

Platform Speech: Facebook and Disintermediation in Three UK General Elections

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Abstract

Through interviews with top-level British political journalists and communications strategists, this paper explores use of Facebook as a campaign tool in the UK General Elections of 2015, 2017, and 2019. Findings demonstrate increasing sophistication in political actors' use of Facebook as a disintermediation device, bypassing the media to speak directly to voters. However, both sets of interviewees also expressed concern about effects of removing political gatekeepers on verification of information and accountability of information providers.

Keywords

disintermediation, elections, Facebook, gatekeeping, political communication, United Kingdom

In the early summer of 2007, the then-shadow leader of the UK House of Commons, Theresa May, sat down to answer questions from users of a new political blog, ConservativeHome.com. One of them asked how Parliament's website might be improved. After offering a few generalities, a politician not known for innovative thinking around digital zeroed in on something of fundamental importance. "The internet makes it much easier for politicians to communicate directly with voters," May said. "But this easier communication doesn't make it easier to control a message. On the contrary, the internet makes information easier to come by, but harder to control" (ConservativeHome.com, 2007).

Fast-forward ten years, and Prime Minister May is preparing to step from behind the black door of 10 Downing Street and call a snap election. Aides place a podium in front of the television cameras, sparking frenzied speculation on social media from journalists, constitutional experts, political observers, and citizens about the content of her speech – a real-time

conversation among political insiders and outsiders unimaginable a decade earlier. During the election campaign that followed, as well as those before it in 2015 and after it in 2019, politicians spoke directly to voters in increasingly sophisticated ways, controlling and shaping their campaign messages through use of digital platforms.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the evolution of political communication on Facebook across these three recent British general elections – in each of which the Conservative Party retained control of government – along with the impact on journalists of the disintermediation afforded by the social media platform. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with key campaigners and leading political journalists in Britain, it documents the changing strategies employed to directly reach and engage voters through social media and their implications for journalists' gatekeeping role in a democracy.

Literature Review: UK Politics and Social Media

The relationship between British politicians and the nation's press has been combative for centuries, from members of the "Fourth Estate" holding those with executive power to account in the 1700s (Hampton, 2010) to contemporary guidance from a former *Times* deputy editor to approach political interviews by asking: "Why is this lying bastard lying to me?" (Harcup, 2021). But as social media forms emerged in the 2000s and matured throughout the 2010s, British political actors realised they no longer needed to subject themselves to such hostility. They could curate their own audiences without relying on journalists to supply the megaphone – but, in the process, diluting, critiquing, and fact-checking the message. Using social media, politicians could frame messages to their own liking and, just as delicious, leave journalists little option but to follow their lead in setting the terms of the debate.

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

Maintaining clarity in this environment is not easy. The top-down message discipline of a broadcast era is impossible in modern campaigning, where strategy is formulated in response to continually changing quantitative data (Chadwick & Stromer-Galley, 2016). Political communication in a social age is simultaneously more targeted, because of vastly increased data gathering, and more distributed, thanks to widened participation in political debate via social platforms (Stromer-Galley, 2014). Jungherr (2016) suggested four key areas of campaign activity that benefit from digital tools, including identifying optimal resource allocation and developing an effective online presence; both are evident in political activities identified in the present study.

Election campaigning on social media has attracted voluminous scholarly attention (see, among many others, Bruns et al., 2016; Persily & Tucker, 2020; Stier et al., 2018). To take just one example of direct relevance here, Bossetta's (2018) study of the 2016 US election showed how a platform's network structure, functionality, and algorithms affected political actors' strategy in using social platforms, including Facebook and Twitter. Around the world, scholars

have explored the role of social media in agenda-setting in a Swiss election (Gilardi et al., 2022), the connection between Facebook performance and electoral success in Hungary (Bene, 2018), Twitter use by India's prime minister in the run-up to his most recent electoral victory (Rao, 2020) and more. Nailing down consistent or predictable effects, however, has proved challenging (Dimitrova & Matthes, 2018). In addition, a growing number of longitudinal studies have, like this one, sought to understand how use of social platforms evolves over multiple campaigns in democracies including Australia (Bruns, 2018), Denmark (Jensen & Schwartz, 2022), Sweden (Larsson & Moe, 2016), and the UK (Lilliker et al. 2016). The latter study, which traces activity to 2014, the year before the current work picks up, finds increasing experimentation and innovation, but also uncertainty about interaction and the ability to manage it.

