

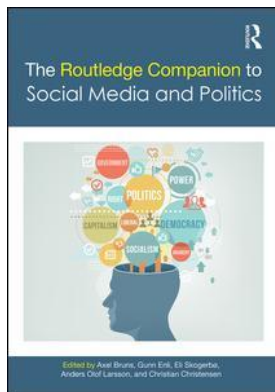
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SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE UK ELECTION CAMPAIGNS 2008–2014

Experimentation, Innovation, and Convergence

*Darren G. Lilleker, Nigel Jackson, and
Karolina Koc-Michalska*

Introduction

Digital and social media platforms and applications have been placed at the heart of debates around political communication for at least the last two decades. The cyberoptimist perspective that technology would be democratising gave way to more pessimistic views. Pessimism was validated by empirical findings which largely demonstrated that access to resources and popularity in the real world was mirrored in online environments and that there were few indications that online political communication attracted a wider or different audience than, say, specialist television documentaries (Ward et al., 2003). Cyberoptimists were proven inaccurate in their predictions because the Internet is a pull medium, with users selecting what they wish to see, and users sought personal gratifications when seeking content. Given that politics is only of interest to a minority, few political websites gain hits and only prominent media outlets and political celebrities gain significant attention.

Social media may be in the process of reinvigorating a more positive perspective of the role digital media can play in democracies. The ability for any individual or organisation to connect to a diverse community, share or create content on any topic, and for that to be seen across a network suggests such sites can raise political awareness, encourage information seeking, and so act as a pathway to participation (Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2009). Yet, to invigorate engagement with electoral politics, political parties or candidates need to be active players in social media environments. We argue that it is normatively good for democracy that citizens should be permitted to interact with political representatives and co-create politics within official and unofficial spaces, and because social media have provided a low-cost means where party campaigning and citizen

co-creation can converge, a new and interactive paradigm of political communication could be emerging. We therefore adopt a methodology for assessing quantitatively the extent that UK political parties permit co-creation and adapt to the communication norms of social media while also exploiting its potential for meeting campaigning aims.

Political campaigns in the UK in many ways are a blend of traditions from European party systems, with some aspects influenced by the more U.S. candidate-centered model. There are two reasons for this. First, the UK features a ‘first-past-the-post’ system, where candidates stand for election as individuals in constituencies, and where the candidate who has most votes is elected, encourages a more individualistic style of campaigning at the local level (Southern & Ward, 2011). Second, since the Thatcher era, British politics has adopted a more presidential style, placing party leaders central to the campaign. That said, Web-based campaigning largely follows a party-centric model where the party rather than the leader has a set of domains across platforms (websites and linked presences on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, mainly), though some local candidates independently create their own presences across the Internet. UK campaigns therefore have potential to be innovative in their use of social media and to present voters with multiple means of interacting with the individuals and their parties who seek their vote.

In order to explore the adoption and use of social media during election campaigns in the UK, this chapter draws on three data sets. First, a longitudinal analysis of website and Web presence features which allows us to track the use of the Internet by the major political parties across the local elections of 2008, subsequent European parliamentary election (2009), general election (2010), and the most recent contest, the 2014 European parliamentary election. The parties selected for analysis represent a cross-section of the UK political scene. Labour were the party of government from 1997–2010 and, subsequently, the main opposition, the Conservatives, were in opposition until 2010 and subsequently major partners in a coalition with the third largest party in terms of popular vote, the Liberal Democrats. The Green Party has a long history as a campaigning organisation but only gained their first MP in 2010. However, they have always had representation in local councils and the European Parliament. The UK Independence Party (UKIP) has been a serious contender in local and European Parliament elections, gaining second place in the popular vote 2009 and first in 2014. Subsequent to the 2014 contest, UKIP gained two MPs through defections from the Conservatives, though both forced by-elections and gained their own mandate. The final party, the British National Party (BNP) has no parliamentary representation but stands in all four nations of the UK (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales) and most of the seats within parliament across those nations. These smaller parties have all had significant impact on the news agenda. Specifically, UKIP due to its populist conservative and Eurosceptic stance coupled with media friendly pseudo-events, and the BNP for its controversial far right, neo-fascist platform. The BNP has also historically been innovative in their use of forums to bind their supporters together into party-focused communities (Lilleker & Jackson, 2011); the BNP had two MEPs until 2014.

