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Social media in the UK election campaigns 2008-14: experimentation, innovation and convergence

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Political campaigns in the UK in many ways are a blend of traditions from European party systems with aspects influenced by the more US candidate-centred model. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, the UK first past the post system where candidates stand for election as individuals in constituencies, the candidate who has most votes being elected, encourages a more individualistic style of campaigning at the local level (Ward & Southern, 2012). Secondly, party leaders since the Thatcher era have been argued to have adopted a more presidential style, so are central to the campaign. That said, largely web-based campaigning follows a party-centric model where the party rather than the leader has a set of domains across platforms (websites and linked presences on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube mainly), though some local candidates will independently create their own presences across the Internet. UK campaigns therefore have potential to be innovative in their use of social media and to present voters with multiple means of interacting with the individuals and their parties who seek their vote.

In order to explore the adoption and use of social media during election campaigns in the UK this chapter draws on three data sets. Firstly a longitudinal analysis of website and web presence features which allows us to track the use of the Internet by the major political parties across the local elections of 2008, subsequent European Parliamentary Election (2009), General Election (2010) and the most recent contest the 2014 European Parliamentary Election. The parties selected for analysis present a cross-section of the UK political scene. Labour were party of government from 1997-2010 and subsequently the main opposition, the Conservatives were opposition until 2010 and subsequently major partners in a coalition with the third largest party in terms of popular vote, the

Liberal Democrats. The Green Party have a long history as a campaigning organisation but only gained their first MP in 2010 but have always had representation in councils and the European Parliament. The other two parties have no parliamentary representation but stand nationally and have had significant impact on the news agenda, the UK Independence Party (UKIP) are a conservative and Eurosceptic party who consistently do well in the popular vote at European Parliamentary Elections, the British National Party are the far-right, neo-fascist party who are most innovative historically online and had two MEPs until 2014.

The second data set is from interviews with party strategists which asked them to prioritise different elements in order to define a 21st Century professional campaign. This chapter draws only on data that compares the prioritisation of different media use (online and offline) to identify how social media are embedded strategically within a campaign. Finally the chapter draws on data from social media pages which analyses the usage of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube by the six major parties, assessing how social media offers each party reach and how reach (in terms of followers and page views) corresponds with strategies. This data will focus on the aftermath of the European Elections and provides insights into the role social media might play in the UK General Election which will take place in 2015. Prior to introducing this data the chapter provides a brief summary of research on web campaigning in the UK up to 2008 and the role the Internet has been argued to play as a campaign tool.

UK online election campaigning: slow on the uptake

One chapter of the annual Political Communications collection in 1997 asked if this was the first Internet election, with the response being no (Ward & Gibson, 1997). Reviewing Internet use, the authors of the first scientific study of UK parties' online election campaigning concluded that UK were recognizing the Internet's potential for increasing internal party debate, so perhaps connecting better to members and likewise connecting them to the party. However, while debate was facilitated, party websites were utilised primarily as a tool for downward information dissemination.

Although there was evidence to support equalisation in terms of parties with lower levels of support having similar or equal quality websites as their higher-resourced counterparts, limited Internet use by the electorate hindered websites being exploited to its fullest extent (Gibson & Ward, 1998). By 2001 inequalities had increased, but innovation was purely within the realm of sophistication. Party websites looked better and were more user friendly but the content was largely shovelware, material from leaflets and other documents stored online in case anyone wanted to view them. Largely there seemed no great sense of strategy of who might visit a party website and so what they might want to find (Gibson et al, 2003; Gibson, Ward & Lusoli, 2003).

