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13. Out with the Old, In with the New? The Media Campaign

Stephen Ward and Dominic Wring

The 2017 General Election will likely be remembered as the campaign where the once dominant forms of TV and print journalism were challenged by digital platforms. This piece analyses this development while also acknowledging that social media networks do not operate in isolation from their more traditional counterparts and content is often shared between them. That said, digital networks did provide Labour Party supporters with significant opportunities to challenge and rebut claims made by the Conservative- dominated press during this campaign. A significant amount of this material focused on the merits (or not) of the two major rival parties and most especially their leaders. In comparison, other politicians received considerably less attention than in 2015.

The 2017 media campaign was not expected to showcase the kinds of innovation or generate the many surprises it subsequently provided. Its unexpected calling meant there was minimal time for campaign planning. In media terms, the rival platforms were often portrayed as though they were operating in parallel universes. So- called traditional media, especially newspapers, were seeking to appeal to older core voters and seen as relentlessly negative, anti-Jeremy Corbyn and pro-Conservative. By contrast, social media was viewed as a vibrant sphere dominated by young, left-leaning voices with a heavily pro-Corbyn agenda. In the aftermath, it could be argued that 2017 marked a watershed moment, one where social media finally proved its electoral worth and the power of the press was significantly challenged. Intriguingly, the media election was not, however, solely characterized by innovation given it too would hark back to an era of two party politics. Thus the

campaign proved to be a highly presidential affair dominated by both of the main parties and their leaders. These factors will be in turn considered in assessments of the role and nature of traditional, as well as social, media in this election.

1. ‘Strong or Stable’? The Tories’ Communication Malfunction

It came as a shock when, shortly after the UK had agreed to invoke Article 50 to leave to the EU, Theresa May reneged on her earlier promise and called the General Election for 8th June. Although a surprise, the *Daily Mail* welcomed this as an opportunity to ‘CRUSH THE SABOTEURS’, a reference to parliamentarians opposed to Brexit (*Daily Mail*, 2017a, p1). Unfortunately for May, the supportive media coverage and consistent polling leads she had enjoyed since entering Downing Street were about to come to a dramatic end. May’s limitations as a communicator were exposed during the election. Her apparent discomfort and even robotic style became self-evident in the way she repeatedly recited the party’s initial advertising strap-line ‘Strong (and) Stable Leadership in the National Interest’ during her opening campaign appearances. Later, forced to deny she had performed a ‘u-turn’ over her manifesto’s so-called ‘dementia tax’, the ‘Maybot’ was increasingly criticised by media commentators and satirists who recycled the ‘strong and stable’ phrase to mock her (Crace, 2017). The Prime Minister remained the overwhelmingly dominant face of her party in news coverage terms (Scammell, 2017).

The two rivals for the premiership dominated reporting of this campaign (Table 13.1). Significantly, in percentage terms the Tory leader featured twice as much in reporting of the election as her predecessor David Cameron had in 2015 (Deacon et al., 2015). That Cameron had, like May this time, been the single most

prominent politician two years before underlined the even more highly personalised, presidential nature of the 2017 campaign.

Table 13.1: Most prominent politicians (TV and print news appearances)

Rank	Politician	% items
1	Theresa May (Con)	30.1%
2	Jeremy Corbyn (Lab)	26.7%
3	Tim Farron (Lib Dem)	6.8%
4	Nicola Sturgeon (SNP)	3.7%
5	Boris Johnson (Con)	3.6%
6	John McDonnell (Lab)	3.4%
7	Paul Nuttall (UKIP)	3.4%
8	Amber Rudd (Con)	2.8%
8	Diane Abbott (Lab)	2.8%
10	Emily Thornberry (Lab)	1.8%

Source: Deacon et al., 2017a, p7.