More recent work in the UK has sought to understand the emotional appeal of political Facebook use in driving engagement and virality (Gerbaudo et al., 2019), particularly after the successful use of targeted Facebook advertising by the Conservatives in the 2015 general election and its effective deployment by and on behalf of Labour in 2017, helping fuel stronger-than-expected results for the opposition party (McLoughlin & Southern, 2021). In the 2019 election, researchers identified coordinated attempts by political activists and supporters of both main parties to promote campaign messages (Nizzoli et al., 2019), with the Conservatives especially keen to engage voters on issues traditionally viewed as Labour Party strengths, such as health care (Power & Mason, 2023). Both parties also used Facebook image posts to attack their opponents (Famulari, 2021). However, there has been little work done to compare the three recent UK general election campaigns, a gap this study seeks to address.

Literature Review: Gatekeeping and Disintermediation

The idea of the disintermediation of political communications is conceptually straightforward: Some political actors are highly active on social media, curating and speaking directly to their audiences via these platforms and thus removing the need for an interlocutor to interpret their meaning for the public. But the application of the proposition has proved harder to pin down. As Eldridge et al. (2019) argue, the idea that politicians speak to an integrated digital public sphere is incorrect. Audiences are constructed, and while information may flow easily between highly engaged individuals, it may have to travel a considerable distance to reach the persuadable. A politician may have a large social media following, but not all those followers are necessarily fellow citizens – or even real people at all (Cole, 2018).

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

As early as 1999, however, Blumler and Kavanagh perceived that political communication had entered a new age of media abundance, with an opportunity to increase active citizenship and to wrest control over political messages from the media. In the UK as elsewhere, journalistic gatekeepers have increasingly found themselves side-lined by other

actors. Early Web 2.0 tools such as blogs, followed by the explosion in social media, have empowered those outside the Westminster Village to cover and critique political actions, policies, personalities – and journalists. Perhaps not since the pamphleteers of the 18th century have self-published works had such an impact on the thinking of the political class. The digital grassroots revolution equalised power relationships in a way unmatched by other forms of disintermediated communication, such as the stump speech or constituency meeting.

Developments in the US in the 2010s also contributed to opening eyes in the UK. Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign explicitly set out to reach past what he saw as an inherently partial and liberal media to voters who felt disenfranchised and marginalised, not least through his use of social media. The success of this strategy for the “disintermediator in chief” (Morini, 2020) offered a lesson not lost on Britain's Labour Party, led into the 2017 general election by Jeremy Corbyn, who held similar appeal to the disaffected on the other end of the ideological spectrum (McTague & Cooper, 2017). Labour strategists in 2017 sought to marginalise an unsympathetic right-wing media and campaign directly to voters via digital communication. Two years later, Conservative Party leader Boris Johnson took a page from the same playbook, running a campaign of direct appeal through repeated Facebook posts calling for voters to back of him and his vision of Brexit.

As the present research shows, these approaches brought successes and failures. But it is undeniable that digital and especially social media have broken the once-symbiotic relationship between political media gatekeepers and their sources. By the period considered in this study, it was abundantly clear that digital technologies had been fundamentally disruptive (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018); while politician and press discourse may still take place on the front pages of newspapers, the discussion of policy increasingly takes place in atomised locations and in

disintermediated forms. Contemporary political activity is networked among candidates, supporters, and parties as well as the media (Kreiss, 2010; Williamson et al., 2010).

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

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

- * RQ1: What was the impact of social media on UK political journalism in these three elections?
- * RQ2: What was the impact of social media on UK political campaigning?
- * RQ3: How did social media campaigning in the UK change over time, from 2015 to 2019?
- * RQ4: How did UK political actors view the effects of disintermediation on their work?

Method

This exploratory study draws on semi-structured interviews with political campaigners and journalists covering the UK general elections of 2015, 2017, and 2019. These interviews shed light on the motivations, strategies, and role conceptions of political strategists and journalists in an era of communication disintermediation. Semi-structured interviews provide more rigour than unstructured interviews but more flexibility for the researcher to pursue interesting responses (Wilson, 2014). They are so widely used that they have been described as “the central resource through which the social sciences – and society – engages with the issues that concern it” (Brinkman, 2020, p.424).

Interviewees were identified using a purposive sampling technique that included background research, snowball sampling, and the recommendations of colleagues as people with expertise in the field. The 12 political interviewees had significant current or recent experience with UK digital campaigning at a national level for one of the two main British political parties, the Conservative Party and the Labour Party. The nine journalists had significant experience reporting on Westminster or leading newsgathering teams for national print, broadcast or digital outlets. All interviewees were provided with participant information and consent forms prior to their interviews, in line with university policy. Some but not all requested anonymity. However, for purposes of this paper, all respondents have been anonymised; use of the plural pronoun “they” rather than “he” or “she” has been used to further mask their identity. All interviewees are quoted at least once in the findings that follow.