The European Parliamentary elections of 2004 showed little reason for optimism. Evidence showed the online campaign, or rather the lack of a campaign, largely reflected the apathy of national politicians and the media with the second-order election (Lusoli & Ward, 2005). Parties provided informational content mirroring the by then longstanding tradition of shovelware content. Although perhaps this would be expected of a second-order contest, which five years later also demonstrated lower effort devoted to the campaign (Maier, Strömbäck & Kaid 2011), the 2005 campaign also relied largely on television and news management (Jackson, 2007). There was little sense across the contests 1997-2005 that the Internet was going to fulfil the potential some suggested it had, though there was evidence that supporter mobilisation was increasingly a function of web presences (Norris & Curtice, 2008) and weblogs became a feature so allowing flexibility in messaging and gaining feedback (Jackson, 2006). Therefore, one should not view the parties as being cautious and so reluctant to innovate, but in the UK as across Europe this may not be unexpected given that a small percentage used the Internet as a source of political information (Lusoli, 2005).

Although many individual MPs may have seen benefits from a more personalised campaign and so developed an Internet presence, this was also unrealised. Using the catchy title 'from weird to wired', one of the first studies of UK MPs shows few dabbled with the Internet (Ward & Lusoli, 2005). There were one or two pioneers who metaphorically dipped their toe into online

campaigning, creating weblogs (Stanyer, 2006), developing websites (Norton, 2007) and interacting with constituents via email (Allan, 2006) but these were exemplars outside of the norm. Furthermore as most MPs' websites were paid for out of their parliamentary communication budget they could not be used for election campaigns, though a few used them to highlight their achievements in parliament on behalf of their constituency or to explain their voting record (Lilleker, 2005). However, beyond isolated examples, there seemed little to indicate that the Internet would be taken seriously as a campaign tool or be used to do anything particularly innovative in the UK.

The evolution of online campaigning 2008-2014

Of course one cannot ignore the fact there were innovations, and that parties were experimenting with a range of features that may appear basic now but at the time were providing data that would shape later behaviour. Party e-newsletters, and the finding that their subscribers wanted to not just read but give feedback, showed there might be rewards from offering greater involvement through interactivity (Jackson & Lilleker, 2007). Simultaneously Howard Dean's campaign in the US in 2004, and the campaigns in France by Segolene Royal, who harnessed a personal blogosphere and had a co-authored manifesto, and Nicolas Sarkozy who dabbled in Second Life to offer a test drive of his leadership (Lilleker & Malagon, 2010) influenced those within UK parties who sought ways to appear more modern, more innovative and to gain greater attention and so support at the voting booth.

Uncharacteristically this meant that the contests for the local councils in 2008 and the 2009 European Parliamentary election became testing grounds for innovations in online campaigning, with the social aspect emphasised to an unprecedented and unexpected degree.

The studies undertaken involved a content analysis, or feature analysis, of websites; a method pioneered by Gibson and Ward (2000) when analysing party and candidate websites at the turn of the century. Our methodology detects the presence of features, with a coding scheme updated to include links to and content on social media platforms. The features were rated for direction of communication (monologue, two-way feedback, or participatory) and for level of user control (rated

1-10); so for example press releases, a common feature of early websites were one-way and offered minimal control, read or not; in contrast a social media profile where comments were allowed is participatory and permitting the maximum level of user control where they might like, share, comment or enter into conversation with the profile host or other visitors. Averages for web presences were created to permit simple comparability.

2008, a period when there were local council elections saw interesting innovations. This period was just after the widespread social adoption of MySpace and Facebook and the introduction of Web 2.0 as a concept explaining interactive communication. Parties were seen to adopt a range of features that fitted into the Web 2.0 framework, so building architecture for websites that permitted participation. However, largely the parties themselves had no representation within the interaction. The parties provided a news feed, invited responses via email or online forms and allowed comments, yet they did not respond to questions and often there was little sense that social media platforms were monitored. For some parties, in particular the BNP, the MySpace profile had no content and users of the platform were allowed to join, post a hostile remark (such as fascist scum) then leave. Hence the conclusion was that UK political parties actually resided within Web 1.5. Their online presences offered the look and feel of Web 2.0, provided space for visitors to correspond, but the parties largely retained the control offered in Web 1.0. This halfway house approach led many visitors to use social media profile walls for 'graffiti', they posted a comment that could be positive or hostile and seemed never to return, perhaps due to them not gaining a response.