Despite her media prominence Theresa May refused to appear on live television alongside her rivals. Her strategists likely calculated that the Conservatives' substantial lead in the polls meant the Prime Minister had little to gain from participating in face-to-face debates (Coleman, 2017). Although initially uncontroversial with most colleagues, May's risk-averse decision might not have been so harmful to her reputation had other aspects of the ensuing Conservative campaign not proven so problematic. The Prime Minister explained her refusal to appear in leader debates was because she preferred to 'get out and about and meet voters' (BBC, 2017). But this claim was visibly undermined when May was subsequently filmed knocking on a door and failing to elicit any response from the occupant. When the Prime Minister did spontaneously converse with a voter in Oxfordshire it proved an

uncomfortable experience in which she listened to complaints about government funding cuts to disability care (Shaw, 2017). Both embarrassments highlighted the obvious limitations of interpersonal campaigning, not to mention May's stated reason for not participating in a media opportunity that would have reached the largest possible audience of voters.

May's refusal to participate in face-to-face leader debates rendered her open to the charge she was seeking to avoid proper democratic scrutiny. This perception was reinforced by carefully controlled 'public' appearances in which she spoke in front of supporters holding Conservative placards. This now familiar, but somewhat staid format, was increasingly criticised by journalists keen to cross-examine politicians about live stories rather than passively listen to their pre-scripted messages (for an earlier critique of this see Osborne, 2005). This tension was palpable in the questioning of a seemingly panicked May about her so-called 'dementia tax' in what was intended to be another routine controlled appearance soon after the party's manifesto launch. Elsewhere even straightforward queries from a local reporter in Plymouth were met with stock responses from the Prime Minister during an awkward interview where the journalist likened their encounter to 'a postmodern version' of popular BBC radio comedy programme *Just A Minute* (Blackledge, 2017).

Once the Prime Minister's credibility had been questioned, particularly over the Conservatives' apparent manifesto 'u-turn', every aspect of her self-promotion was more readily challenged. Her appearance on supposedly 'softer' interview programmes did not necessarily convey the impression she might have hoped. On primetime BBC1 magazine style *The One Show* May and her husband Philip digressed into talking about who did the 'boy jobs' and 'girl jobs' at home. Similarly, when ITV journalist Julie Etchingham asked the Conservative leader what was the

‘naughtiest’ thing she had done in her life, her surreal response was to admit to once running through a field of wheat when she was younger. The light-hearted questioning elicited responses that were further gifts for satirists and also offered a demonstration of how even the most seemingly innocuous queries could help undermine a politician’s image as a credible figure.

2. For Many Audiences Not a Few Journalists: Labour’s Media Strategy.

There was a marked consensus among the expert ‘commentariat’ that Labour was on course for a major defeat in this election. The *Financial Times*’ political correspondent summed this up when he suggested: ‘One thing is certain: this is going to be a very bad election for a divided Labour Party and a weak Mr Corbyn’ (Payne, 2017). The reasons for the impending landslide defeat were the supposedly ineffectual Jeremy Corbyn, the party’s ‘lurch to the left’ and its alleged lack of credibility on key issues. Corbyn’s leadership abilities had been constantly questioned since his elevation to the post and were once again challenged on ITV’s *Good Morning Britain* only hours before the election was announced. Interviewer Piers Morgan compared his guest to Arsene Wenger, the beleaguered manager of their favourite football team Arsenal, in suggesting he too might want to consider his position so that the team could recover and progress. The ensuing General Election would prove to both a liberating period, as well as a turning point for the Labour leader.

The campaign Jeremy Corbyn led confounded expectations, particularly among his many critics in the media, which had even included Labour-leaning newspapers such as the *Guardian* and *Mirror*. As the election progressed they were the only dailies that supported the party, as Table 13.2 shows. The overwhelming majority of

national newspaper coverage remained trenchantly hostile towards Labour, rather than favourable towards the Conservatives.

Table 13.2: Political allegiance and circulation of daily national newspapers, May 2017

Title	Declaration	Print Circulation	Unique online browsers
<i>Daily Mirror</i>	Labour	0.65	5.41
<i>Daily Express</i>	Conservative	0.38	2.05
<i>Daily Star</i>	No declaration	0.43	1.02
<i>The Sun</i>	Conservative	1.58	4.96
<i>Daily Mail</i>	Conservative	1.44	15.37
<i>Daily Telegraph</i>	Conservative	0.48	4.78
<i>The Guardian</i>	Labour	0.15	8.47*
<i>The Times</i>	Conservative	0.46	Paywall
<i>I</i>	No declaration	0.27	6.58 (NB independent.co.uk)
<i>Financial Times</i>	Conservative	0.20	Paywall

Sources: Mayhew, 2017a; Mayhew, 2017b; Ponsford, 2017.