Interviews lasted an average of 42 minutes, and most interviews were recorded using Zoom. Two interviews were conducted by phone, with quotes hand-written and interview transcripts created immediately after the call. Where there was recorded audio, Otter.ai was used

to transcribe the interviews. After multiple readings, interview transcripts were read multiple times by the lead author and were then coded thematically in line with grounded theory, which enables themes to emerge from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Findings: The Impact of Social Media on UK Political Journalism

Virtually everyone agreed that social media had a significant impact on political communication. All nine of the journalists interviewed felt they had to monitor social media in order to find stories and stay current with the day's debates, describing it as “effectively, a news wire,” as one political TV journalist said. “I think it's pretty much impossible in political journalism to not be lurking on Twitter, even if you've decided, perfectly reasonably, because you don't fancy a headache seven days a week, that you're not going to have much of an outward broadcasting presence on it.”

Several journalists highlighted practical ways that their jobs had changed. For instance, it has become much easier to obtain reactive quotes; gone is the need for “ringing up half a dozen people to get their initial reaction,” the same BBC journalist said. Now, “something happens, and they respond” online. There are obvious dangers, however. “Journalists got stuck watching accounts,” one interviewee with experience both in a newsroom and at 10 Downing Street said. “They don't get out and about and cover stories. It has meant that journalists, more and more often, don't get stories right. Journalism has lost its way.” Another political strategist agreed that journalists can become fixated on new developments and miss the deeper story. “The Westminster press still want to see the shiny thing. They still like the gossip, they still like the kind of smart-Alec stuff, and that's totally fine. That's currency in terms of Westminster journalism,” they said. “But it's not really where digital campaigning has been for a long time.” A broadcast journalist echoed the fear that social media use can supersede good reporting:

The danger is that people perhaps assume that [follow-up questions are] not necessary because “oh, look, they've tweeted about it.” Well, yeah, they have, but that's not subject to any scrutiny, and it's not subject to any inquiry because you're just swallowing what they've sent you, which is fine as an off-the-top-of-their-head instant reaction but shouldn't stand in the way of proper journalistic scrutiny.

Several journalists acknowledged that though Twitter is fast-paced and information-rich, the range of perspectives can be narrow. A columnist for a national newspaper put it this way:

I find using Twitter is a constant tussle between allowing your perspective to be influenced by what you know is a sample biased both in its views and temporally, that is very much biased towards the moment as against perspective. On the other hand, the fact is that you're using something that has a huge amount of reach, with both your peers and readers, and a big audience, and is a great source of information. So if the thought ever occurs to me to turn off social media, which it sometimes does because it can be very irritating, I remember how useful it can be to read.

It also can be treacherous, of course, as another communications expert highlighted:

You're watching it evolve in real-time on Twitter, which is kind of exciting and sort of interesting, up until you realise that it's led to a rise of misinformation and gossip and things being out there before they can be retracted. And it doesn't feel to me a lot like political journalism really adds much value. It feels like in a lot of cases, it makes it worse, not better.

Other interviewees echoed this concern about the temptation for journalists to repeat misinformation, or even disinformation, from social media. “During the Brexit referendum, there were all sorts of shit on social media. It was lying on an industrial scale,” a former No. 10 communications executive said, adding that the Leave campaign knew that evoking an image of massive waves of new immigrants to the UK “was gold dust. It didn't matter to them that it wasn't true.” And the pace of social media leaves little time for verification. “You'd start putting a call in to double source. But then one of the other journalists would have just stuck it up on Twitter,” explained a newspaper journalist. “The pool was already polluted because by the time you'd even tried to double-source anything, everyone else had already seen the other journalists

tweet it, while all the MPs were also hooked to their phones watching it ... At least there used to be a few stops. Now there's no friction on how it spreads around.”

The need to be engaged and engaging on social media was identified by many journalists, as was an underlying concern about the level of abuse that could result. “You will see a lot more calling out of journalists now from MPs for asking the wrong questions,” a journalist said. “And you see a lot of support for that position, and they know it. It does make life more difficult. But it's not a very healthy position to be in, is it? When you have a politician saying journalists are asking the wrong questions and rabble-rousing.”

Nor is there necessarily any accountability for what is said on social media, journalists said. “If it was on party leaflets, or on-the-record press conference briefings, you would immediately ring up the party chairman, chief whip, or whomever, and say ‘this is completely unacceptable’,” one said. “Now, who the hell are you ringing up? All these people who do this are not even necessarily party workers. They're just party supporters.”

Another journalist suggested that political campaigners use video on social media to control broadcasters’ access to sources and limit their ability to question political figures. They pointed to the practice of political actors releasing videos of statements and subsequently refusing to take part in broadcast interviews:

And then you are in a problematic situation because, as a broadcaster, if you don't broadcast that, then you're not going to get access to the prime minister's words that day. But if you do, you are setting a precedent where you are broadcasting content which has had no journalistic input, and so there's no scrutiny of it.