This approach remained largely the same with the European Parliamentary election in 2009. The web presences built for the contest emphasised resource inequalities, with the major parties innovating in more sophisticated ways than minor or fringe parties. However when comparing the features used, their functionality and the level of control awarded to site visitors in being able to post, comment and interact it was actually two far-right fringe parties and UKIP which offered visitors the most freedom, these were followed by Labour then party of government. We suggested,

therefore, a strategic focus on Internet campaigning was emerging (Jackson & Lilleker, 2010). The four most interactive parties were ambitious to increase their vote share, or in the case of Labour limit their decline at the next General Election and so were developing ways to enhance the relationship with their grassroots and tentative supporters and so used the online environment as a greenhouse for nurturing support (Albrecht, 2007).

Perhaps it was the influence of Obama that led some parties to reconsider their adherence to Web 1.5, perhaps it was a combination of desperation and caution surrounding the close 2010 General Election contest that determined strategies; insights from party strategists suggested something of both. However the divergence in strategies was striking (Lilleker & Jackson, 2011). UKIP largely eschewed any social aspects, focusing on older voters not expected to be online, though they did have some members who regularly blogged. The Greens, constrained by resources, offered little onsite interaction but provided some engaging features such as a customisable video that could be shared via Facebook. Labour retreated somewhat, although the 'Change We See' campaign permitted supporters to upload pictures that encapsulated Labour's achievements over their thirteen years of government and the #Labourdoorstep Twitter campaign was important in mobilising their activists. But these were minor innovations compared to the Obama-style social network created by the Conservative Party (myConservatives.co.uk) or the Liberal Democrat's Forum (LibDemAct), these allowed visitors who wished to sign up to write directly to the websites, creating content and shaping the experiences of future visitors. The Greens, Labour, Conservatives and Liberal Democrats also utilised Facebook, Twitter and YouTube so creating multiple points of entry and participation to their campaign. Yet, the British National Party offered an even more participatory experience. Their website consisted of participatory architecture that gave members a role in creating the campaign. Around 1,500 members, using pseudonyms, contributed detail on local campaigns, supportive examples for the anti-immigrant and homophobic platform and attacks on the other parties. The BNP avoided other social networks, and there were controls over joining and posting, but the parties was the closest to a Web 2.0 campaign and embraced the philosophy of

the social web by creating their own social media platform while most other parties relied on the free platforms.

Given this level of innovation one might expect further advances between 2010 and 2014. In contrast, as shown in Figures 1 and 2 we find in 2014 almost complete convergence around a mixed communication strategy that offers varying levels of control and varying directions of communication. The differences are minor, for example the Liberal Democrats do not have an online shop, the Green Party only have an online mechanism for volunteering, the BNP and UKIP do not encourage emails to the party. But all interactive elements are gone from the sites, so for specific websites user control is low and the communication one-way or in places two-way. Rather the free spaces offered by the Facebook, Twitter and YouTube platforms are utilised exclusively to allow participatory communication and for visitors to have control over communication. Therefore social media, by 2014, are the one place where supporters can interact with one another and, in theory, with the party. Only the BNP site allows commenting within their news section which features weblog tools, all the other parties encourage sharing their pages and joining their presences on social media platforms. The retrenchment could be a reflection of the second-order status of the European parliamentary election. However it might also suggest recognition that the website has greater use for supporters, allowing them to donate, download material for printing, or promoting the party online. Social media may attract a looser support base into a community that can then be mobilised. The functionality is similar to the bespoke social network created by Obama (Woolley, Limperos & Oliver, 2010), but costs little, does not require large levels of resources for monitoring, as some believe social media to be anarchic and uncontrollable anyway so would not expect all comments to be on message. The website, however, remains simple, clean of clutter and largely utilised to disseminate simple messages and brand information in the form of images, soundbites and policy promises. This strategy may reflect the priorities UK party strategists place upon different platforms and media.

