

Party Platform:

Disintermediated Campaigning on Facebook in Three UK General Elections

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This paper explores the use of Facebook as a campaign tool in the UK General Elections of 2015, 2017, and 2019. Through a content analysis of Facebook accounts of British political parties and their leaders, plus interviews with key political journalists and communications specialists, it demonstrates increasing sophistication in political actors' use of Facebook as a disintermediation device, bypassing the media to speak directly to voters.

In recent years, election campaigning on social media has been the subject of considerable study (Stier et al., 2018). There has been significant academic interest in how politicians use social media platforms to communicate with the electorate (Anstead and Chadwick, 2010; Bimber, 2014; Borah, 2016; Chadwick and Stromer-Galley, 2016; Hendricks and Schill, 2017; Miller, 2013). As Stier et al. (2018) argue, much of this interest has focused on using Twitter (latterly X.com) and, to a lesser extent, Facebook.

Early studies of political Facebook use in the United States looked to understand candidates' use of the platform through content analysis and coding of the focus, emotional tone of a post, or meta-data around engagement (Borah, 2016). Similarly framed studies looking at UK elections have also sought to understand the emotional appeal of political Facebook use in driving engagement and virality (Gerbaudo et al., 2019). Lilleker et al. (2015) found that the UK's system of first-past-the-post elections led to a hybrid approach combining elements of European electoral systems and the presidential campaigning approach in the United States. These models led to an initial focus on party campaign approaches – marked more by caution than a desire to innovate (Lilleker et al., 2015) – rather than a personality-led communications style. While the UK parties gradually enabled participatory campaigns via digital media, they were initially reluctant to engage with voters through

social media. This study will show that this approach changed as digital election campaign methodologies matured on Facebook. However, this study will also show that interactivity remains low on the parties' list of priorities for the use of digital media, with influence still sought through the broadcasting of key messages on social platforms, amplified using high-profile supporters.

Other studies have revealed that social media deliver a wide range of functions during election campaigns. They can be used to frame issues to voters (e.g. Banks et al., 2021), to persuade potential converts (e.g. Gil de Zuniga et al., 2018), to motivate supporters (e.g. Schaub and Morisi, 2020), or to create political commentary (e.g. Grant et al., 2010). In the UK, the range of studies published since the mid-2010s, the period also covered by the present research, has been extensive, partly because of the significant number of elections and the impact of 2016's Brexit referendum on British politics. Scholars examining UK election activity since 2015 have found an increasing sophistication, with campaigns making significant use of media logic to frame political communication (Chadwick, 2017; Chadwick and Vaccari, 2019). Others have examined the development of satellite campaigns that help drive virality in political communication (Dommett and Temple, 2018; Hotham, 2021).

As Jungherr (2023) argues, despite a growing number of studies examining digital media use by political parties, more needs to be revealed about the strategic use of digital media, their organisational embedding, or their effects on campaign goals. The literature requires greater use of mixed methods research to analyse empirical evidence and understand strategic intention alongside theory building. Jungherr suggests that some of the richest accounts stem from the insights of participants and consultants (Bond and Exley, 2016; Pearlman, 2012; Therriault, 2016) or journalists (e.g. Edelman, 2020) but warns that these accounts need to be critically interrogated. Although acknowledging observational approaches -- such as embedded participatory observation (Baldwin-Philippi, 2015; Nielsen, 2012) or interview-based ethnography (e.g. Dommett et al., 2021a; 2021b;

Kreiss, 2012) – and practitioner-based meta-accounts (Stromer-Galley, 2014) are useful.

The concepts of disintermediation and reintermediation (Katz, 1988; 2003) have had a significant history in communications theory, relating to the moments when a new information provider disrupts an existing one. In digital political communication, conceptually, this is a straightforward proposition: some political actors are highly active on social media, curating their audiences and speaking directly to them via Twitter, Facebook, and others. In doing so, they are removing the need for an interlocutor to interpret their meaning for the public. However, the application of the proposition has proved harder to pin down. Eldridge et al. (2019) argue that the idea that politicians speak to an integrated digital public sphere is incorrect. Followings are constructed, and while information may flow easily between highly engaged individuals, the distance it may have to travel to reach the persuadable may be considerable. Even in circumstances where a politician has a large social media following relative to the population size of their nation, it is not the case that all their followers are fellow citizens or even real (Cole, 2018). For example, Donald Trump used his Twitter following to speak directly to supporters. However, he also exercised an intermedia agenda-setting power through journalists who hung on his every tweet, reaching their audiences and his own (Lewandowsky et al., 2020).

However, the ease of frictionless sharing of political memes on Facebook demonstrates that a post can easily be shared with an audience that would not typically have seen that political message. A group of strong party supporters might share content supporting policy proposals. Through organic sharing, that content can be passed via a network of weak ties to supporters of other political parties or floating voters who would not otherwise have seen those messages. The spillover of what might have started as targeted communication would have a greater impact by influencing the undecided rather than merely bolstering the committed. Indeed, Wojcieszak and Mutz (2009) argue that the politically unengaged may be more likely to engage with content on social media as it is not explicitly

seen as being politically motivated, increasing the chance that they will be exposed to unfamiliar views.

Considering these ideas alongside Katz and Lazarsfeld's work on influence and thought leadership indicates the potential for significant media effect through a social network's ability to pass information through weak ties (Granovetter, 1973). As this study shows, this concept of spillover influence would underpin campaign approaches in 2017 by the Labour Party and the Conservatives in 2019, as the parties sought to maximise the political impact of organic sharing through social media. Other studies have also found that people who find political information online are likely to discuss it with others (Norris and Curtice, 2008; Vaccari, 2013). Two-step flow communication on social media can influence voting behaviour through politicians sharing information with their followers (Choi, 2015; Velasquez, 2012) or opinion leaders sharing content within their networks (Harrigan et al., 2021; Weeks et al., 2017). Social media users are more likely to engage with political information shared by close connections; they trust opinion leaders' posts (Anspach (2017); Turcotte et al., 2015). The spillover effect and connection through weak ties may expose users to political information for which they were not explicitly searching (Vaccari and Valeriani, 2015).

Thus, this study will tackle two research questions:

RQ1: How did UK political actors use Facebook as a disintermediation tool during the 2015, 2017, and 2019 general election campaigns?

RQ2: What impact did UK political campaigners and journalists believe social media had on journalism in these campaigns?

Methodology

This exploratory study draws on content analysis of Facebook datasets and semi-structured interviews with political campaigners and journalists covering the 2015, 2017, and 2019 UK general

elections. Facebook was chosen as the focal platform because the parties – particularly but not exclusively the Conservatives (Ross, 2015) – overwhelmingly favoured it over Twitter; Facebook also enjoyed much higher audience usage in the UK during the study period (Digital 2020 UK, 2020).