A newspaper journalist said growing social media sophistication in the political class also had made it tougher to get stories. “There was a sort of golden age of Twitter when not everyone was so used to it,” they said. “And now it's a bit harder to find people stepping out of line, and politicians tend to have a quite coordinated, disciplined message, which is good for them but not

much good for us.” However, a broadcaster warned against overestimating the importance of social media. “Although social media has absolutely galloped away in terms of its importance and its profile over the last ten years, broadcast media is still very, very important in getting the brand recognition out there,” they said. “It’s more powerful on the telly than it is on your phone.”

Interviews reflected a clear division between journalists and political actors regarding the platforms they considered important in their work. Journalists, particularly older ones, thought Twitter was vital for doing their jobs; political campaigners rated Facebook more highly.

“Covering politics at Westminster, Twitter is the main platform, both in terms of newsgathering and indeed as, bluntly, a brand builder,” a senior broadcaster said. But their younger, digital-native colleague highlighted the hybrid nature of news dissemination on social media. “Twitter is the first point, it’s where you’re mainly speaking to a load of insiders and political journalists,” they said. “But they might then post it on Facebook, or they might know someone who sent it through WhatsApp. [Twitter] is the first point in a distribution network.”

Looking to the future, many interviewees were downbeat, especially about newspapers. “It’s difficult not to be pessimistic about the future for journalism,” one said. “There are less people paying for it in the broad mainstream titles. But we shouldn’t get too romantic about the past. Most newspapers were campaign papers.” Others were more positive. A political communicator said good journalism still commands respect. “I think that the enduring things are pretty much the same, and the journalists that I rate, whose material I consume on Twitter, are the same ones that I would consume on any other media, broadly speaking,” they said. “They don’t have to be first all the time, but they’re fast, they’re well-sourced, they’re thought sufficiently reflective, that they are not just mouthpieces for something. They will take a step back even in the heat of a volatile situation.”

Findings: The Impact of Social Media on UK Political Campaigning

The political campaigners viewed social media as an essential weapon in their armoury, but all were wary of framing it as a magic bullet. They pointed to the importance of having a clear message on policy, a solid leadership vision, a good ground operation, and competent media performers among the top campaign team. The ability to convert “persuadable” swing voters to backers is crucial, one said: “You need to work out how you get people to change their views.” Social media can actually be a distraction from these key goals, “a platform on which to say shocking things.” Another digital campaigner agreed:

I think Twitter is a problem for political campaigns in this country, whether you're in them or reporting on them. It is the extent to which it has accelerated cycles, de-nuanced issues, and increased scandal politics, gotcha politics, fuck-up politics, whatever you want to call it. It's really damaging to the health of our campaigns. And I personally think that campaigns are a vital part of healthy democracies. ... The thinking of the campaign's leadership and the political strategy of a campaign is really dominated by media cycles, and media cycles are now dominated by Twitter cycles, and Twitter cycles are inherently toxic, short-term, and unhealthy.

Yet British political campaigners were convinced that in the UK, Twitter was a place mainly for Westminster gossip. One described it as a tool useful if you wanted to “make headlines, insert yourself into the news agenda.” But “one million views on Twitter was not important. One million views on Facebook was exciting.” Facebook was seen as by far the better platform for communicating with, and ideally persuading, voters. A former digital communications specialist at 10 Downing Street put it this way:

Twitter, for people in the political and comms world, I think, is the place of choice where people will go to engage with others in the same world. And that, I think, is the slight danger. It's a bit of an echo chamber in that it's a very good way of hearing others in that political world or from journalists' media world. But as [former Prime Minister] David Cameron once said, Twitter is not the same as the rest of the country.

Another political strategist said that with half the UK population on Facebook, and spending considerable time there, “it’s a no-brainer.” Those high levels of engagement on

Facebook, they said, could not be matched by Twitter, which they described as “much more an army of supporters with key messages, shaping, breaking stories, and using it for rapid rebuttal.” A political campaigner from the opposite end of the political spectrum agreed that “the bubbles are more pronounced” on Twitter, adding: “We had a huge impact on Twitter that didn't really seem to translate to a lot in the real world. I think we're viewing Twitter more these days as a way to talk to our supporters than to reach into the public.”

But political campaigners highlighted the ability of all social platforms to retain control of their message, sidestepping media gatekeepers, particularly in the overtly ideological British press. “Most newspapers are campaign papers. They want to reassure their readers that their worldview is correct,” one said. “Social media allows campaigns to go above and beyond a newspaper's filtering of the story through their own prism. Social media allows you to tell it straight. You can keep hitting the themes you know from your research.”