Figures 1 and 2 about here please

Social media: just another mass medium?

The data for this section draws on a survey, conducted either face-to-face, via telephone or in one case via email with the individual responsible for designing and overseeing the campaign strategy for the 2014 European parliament and 2015 general election strategies for each of the major UK parties, the BNP refused to respond to this and so there is no data on that party. The titles differed across parties, from party leader to communication and campaign manager, however each had a unique perspective on where their party stood in relation to voters and the challenge they faced at forthcoming electoral contests, the objectives the party had set and how these were best achieved. For each means of communication they gave a score from 1-5, denoting its relative importance and so allowing means to be derived which are compared in this case across parties. The means are generated from two distinct sets of questions, one set on priorities for the 2014 European parliamentary election; the second for the forthcoming general election, in the case of advertising this is cumulative for prioritising print, online and television advertisements.

The mean scores, shown in Table 1, offer some indications of the different priorities parties have when viewing different means for communication to and with their potential voters. Face-to-face communication is the priority for all but there are divergences across traditional and social media. Major parties see news (an up-to-date presence in the media and having an impact on the agenda) as of significant importance; the two minor parties recognise the difficulty in achieving positive or balanced news coverage. The two parliamentary opposition parties, Labour and the Greens, although the latter only has one MP, both rate social media as highly important; UKIP due to their more conservative, older and working class target electorate prefer a ground, street-level campaign. Labour appear to be prioritising all forms of communication, perhaps as they are trying to build positive awareness for their new leader and have struggled to build a strong public image despite them earning a respectable standing in the polls.

Overall, however, there is a general pattern across the UK parties. The gold standard for communication is face-to-face, hence the importance of canvassing and, within the marginal constituencies, local and national party luminaries are highly visible throughout a campaign (Lilleker, 2005). The second priority is likely to be mass media, and in particular appearances on regional and national news, so suggesting these give the party and its candidate's prominence as well as allowing them to set the news agenda. Thirdly is email, perhaps for hard to reach groups but particularly as a tool for inter-party communication. Social media reinforces these activities but only the Green party place it as a highly important medium, notwithstanding the prioritisation of face-to-face communication. For most parties there is a respect for the role of social media in a campaign, however there is a level of uncertainty as to the potential advantages and disadvantages of social media campaigning.

Caught in the social web: party use of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube

Table 2 shows the reach the six parties enjoy, with this representing the number of likes (on Facebook fan pages) followers (on Twitter) and subscribers (to YouTube channels). Reach is important as it suggests, at the very least the number of people willing to receive direct communication from each party, including having material pushed at them. The numbers represent the immediate audience each party can reach by social media but not the networks they might have access to, or reach into, should their online supporters like and share the party posts, videos and images. The picture is disparate to some extent with the likes, followers and subscribers largely mirroring recent electoral results. We therefore see the Conservatives and UKIP having the largest following on Facebook, Labour beating the Conservatives on Twitter slightly with the Liberal Democrats, Greens and UKIP with half their following and with little between them. UKIP win hands down on YouTube with the rest of the parties with under 10,000 subscribers led by Labour. The BNP have a strong following on Facebook but seem to be nowhere across the other platforms. Largely politics as usual is supported here, with the current hype around, and support for, UKIP being

mirrored online with the two traditional rivals for government in close proximity to them depending upon the channel; the question is whether there are alternative explanations for the levels of support?

In terms of the effort parties make in communicating via these platforms there seems no correspondence between the number of posts, tweets or videos and the likes, follows or subscribers earned, the figures in brackets in Table 2 denote effort in terms of material created during the 2014 European parliamentary election campaign when one might expect activity to be at its greatest. Therefore, in terms of the adage that producing content equally might generate a following it would seem erroneous, in particular given that the Green Party created most content for both Twitter and YouTube but do not have an equitable level of following.