The second data set is from interviews with party strategists who were asked to prioritise different elements in order to define a 21st-century professional campaign. This chapter draws only on data that compare the prioritisation of different media use (online and offline) to identify how social media are embedded strategically within a campaign. Finally, the chapter draws on data from social media pages that detail the usage of Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube by the six major parties. Here we assess how

social media offers each party reach and how reach (in terms of followers and page views) corresponds with strategies. This analysis focuses on the aftermath of the European elections and provides insights into the role social media might play in the UK general election in 2015. It follows a brief summary of research on Web campaigning in the UK up to 2008 and the role the Internet has been argued to play as a campaign tool.

UK Online Election Campaigning: Slow on the Uptake

One chapter of the Political Communications study of the 1997 general election asked if the contest was the first Internet election, with the response being no (Ward & Gibson, 1997). Reviewing Internet use, Ward and Gibson noted UK parties were recognising the Internet's potential for increasing internal party debate and connecting better to members. However, while debate was facilitated, party websites were utilised primarily as a tool for downward information dissemination. There was evidence of equalisation, with parties having similar or equal quality websites independent of their resources, but limited Internet use by the electorate hindered technology being exploited to its fullest extent (Gibson & Ward, 1998). By 2001, party websites looked better and were more user friendly, with easy-to-navigate menus, less dense text, and more pictures and videos. However, the content was largely 'shovelware', material from leaflets and other documents stored online in case anyone wanted to view them. Largely, there seemed no great sense of design strategy, with no evidence of the production of targeted content relevant to those who might visit a party website and so providing what they might want to find (Gibson et al., 2003; Gibson, Ward, & Lusoli 2002).

The European parliamentary Elections of 2004 offered little evidence that the Internet was becoming a serious electoral battleground. Evidence showed that the online campaign, or rather the lack of a campaign, largely reflected the apathy of national politicians and the media with the second-order election (Lusoli & Ward, 2005). Parties provided informational content mirroring the, by then, longstanding tradition of shovelware content. Although perhaps a lower resourced campaign would be expected of a second-order contest (Maier, Strömbäck, & Kaid 2011), the 2005 general election campaign also relied largely on television and news management with little development in the use of digital technology (Jackson, 2007). We therefore find that there was little sense across the contests 1997–2005 that the Internet was going to fulfil the potential to provide a more level playing field where all parties and citizens could co-create a cyber-campaign. There was, however, evidence that supporter mobilisation was increasingly a function of Web presences (Norris & Curtice, 2008) and weblogs became a feature, so allowing flexibility in messaging and provided a means for parties to gain feedback on some aspects of policy or their campaign (Jackson, 2006). In the UK, as across Europe, this cautious approach by the parties was natural given that only a small percentage of voters used the Internet as a source of political information (Lusoli, 2005).

Although many individual MPs may have seen benefits from a more personalised campaign and so developed an Internet presence, this was also unrealised. Using the catchy title 'from weird to wired', one of the first studies of UK MPs shows few dabbled with the Internet (Ward & Lusoli, 2005). One or two pioneers metaphorically dipped their toe into online campaigning, creating weblogs (Stanyer, 2006), developing websites (Norton, 2007), and interacting with constituents via email (Allan, 2006), but these were exemplars outside of the norm. Furthermore, as most MPs' websites were

paid for out of their parliamentary communication budget, they could not be used for election campaigns. A few used them to highlight their achievements in parliament on behalf of their constituency or to explain their voting record (Lilleker, 2005). However, beyond isolated examples, there seemed to be little to indicate that the Internet was taken seriously as a campaign tool.

