affordances of political campaign software are shaping campaigning behaviours towards what we see in 2015: increasingly data driven, personalized, targeted, and social media enabled.

While targeted advertising and private communication via email are increasing in importance, social media is a space where parties can increase their reach as their supporters like and share content; therefore creating engaging and shareable content is important. As Table 1 demonstrates, all of the main parties were present on social media but there is diversity in the concentration of usage of the differing platforms across the parties. Labour may be accused of over-communicating with their followers on Facebook, by the same token the Liberal Democrats seemed to be using Twitter to an inordinately greater extent than their rivals. Arguably the question of resources, and the notion of normalization which suggests parties with higher levels of resources maintain a communication advantage across all media (Margolis & Resnick, 2000), does not play a significant explanatory role. One of the lower resourced parties, the Greens, produced a far greater number of videos over the course of the campaign. Similarly Plaid Cymru, who only field candidates in Wales, produced a higher number of tweets than any other party apart from the Liberal Democrats. Therefore it seems reasonable to suggest that the concentration on any particular platform is purely an artefact of strategy.

Table 1: Party usage of social media platforms

	FACEBOOK POSTS	TWEETS	VIDEOS
CONSERVATIVE	183	1,730	42
LABOUR	432	1,436	49
LIB DEMS	107	4,841	101
GREEN	217	901	113
SNP	166	1,340	28
UKIP	174	1,451	10
PLAID CYMRU	274	2,070	43

Most parties concentrated on using Facebook as a virtual news feed, combining text reports of policy launches with posters, videos and hyperlinks to news reports. Labour, in particular, concentrated on posters, producing 316 over the campaign ensuring the availability of content for supporters to engage with and share. The Conservatives were more circumspect perhaps, with a total of 96. All other parties produced around 50 posters apart from Plaid Cymru who also appeared keen to leverage the enthusiasm of their supporters to share their 202 posters (for full data on poster production see Campbell and Lee, 2015). The Green Party and Liberal

Democrats focused more on videos, both attempting to articulate their policies through this medium as well as building – or in the case of the Liberal Democrats rebuilding – trust through appearing to be honest and transparent in their communication using leader-focused videos.

A broader observation here is the sheer amount of content created by the parties during the campaign. A collective 343 Youtube videos and 1,285 posters (not even taking account of new visual formats like games, lists, gifs, vines, boos, and raw videos) is evidence of their increasing embrace of social, mobile and visual media platforms as a way of communicating key campaign messages. Whilst broadcasters still place limitations on the number of Party Election Broadcasts (PEBs), social media is like the new Wild West in comparison. But again, we would hesitate to consider media platforms as separate spheres. In a hybrid media system, old and new media co-exist, feeding off each other, with content often remediated as it passes through different platforms (see Chadwick, 2011). As Anstead argues (2015), "older formats, such as Party Election Broadcasts, find a second life online, while online phenomenon such as [the collecting of tweets or posts by a hashtag to promote a particular idea, Cleggmania in 2010 or Milifandom in 2015 for example], are elevated by television and newspaper coverage." Political party posters are a now a mixture of big budget billboard images designed by agencies such as Saatchi and Saatchi, hastily assembled in-house rebuttals to opponents' claims and semi-amateur assemblages created in Photoshop. For parties, designing content that cuts through the clutter is increasingly hard and, on social media at least, the question is whether a significant proportion of the electorate were likely to participate in the sharing culture parties promoted.

Visitor Participation

Drawing on the data from our survey (Table 2) we find, as an overall percentage of the UK electorate, around 17% are willing to share or comment on political material via social media[1]. The numbers for actual and projected voting behaviour are consistent with other polls, and we find that while 32% engage in none of the forms of participation offered as options, a significant number participate in at least one activity which encompasses both the online and offline environments. Taking discussing politics as an indicator of political interest, rather than using knowledge tests or self-reported interest as a measure, we also find just over half have sufficient interest for political issues to be a topic of conversation.

Table 2: Percentage of UK citizens who participate in some form of political behaviour

[1] No question was asked about liking political content on social media given that we did not differentiate between partisan and non-partisan materials to keep the questionnaire to a reasonable length. Therefore the interpretation of politics could be fairly wide.