In terms of the type of content, all parties treat social media as a news feed. The profiles across platforms for all parties are largely a repository for current videos, or with Twitter links to a video, the latest line from the party leader, or updates about events and inviting members. The exception is the BNP who select news stories and put their nationalist spin on these, so pushing the image they promote as representing Britishness. If the party shares material it is from their leader's pages or profiles, or for the major parties other prominent spokespersons.

Facebook offers the opportunity to see the extent of likes, shares and comments received as well as whether the party or any notable and obvious figure from the party responds. Table 3 shows the numbers of page likes and then for the 2014 contest period the number of likes on posts, the number of shares of posts and the number of comments. The only observation that can be made from this data is that, unless the party is a member of the coalition (the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats) the size of support is also an indicator of the level of expected activity with, on the whole, a large number liking, a smaller number sharing and yet fewer commenting. The commenting figure is however spurious, as on some posts there are numerous interactions between a small number of participants as opposed to a stream of comments each from a single individual. What is

striking however is that at no time does the party respond (or rather the individual or individuals who manage the Facebook profile and speak as the party) nor do any of the top party personnel feature in responding to posts or comment posted by their supporters. Even when, as in the case of the Conservatives, many of those who have liked their page are saying in comments they are unconvinced by Conservative party promises and will vote for UKIP, there is no attempt by the party to prevent this erosion of votes. While the party activity seems to encourage graffiti, it is only due to the energy of those who comment that some form of interest is sustained. It may be that parties view these pages simply as ways to gather data about their supporters and their opinions, and that has value. However, as noted in empirical studies, it would appear they are missing a trick in not communicating back and building relationships with their online supporters (Jackson & Lilleker, 2009).

The UK social media campaign: evolution and devolution, never revolution

The long history of online campaigning, albeit covering only seventeen years, demonstrates a greater sense of caution than a desire to be innovative. Indeed the decade of reliance on shovelware perhaps indicates that UK parties see voters and supporters as individuals who need informing and persuading in equal measure but not talking with online. This may be an indication that all parties are unsure of the impact of interaction, how to deal with the demands of their online community of loose supporters, and are concerned about the extent that the party may have to accommodate them more at the expense of usual decision making processes (Lilleker, Pack & Jackson, 2010). Innovation appears to have been ushered in on the back of influences from across the channel and then from over the Atlantic, but it was short-lived. It was also unsuccessful, with the myConservatives social network having very few members and even less activism (Lilleker & Jackson, 2010: 135), suggesting the O'Reilly adage 'build it and they will come' is reliant on context. It is therefore unsurprising that parties turn to free platforms, as do many corporate and not-for-profit entities, as they require little effort, low-level monitoring, and are places where the people

already go. As one veteran campaigner commented “the website is a side street, people only go there to visit someone when invited; Facebook and Twitter are the high street, everyone passes through nowadays, and if you do something interesting people may stop to take a look”. While there still needs a pull to any profile there is some logic to the statement. It is therefore unsurprising that we find mixed views on social media as a priority channel but that all, except UKIP, rate it as an above average priority. It is also important to note that UKIP used social media extensively, and gathered a significant following. So despite these media being a low priority in the lead up to the 2014 contest this perception may change for the 2015 general election when their goal is their first seat in the national parliament. It is also interesting to note, of the 50 parties that stood across the UK for election to the European Parliament 26 had a Facebook profile, 29 used Twitter and 32 a YouTube channel. These figures suggest that social media is embedded in UK campaigning and is a de rigueur feature for any party seeking to be taken seriously and seeking to reach out to the electorate.