The Evolution of Online Campaigning 2008–2014

Of course, one cannot ignore the fact there were innovations and that parties were experimenting with a range of features that may appear basic now but at the time were providing data that would shape later behaviour. Party e-newsletters, and the finding that their subscribers wanted not just to read but also to give feedback, showed there might be rewards from offering greater involvement through interactivity (Jackson & Lilleker, 2007). Examples from campaigns in other nations also appeared to lead innovation in the UK. Howard Dean's campaign in the U.S. in 2004 paved the way for crowdsourcing donations. The campaigns in 2007 in France by Ségolène Royal taught of both the potentials and pitfalls of co-creation through her harnessing a personal blogosphere and producing a co-authored manifesto. Similarly, Nicolas Sarkozy's adventures in *Second Life*, where he offered French citizens a chance to test drive his leadership, showed the values of having an interactive dimension to the campaign (Lilleker & Malagón, 2010). These innovations influenced those UK parties who sought ways to appear modern, innovative, and to gain greater attention and support. Uncharacteristically, this meant that the contests for the local councils in 2008 and the 2009 European parliamentary election became testing grounds for innovations in online campaigning, with interactive opportunities emphasised to an unprecedented and unexpected degree.

Our research captured data from the Web presences constructed by the six UK parties described earlier for the 2008 local elections, 2009 and 2014 European elections, and the 2010 general election. The research involved a content analysis, or feature analysis, of websites; a method pioneered by Gibson and Ward (2000) when analysing party and candidate websites at the turn of the century. The method initially detects the presence or absence of features, with a coding scheme updated to include links to and content on social media platforms. This non-intrusive method treats Web presences as a strategic artefact, designed in order to provide experiences for visitors (from informative to interactive) and provide a feature count for each party, which aids simple comparison. Inter-coder reliability tests of 86 per cent to 100 per cent demonstrate the reliability of the counting procedures between the researchers. The presence of features in and of themselves tells little; the function is important. The team produced a range of measures that were tested with experts in digital communication design in order to determine the function and extent of functionality. The features were rated for direction of communication (monologue, two-way feedback, or participatory) and for the level of user control (rated 1–10); so, for example, press releases, a common feature of early websites, were one-way and offered minimal control, read or not. In contrast, a social media profile where comments were allowed is participatory and permitting the maximum level of user control where they might like, share, comment, or enter into conversation with the profile host or other visitors. The expert testing of attributed scores ensure the validity of the measurement tool. Averages for each party's Web presences were created to permit simple comparability; the data for average direction of communication and user control for each contest are presented graphically in Figures 23.1 and 23.2.

SOCIAL MEDIA IN UK ELECTION CAMPAIGNS

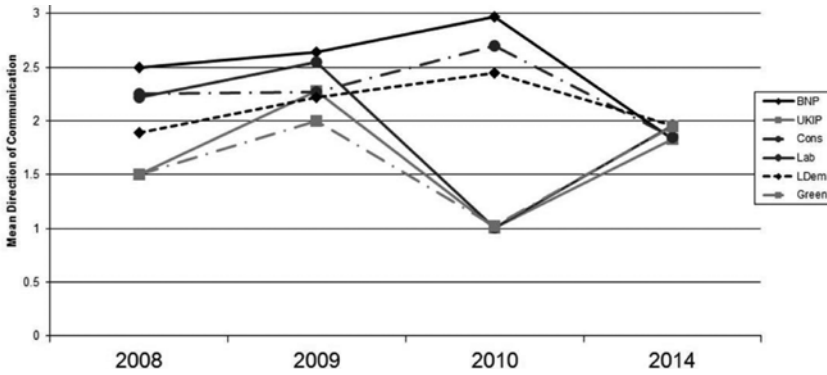


Figure 23.1 Direction of Communication between Parties and Their Voters (one-way, two-way, or participatory) Compared across Contests 2008–2014, Mean Scores