	Percentage engaged (N = 2037)
Voting (have and would)	68.3
Voting (probably or definite)	87.1
Signed a petition	40.0
Taken part in a demonstration	6.5
Boycotted a company or product	17.3
Contacted an elected representative	15.8
Joined/Rejoined a political party	5.9
Followed a party, MP or candidate on social media	10.1
Followed a non-governmental political organization (e.g. 38 Degrees etc.) or charity (e.g. Oxfam etc) on social media	13.9
Shared political content (e.g. blogs, posters, news pieces etc.) on social media	12.3
Commented about politics on social media	16.1
Discussed politics with friends or family	50.5
Did not participate in any political activity	32

Note: numbers do not add to 100% as respondents could choose more than one option

More worrying for parties is that their cumulative followers are no more than 10.1%. While this can mean that up to 6.5 million are potential followers, in reality the numbers are much lower. In the 2015 general election, the six major UK parties had a total of 1,799,689 followers on Facebook and 822,581 on Twitter (see Table 3 below). Combined with the fact that just under 6% are members of a political party, the data suggests that the current reach of parties on social media remains low. Benkler (2006) has hypothesised, however, that the network effect is the level of a party's support squared. He suggests that if all supporters like or share content and they have a network of up to 500 people, some of who may also like and share party political content then the reach is accelerated and is exponentially greater than the actual number of fans. Therefore, while we find the actual number of those who directly participate is low, if parties can achieve their goal of harnessing their supporters to extend their reach there is potential benefits from their use of social media. Little wonder, then, that the parties created so much online content that was designed to be shared through social networks.

When we look at the breakdown of Facebook followers in 2015, the Conservatives and UKIP had significantly more than any other party (see Table 3). The Liberal Democrats had a low number considering they are a national party, with the Greens gaining twice as many followers. It is clear then, that social media popularity is not wholly reflective of vote share. The figures are also not linked to the levels of output on each platform. Despite producing more than twice the number of Facebook posts than their rivals, Labour did not appear to earn as significant a following as the more strategic and less communicative Conservatives. The pattern for Twitter appears the reverse with Labour tweeting less than other parties, yet attracting more followers.

Table 3: Support levels and Interactions with Parties at the 2015 UK Election

	FACEBOOK FANS	FB INTERACTION	TWITTER FOLLOWERS	RETWEETS
CONSERVATIVE	480,955	4,171,734	157,590	282,335
LABOUR	304,875	8,600,334	215,578	443,841
LIB DEMS	113,126	190,533	95,722	238,736
GREEN	215,955	2,638,966	137,057	222,322
SNP	203,883	1,171,707	94,088	350,405
UKIP	462,672	6,668,586	103,744	354,653
PLAID CYMRU	18,223	153,743	18,802	169,855

A clue to understanding this apparent contradiction can be found by looking at social media interactions, which are more meaningful than looking at followers alone and will be more valued by the parties. Any interaction, whether a like, a share or retweet, or a comment, is likely to show in an individual's news feed and so has a chance of being seen by their network (and thus their network's network and so on); though we recognise that the Facebook algorithm can influence what users see and from whom among those they follow. On Facebook there a significant number of likes, shares and comments across party posts and significant numbers of retweets. While there are no clear correlations between the effort, number of posts, and interactions, Labour's verbosity on Facebook seems to have paid off with the party earning twice as many interactions as their main rival the Conservatives. Yet UKIP, who only posted 174 times, including 'only' 54 posters and 10 videos, gained two-thirds the number of interactions as Labour. Therefore for significantly less effort, but due to an active and committed following, UKIP were able to extend their reach in a more cost effective way.

Interestingly, an analysis of election Google searches found that UKIP consistently generated more search queries than all the other parties and their leaders throughout the campaign (Trevisan and Reilly, 2015). This would appear to validate Farage's post-election claims that the party was a social media force that had "suddenly [become] the party for the under 30s," a group that is perhaps best reached online.

The comparatively fewer social media interactions of other parties perhaps hints that their supporters were less committed. This is particularly the case for the Liberal Democrats, who gained the lowest number of interactions beyond Plaid Cymru, whose follower numbers were significantly lower anyway. Labour, SNP and UKIP led a tighter field for the number of retweets. The Liberal Democrats demonstrate no advantage from their frequency in tweeting, though Plaid Cymru's low but not insignificant number of retweets may suggest they gained some benefit from high

usage. Figures for YouTube are highly reliant on single videos and their shareability. In this respect only one party stood out in 2015. The Green Party boy band parody "Change the Tune" was the only one to genuinely go viral, being viewed by just short of 8 million people[2] by the day of the election and breaking through into mainstream media attention.