Note: *denotes figure for April

This, however, temporarily changed during the hiatus over the ‘dementia tax’ when the focus of criticism briefly switched to the Tories, as Figure 13.1 demonstrates (see ‘Week 3’). Nonetheless the overwhelming bulk of commentary in the press was negative rather than positive, and most of the negative was overwhelmingly directed at Labour.

Figure 13.1: Weekly campaign press evaluations of parties (weighted by circulation)

Source: Deacon et al., 2017b.

Lurid headlines in right-wing newspapers depicted Corbyn and some of his colleagues as extremists with unacceptable views on terrorism, an issue that became highly salient during the campaign because of the heinous attacks on London and Manchester. *The Sun* (2017a; 10) used the testimony of a former Irish Republican paramilitary to accuse the Labour leader and Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell of being ‘IRA fanboys’ in the past. The *Daily Mail* similarly condemned Corbyn, McDonnell and Shadow Home Secretary Diane Abbott as ‘this troika’ of ‘APOLOGISTS FOR TERROR’ on account of them allegedly ‘befriending Britain’s enemies’ (Daily Mail, 2017b, p1). On polling day, *The Sun* rehearsed many of the now familiar attacks with a front-page mock-up of the party leader and a plea to readers ‘DON’T CHUCK BRITAIN IN THE... COR-BIN’ alongside a ten point charge list that denounced him as a ‘TERRORIST FRIEND’, ‘ENEMY OF BUSINESS’ and ‘MARXIST EXTREMIST’ among other things. Perhaps unsurprisingly Labour strategists shunned most mainstream print journalism, with the

exception of friendlier publications such as those belonging to the Mirror Group (Waterson, 2017).

Some of the negative stories in the print media about Corbyn also featured in broadcast coverage of the election. For instance, Sky News' interviewer Sophy Ridge cross-examined Corbyn over his past involvement in Northern Irish politics prior to the peace process. This led to some tense exchanges during a campaign in which he appeared to gain confidence. Rather than passively accept journalists' preconceived agendas, Labour also sought to shape the news and this was most amply demonstrated in the days following the two atrocities that temporarily suspended campaigning.

Speaking after the Manchester bombing, Corbyn linked the outrage to foreign policy decisions he had previously opposed and now contended were destabilising the world. Similarly, following the London attack, Labour argued the government cuts would further hamper the ability of the police and public services to prevent and respond to similar incidents in the future. Far from being potentially damaging to a party depicted as being 'soft' on the issue, an increased prominence afforded to defence and security related news coverage (Figure 13.2) was met with a clear response from Corbyn. More predictably, Brexit was also an issue during the campaign, particularly at the beginning, but not the all-consuming some had predicted.

Figure 13.2: Proportional prominence of campaign issues, week by week (TV and press)

Source: Deacon et al., 2017a, p16.

The leaking of the Labour manifesto before its launch proved fortuitous given journalists spent more time discussing its contents than they might otherwise. This is not to say the party's presentation of its policies was without incident. Corbyn's record and plans were closely interrogated by a vocal group of voters, some highly critical, on the BBC1 *Question Time Leaders' Special*, as well as Channel 4's equivalent programme. Although he appeared resilient during these occasionally uncomfortable experiences, the party leader was not always able to readily respond. When asked on BBC Five Live about the cost implications of his ambitious plans for childcare on the day the policy was being promoted, Corbyn struggled to answer. Similarly, Diane Abbott was embarrassed during an interview with LBC radio in which she was unable to explain the amount of funding that would be needed to support an expansion in police numbers.

High profile gaffes like those of Corbyn and Abbott contributed to a greater emphasis being placed on policy, at the expense of 'process' that typically dominated

election news; in 2017 this figure was at a third of all coverage, markedly down on its 2015 equivalent (Deacon et al., 2017b). And although Labour appeared keen to campaign on substantive issues, Corbyn did emulate his Conservative opponent by appearing on *The One Show* where he seemed comfortable talking about his upbringing and hobbies. Unlike May, the Labour leader's partner was not a fellow guest and nor did he talk much about his current family life. The popular appeal of Corbyn was perhaps most memorably captured in television footage of his tour of the country where he was met by enthusiasm (Parry, 2017). Facing a concert crowd in Wirral he was greeted by an apparently spontaneous chant of his name that would continue to be heard throughout the rest of the campaign and beyond.