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

We served Facebook ads that said, “The Tories are cutting income tax for 26 million people; click here to find out how much you've saved.” ... That was just unbelievably powerful for us and enabled us to gather about a million email addresses also tied to postcodes, which enabled us to identify which of the voters lived in our target constituencies. And speak to them in a different way about their specific local issues. And I guess give them more focus and attention because they were the guys that were ultimately going to decide the election.

A Labour strategist agreed that while strong content that “people spontaneously want to share because it's good and they identify with it” was of greatest value, targeted advertising also mattered: “Organic is primary because you have to have that content. But to have the money to be able to pay to get it beyond your organic reach is so important. It can't be stressed enough.”

Other political campaigners disagreed about the importance of micro-targeting on Facebook, however. One Conservative interviewee expressed the view that its effectiveness in the 2015 campaign was in fact “massively over-hyped.” More important, they said, was that the campaign “placed digital communication in context, important but just one tool among many.” Others pointed out that political outriders, social media users with large online followings, also were important message carriers. The same Conservative strategist ruefully agreed:

In 2017, if I recall correctly, the most shared video was of doctors just basically filming pieces to camera, all cut together, saying, “Whatever you're doing in this election, do not vote Conservative.” I gotta tell you, I watched that video, and they almost had me. I mean, that's great, great, great stuff, but it's really only stuff that you can make at best, at arm's length and in an ideal world, genuinely independently. Because it's compelling. It's real. It's emotive. It's persuasive.

The ability to communicate directly with voters also had down sides. A Labour respondent pointed to the danger of reaching only existing supporters: “We ended up talking to [party] members when we should have been talking to the country,” they said. The rapid pace of social media and the need to maintain a continuous narrative – often with stories that have little impact on voters’ lives – also were problems. “Everyone who works in communications at Downing Street quickly comes to understand that you have to fill the vacuum or have it filled for you,” said an interviewee with experience there. “The increased speed means nuance and argument are lost. Where do people get the time to stop and reflect?”

Interviewees also pointed to the importance of using video on social media to address supporters directly. Appearances on legacy broadcast news shows could be edited down and turned into powerful social media clips, for instance, then assessed for effectiveness through analytics. “Whenever we put out a video, we know within the first 10 minutes if it's going to do well, based on the shares per minute,” one said. “If it's 10, we're happy. Five or lower, it's a failure. Twenty, it's a success”. But there's a catch, another strategist warned:

I think the use of metrics is really important. And when people learn how to start using metrics, you gain the advantage, the same in sport. But then everyone else started doing it, and it became less important. And one of the problems with politics compared to sport is, sport tests itself and tests its theories every week. And we generally test them every three or four years, on average. And therefore, failure or bullshit takes a lot more time to work through the system.

Findings: Changes in Social Media Campaigning Over Time

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

One Conservative strategist said message discipline was a crucial element of their party's success in 2015, especially around the key theme of the economy. "Our stuff sometimes took a bit of a beating in the press for being quite focused, shall we say," they said. "Some people would say it was one-dimensional, it was dry, it was boring. But we were sticking to the plan and constantly sticking to this narrative and trying to find new and interesting ways to tell that story – but never veering away from the story." However, not everyone was convinced of the brilliance, given the Brexit results little more than a year later. As one doubter said:

I'm a little bit sceptical because I think all those people that held themselves up as messiahs and incredible campaigners were also the ones who were on the wrong end of the [European] referendum a year and a half later. They viewed themselves as being untouchable and that they knew what was going on, and then they were demonstrably caught with their pants down a short time afterwards. I guess my scepticism would suggest that a lot of people talk a good game about campaigns as though it's all seamless and logical and works according to a playbook. I think there's probably a bit more luck involved in it than that.

Success on Facebook patently did not equate to success at the ballot box, either, as a Labour Party digital strategist pointed out. Their party's digital team had "tremendous success in the space that they were trying to have success in" in 2015, which was recruiting and mobilising supporters to share digital content, to donate to the campaign, and to volunteer. But their

opponents were more successful where it counted: reaching “persuadable voters with persuasive content.” Labour failed to gain enough votes for control of Parliament.

There were several innovations in 2015. The parties made extensive use of viral videos, especially attack ads, for the first time, though one of the strategists responsible denied importing US-style negativity: “I always tried to make it a joke. I don't do negative campaigning. I do contrast campaigning, trying to present a contrast.”

Perhaps most important, at least from the victorious Conservative perspective, was that the 2015 campaign – unlike the two that followed – provided plenty of time for digital campaigners to plan a strategy: roughly two years, one strategist said, “to test and measure and learn and make the case internally for the resources and the budgets that we needed. In 2017, we got called up the day before they called the election.”