Two-step flows – the visitor as medium

Our data shows that the parties gained varying numbers of total interactions. However, the important question is the extent to which they were unique interactions or whether they are part of a suite of activities performed by highly committed activists, who frequently like, share and comment, and effectively were harnessed to the campaign. The only social media data we can analyse for the extent of individual actions is from Facebook. Here we use the terminology from SoTrender which classifies those who interact on party profiles. *Occasionals* are users who interact only once, *Likers* only 'like' but do so more than once, *Debaters* only comment (an interesting category as these may be as likely to be trolls who post hostile remarks as party cheerleaders showing support), *Writers* not only comment but interact with other users, *Activists* perform all behaviours, liking, sharing and commenting and appear to be advocates for the party.

The highest percentages of visitors fall into the categories of Occasionals, the Lurkers who interact very rarely, or Likers (who only like). However, the positive note here is that around 40% of supporters are serial likers who extend the reach of their respective parties. The number of Debaters (who comment only and may include trolls) may concern some parties, in particular the Liberal Democrats. A previous study noted that the BNP MySpace page housed only negative graffiti, with people joining, typing a post such as 'Fascist Scum' then leaving (Jackson & Lilleker, 2009). While Debaters will include cheerleaders who post comments such as 'Go Ed' on a Labour post following a speech by leader Ed Miliband, they also are likely to include those who posted negative remarks on Liberal Democrat posts about reneging on the promise to scrap student tuition fees when the party entered into coalition in 2010. Therefore graffiti-style negativity may prevail for some parties to which there are strong negative associations with some members of the online community. Writers (who comment or publish only) are a minority, and again may include trolls and appear to be highest for Liberal Democrats. Within social media these 'writers' may be highly influential due to being perceived as highly knowledgeable activists within their networks, therefore while a minority these individuals maybe highly important and have an impact on not only remediating party communication but also adding interpretation that leads to a broader shared understanding, positive or negative, within their network (Anstead and O'Loughlin, 2014)

[2] Whilst the Youtube video itself garnered 'only' approximately 800,000 views by the day of the election, our figure of 7.9 million views contains those achieved via shares (source: the Green Party).

Table 4: Facebook interactions, segmented as a percentage of those performing actions frequently

	Occasionals	Likers	Debaters	Writers	Activists
Conservative Party	35.66	39.80	19.55	3.47	1.53
Green Party	42.50	41.91	11.23	3.09	1.27
Labour Party	43.08	34.90	16.68	3.68	1.65
Liberal Democrats	32.72	37.01	24.72	4.40	1.16
Plaid Cymru	43.46	43.43	9.33	2.68	1.10
Scottish National Party	43.48	44.43	7.69	3.46	0.94
UK Independence Party	34.12	48.43	11.06	3.64	2.75