3. Finding their voices? Coverage of the minor parties

The growing confidence of the Labour campaign led Corbyn to make a surprise appearance in the final major face-to-face televised leaders' debate. Previously he had said he would not participate without the Prime Minister also being involved. Although these kinds of live encounters are scrutinised for any perceived gaffes by those speaking, it was perhaps Theresa May's decision to stay away that was more important than anything that happened on the night itself. The controversy over May's no-show also gave Liberal Democrat leader Tim Farron one of his few opportunities to make an impression on the campaign. Using his closing remarks as the penultimate speaker, Farron rounded on May and the Home Secretary who was representing her: 'Amber Rudd is up next. She is not Prime Minister. The Prime Minister is not here so she can't be bothered, so why should you. In fact *Bake Off* is on BBC2 next, why not make yourself a brew? You are not worth Theresa May's time, don't give her yours'

(Mortimer, 2017). Moreover, he urged viewers to change channels before the Prime Minister's stand-in Amber Rudd made her final remarks.

The Liberal Democrat leader's bonhomie was in evidence when he showed himself to be open to scrutiny by engaging in conversation during a televised encounter with an irate Leave supporter. But Farron was less patient when the issue of whether his Christianity conflicted with party policy advocating gay equality was repeatedly brought up in media interviews. Similarly, when challenged over his support for a second EU referendum by the BBC's lead interrogator Andrew Neil, their interview descended into a row. The Farron interview was one of a number Neil conducted with party leaders on behalf of the BBC. In his programme with Neil, UKIP's Paul Nuttall was similarly discomforted when asked about inflammatory comments attacking Islam made by one of his fellow MEPs. Nuttall had been keen for positive public exposure due to the marked decline of news interest in his party that mirrored its collapse in the polls. UKIP also lost the support of the *Express*, the fiercely Eurosceptic newspaper that had been the only daily national newspaper to endorse it during the previous election.

Figure 13.3: Party prominence in the 2017 vs 2015 General Elections (TV and press)

Source: Deacon et al. 2017b, p370.

Having assumed a high profile in 2015, national news coverage of the SNP also substantially declined in this campaign, the reporting of which was now dominated by the two major parties as shown by Figure 133. Despite enjoying representation in the leaders' debate, the Greens and Plaid Cymru were largely ignored by the media. But at least they, unlike the similarly marginalised DUP, had a place in the live UK-wide televised leaders' programming. The Northern Irish party had protested its exclusion from this by broadcasters. Following the result and election of a hung parliament that gave them the balance of power, there was far greater coverage of the DUP than the tiny amount it had received in the preceding campaign (Deacon et al., 2017a).

4. Parties and social media competition: The unexpected election?

At the outset of the election, there was arguably less media interest in online campaigning than the previous four campaigns. The ubiquitous nature of Internet technologies meant their novelty value for journalists had worn off. Moreover, the seemingly pre-determined nature of the result did little to stimulate interest in the campaign. Rather than the usual hype around whether the Internet would swing it for one particular party, there were fears, following the US presidential election, of social media promoting fake news, abuse and a polarization of the electorate. Yet, as the campaign progressed, social media was highlighted as a significant factor in the unexpected rise in support for Labour. It was generally accepted, even by some Conservatives, that Labour won the 2017 social media battle and had been particularly successful at mobilizing young voter support.

Social media has sometimes been viewed as a more open and less skewed communication playing field producing different patterns of competition and more accessibility for minority parties than mainstream media channels (Ward et al., 2018). At the previous 2015 election, there were mixed messages in terms of online campaign competition. Labour was seen as dominating the Twittersphere, whilst the Conservatives utilised negative advertising on Facebook. (Wring and Ward, 2015).