A sequential explanatory design approach was taken, with the initial quantitative phase followed by the qualitative one (Ivankova et al., 2006), to explore the use and impact of disintermediated political communication effectively. Understanding political actors' motivations, intentions, and Facebook strategies yields a more complete answer to the research questions than quantitative analysis of social media posts alone would allow. Its longitudinal structure further facilitated the understanding of changing approaches over time (Ployhart & Vanderberg, 2009).

Berelson (1952), a pioneer of content analysis in social science research, usefully described it as “a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication” (p. 18). The method enables the systematic and replicable analysis of communication messages by assigning them to categories according to rules (Riffe et al., 2019). It has been widely used as a tool for understanding political communication (see Benoit, 2013; Burnham et al., 2008; Graber and Smith, 2005; Neuendorf and Kumar, 2017), including via social media (see Magin et al., 2016; Stier et al., 2018). In another example relevant to this study, Heiss et al. (2018) used tonal and rhetorical style coding to content analyse Facebook posts by Austrian politicians outside of an election period, exploring techniques used to drive engagement.

This study captured two sets of Facebook posts – by the UK political parties’ main Facebook account and by party leaders’ public Facebook account – in 2015, then replicated the sample in 2017 and 2019. The content was screen-captured along with any relevant metadata visible to the viewer, such as the number of shares or video views. In addition, every video, animation, or other multimedia content publicly available on Facebook was recorded using Screen-o-matic.com. Facebook’s CrowdTangle tool, which monitors post engagement, also was used to assess public reaction to

politicians' use of Facebook.

For the 2015 campaign, data were captured in the weeks after the election. In the 2017 and 2019 elections, all posts were recorded within three days of publication using screen grabs and video recordings. In all, 8,389 Facebook posts were coded in the sample.

During the 2015 election campaign, the sampled parties were the Conservatives, Greens, Labour, Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru, Scottish Nationalists and UKIP – broadly in line with Ofcom's (2015) definition of the main parties for television airtime purposes. Ofcom did not define the Green Party as a major party, but it was included here because party leaders participated in televised debates during the study period. The selection of parties remained the same in 2017 and 2019, with one exception: By 2019, UKIP was no longer a viable party and was replaced in the sample by the Brexit Party, which had become home to many UKIP defectors.

Facebook data for this study was drawn from the short campaign plus polling day. The "short campaign" is the period between the dissolution of a Parliament and the election of its replacement. This period generally is 25 working days, though national holidays can create variations. The sample period for the three campaigns in this study is shown in **Table 1**.

Election campaign	Sample period
2015	30th March to 7th May
2017	3rd May to 8th June
2019	6th November to 12th December

Table 1: "Short campaign" period for the most recent UK General Elections

Note that three UK public holidays – Good Friday, Easter Monday, and the early May Bank Holiday Monday – lengthened the 2015 General Election short campaign period. There also was a public holiday during the 2017 campaign, the late May Bank Holiday Monday.

Directed content analysis (Assarroudi et al., 2018; Kibwisa, 2019) was used to establish initial coding categories, but the final coding manual was the result of an inductive process that involved examining the political Facebook posts, empirically identifying categories, and then adjusting those categories in response to a dataset that evolved, particularly as new policy issues emerged. The codebook went through nine iterations before the final version was used to code the entire data universe. A second coder was involved in two rounds of coding iteration, with intercoder reliability tests performed after the second round. Krippendorff (2004) suggests values of more than 0.800 should provide reassurance of reliability in content analysis. This was achieved for all but two of the domains, rhetorical style (0.758 agreement, using Scott's Pi) and strategic function (0.601). Given the politically nuanced nature of these categories as well as their situated context within each of the three campaigns studied, this relatively low level of agreement was deemed acceptable for the purposes here. A list of domains used for coding the Facebook data in this study, along with their definitions, is provided in **Appendix A**.

In addition to this quantitative assessment of the Facebook posts of UK political parties and their leaders during each of the three General Election campaigns, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key political actors in the summer of 2020. Qualitative interviews add context and insight to the quantitative data, shedding 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 (Renner, 2001; 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). Numerous other scholars have used them in conjunction with content analysis of political social media posts, as here, for instance examining candidates' personalised social media campaigns (Enli and Skogerbo, 2013) and the structure of presidential digital campaigns across different platforms (Bossetta, 2018).

Interviewees were identified using purposive sampling technique that included background research, snowball sampling, and the recommendations of colleagues as people with expertise in the field, as shown in **Table 2**. The 12 political interviewees had a significant current or recent experience with UK digital campaigning at a national level; the nine journalists had significant experience reporting on Westminster or leading newsgathering teams, with selected interviewees reflecting broadcast, print, and digital political journalism. All interviewees were provided with participant information and consent forms prior to their interviews, in line with university policy. Four of the interviewees requested anonymity – two journalists, and one campaigner each of the Labour Party and Conservative Party digital teams.

Name	Role
Tom Baldwin	Former Director of Communications for Ed Miliband
Emil Charlaff	Head of digital media at Momentum
Conservative respondent one	A senior party worker on the digital campaign
Joey D'Urso	Former BBC and <i>Buzzfeed</i> reporter covering media and politics
Daniel Finkelstein	Conservative peer and columnist at <i>The Times</i>
Steve Howell	Former Deputy Director of Communications for the Labour Party
Joey Jones	Former Deputy Political Editor, Sky News, and spokesperson for Theresa May
Journalist respondent one	A senior television news political producer
Journalist respondent two	A senior digital journalist covering politics
Giles Kenningham	Former Director of Communications at the Conservative Party
Labour respondent one	A senior party worker on the digital campaign
Chris Mason	Political Editor, BBC News (Political correspondent at the time of interview)
Kate McCann	Political Editor, Talk TV (Political correspondent at Sky News at the time of interview)
Matthew McGregor	Former Labour Party digital advisor and aide to the Obama 2012 campaign
Jonathan Munro	Interim CEO, BBC News (Head of Newsgathering at the time of interview)
Paul Nicholson	Content manager at Momentum
Sir Craig Oliver	Former Director of Communications for David Cameron
Laura Parker	Former Private Secretary for Jeremy Corbyn and National Organiser for Momentum
Anthony Simon	Former head of digital at 10 Downing Street
Jim Waterson	Media Editor, <i>The Guardian</i>
Esther Webber	UK correspondent, <i>Politico</i> (Editor of Red Box at <i>The Times</i> at the time of interview)

Table 2: Interviewees and their roles.

Note: quotes are attributed to the role at time of interview

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 coded thematically in line with grounded theory, which enables themes to emerge from the data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The Findings address the research questions by integrating data drawn from both the content analysis of Facebook posts and interviews with political actors.