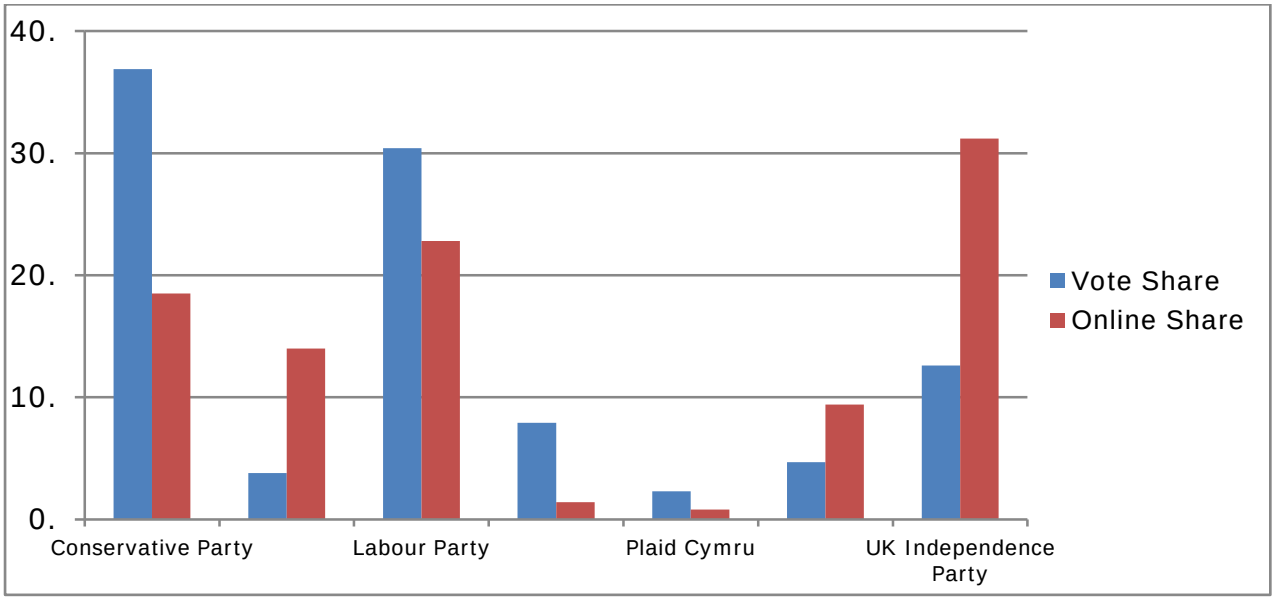
For all parties the worrying statistic is that in most cases the percentage of those who are Activists (who like, share and comment and may be ambassadors) is under 2%. The actual number of activists for the Conservatives is a low but a comparatively respectable 7,344 people, the Liberal Democrats, in contrast, had only 1,311 activists. The overall percentages then mask a reality that while the overall numbers are reasonably equal, apart from the number of Debaters, in order to maximise reach you need a large number of overall followers in order to gain a large number of Activists. The highest levels of commitment were demonstrated by UKIP followers, who number 12,705 – almost double that of the Conservatives. Hence, when we consider this, we assume that in terms of accidental exposure Facebook users were most likely to see content from UKIP followed by the Conservatives and Labour and least likely to see content from the Liberal Democrats and smaller parties. However this hypothesis is largely dependent on the network one chooses. If a person has a tendency towards one party or ideological standpoint – the left for example – and has a large community who also tend to be more leftist, it is equally likely that person will see no posts from UKIP and the Conservatives and rather see only content they agree with which might be shared from the profiles of Labour, the Green party or SNP (see Sunstein, 2007). Therefore, while reach is a goal for parties, even on the digital high street parties may only be preaching to the converted (Norris, 2003).

Election outcomes and online activism

The caveats regarding networks consisting of the ideologically similar, and the power of the Facebook algorithm to filter content, may explain why from a user's point of view, social media is in actuality an ideological bubble that is isolated from the real world. Content from a range of sources may be remediated but it may also be contextualized to fit an ideological position which is shared witin a network. By taking

the number of followers each party has across Facebook and Twitter as an absolute percentage of the overall total number of followers, so assuming each follower is unique and that the total number represents those with a propensity to engage in partisan politics on social media – an admittedly imperfect but indicative procedure – we gain a sense of the share each party has online. As Figure 1 indicates, UKIP have the highest percentage following overall, followed by Labour, the Conservatives, the Green Party, SNP, and then the Liberal Democrats and Plaid Cymru. Taking the overall vote share nationally we see that while the Conservative and Labour parties are prominent their position was reversed, UKIP only gained 14% of the vote as opposed to over 30% of the online share of support and the Greens and SNP also saw an online bias that was not reflected in their vote share.

Figure 1: Comparing online support share and vote share (%)



While the measurement of online share has significant flaws and is for illustration only, the serious point this data makes is that independent of the levels of support online – which is an influential factor in the number of activists harnessed to the campaign and the chances of extending reach and gaining accidental exposure to communication – there appears to be no link to the eventual outcome of the election contest.

While there might be no reason to expect any form of correlation between online activity, the levels of support earned and vote share, similar measures have been used when considering the effort expended in constituency campaigning (Denver et al, 2004; Fisher et al, 2011). Therefore the problem is not with seeking an effect but with the fact that the numbers of activists and the likelihood of reaching beyond those already committed remains slight.