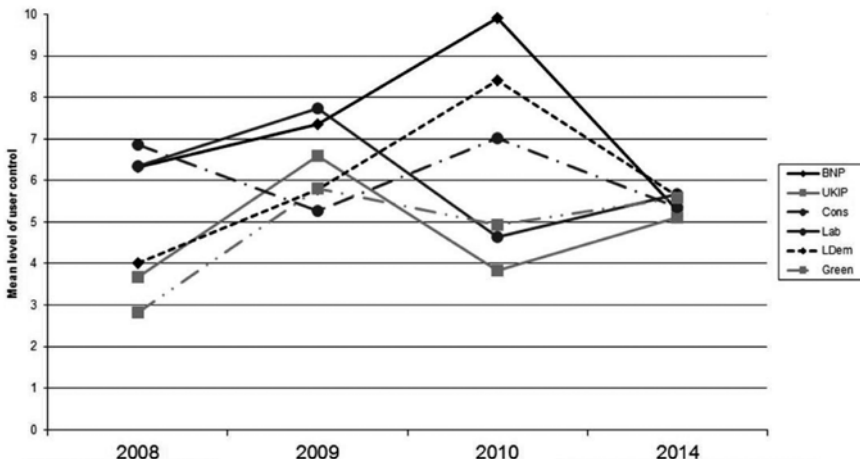


Figure 23.2 Level of User Control over Communication between Parties and Voters (low 1–10 very high) Compared across Contests 2008–2014, Mean Scores

The local election contest of 2008 saw some interesting campaign innovations. The contest coincided with the widespread societal adoption of MySpace and Facebook and the introduction of Web 2.0 as a concept explaining interactive communication. Parties adopted a range of features that fitted into the Web 2.0 framework, so building architecture for websites that permitted participation. However, largely the parties themselves had no representation within the interaction. The parties provided a news feed, invited responses via email or online forms, and allowed comments, yet they did not respond to questions publicly and rarely monitored social media platforms. For some parties, in particular the BNP, the MySpace profile had no content and users of the platform were allowed to join, post a hostile remark, and then leave. Hence, the conclusion was that UK political parties actually resided within Web 1.5. This suggested that while their online presences offered the look and feel of Web 2.0, providing

space for visitors to correspond, the parties largely retained the control offered by technologies underpinning the Web 1.0 era of online communication. This halfway-house approach led many visitors to use social media profile walls for ‘graffiti’; they posted a comment that could be positive or hostile and seemed never to return, perhaps because not gaining a response.

This approach remained for the European parliamentary election in 2009. The Web presences built for the contest emphasised resource inequalities, with the major parties innovating in more sophisticated ways than minor or fringe parties. However, when comparing the features used, their functionality and the level of control awarded to site visitors in terms of being able to post, comment, and interact, it was actually the far-right fringe BNP and populist conservative UKIP which offered visitors the most freedom, followed by Labour, the then party of government. We suggested, therefore, a strategic focus on Internet campaigning was emerging (Jackson & Lilleker, 2010). The fringe parties were ambitious to increase their vote share and opened up their site to their supporters. Labour similarly offered a more interactive experience in an attempt to limit their decline at the next general election. Drawing on the innovations of Dean and Obama in the U.S., parties appeared to be exploring the potential of technology to enhance the relationship with their grassroots and so used the online environment as a greenhouse for nurturing support (Albrecht, 2007).