Findings:

The data from the three election campaigns show a clear development in digital campaigning by the political parties. As shown in **Figure 1** the Labour Party, Conservatives, and Liberal Democrats published far more frequently in 2019 than in previous elections. Under Theresa May in 2017, the Conservatives did not campaign heavily on Facebook. Thus, the change to 2019 was marked. While the SNP posted less in 2019 than in 2017, there was still an increase on 2015. The Green Party posted less often in 2017 and 2019 than in 2015, as did Plaid Cymru. The Brexit Party posted more often in 2019 than UKIP in 2015 or 2017.

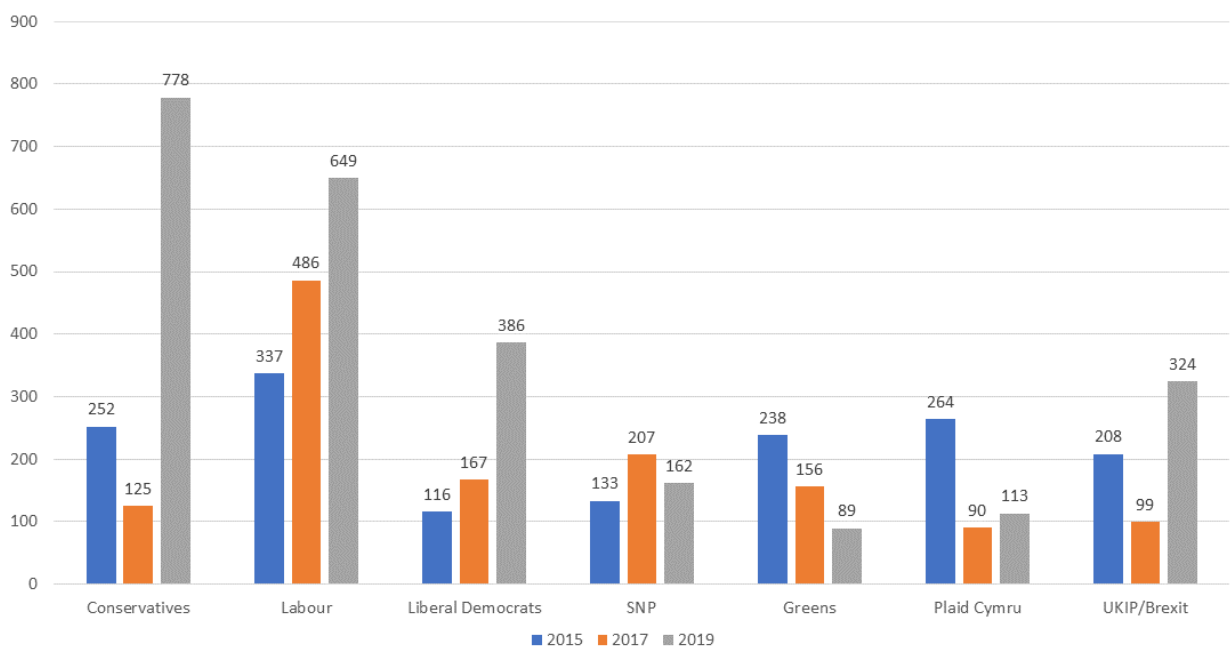


Figure 1: Party posts in each election ($n=5,379$)

The pattern of posting behaviour is not dissimilar for the main parties' leaders, as seen in **Figure 2**. The Conservatives and Labour leaders posted more frequently in 2019 than in earlier elections. For other party leaders, enthusiasm generally waned over time; 2015 marked a high point for the Greens, UKIP/Brexit, and Plaid Cymru.

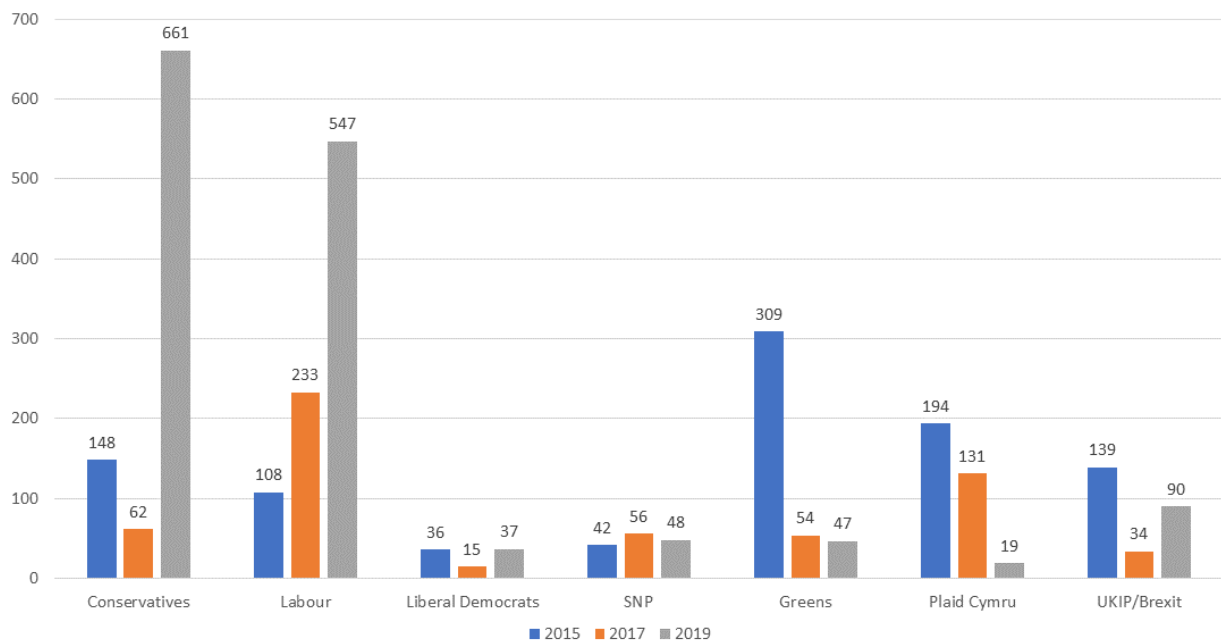


Figure 2: Leader Facebook posts at each election ($n=3,010$)

The increase in activity for Labour and Conservatives reflects the growing professionalism of the parties' digital campaigns. As the interviews with party workers demonstrated, the two main parties took digital campaigning more seriously as time passed. They devoted more resources to it, including hiring dedicated staff to produce content for social media consumption. Under Jeremy Corbyn and Boris Johnson's leaderships, video and photography taken during campaign events were used to create promotional content for distribution through social media.