However, if we imagine public opinion as less the sum of individual opinions (Allport, 1937) and more as something generated through social interaction, embedded in

social relationships (see Blumer, 1948); then there might be more that social media can tell us about election results (see Anstead and O'Loughlin, 2014). Here, Blumer (1948) claims that public opinion measurement should be hierarchical, because *who* holds an opinion does matter, as some voices are likely to have more influence on public debate than others. Such an approach is well suited to analysis of social media share of voice, and the extent that some writers and activists may be extremely influential among their followers or within bounded ideological networks. Thus it may be that whilst UKIP and Labour had more support in a quantitative sense online, Conservative online supporters were ultimately more influential.

Patterns of participation

Identifying the extent that any individual is highly influential is impossible, however one might expect those who are hyper-activists may have greater influence. Furthermore, examining whether online activities are part of a suite of participatory behaviours indicates the extent of the online environment being connected to, or indeed detached from, the real world of politics. Returning to the data from the survey firstly we find some highly uneven patterns of participation (Table 5).

Table 5: Patterns of Participation – standard correlations

	Petition	DEMO	Boycott	Contact Reps	Join party	Follow party	Follow NGO	Share political content	Political comment
DEMO	.221**								
Boycott	.352**	.391**							
Contact Reps	.334**	.417**	.340**						
Join party	.204**	.578**	.354**	.430**					
Follow party	.258**	.269**	.260**	.311**	.283**				
Follow NGO	.363**	.245**	.345**	.328**	.200**	.424**			
Share political content	.293**	.266*	.296**	.278**	.250**	.445**	.476**		
Political comment online	.284**	.216**	.299**	.251**	.180**	.443**	.442**	.615**	
Discuss Politics offline	.294**	.137**	.281**	.256**	.164**	.192**	.260**	.287**	.291**

** significant at <.001

We find that those likely to participate in all behaviours are around 20-30% likely to participate in any other of the forms of participation offered as options. However, for those who join a party while the correlations are significant the relationship is lower when asking about whether they share or comment on content. The numbers who follow parties online and then share content and comment are significantly higher, but the numbers are not as high as for those who follow NGOs. Therefore it would appear that parties are not mobilising their supporters effectively and in particular are not encouraging their members to follow them online or be harnessed to the campaign. Those who do follow parties online are committed partisans, measured by the extent that they are repeat voters and there is a strong and significant correlation with voter loyalty (.804**) however it would appear many are casually connected online as opposed to connecting with the party in order to both receive information and support campaigns. Therefore parties may be failing to draw online supporters closer to the party and so nurture and harness their enthusiasm, so the online activity has little impact due to the low numbers who work as activists.

A further reason for the disparity between being active online and vote share may be explained by the likelihood of respondents voting and their self-reported participation in other participatory acts (Table 6). Rather than asking about past voting behaviour we take the number of those who declare they are likely or very likely to vote, those who constitute the 87.1% shown in Table 2.

Table 6: Political Participation and Likelihood of voting

	Voting Likelihood (Pearson's r)
Signed a petition	.128**
Taken part in a demonstration	.083**
Boycotted a company or product	.090**
Contacted an elected representative	.159**
Joined/Rejoined a political party	.100**
Followed a party, MP or candidate on social media	.109**
Followed a non-governmental political organization (e.g. 38 Degrees etc.) or charity (e.g. Oxfam etc) on social media	.083**
Shared political content (e.g. blogs, posters, news pieces etc.) on social media	.096**
Commented about politics on social media	.106**
Discussed politics with friends or family	.173**
Did not participate in any political activity	.168**

The curious finding from the survey data is that despite nearly 100% declaring that they are likely to vote there is little correlation between voting and performing any other form of activity. The reasons for this are that, firstly, the numbers participating in one or more other actions are few and spread across the range of activities

offered. Secondly, though, we find that in actual fact the 32% who participated in no other forms of political participation were no less likely to vote than the small number who claimed they had performed all other actions. In fact it seems that the non-participants are slightly more likely to vote than any other group including those who contact elected representatives or join parties. The underlying reasons may be a factor of the UK voting system and the fact that within the first past the post, winner-takes-all system in the safe seats there are many wasted votes. However there may be a range of other reasons which might be explained by specific context and campaign factors, as well as attitudinal and sociological explanations. The fact remains, putting the causes to one side, that despite there being a group within the survey who might align with the activists we witness sharing content and commenting on party profiles this group appear to be one of the groups that is least likely to vote.