Perhaps it was the influence of the 2008 Obama campaign for the U.S. presidency that led some parties to reconsider their adherence to the Web 1.5 mode of campaigning; perhaps it was a combination of desperation and caution surrounding the close 2010 general election contest that determined strategies; insights from party strategists suggested something of both. However, the divergence in strategies was striking (Lilleker & Jackson, 2011). UKIP largely eschewed any social aspects, focusing on older voters not expected to be online, although they did have some members who regularly blogged. The Greens, constrained by resources, offered little onsite interaction but provided some engaging features, such as a customisable video that could be shared via Facebook. Labour retreated somewhat, although the ‘Change We See’ campaign permitted supporters to upload pictures that encapsulated Labour’s achievements over their 13 years of government and the #Labourdoorstep Twitter campaign was important in mobilising their activists. However, these were minor innovations compared to the Obama-style social network created by the Conservative Party (myConservatives.co.uk) and the Liberal Democrat’s Forum (LibDemAct). These allowed visitors who wished to sign up to write directly to the websites, creating content and shaping the experiences of future visitors. The Greens, Labour, Conservatives, and Liberal Democrats also utilised Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to create multiple points of entry and participation in their campaign. Yet, the British National Party offered an even more participatory experience. Their website consisted of participatory architecture that gave members a role in creating the campaign. Around 1,500 members, using pseudonyms, contributed detail on local campaigns, supportive examples for the anti-immigrant and homophobic platform, and attacks on the other parties. The BNP avoided other social networks and controlled joining and posting, but the party was the closest to a Web 2.0 campaign. They embraced the philosophy of the social Web by creating their own social media platform while other parties relied on the free platforms.

Given this level of innovation, one might expect further advances between 2010 and 2014. In contrast, as shown in Figures 23.1 and 23.2, we find in 2014 almost complete convergence around a mixed communication strategy that offers varying levels

of control and varying directions of communication. The differences are minor; for example, the Liberal Democrats did not have an online shop, the Green Party only had an online mechanism for volunteering, and the BNP and UKIP did not encourage emails to the party. More importantly, all interactive elements were gone from the sites, so for party websites user control became very low and the communication one-way or in places two-way. Rather, the free spaces offered by the Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube platforms were utilised exclusively to allow participatory communication and for visitors to have control over communication. Therefore, social media, by 2014, were the one place where supporters could interact with one another and, in theory, with the party. Only the BNP site allowed comments to their news section that features weblog tools. All the other parties encouraged sharing their pages and joining their presences on social media platforms. The retrenchment could be a reflection of the second-order status of the European parliamentary election. However, it might also suggest recognition that the website had greater use for supporters, allowing them to donate, download material for printing, or promoting the party online. Social media, in contrast, may attract a looser support base into a community that can then be mobilised. The functionality is similar to the bespoke social network created by Obama (Woolley, Limpers, & Oliver, 2010), but costs little, does not require large levels of resources for monitoring, as some believe social media to be anarchic and uncontrollable anyway so would not expect all comments to be on message (for discussion, see Papacharissi, 2002). The website, however, remains simple, clean of clutter, and largely utilised to disseminate simple messages and brand information in the form of images, soundbites, and policy promises. This strategy may reflect the priorities UK party strategists place upon different platforms and media.

Social Media: Just Another Mass Medium?

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

The mean scores, shown in Table 23.1, offer some indications of the different priorities parties have when viewing different methods for communicating to and with their potential voters. Face-to-face communication is the priority for all, but there are divergences across traditional and social media. Major parties see news (an up-to-date presence in the media and having an impact on the agenda) as of significant importance; the two minor parties recognise the difficulty in achieving positive or balanced news coverage. The two parliamentary opposition parties, Labour and the Greens, although

Table 23.1 Parties' Preferred Priorities of Methods for Communication with Their Voters in the 2014 EP Campaign and General Election Campaign 2015, Mean Scores