That 2017 campaign took Labour, in particular, in an entirely new direction. Having fought two party leadership campaigns in two years, Jeremy Corbyn had learnt to use social media to get his messages across to supporters, adroitly circumventing the traditional Westminster lobby, which he saw as hostile. Those techniques would now be applied to a general election campaign. A political journalist described the strategy:

He very early on started using YouTube to get his message out and putting things on Facebook. ... He used that during the 2017 campaign to great effect. We got used to Jeremy Corbyn, instead of doing the old regular interviews with the BBC or pooled interviews with Sky, he would literally just sit in front of the camera and give his message and just put it straight out there.

But there were visible tensions between the party and its leader, whose digital teams worked with different personnel in different locations. Another former journalist said the use of social media both to campaign and as a reservoir of support posed dangers for the Labour Party,

In 2017, Corbyn showed that he could use the alt-left army to insulate himself from traditional media. The attacks that they were making were actually to defend him against

traditional media. But there's a terrible danger of being in this bubble when all you're hearing are supportive left voices, and you don't quite understand why everyone doesn't regard Jeremy as this sort of embodiment of all that's good in the world.

The Conservatives, on the other hand, struggled with the very obvious fact that their candidate, the sitting prime minister, was as weak on social media as Corbyn was strong. One journalist highlighted the issue:

There is a language for social media, just like there is for tabloid newspapers. And you have to speak it, and you have to have people who are willing to jump in on your side. ... In 2015 and 2019, there were real people who supported the government's position, which there weren't in 2017. There was nobody who really supported Theresa May. Because social media relies on troops who are on your side, because it's a peer-to-peer mechanism, it doesn't work if you don't have enthusiasm.

Several other journalists pointed to 2017 as a turning point in digital politics. Many factors come into play during an election, but it was undeniable that “social media sentiment was overwhelmingly pro-Labour,” as one former reporter put it. “There was a massive social media noise around Labour policies.” The party did much better on Election Day than expected, albeit not well enough to command a majority in Parliament. Other journalists, however, felt social media over-emphasised Labour’s popularity, which ultimately did the party no good:

Video became a big thing. Every Corbyn rally you went to, it was a sea of phones; it was like going to a gig. And that changed the way that it was reported. In a way, it was responsible for the way that election was reported because it was the first time we'd ever encountered a wave of instant reaction to a politician like that. And I think it led some people to believe that there was more to Corbyn's campaign than perhaps there was, ultimately. I think it gave a sense that he was much more popular and had much more of a chance than perhaps polling would have told you.

If the impetus in digital campaigning had shifted from the Conservatives in 2015 to Labour in 2017, 2019 was a reminder that no party can stop innovating in a fast-changing political environment. Several interviewees pointed to stagnation in Labour’s approach to digital campaigning, despite an increase in staff from the previous campaign, also suggesting the Tories had been forced to innovate to address their earlier shortcomings. In 2019, the Conservatives ran

a campaign focusing on the virality of core messages – notably “Get Brexit Done” – and flattering comparisons of Johnson to Corbyn, capitalising on what one strategist described as “the very unique personality and charisma of Boris Johnson, who's just an asset.”

Labour, in contrast, struggled to engage voters beyond its already-committed base. A Labour campaign strategist said the party made a mistake in going down “the microtargeting route completely,” a mistake the Conservatives avoided. A political journalist agreed Labour was super-serving only a small proportion of the electorate, which failed to translate into much of an impact on polling day. “It was very much about hammering home messages to people who were already on board with them,” they said, “not necessarily doing enough to reach beyond their own core metropolitan base.”

Another journalist highlighted the importance of message discipline as a factor in 2019.

The Conservatives had it, they said. Labour, not so much:

It doesn't really matter how you communicate [your message], as long as you do it across platforms. And you repeat it. Like when we were going on campaign visits in the North, and there were people who had never voted Conservative before who were repeating their messaging, almost as if they had been briefed by the Tory Party. And I'd never seen anything like that before. ... It was almost word for word. And it's that repetition everywhere he went; it was that repetition. It was on the side of a bus. It was on Twitter. It was on every video that they made. And I suppose that's how you sell a campaign, isn't it? Whereas I think the Corbyn campaign struggled with that, their manifesto had too much in it. They couldn't find it. They couldn't find a clear line, and they certainly couldn't communicate it.

A Labour campaign consultant sheepishly admitted that in trying to use Facebook to talk about a lot of different policies in 2019 – as opposed to the Conservatives’ near-laser focus on Brexit – the overall message got lost:

Everything revolved around policy. And the whole grid was about fitting in all these different policy announcements that we had to slot in. And the effect of having too many key messages, no narrative, and so many policy announcements was the impression was created that we'd gone policy mad. Which, to some extent, was right.