Conclusions

In UK elections the air war, employing mass media, remains dominant and this tends to be a feature of most European democracies (Lilleker et al, 2015). The ground war, involving doorstep canvassing and getting out the vote is a feature of the swing seats only, and in 2015 the Conservatives 40/40 strategy targeting specific seats where they felt they could win accelerated the trend towards an uneven election. This inequality of campaigning was replicated online with geo-political targeting of voters within the strategically important geographical areas.

Social media therefore plays an intermediary function, somewhere between the mass media campaign which it remediates and a more grassroots style where people are empowered to be campaigners; hence there is hybridity on two levels, in terms of content and in terms of ownership. Social media is given significant priority due to potential reach that can be earned via supporters within a two-step flow model of communication. Parties all produce material that is engaging, in the form of videos and posters, and shareable; so there is a strategy which seeks message virality. The parties largely remain in a realm of Web 1.5, in terms of eschewing direct interactions, but they attempted to harness the affordances of Web 2.0, and use the social web dynamics to extend their reach. The challenge they have is that their number of activists is as low online as offline, on average 1-7,000 per party. Therefore, while they may be making content that has the potential to go viral, unless they have active supporters keen to promote that content they are largely preaching to the converted. However, accepting the notion of ideological clustering, preaching to the converted and so firming up and encouraging the support of activists may be the best parties can achieve. But even when parties do gain a high number of activists, as UKIP managed in 2015, and when this converts into a modicum of electoral success in gaining 14% of the popular vote, they remain a political irrelevance with a single seat and perhaps some highly demoralised activists.

Yet online activists remian a distinct minority. Online and clicktivist forms of political participation are slightly more commonplace than the traditional acts of demonstrating or joining a party. It would appear that actually they are a component within a suite of participatory actions, though they are largely not driven by partisan affiliation. Hence parties still struggle to get their messages promoted. This negative observation might underplay the power of the like, however. While hardcore activists are fairly low, around 40% of each party's online support base liked or shared content at least once and a further group of 30-40% were serial likers. These people may have been drawn to like content on one or a few specific policy areas, content of a specific type or offering a specific style of message. Hence further research is required to determine what kind of content earns more shares and likes. The numbers, however, do suggest that all parties, depending of course on the number of supporters they have on social media, are likely to earn some degree of accidental exposure, despite ideological clustering and the Facebook algorithm having some negative impact on them realising this potential. But, perhaps actually content is king on social media. Despite having a maximum of 357,000 online followers, and of them 215,000 of whom on Facebook only 1.27 were activists, the Green Party managed to have a video go viral and earn 8 million views in a matter of a few days. The video was humorous, perhaps appealed to those who agreed that the male party leaders offered little that was distinct, and so had qualities that made it engaging and shareable.

However, we should not suggest that there is a 'net' effect as a result. 8 million people may have seen the video, they may even have agreed with the message and subsequently added a further like that accelerated its reach around the online network. But, viewing the video did not translate into votes. The Green party appeared to have plateaued at around 1 million supporters, and although their support base held between the 2014 European Parliament elections and the 2015 General Election their enhanced viewing figures did not deliver a vote dividend. Hence, while there may have been small numbers converted or saw their support firmed up sufficiently to motivate them to vote the numbers may have been very small and in the broader scheme of an election fairly insignificant. In some marginal seats a few votes may have been crucial, but given that voters in those seats were bombarded with tailored advertising, doorstep visits by local and national figures, and experienced all aspects of the campaign jamboree it would be difficult to attribute any vote to accidental exposure on social media. As with many other campaign tools it is likely no party would abandon social media in the fear that there was an effect, however the reality is that much social media campaigning may only reach those already converted and loyal supporters.

But these conclusions focus purely on activities within the networks of political parties and not the broader social space which is created within social media environments. If we look beyond the immediate lens of what the parties are doing and look at social media as a space, we may find it to increasingly be the primary

space for citizens to conduct everyday political talk. Through complex patterns of remediation and contextualization we might find alternative patterns of influence from which parties and media brands may be present through content but their messages are altered and alternative meanings are offered. If these are also manifested as ideological echo chambers then social media may play an increasingly important role in providing the fabric for political socialization, including voter education, deliberation, persuasion and opinion formation. These highly dynamic and complex processes occur beyond the realms of party profiles but through the sharing mechanisms and the ability to write comments may be playing an increasingly important role in shaping election outcomes, ones which are largely hidden within the personalized news feeds of the millions of users that log in and engage within something political.

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