	<i>News</i>	<i>TV spots</i>	<i>Other ads</i>	<i>Website</i>	<i>Email</i>	<i>Face-to-face</i>	<i>Facebook</i>	<i>Twitter</i>	<i>YouTube</i>
Cons	4.5	4.0	3.7	4.5	2.0	5.0	3.0	3.0	3.0
Lab	5.0	4.5	4.2	5.0	4.0	5.0	4.0	4.0	4.0
LibDem	5.0	3.0	3.2	4.0	5.0	5.0	4.0	3.0	3.0
UKIP	3.0	1.5	1.0	1.0	3.0	5.0	1.0	1.0	1.0
Green	3.0	1.0	2.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	3.0	4.0	5.0

the latter only has one MP, both rate social media as highly important; UKIP, due to their more conservative, older and working class target electorate, prefer a ground or street-level campaign. Labour appear to be prioritising all forms of communication, perhaps as they are trying to build positive awareness for their relatively new leader and have struggled to build a strong public image despite them earning a respectable standing in the polls.

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

Caught in the Social Web: Party Use of Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube

Table 23.2 shows the reach the six parties enjoy, with this representing the number of 'likes' (on Facebook fan pages), followers (on Twitter), and subscribers (to YouTube channels). Reach is important as it suggests, at the very least, the number of people willing to receive direct communication from each party, including having material pushed at them.

The numbers represent the immediate audience each party can reach by social media but not the networks they might have access to, or reach into, should their online supporters like and share the party posts, videos, and images. The picture is disparate to some extent, with the likes, followers, and subscribers largely mirroring recent electoral results. We therefore see the Conservatives and UKIP having the largest following on Facebook, Labour beating the Conservatives on Twitter slightly with the Liberal Democrats, Greens and UKIP with half their following and with little between them. UKIP

Table 23.2 Social Media Reach by Party during the 2014 EP Campaign; Facebook Likes, Twitter Followers, YouTube Subscribers; Absolute Figures

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

won on YouTube with the rest of the parties having under 10,000 subscribers. The BNP had a strong following on Facebook but was hardly visible on Twitter. Largely, politics as usual (Margolis & Resnick, 2000) is supported here, with the current hype around, and support for, UKIP being mirrored online with the two traditional rivals for government in close proximity to them depending upon the channel. The question is whether there are alternative explanations for the levels of support.

In terms of the effort parties make in communicating via these platforms, there seems to be no correspondence between the number of posts, tweets, or videos and the likes, followers, or subscribers earned. The figures in brackets in Table 23.2 denote effort in terms of material created during the 2014 European parliamentary election campaign when one might expect activity to be at its greatest. Therefore, in terms of the adage that producing content equally might generate a following, that would seem an erroneous hypothesis. Particularly, the Green Party created most content for both Twitter and YouTube but did not have an equitable level of following.

In terms of the type of content, all parties treated social media as a news feed. The profiles across platforms were largely a repository for videos, or with Twitter, links to a video, the latest line from the party leader, or updates about events and inviting members. The exception was the BNP who selected news stories and put their nationalist spin on these, so pushing an image of representing and defending Britishness. The party only shared material from their leader's pages or profiles, or for the major parties other prominent spokespersons.

Facebook offers the opportunity to see the extent of likes, shares, and comments received as well as whether the party or any notable and obvious figure from the party responds. Table 23.3 shows the numbers of posts by the party during the four-week period of the 2014 European parliamentary election campaign, and the average number of likes, shares, and comments per post. The only observation that can be made from this data is that, unless the party was a member of the coalition (the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats), the size of support was also an indicator of the level of expected activity. UKIP gained most votes at the 2014 European parliamentary election and earned a larger and much more vibrant online community than any of the other parties, suggesting a simple correlation between electoral and social media support for that party. We also find that activities that required least effort were the most popular: a

Table 23.3 Parties' Reach and Visible Support on Facebook during the 2014 EP Campaign; Absolute Figures