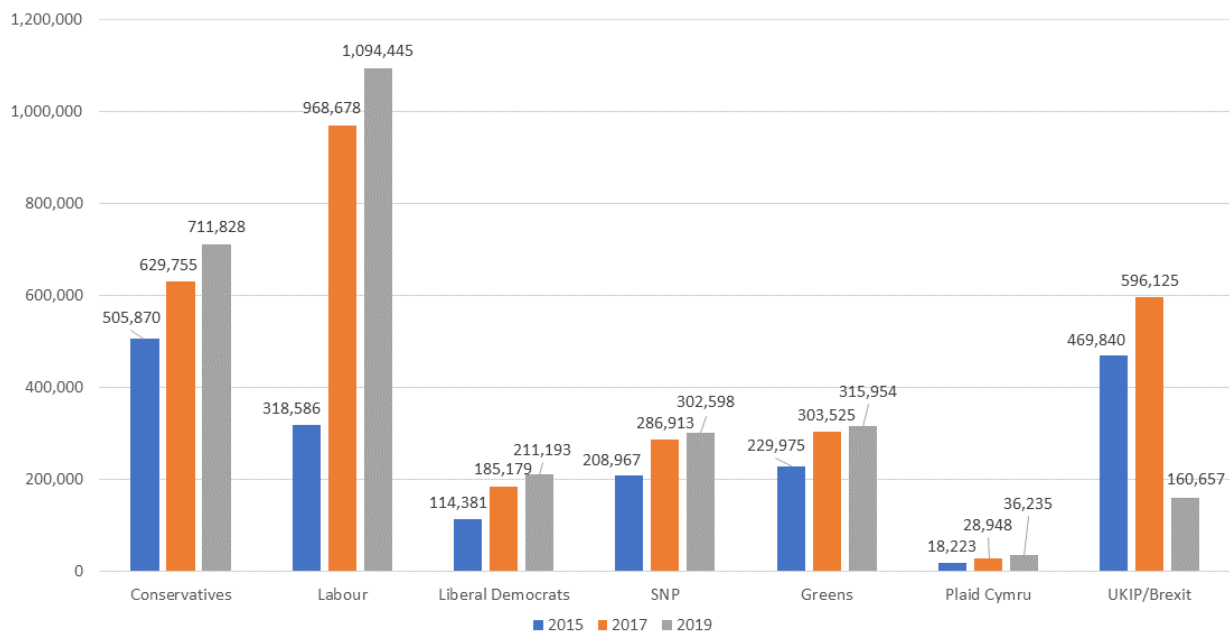


Figure 3: Likes for party accounts on polling day, all campaigns

The likes for all accounts increased through the study period, as seen in **Figure 3**. The Conservatives made substantial gains in likes to both party and leader accounts ahead of the 2015 election. Labour made large gains ahead of the 2017 election. However, the large percentage increases in likes during the short campaigns slowed over time. While UKIP’s likes increased between 2015 and 2017, the increase during the short campaign was slight. The same is true of the SNP. By 2019, growth in likes during the campaign is under 5% for all parties. However, there continues to be considerable percentage growth for new party leaders, no doubt reflecting greater public awareness of their role as they fight their first general election campaign. In 2019, the Brexit Party launched a new Facebook page, hence the relative drop from UKIP’s 2017 position.

Policy areas

The political parties rarely engaged with each other in their Facebook posts but campaigned in isolation on topics closely aligned with their election key messages. This is particularly notable on the

issue of Brexit in 2017 and 2019 as can be seen in **Table 3**. The Conservatives' Facebook posts reference Brexit frequently (2017: 36.8% single-policy posts, 63.64% multiple-policy posts; 2019: 35.09% single-policy posts, 64.29% multiple-policy posts). In comparison, the Labour Party barely mentions the issue (2017: 0% single-policy posts, 10.95% multiple-policy posts; 2019: 2.01% single-policy posts, 22.38% multiple-policy posts). Conversely, the Labour Party made significant reference to health and the NHS in its campaigning throughout (2015: 26.71% single-policy posts, 68.96% multiple-policy posts; 2017: 7.82% single-policy posts, 55.72% multiple-policy posts; 2019: 16.49% single-policy posts, 55.94% multiple-policy posts). The Conservative Party did campaign on health policy but at a significantly lower rate (2015: 1.98% single-policy posts, 9.52% multiple-policy posts; 2017: 0% single-policy posts, 21.21% multiple-policy posts; 2019: 2.70% single-policy posts, 43.65% multiple-policy posts).

	2015 <i>n=1,548</i>	2017 <i>n=1,330</i>	2019 <i>n=2,501</i>
1	Health 131 (8.46%)	Brexit 107 (8.05%)	Brexit 568 (22.71%)
2	Economy 88 (5.69%)	Health 52 (3.91%)	Health 167 (6.68%)
3	Tax 74 (4.78%)	Education, Tax 30 (2.26%)	Tax 124 (4.96%)
4	Employment 53 (5.42%)		Environment 105 (4.20%)
5	Austerity, Defence, Devolution 36 (2.33%)	Immigration, Terrorism 25 (1.88%)	Defence 54 (2.16%)

Table 3: Policy frequency by all party accounts

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 cease to innovate in a fast-changing political environment. Many interviewees pointed to stagnation in Labour's approach to digital campaigning while also suggesting the Conservatives had been forced to innovate to prevent a repeat of the shortcomings

of 2017. That meant the Conservatives running a campaign focusing on the virality of core messages such as “Get Brexit Done” and flattering comparisons of Boris Johnson to Jeremy Corbyn. “It was definitely more organic than paid this time around, and it was the most reductive of all the campaigns,” Conservative respondent one said. “But I think that's what they needed to do. They needed to make it about: “we’ve got to get Brexit done”. And, obviously, leaned into the very unique personality and charisma of Boris Johnson, who's just an asset”.

Laura Parker was the National Organiser of the left-wing campaign group Momentum during the 2019 campaign. She also pointed to the lack of innovation in Labour’s digital campaigning. “The party was stale in 2019 relative to 2017. There was a failure to capitalise on 2017 when a lot of the Jeremy rally footage went quite viral,” she said. “Momentum’s films went bigger in 2019 by a factor of two than they had in 2017. But of course, the rest of the world had started to catch up a little bit”.

Sky News’s McCann highlighted the importance of message discipline as a factor in 2019. The Conservatives had it, she 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 ... 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.

The Labour Party’s Howell 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. Labour respondent one said:

After 2017 and with Labour having done so well, there was a bigger appreciation of social media, and that led to hiring a full-time videographer and a full-time social media executive. But Labour didn't reform the use of social media, and there wasn't enough investment. That meant that come 2019, the Tories were much better at social media.

Former Corbyn aide Parker agreed, "The organic sharing, which in 2017 had been really extraordinary, seemed to me to plateau," she said. "If your model is based on organic rather than paid sharing, and you're not as popular as you were, it stands to reason you're not going to travel as far".

Momentum's Emil Charlaff pointed to improvements in the Conservatives' organic campaign on Facebook as an explanation for their success:

They didn't go down the microtargeting route completely, which Labour definitely did buy into, which I think was a mistake. Whereas the Tories were just buying masthead ads on YouTube and advertising to the whole population, which worked for them.... The Labour Party itself, I wasn't hugely impressed by. We did a lot of stuff for them. We made video content for them, which they put out. Most of that went out through Corbyn's channels rather than the Labour Party. But I don't think they were particularly ambitious or decisive. I don't think they had a good strategy about who they wanted to reach and how to reach them. I think their advertising money wasn't particularly well spent. They did a lot of micro-testing, including down to the line on election day, which I don't think was particularly effective.