Several other interviewees also noted the failure to capitalise on the success of the 2017 digital campaign; one former digital strategist described the Labour Facebook campaign in 2019 as not “particularly ambitious or decisive.” A former Corbyn communications aide said that while the amount of Facebook sharing in 2017 had been “really extraordinary,” it seemed to “plateau” in 2019. They attributed the lack of momentum to inadequate investment, strife between the leader’s office and the party headquarters, plus a drop in Corbyn’s popularity. “If your model is based on organic rather than paid sharing, and you're not as popular as you were, it stands to reason you're not going to travel as far,” they said.

Besides that, their Conservative opponents considerably upped their game, particularly in terms of the aggression level. Indeed, one journalist described it as a “street-fighting” approach, led by “young bucks” on the social media team imported from New Zealand for the campaign:

They'd probably not been trained as journalists, matching the need to actually fact-check things and actually be honest about things. But what was interesting was when they got things wrong was how willing ministers were to back them up and not criticise. ... The Tories just weren't that bothered that they got into trouble for what they'd done. They just thought, 'Okay, it's all part of the cut and thrust, everyone's going to have moved on in two hours' time'. And that's sort of what happened.

A veteran Conservative strategist preferred to describe the young campaign strategy recruits as “mischief-making,” saying they were:

Definitely more mischievous than we ever would have been. I think that probably reflects the way that digital campaigns may be going. ... Every time I saw that campaign being criticised for being reductive, I just thought, 'This is criticism coming from people who just don't get it. This is actually being run really well.'

A newspaper reporter agreed that in 2019, the Conservatives showed a much clearer understanding of online culture than before. Citing the Tory campaign’s use of memes and a distinctly undignified Comic Sans font – itself a sly joke that only the digitally savvy were likely to get (Garfield, 2010) – they said:

They have a sense of humour, right? They were looking at people like me writing stories about how they were doing bad memes, and then just decided to start putting it out. Can you imagine two 25-year-olds with access to the Tories' account just tweeting stuff in Comic Sans and waiting for a load of angry left-wing people to go, 'This is bizarre.' I mean, they're just messing.

Another journalist agreed that use of a font that was “obviously an Internet joke” enabled the party to reach – and amuse – an audience that otherwise would probably never see messaging from the Conservative Party:

It's only going to appeal to a niche group of people. But for the people that saw it and thought it was funny, it got retweeted by accounts that would never have retweeted Tory messaging. And that was all they wanted. They didn't mind if it were taking the mick out of the font because their message was being repeated into loads of people's timelines.

Findings: From Gatekeeping to Disintermediation

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

With political journalists already treating social media as “an official primary source” for newsgathering, political communicators quickly realised that it also was a direct communications tool “with the outside world,” as a TV reporter said. “You can bung it out directly yourself. In that sense, you can cut out the middleman.” Other interviewees also highlighted the declining power of political journalists to control the flow of information, acknowledging that social media accounts with substantial followers could force stories onto the agenda and that political

journalists would then follow the lead of sources they frankly might not previously have considered at all. The same broadcast journalist put it this way:

Does that mean that the power and influence of mainstream broadcast journalism has diminished a bit? Well, I think the honest answer to that is 'yes'. I can't see how you could answer that any other way, given that people have this direct means of communication. But at the same time, our job as scrutineers of politics and the political process remains just as important, if not greater, because you still have to be asking those questions, seeking to hold people to account. But does it make it easier for politicians to avoid the scrutiny? The honest answer to that is 'yes.'

Another broadcaster declared there is “still a huge demand for vetting,” though admitted that the value of impartial political journalism had risen at precisely the time that many citizens were losing trust that broadcasters were in fact impartial, as mandated by Ofcom (2021). Nonetheless, they said, political actors remain cognizant of broadcasters’ power. “They are more bothered about what we say on broadcast than ever before. If they see anything or perceive anything to be incorrect or want it changed, they will be very quick to highlight that and to ask questions of it,” they said. “So they clearly do still care. I mean, they still watch.” A third broadcaster said: “Politicians need the validation of a brand to say, ‘Yeah, this guy's telling the truth.’ And of course, the downside of that is when they're not, we'll call them out for it. But they need the validation of that. The validation is an important function of what we do.”

Political strategists also highlighted the changing relationship between campaigners and the press, but placed the emphasis more on the benefits of disintermediation. A former No. 10 communications director admitted that speaking directly to voters was a key driver of their approach to social media from the start, ultimately convincing their boss – who saw social media as “a playground for narcissists” and liked to say that “too many tweets make a twat” – of the benefits of going “above and beyond the journalists [to] deliver your message unmediated.”