2017 was somewhat different with Labour and Jeremy Corbyn seen as a dominant force across a range of platforms. Moreover, in-line with Labour's rise in the opinion polls, Labour's advantage appeared to increase over the course of the campaign. Labour maintained their dominant position on Twitter in terms of a range of basic measures such as followers, likes and shares (Bauchowitz and Hanska, 2017). Labour supporting hashtags and accounts outperformed the Conservatives. Similarly, when examining the most popular election hashtags, the Labour advantage was again underlined with groupings of both Labour and Corbyn hashtags appearing in the top six election terms. Whilst the Conservatives and May hashtags appear in 8/9th position, they were a long way distant in terms of numbers. By the last two weeks of the campaign, one study indicated that Labour's dominance was increasing - Labour accounted for 61.9% of party related tweets during one week compared to just 17% for the Conservatives (Kaminska et al., 2017).

Twitter also seemed to magnify the importance of party leaders and their personal accounts. Here again, Labour dominated with Corbyn's account gaining by far the most mentions and retweets – twice as many as May and four times as much as official Labour and Conservative party accounts. Corbyn began with the campaign with over twice as many followers as May and extended this advantage during the campaign with a 45% increase (Cecil, 2017).

Whilst Labour may have maintained and extended its advantage on Twitter, Facebook was seen as the key social media battleground for three main reasons: Firstly, it reaches a greater potential share of the electorate with well over half UK population now having Facebook accounts; Secondly, its demographic profile, although still skewed, is more diverse than other social media. Thirdly, Facebook offers the greatest potential in terms of data mining, profiling and then advertising and targeting. As with Twitter, Labour's Facebook following grew substantially to close to a million over the course of the campaign; the number of likes grew by 75% compared to just 10% for Conservatives; Labour also had three-times as many Facebook shares.

Use of other social media platforms appeared more-patchy. However, the Conservatives reportedly used paid advertising on a range of other outlets particularly YouTube. According to BBC reports though, these were more randomly distributed compared to the micro-targeting on Facebook. Snapchat, one of the most popular social media outlets amongst teenagers, was used fairly cautiously. The main party leaders and the co-leaders of the Green Party took part in a rather awkward Snapchat Q&A session. Labour latterly appealed to Snapchat users to turn out to vote, whilst the Conservatives experimented with paid content (BBC, 2017).

Despite its reputation as being a more open media space for minority parties, few minor parties made much of an impact online in 2017. The eventual dominance of the two main parties in vote-share terms was reflected in many of the social media metrics. The increasing complexities and resource demands of data-driven marketing strategies clearly limit smaller parties' ability to compete. But even in basic terms, the Liberal Democrats, for example, didn't even appear in the top 20 election-hashtag groupings. Amongst the smaller parties, only the SNP and Nicola Sturgeon managed

to register much of a presence across Twitter and Facebook in terms of following, discussion and sharing (Cram et al., 2017; Kaminska et al., 2017).

Patterns of major party dominance were also seen in terms of candidate presence on the two main social media platforms. Overall, 68% candidates ran Twitter accounts with a similar number maintaining a Facebook presence. This masks slightly different underlying patterns. Labour had most candidates on Twitter with 88%, well ahead of the Conservatives, SNP and Liberal Democrats. On Facebook, SNP candidates had the largest presence followed by Labour. Other minor parties, however, lagged well behind with a 62% Facebook presence and only just over half their candidates being found on Twitter. Indeed, the UKIP Party Chairman was reported to have instructed candidates to close their own social media sites as he “hated social media” because it simply caused “more grief for the party” (www.order-order.com, 2017).

Whilst basic social media metrics such as followers, retweets and links are fairly crude measures of the importance or success of campaigns, this time most pointed in one direction. As one media report put it: “Labour tweeted more, posted more and shared more than all its rivals” (Bloomberg, 2017).

5. Online Campaign Organisation: Networks, Movements and Sharing

Over the past decade, two broad models of social media campaigning have attracted attention. Firstly, a more decentralized, networked, citizen-led style of campaign (Gibson, 2013), tends to focus on social media’s participatory possibilities and where the actions of campaign activists/supporters determine the direction or focus of a campaign. Participatory acts and engagement are often at the heart of this approach. The second emergent model is that of data-driven or big-data campaigns

(Anstead, 2017). Here the concentration is on the exploitation of data gathering/mining possibilities of social media to then target personalized marketing and advertising to key groups of voters in swing seats. The notion of data driven campaigning attracted attention at a number of recent elections and during the EU referendum campaign (*Economist*, 2017). However, the use of data and marketing in itself is not, of course, new, but the internet's potential for information surveillance provides opportunities to drill down ever further into voter sentiment.