Many political campaigners pointed to the ability to retain control of their own social media while avoiding the framing and gatekeeping effects of traditional media. "Don't forget that most newspapers are campaign papers. They want to reassure their readers that their worldview is correct," Oliver 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 work".

But despite this, many Facebook posts did not reference policy, as shown in **Table 4**, suggesting that parties failed to maximise voter support through social media engagement. While the proportional rate of posts without a policy reference declined for most parties from 2015 to 2019, the Labour Party and the Brexit Party failed to mention a policy in more than 30% of their posts in 2019. These data suggest that some parties missed key engagement opportunities afforded them by Facebook campaigning.

	2015 <i>n=1,548</i>	2017 <i>n=1,330</i>	2019 <i>n=2,501</i>
No stated policy	547	416	531
Proportion of total posts	35.38%	32.18%	21.23%

Table 4: Party Facebook posts without a policy reference

But the ability to communicate directly with voters also brought challenges for political campaigners. Labour respondent one pointed to the danger of communicating only with supporters rather than the persuadable. “We ended up talking to members when we should have been talking to the country, especially from 2015-18 and the second leadership campaign,” they said. “But by 2019, we were just talking to voters, and we were focused on creating the most viral content we could. So Jeremy PTCs (pieces to camera), human stories, and Facebook news stories”. Oliver also emphasised the need to keep up a continuous narrative. “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,” he said. “The increased speed means nuance and argument are lost. Where do people get the time to stop and reflect?”

Rhetorical style and tone of posts

Persuasion was the most-used rhetorical style across all parties and all leaders in all elections.

Attacking was generally the second most-used style, but many parties relied heavily on motivational posts asking supporters to do something. This was usually to donate money, help canvass

supporters, or go and vote. Leaders' accounts tended not to be so aggressive in attacking opponents. But there are exceptions, notably Nigel Farage's use of the attacking rhetorical style in 2015 (33.09%) and Jeremy Corbyn's use in both 2017 (26.18%) and 2019 (35.10%). These results reflect a strong personal style defined in opposition to their chief opponents, in these cases, the Conservatives. Leaders' accounts also tended to be defined by increased use of personalisation for strategic purposes. This was more often used by the leaders' accounts than the party accounts but still remained small as a percentage of the overall leaders' posts (2015: 3.79%, 2017: 2.22%, 2019: 1.10%). Findings suggest that leaders' potential to take a different strategic approach from their parties was not effectively maximised. The leaders had an opportunity to use their own accounts to promote their personal brand and leadership style. Results clearly show that, as a cohort, they failed to do this strategically.

As **Table 5** shows, the parties consistently used Facebook to discuss policy, even taking into account the significant number of posts that didn't reference any policy at all. There was also considerable position-taking, using media coverage to amplify their policy positions, along with attempts to motivate voters and supporters.

Strategic function	2015		2017		2019	
	Parties n=1,548	Leader n=976	Parties n=1,330	Leader n=585	Parties n=2,501	Leader n=1,449
1	Policy outline or discussion 356 (23%)	Amplify media coverage 322 (32.99%)	Policy outline or discussion 342 (25.71%)	Amplify media coverage 108 (18.46%)	Policy outline or discussion 578 (23.11%)	Leadership 312 (21.53%)
2	Amplify media coverage 282 (18.22%)	Canvassing 150 (15.37%)	Voting 231 (17.37%)	Policy outline or discussion 95 (16.24%)	Amplify media coverage 445 17.79%)	Policy outline or discussion 256 (17.67%)
3	Voting 212 (13.70%)	Policy outline or discussion 141 (14.45%)	Amplify media coverage 202 (15.19%)	Canvassing 90 (15.39%)	Voting 421 (16.83%)	Canvassing 243 (16.77%)
4	Canvassing 194 (12.53%)	Voting 93 (9.53%)	Canvassing 131 (9.85%)	Voting 75 (12.82%)	Canvassing 237 (9.48%)	Voting 178 (12.28%)
5	Attack on government record 84 (5.43%)	Personalisation 43 (4.41%)	Attack on politician 79 (5.94%)	Attack on politician 56 (9.57%)	Attack on politician 211 (8.44%)	Amplify media coverage 171 (11.80%)

Table 5: Strategic function of Facebook posts

Oliver, who was a key figure in the campaign to re-elect David Cameron in 2015, pointed to the necessity of converting swing voters to backers: “You need to go to people who are persuadable; you need to work out how you get people to change their views”. That point was echoed by former Labour digital advisor Matthew McGregor, who also suggested that social media, and especially Twitter, could distract campaigners from the critical task of persuading voters to support them:

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... Obviously, it's not the entirety of a campaign. We knocked on six million doors in 2015. It's unprecedented for a political party to have that

level of activism. But 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.

Tom Baldwin, who was Ed Miliband's Director of Communications, agreed that Twitter could have a negative campaign impact but also pointed to its potential benefits in persuading users, as seen in the example of Donald Trump. "It's a platform on which to say shocking things," he said. "But the success of using Twitter isn't explained by the metrics or how many clicks and shares you're getting. It's actually about the ultimate political impact. And Trump's political impact from his tweets went way beyond Twitter".

Media usage

Viral videos and attack ads became prominent during the 2015 campaign as parties began exploiting new technology to create content and target smartphone users. By the time of the 2017 and 2019 campaigns, attack ads were among the most-watched videos. Some of these, including the videos created by Momentum for Jeremy Corbyn, were sophisticated, high-concept pieces of work that required scripting and actors to carry the core message to viewers.

However, not all videos required substantial production effort. Clips of both broadcast interviews and televised election debates were often used but were edited to remove context, such as questions or rebuttals by other participants. In some cases, such as the Conservatives' editing of a Good Morning Britain interview with Sir Keir Starmer, this selective presentation led to content that seemed designed to mislead the viewer.

In general, media used in Facebook posts became increasingly polished and reflected increased media production value across the three elections. Music, graphics, and slow-motion video were all used. Momentum's entry into British politics led to a rapid evolution in video quality, with humour becoming more critical in 2017. But Momentum found that by 2019, while sketch videos still had an

impact, other formats, such as montage videos, had also become popular. Longer videos that performed better on Facebook Watch were deployed, and aggregate video views grew substantially.

It is essential to underline that most videos individually were not heavily watched, but the main parties tried to create hits that would go viral and carry messages beyond their core supporters.

Laura Parker, who was Corbyn’s Private Secretary from 2016 to 2017, also said that using broadcasters’ clips was crucial:

There was much better use, even from within Parliament, of clips from PMQs. And Jeremy didn't do a huge amount of work with the mainstream media. So his own clipping team was even more important. And of course, he wasn't getting much of a fair hearing from the mainstream media. So again, necessity is the mother of invention.