Yet in truth little beyond adoption of these platforms is innovative. Social media are simply used to replicate tasks of old media, it is a form of online advertising with some elements of recruitment built in. There seem few attempts to convert supporters into more active advocates or campaigners despite visitors’ apparent willingness to like, share and comment on the material of the party. Even more surprising it would appear many comments are unread (as some insult the party leaders on personal and professional grounds) and are never responded to. Perhaps Facebook, in particular, is perceived as a place for supporters to keep in touch with what the party is doing and with one another; however erroneous that perception might be. Therefore, while UK parties have embraced social media and use them regularly, their use remains in the realm of Web 1.5. They facilitate participatory interaction but seldom participate themselves. Hence we might view the UK party experience with social media as one of cautious experimentation, followed by some innovation but ending with convergence around the most basic usage. This is not a normative judgement and criticism, but it does raise a question; is this appropriate usage of social media, or at least

appropriate for a political party, and if not what is an effective model of usage that may lead to a more social, interactive and accessible form of politics? The medium may have changed but the political mindset has not, it may be fear of losing control of communication, having to answer the tough questions in public or it may be a more primal fear that politicians experience (Stromer-Galley, 2000). In setting out why politicians must be independent legislators and not delegates Edmund Burke argued “When the leaders choose to make themselves bidders at an auction of popularity, their talents, in the construction of the state, will be of no service. They will become flatterers instead of legislators; the instruments, not the guides, of the people”; perhaps for many politicians the fear is that moving closer to their online supporters will lead to just such impulses. Hence communication remains two-way at best, private and under the control of UK parties even when they colonise platforms designed for social interaction and conversation.

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Word Count 5,198 words

Figure 1: Mean Direction of Communication (one-way, two-way or participatory) compared across contests 2008-2014

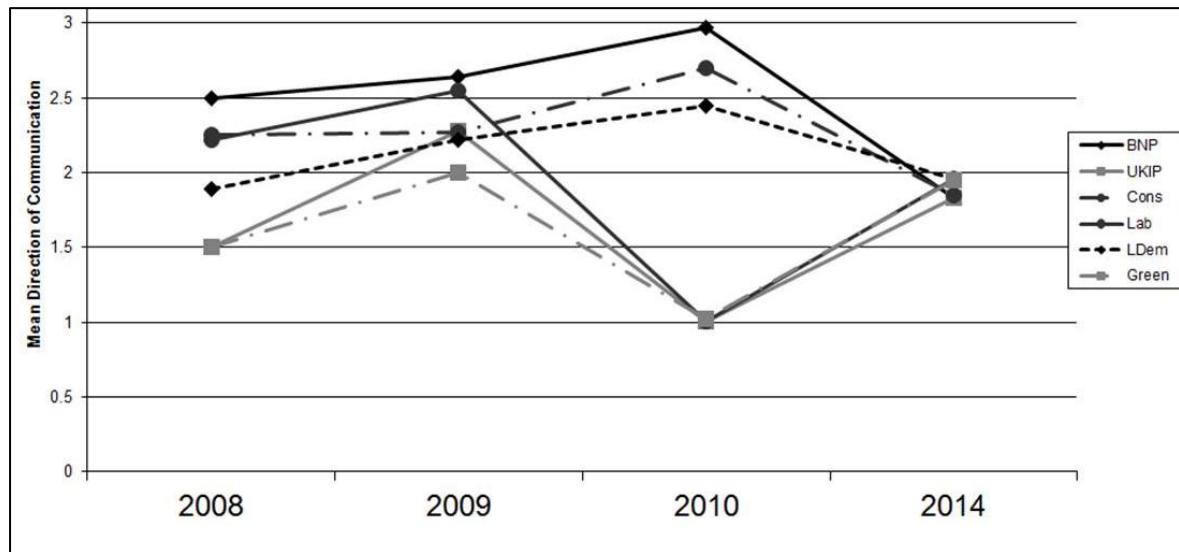


Figure 2: Mean User Control (low 1-10 very high) compared across contests 2008-2014