Journalists, unsurprisingly, were articulate about the down-sides of disintermediation. “You can completely make stuff up, and you can reach your followers directly without us or other reporters or anyone having to fact check it,” one said. A broadcaster returned to the potential for even small political players to influence debates through social media:

I think there's a savviness amongst politicians that even if they don't have a vast number of followers, and those that do follow them may be vastly atypical of their electorate, then they will have lots of people in political journalism following them. And so it is a direct communication device through which they can get messages out that in the past they might have been forced to communicate via back channels and more subtle ways, whereas now they can just do it. They can just do it directly.

But some political campaigners said the fact that “mainstream political journalists are no longer mediating” was partly their own fault, citing audience disengagement as the quality of political journalism declined and journalists spent more time “pumping out” information, especially on social media, than serving as thoughtful gatekeepers:

[Political journalists are] no longer judging and weighing things and trying to interpret. ... To some extent, the mainstream media and traditional political journalism have become a prisoner of social media. So competition for clicks, shares, and followers, I think, is distorting their capacity to do the thing that potentially mainstream journalism could do, which is to be the antidote to the worst excesses of social media.

On the other hand, some political strategists said the Westminster lobby of political reporters, in particular, remained “really influential” – and therefore remained needed.

You still need the media. Ideally, you want a good comms strategy which would be multi-faceted. On the day of a policy launch, you'd want strong social media, op-eds ... and you'd want people with human stories for broadcast. So it's not true that you don't need the media. Remember, lots of voters don't engage with social media. But it should be part of a multi-faceted comms strategy. Plus you want something on social media that's so good that it leaks into traditional media.

Discussion

The quotes above encapsulate the lessons about the use of social media in political discourse, and its impact on both political journalism and political campaigning, that leading

British political communications strategists and journalists took away from the three general election campaigns in 2015, 2017, and 2019. Some topics generated significantly different perspectives, while others yielded a surprising amount of agreement – both between parties, and between journalists and communications strategists. All felt it was vital to be engaged on social media, for example. But they differed over which platform should take priority; journalists rated Twitter highly, while political campaigners focused on Facebook. Their preferences reflect their goals: Political campaigners want to reach persuadable voters and appreciate the reach of Facebook, but journalists are more interested in content sourcing and distribution. Over time, both parties became more sophisticated in using Facebook for their purposes, though various interviewees suggested that Labour, in particular, did not put the lessons learned to optimal use.

Not surprisingly, campaigners and journalists also disagreed about the effects of disintermediation. Journalists were particularly attuned to the dangers, particularly in the avoidance of fact-checking and more general scrutiny of political messages – including viral ones with the potential to reach many people very fast – during an election campaign. Campaigners, on the other hand, were generally pleased by the ability to circumvent journalistic scrutiny and reach voters directly – even if their strategies for doing so during the three election campaigns studied here varied considerably, as did their ultimate success in translating that reach to turnout at the polls. Yet they also expressed, sincerely or not, regret that journalism had, as one communications specialist put it, “lost its way.” Although it didn’t stop them trying to manipulate and bypass journalists, they seemed almost disappointed at how well they succeeded.

The journalists in this study, for their part, mostly continued to cling to the perhaps increasingly illusory belief that they serve an important role in democracy: verifying information and holding power to account. They certainly recognised what the communications strategists

were doing, but few of these seasoned journalists at major national news outlets offered an effective counter-strategy. Several said that investigation, “vetting,” and analysis were more important than chasing “shiny things” on social media – but they didn’t say they were ready to abandon the chase. Instead, it was hard to argue with the charge from many of the political strategists interviewed here that political journalists in the UK were failing to live up to their own standards or to fulfil their normative role in democratic society. Instead, they were allowing themselves to be sucked into the fast pace and gossipy nature of social media when their time would be much better spent – and their value much more evident – if they focused on reporting.

This study of course has many limitations. Although the Conservatives’ on-the-ground strategy in 2019, in particular, was to meet with local journalists on trips outside London, only national-level journalists were interviewed here. Nor were communications strategists from the smaller parties included; follow-up work, including of the next election in 2024, should encompass the social media activities of parties that typically struggle to be heard in the mainstream media, such as the Greens and the Liberal Democrats. And needless to say, political Facebook posts should be considered – as actually was done in conjunction with the interviews reported here, though obviously not included in this paper.

Nonetheless, this exploratory study provides unique longitudinal insight into the evolution of social media strategies by political actors in the UK, part of an increasingly disintermediated communications environment in which even experienced and savvy journalists are struggling to enact their watchdog role or even to see how they might effectively do so. The explosion in use of AI technologies since the last election studied here will make the challenges they face even more difficult, and the “lying bastards” and their lies even harder to identify. There will be much to study, and the knowledge gained from doing so will be much-needed.

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