As **Table 6** shows, across all three elections, video was the most favoured medium, with clips of broadcasters’ content becoming increasingly important alongside direct political advertising.

	2015		2017		2019	
	Media type n=1,548	Media source n=1,548	Media type n=1,330	Media source n=1,330	Media type n=2,501	Media source n=2,501
1	Video 392 (25.32%)	Political advert 635 (41.02%)	Video 446 (33.53%)	Political advert 580 (43.61%)	Video 764 (30.55%)	Political advert 1,250 (49.98%)
2	Linked article 332 (21.45%)	Party text content 210 (13.57%)	Linked article 294 (22.11%)	Party text content 218 (16.39%)	Image and text 653 (26.11%)	Broadcaster’s content 285 (11.40%)
3	Infographic 261 (16.86%)	Party photographic content 152 (9.82%)	Animation 239 (17.97%)	Broadcaster’s content 161 (12.11%)	Linked article 452 (18.07%)	Newspaper article 213 (8.52%)
4	Image and text 254 (16.41%)	Broadcaster’s content 187 (12.08%)	Image and text 146 (10.98%)	Party video content 127 (9.55%)	Infographic 231 (9.24%)	Party text content 185 (7.40%)
5	Photograph 159 (10.27%)	Party video content 131 (8.46%)	Photograph 45 (3.38%)	Newspaper article 56 (4.21%)	Animation 142 (5.68%)	Party video content 141 (5.64%)

Table 6: Types of media and sources across all elections

Different video formats evolved through the election period in response to changes in Facebook’s technology. From 2017, Facebook Live was used widely to engage users in live events, such as speeches or policy launches. Following changes to Facebook’s algorithm that favoured longer videos, Labour had begun to create more videos with durations above three minutes, although party workers admitted it was difficult to sustain some videos for durations of that length. While the main parties increasingly tried to create bespoke video content, the less well-funded parties were more likely to link to material produced by the media to amplify their policy positions, gain credibility with voters, and bolster supporters. But as **Table 7** demonstrates, there was a reliance on a few key styles of video, especially the leader statement made in a piece to camera.

Video style	2015		2017		2019	
	Parties n=445	Leaders n=100	Parties n=686	Leaders n=214	Parties n=918	Leaders n=490
1	TV debate 98 (22.02%)	Leader statement 44 (44%)	Policy explainer 177 (25.80%)	Leader statement 78 (36.49%)	Campaign promo 181 (19.72%)	Leader statement 146 (29.80%)
2	Leader statement 73 (16.41%)	Interview 11 (11%)	Campaign promo 105 (15.31%)	Interview 29 (13.55%)	Interview 134 (14.60%)	Campaign promo 67 (13.67%)
3	Attack ad 56 (12.58%)	Policy explainer 10 (10%)	Leader statement 93 (13.56%)	Campaign Promo 22 (10.28%)	Leader statement 126 (13.73%)	Interview 53 (10.82%)
4	Policy explainer 51 (11.46%)	Campaign promo 9 (9%)	TV debate 75 (10.93%)	TV debate 20 (9.35%)	Attack ad 119 (12.96%)	Campaigning 48 (9.80%)
5	Other politician statement 40 (8.99%)	Campaigning, Celebrity endorsement, TV debate 6 (6%)	Attack ad 63 (9.18%)	Celebrity endorsement 15 (7.01%)	Policy explainer 104 (11.33%)	TV debate 42 (8.57%)

Table 7: video style across elections

Engagement

While attack ads delivered a large number of video views from 2017 onwards, some of the most engaging posts were often positive in tone as show in **Tables 8 through 13**. For example, an infographic that thanked supporters for voting attracted the most user engagement of any post during the Conservatives’ entire 2019 Facebook campaign. But overall, the account that delivered the most engagement was Jeremy Corbyn’s from 2017 onwards. As the interviews with party workers in the following chapter demonstrate, Corbyn used social media to circumvent the gatekeeping activity of the press. While political campaigners were split over the success of this strategy, it was clearly pursued with vigour.

	Party	Description	Total interactions	Likes	Shares	Comments
1	Labour	Steve Coogan PEB	67,500	19,739	45,267	2,494
2	Conservatives	Thanks for voting Image and text	65,397	55,114	6,465	3,818
3	Labour	Five more years attack ad	42,268	11,387	28,934	1,947
4	Labour	Vote Labour infographic	31,132	13,498	16,948	686
5	Labour	Evasive Osborne attack ad	25,597	8,174	15,506	1,917

Table 8: Most engaged with posts by party account, 2015 campaign

Source: CrowdTangle (2021)

	Name	Description	Total interactions	Likes	Shares	Comments
1	David Cameron	Easter message leader statement	48,095	19,858	24,739	3,498
2	Nicola Sturgeon	Thank you and vote SNP photograph	36,910	31,453	3,035	2,422
3	Nicola Sturgeon	Thank you message post-debate. Text only	33,462	30,219	790	2,453
4	David Cameron	Vote Conservative today leader statement	26,856	15,181	8,614	3,061
5	Nigel Farage	90-second manifesto animation	26,571	15,131	8,378	3,062

Table 9: Most engaged with posts by leader accounts, 2015 campaign

Source: CrowdTangle (2021)

	Name	Description	Total interactions	Likes	Shares	Comments
1	Jeremy Corbyn	Thanks for voting image and text	149,326	131,185	12,148	5,993
2	Jeremy Corbyn	This is our chance leader statement	84,304	52,671	28,473	3,160
3	Jeremy Corbyn	Manchester bomb condolence text only	62,053	50,599	7,774	3,680
4	Theresa May	London Bridge anti-terror leader statement	58,175	27,811	17,985	12,379
5	Jeremy Corbyn	London Bridge condolence text only	55,054	44,023	6,634	4,397

Table 10: Most engaged with posts by leader, 2017 campaign

Source: CrowdTangle (2021)

	Party	Description	Total interactions	Likes	Shares	Comments
1	Labour	Clean Bandit Facebook live	164,840	87,503	41,925	35,412
2	Conservatives	Corbyn terror attack ad	150,747	34,713	86,145	29,889
3	Green Party	Lucas TV debate attack on Rudd	70,207	47,519	20,370	2,318
4	Labour	I voted Labour infographic	66,657	19,999	45,423	1,235
5	Labour	10 reasons to vote Labour animation	45,700	15,306	26,181	4,213

Table 11: Most engaged with posts by party, 2017 campaign

Source: CrowdTangle (2021)

	Party	Description	Total interactions	Likes	Shares	Comments
1	Labour	Boris Johnson's lies attack ad	93,743	30,878	55,259	7,606
2	Labour	Question Time clip Johnson disastrous night	49,447	18,156	26,281	5,010
3	Labour	Steve Coogan on supporting Labour	48,224	26,975	18,752	2,497
4	Conservatives	Thank you for voting infographic	47,431	37,473	6,918	3,040
5	Labour	On this day NHS set up photograph	46,127	23,354	20,127	2,646