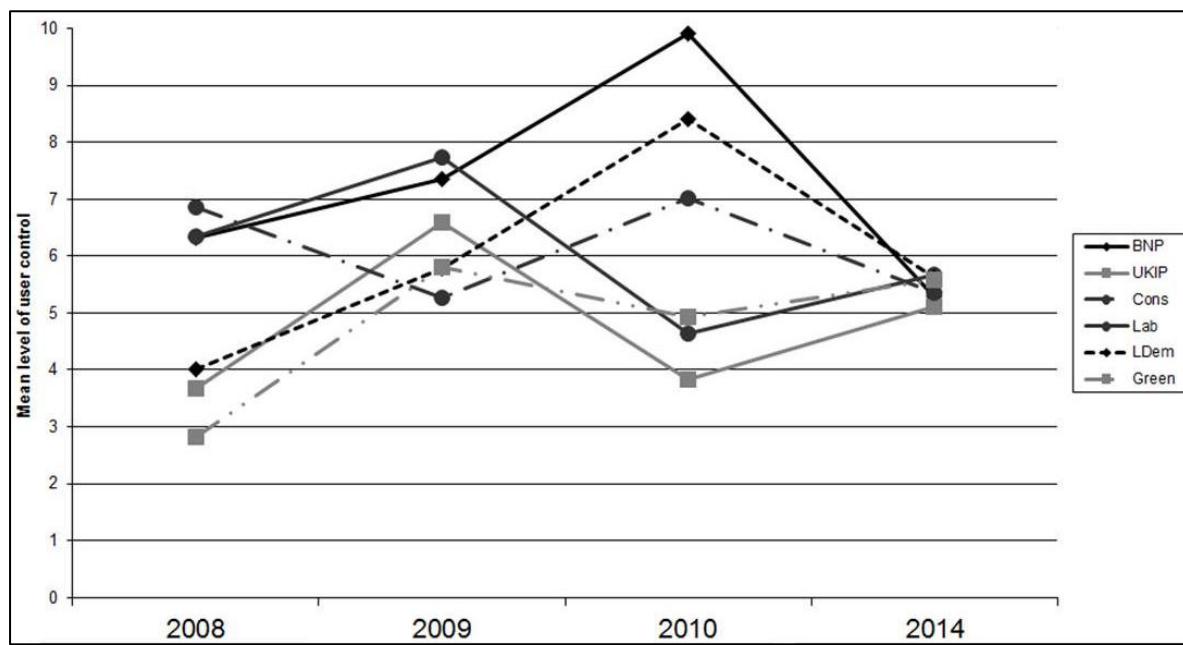


Table 1: Means scores, by communication means, by party

	News	TV Spots	Other Ads	Website	Email	Face-to-Face	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube
Cons	4.5	4.0	3.7	4.5	2.0	5.0	3.0	3.0	3.0
Lab	5.0	4.5	4.2	5.0	4.0	5.0	4.0	4.0	4.0
LibDem	5.0	3.0	3.2	4.0	5.0	5.0	4.0	3.0	3.0
UKIP	3.0	1.5	1.0	1.0	3.0	5.0	1.0	1.0	1.0
Green	3.0	1.0	2.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	3.0	4.0	5.0

Table 2: Social media reach by party

	Facebook		Twitter		YouTube	
Cons	223,180	(29)	113,649	(59)	6,953	(3)
Lab	176,979	(33)	141,419	(335)	7,360	(3)
LibDem	97,219	(26)	65,878	(482)	3,328	(11)
UKIP	219,285	(46)	62,494	(265)	19,802	(1)
Green	67,068	(46)	63,842	(578)	2,522	(17)
BNP	151,837	(86)	7,813	(181)	5,656	(9)

Table 3: Reach and visible support on Facebook

	Page Likes	Likes of Posts	Shares of Posts	Comments on Posts
Cons	223,180	10,325	4,130	5,741
Lab	176,979	41,917	16,767	10,858
LibDem	97,219	8,250	3,300	3,015
UKIP	219,285	91,480	60,987	50,292
Green	67,068	30,512	12,205	2,647
BNP	151,837	133,056	73,920	13,851