	<i>Posts to the page</i>	<i>Likes of posts average per post</i>	<i>Shares of posts average per post</i>	<i>Comments on posts average per post</i>
Cons	29	356	142	197
Lab	33	1,270	508	329
LibDem	26	317	126	115
UKIP	46	1,988	1,325	1,093
Green	46	663	265	57
BNP	86	1,547	859	161

large number liking, a smaller number sharing and yet fewer commenting. The commenting figure is, however, spurious, as on some posts there are numerous interactions between a small number of participants as opposed to a stream of comments from different individuals. The most striking finding is that at no time did the party respond (or rather the individual or individuals who manage the Facebook profile and speak as the party) nor did any of the top party personnel feature responding to posts or comment posted by their supporters. Even when, as in the case of the Conservatives, many of those who liked their page commented that they were unconvinced by Conservative party promises and would vote for UKIP, there was no attempt by the party to prevent this erosion of votes. The party activity seemed to encourage graffiti and only due to the energy of those who commented, some form of interest was sustained. It may be that parties viewed these pages simply as a means to gather data about their supporters and their opinions, and that had unique value. However, as noted in empirical studies, it would appear they were missing a trick in not communicating back and building relationships with their online supporters (Jackson & Lilleker, 2009).

The UK Social Media Campaign: Evolution and Devolution, Never Revolution

The history of online campaigning, albeit covering only 17 years, overall demonstrates a greater sense of caution than a desire to be innovative. In this respect, UK parties demonstrate similar caution to their EU counterparts (Lusoli, 2005) barring some notable exceptions. Where there is innovation towards more interactive modes of communication, it mirrors findings from the U.S., where 'controlled interactivity' is argued to dominate (Stromer-Galley, 2014). The decade of reliance on shovelware perhaps indicates that UK parties see voters and supporters as individuals who need informing and persuading in equal measure but not talking with online. This may be an indication that all parties are unsure of the impact of interaction, how to deal with the demands of their online community of loose supporters, and are concerned about the extent that the party may have to accommodate them more at the expense of constitutionally defined decision-making processes (Lilleker, Pack, & Jackson, 2010). Innovation appears to have been ushered in on the back of influences from across the channel and then from over the Atlantic, but it was short-lived. It was also unsuccessful, with

the myConservatives social network having very few members and even less activism (Lilleker & Jackson, 2010: 135); suggesting the O'Reilly adage 'build it and they will come' (O'Reilly, 2007) is reliant on context.

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

Yet, in truth, little beyond adoption of these platforms is innovative. Social media are simply used to replicate tasks of old media; it is a form of online advertising with some elements of recruitment built in. There are few attempts to convert supporters into more active advocates or campaigners despite visitors' apparent willingness to like, share, and comment on the material of the party. Even more surprising, many comments are never responded to and remain unread. Perhaps Facebook, in particular, is perceived as a place for supporters to keep in touch with what the party is doing and with one another; however erroneous that perception might be. Therefore, while UK parties have embraced social media and use them regularly, their use remains in the realm of Web 1.5. They facilitate participatory interaction but seldom participate themselves. Hence, we might view the UK party experience with social media as one of cautious experimentation, followed by some innovation but ending with convergence around the most basic usage. This is not a normative judgement and criticism, but it does raise a question; is this appropriate usage of social media, or at least appropriate for a political party, and if not what is an effective model of usage that may lead to a more social, interactive and accessible form of politics? The medium may have changed but the political mind-set has not, it may be fear of losing control of communication, having to answer the tough questions in public or it may be a more primal fear that politicians experience (Stromer-Galley, 2000). In setting out why politicians must be independent legislators and not delegates, Edmund Burke (1890, p. 474) argued,

When the leaders choose to make themselves bidders at an auction of popularity, their talents, in the construction of the state, will be of no service. They will become flatterers instead of legislators; the instruments, not the guides, of the people.

Perhaps for many politicians the fear is that moving closer to their online supporters will lead to just such impulses. Hence, communication remains two-way at best, private and under the control of UK parties even when they colonise platforms designed for social interaction and conversation.

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