Table 12: Most engaged with posts by party, 2019 campaign

Source: CrowdTangle (2021)

	Name	Description	Total interactions	Likes	Shares	Comments
1	Jeremy Corbyn	Rob Delaney on the NHS video	181,884	46,627	130,472	4,785
2	Jeremy Corbyn	60-second challenge video	155,152	64,141	71,720	19,291
3	Jeremy Corbyn	5% taxpayer video	120,795	64,416	49,066	7,313
4	Boris Johnson	Brexit, Actually	92,939	41,318	31,500	20,121
5	Jeremy Corbyn	Talking to both sides of Brexit Twitter image	85,874	65,912	17,095	2,867

Table 13: Most engaged with posts by leader, 2019 campaign

Source: CrowdTangle (2021)

Despite recognising the growing importance of social media, the communications team in the Leader of the Opposition's Office still believed that Corbyn's digital campaign team was underfunded, especially compared with the Labour Party team based at the Southside party headquarters. "In 2017, social media was still viewed as an add-on," Labour respondent one said. "We had three people, including a videographer in Jeremy's social media team. But we ran the most successful social media campaign, not just compared to the Tories but also the official Labour campaign". They also pointed out that despite the Conservatives' use of paid Facebook advertising in 2015, Corbyn's team relied heavily on an organic campaign to promote the Labour leader's campaign activity, attributing this to budget conflict with the party operation "2017 was a hostile environment for Facebook advertising," they said. "I believe we spent less than £30,000 promoting Jeremy's Facebook account out of a total digital campaign budget of £1.2 million. That was because of personalities and politics".

However, Sky News's Kate McCann suggested that while the campaign led to a change in the reporting of Corbyn's leadership, social media was also a chimaera that over-emphasised Labour's popularity:

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.

Some of the most popular videos featured celebrity supporters of the Labour Party. These delivered large amounts of views and engagement, especially those featuring the comic actor Steve Coogan. In all three elections, the party tried to leverage the personal popularity of its supporters; it wanted to persuade the fans of the singer Dua Lipa, or snooker champion Ronnie O'Sullivan, or actors Coogan and Martin Freeman, to act on their endorsements and vote for Labour. Given the subsequent

electoral performance of the party, it is unclear whether these endorsements persuaded wavering voters to support Labour, bolstered existing supporters, or indeed had no effect at all. But as **Table 14** demonstrates attack ads were also widely watched during the 2017 election.

Top 5 videos	Content	Party	Views
1	Attack ad on Corbyn's record on national security	Conservative	7.9M
2	Corbyn's question to May on ITV's Facebook live	Labour	4.6M
3	10 reasons to vote Labour animation	Labour	4.4M
4	Attack ad on May's record on national security	Labour	3M
5	Attack ad on Abbott's record on national security	Conservative	2.9M

Table 14: Most watched videos, 2017 campaign

Oliver, Cameron’s former Director of Communication, pointed out that it is not always easy to differentiate between organic viral content and paid activity. He pointed out that many third-party single-issue campaigning organisations are closely connected to party operations. “Loads of the organisations in campaigns are fronts,” he said. “Most campaigns are not organic in terms of persuading members to carry messages. It’s organised people carrying messages”. The view that political outriders, social media users with large online followings, were important message carriers was repeated by former Corbyn aide Laura Parker. “Other successes were the outriders, Owen Jones, Novara (Media) and then the army of online people. People like Rachael Swindon will get half a million shares with a tweet,” she said. She added that supporter-generated content helped carry messages in the 2019 campaign and that, on occasion, Momentum would help supporters make and boost content. Conservative respondent one also reflected on the importance of supporters carrying messages and the challenge the Conservatives had in enlisting them, saying:

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.

Disintermediation

Sir Craig Oliver, Cameron's former communications director, was clear that speaking directly to voters was a key driver of his approach to social media from the start. "Cameron was against social media, (saying) 'too many tweets make a twat'. He thought it was a playground for narcissists," Oliver said. "I was able to persuade him that you can go above and beyond the journalists and deliver your message unmediated". Journalist respondent one agreed. "They use Twitter as a way of going directly to the public, and bypass us when they've got something specific they want to say," they said. "So it's a new tool in the armoury for them, and it allows them to get their message out unfiltered, they would say". The BBC's Chris Mason also made a similar but more nuanced point, saying that even those without large audiences of their own could seek to influence debates:

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.

However, several journalists warned of the limitations of this approach. Esther Webber of *The Times*' Red Box pointed to the need for politicians to keep briefing journalists to frame reporting. "When it comes to the papers, like papers being briefed that the prime minister is going to make a big speech, that is something you can only really do in the papers," she said. "You can't do that kind of informal briefing online". Her *Times* colleague Daniel Finkelstein also suggested that political campaigners might not have fully understood the potential of the tools at their disposal. "They are still surprisingly quite Lobby journalist focused, even though the reach of those journalists they're spending a lot of time on isn't as great as it was, and as maybe they think it was," he said. "So it's made surprisingly little difference".

Journalist respondent two also pointed to issues related to access and fact-checking that are raised by 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. ... And I think the other thing is, it allows them to bypass us in a way that they don't really need us anymore. ... And it means that politicians don't need us as much to access the public, so they're less likely to give us access to them.

While some political journalists appeared to feel in danger of being excluded from future conversations, the political campaigners took a different tack. Former Miliband aide Tom Baldwin believed that a decline in the quality of political journalism was a driver for audience disengagement:

I think mainstream political journalists are no longer mediating. They're no longer judging and weighing things and trying to interpret. It's actually that they're pumping out primary information. ... 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.

Former Corbyn aide Laura Parker said Labour's attempt to bypass political journalists had delivered unintended consequences:

I think the strategy of disengaging with the mainstream media was overly ambitious in thinking that you could completely replace it by doing the social media stuff because, I mean, the Westminster Lobby is really influential. And, of course, they were gunning for Corbyn from Day One. ... It became a bit of a vicious circle thing then or a self-fulfilling prophecy, because obviously if you don't engage with people who anyway don't like you, they're not going to like you any more when you don't engage with them, and on you go. The problem with this was that there wasn't sufficient systematic engagement or attempt to engage with mainstream media because, in social media, we were doing so well.

Labour respondent one also thought there was still a place for the media in parties' communications strategies:

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, the Shadow Cabinet on broadcast, 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:

RQ1: Results of the content analysis of Facebook posts by political parties and their leaders show growing sophistication in disintermediated communication. In 2015, the Conservative Party used its posts largely to defend its role in government and to talk about how awful a coalition between Labour and the Scottish National Party would be. Policy issues were not emphasised, with parties, instead favouring visuals of campaign events. For the first time in British general elections, party accounts made significant use of video, which featured in more than a quarter of party posts; Labour's video attack ads generated considerable engagement.

In 2017, the parties exhibited growing confidence not only with videos, including Facebook Lives, but also with animated posts, formats favoured by the Facebook algorithm. Labour videos emphasised their party leader's personality, a strategy that benefitted seasoned stump speaker Jeremy Corbyn. Labour's core set of repeated messages attracted nearly 2.3 million interactions, plus 2.2 million for Corbyn's account, far outstripping their rivals. Brexit was the topic of 37% of the Conservatives' 125 posts; Labour's policy message was diffused.

Bolstered by Boris Johnson's vow to "Get Brexit Done," the Conservative Party made massive gains in 2019. Findings show the Tories bringing personality and internet-savvy humour to bear on a disciplined Facebook campaign that relentlessly delivered its key messages, particularly around Brexit and leadership. That a majority of those messages were so radically edited as to be misleading (Dotto, 2019) was no deterrent; the party's Facebook posts generated over 3 million user engagements, and posts to Johnson's account added nearly 4 million more.

The three campaigns were marked by clear development in digital campaigning. Posting frequency increased significantly, reflecting growing professionalism of social media campaigns. Engagement also increased. Posts sought primarily to persuade and motivate supporters; party accounts also used Facebook to attack opponents, attracting large audiences. Policy issues got relatively short shrift across all three campaigns.

RQ2: Interviewees agreed that social media had a major impact on British political journalism.

Journalists all felt it was imperative to monitor social media for potential stories and stay current with the day's debates. But interviewees expressed concern about journalists repeating misinformation or disinformation from social media, with one former No. 10 strategist citing "lying on an industrial scale" during the Brexit referendum. And the pace of social media leaves little time for verification. "There used to be a few stops," a political journalist said. "Now there's no friction on how it spreads around."

Interviews reflected a division between journalists and political actors on the platforms they considered important. Journalists, particularly older ones, thought Twitter was vital; political campaigners rated Facebook more highly. Despite former US President Donald Trump's impact with Twitter in the mid-2010s, British strategists were convinced that in the UK, Twitter was mainly a place for Westminster gossip, useful if you wanted to "insert yourself into the news agenda" but less valuable than Facebook for reaching voters.

Conclusion

This study offers an insight into the political disintermediation tactics employed by British political actors through the use of Facebook. Although their approach gained sophistication over time, campaigners' overall strategy was to use social media to encourage engagement that would generate message spillover, from those activity engaged in politics to those less interested. Political

campaigners clearly saw a value in bypassing journalists to speak directly to supporters and, by extension, other potential voters – essentially seeking to replace journalistic gatekeepers with social media influencers. Journalists, for their part, worried about the potential for unverified information to flow unchecked. The lack of substantive policy discussion on social media also was troubling, and both groups of interviewees raised concerns about journalists being more focused on gossip than investigation.

The data suggest that the parties were not taking advantage of all the opportunities for voter maximisation through Facebook. A substantial proportion of posts in the datasets did not contain policy references, and sometimes there seemed to be no strategic purpose for posting. In reviewing the parties' Facebook output during the three elections, it is clear that most, if not nearly all, posts need to contain a policy reference or call to action to have an explicit reason for existing. Voters need to either be persuaded to back a party's positions or to identify with the party's mission. Both positive and negative campaigning can work. For example, Labour had great success with a 2019 video decrying the Conservatives' history of austerity policy. It was successful because it allowed supporters to signal what they were against and demonstrate what they were for. Merely posting photographs of politicians on the campaign trail is much less engaging and does not provide this kind of opportunity for persuasion or identification.

It is clear that negative campaigning can drive virality, for example, with the Conservatives' use of attack ads in 2017 to characterise their opponents negatively. In a series of attacking posts, the Conservatives labelled Corbyn soft on terrorism and the then-shadow home secretary Diane Abbott as innumerate. These attack ads can go viral, delivering millions of video views, and the negative framing can make a lasting impression on voters (Bond et al., 2012). But users also want the opportunity to demonstrate their positive support for a party's objectives and to show their sense of

identification with it, as can be seen through the high levels of engagement with positive posts about voting.

This study suggests that campaigners should also consider the number of election themes they want to support in Facebook posts. The Conservatives' 2019 campaign shows the value of a few messages that are often repeated, as does Labour's 2017 campaign. Parties should aim for engaging content that promotes likes, shares, or comments to benefit from the spillover effect. As the interviews make clear, shares with framing text supporting the views of the party are viewed favourably by campaigners.

The political parties should also carefully consider the strategic purpose of any posted content. Labour under Jeremy Corbyn spent too much time speaking to supporters and providing them with positive, bolstering content. The party did not put enough time or effort into locating persuadable voters in swing constituencies, instead building large majorities in seats it had already won.

Throughout the three elections, there are a surprisingly large number of instances when a political party has referenced a policy area once or twice and then not revisited the theme during the rest of the campaign. This is pointless. Any Facebook post's audience is a fraction of the total audience that can be reached throughout a campaign. There is little point in wasting resources on creating marginal content.

The data also suggest that while there have been some attempts through the elections to use the party and leader accounts differently, there is an opportunity to segment audiences further. There is more opportunity to differentiate between party and leader, with leaders' accounts used to personalise the leader and emphasise leadership qualities. Party accounts already are more likely to focus on policy explanation and attacking opponents.

Ongoing social media developments, as well as the skyrocketing use of AI, will undoubtedly shape the next UK election, anticipated in 2024. Parties seem certain to continue escalating their disintermediation strategies.

Appendix A: Coding domains for Facebook posts in 2015, 2017, and 2019 elections

Domain	Domain description
Date	The date the post was published
Post type	Facebook posts were identified as one of three types: containing links to content elsewhere on the internet; containing embedded media; or text-only, with no links or additional embedded media formats.
Embedded or linked media	A classification of the media either embedded in the post or linked from it, where applicable; examples include infographics and videos.
Media source	Where the media originated, a category for identifying the content creator.
Publisher	Who published the content provided in the post.
Location	Location mentioned in the post or the media, where applicable.
Rhetorical style	The ways in which language and imagery are used to convey meaning, such as disapproval or gratitude.
Discourse tone	This domain employed a five-point Likert scale to assess the tone of Facebook posts, from strongly positive to strongly negative.
Strategic function	The overall purpose or function of the post, for instance policy explanation or amplification of media coverage.
Policy area	The policy topic with which the content most closely aligned, such as Brexit or education.
Video function	Purpose or function of video in the post, if available; examples included attacks ads and celebrity endorsements.
Video length	The duration of any video content within a post.
Repost?	A yes / no category to log whether the political actor had posted the content previously during the study period.
Shared from another user?	(0.899) Another yes / no category indicating whether the post originated with the political actor or with another user.

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