In the 2017 campaign, superficially at least, the Conservatives appeared to lean towards a more data-driven, top-down approach. Labour with its newly reinvigorated party membership appeared to incorporate more of the citizen-led aspect. This may simply be a reflection of the respective parties' current strengths and structures rather than any necessary strategic choice. Moreover, as noted below, Labour appeared to combine elements of both data-driven and supporter-enabled digital campaigning. Interestingly, this seems to have been reflected in Labour's formal campaign organization. Andrew Gwynne, the campaign co-ordinator revealed that:

we placed digital at the heart of our activities, with HQ teams organised into separate campaign and organisational arms. The former led on delivering the right message to the right voters, the latter on engagement and mobilization (*Guardian*, 2017).

In the aftermath of the election, there has been considerable criticism both internally and externally of the Conservatives (digital) campaign. Critics have argued that it was too-controlled, too-negative, too-top-down (leader focused), inflexible and appeared to want simply replicate some of the 2015 campaign tactics. In short, the party forgot the social element to social media (Morgan, 2017; Mason, 2017). The Conservatives had, indeed, rehired many of same digital advisors from 2015 and much emphasis again was placed on micro-targeted ads via Facebook (Ruddick,

2017). However, the messages failed to resonate and were much less likely to be shared. Social media analysts noted that whilst the approach was not necessarily wrong, the messages did not always match the targets (Booth and Hern, 2017). The over-confidence of the early part of the Conservative campaign meant that advertisements were often targeted towards soft Labour voters in marginal or even relatively safe Labour seats. Little emphasis was apparently placed on digital marketing in their own marginals. The 'strong and stable' mantra seemed to find little traction with the targeted swing voters, but might have had more impact on core Conservative supporters (Booth and Hern, 2017). Furthermore, the campaign did not appear very responsive even though the data reportedly coming into Conservative Headquarters in the latter part of the campaign suggested the strategy wasn't working. The Conservative social media campaign, could arguably be encapsulated in MP Greg Knight's much-ridiculed online video. His Alan Partridge-style performance saw him walk awkwardly into a bland office and woodenly deliver a banal message, rounded-off with a 1970s style musical jingle (www.LBC.co.uk, 2017). Although, to be fair to Knight, this garnered over half a million views more than some of the messages put out by his party.

Labour, by contrast, was viewed as having a more slick, flexible, and positive online campaign with sharing and mobilization at its heart (Walsh, 2017). This could be seen not just in the public metrics of followers, likes and shares, but also in their below the radar social media marketing. The party appeared to have learnt the lessons from 2015 where they had been massively outspent by Conservatives who successfully targeted negative attack adverts. This time Labour married both data targeting and marketing ads whilst also extensively encouraging grassroots engagement. They reportedly spent over £1m aiming to match the Conservatives in

Facebook advertising assisted by a new digital tool “Promote” to produce targeted hyper-localized social media marketing (Wendling, 2017).

Labour also allied themselves to so-called “influencers” with large existing social media audiences (Pringle, 2017). A range of celebrities from music, sport and television were used to endorse Labour’s message through videos and at campaign rallies which were then shared virally on social media. According to BuzzFeed analysis, these celebrity endorsements were amongst the most shared election related articles on Facebook. The support of specific types of celebrity such as Stormzy and rapper Akala were seen as boosting Corbyn’s anti-establishment image and reaching out to a younger audience. Crucially, however, the content and messages aimed to gain both clicks and encourage sharing. Labour placed considerable emphasis in this campaign on video content that was likely to be shared by friends (Segesten and Bossetta, 2017; Fletcher, 2017).

Labour’s other main advantage in spreading its message was what Chadwick (2017) has referred to as the party-as-movement mentality. The surge in Labour membership post-2015 meant there was a ready army of digitally-skilled supporters. Yet, in the run up to election, doubts had been raised about how valuable an asset the newer members might be. Initial research on new Labour members suggested that they were Internet engaged, but were largely clicktivists distant from the party as whole (Poletti et al. 2016). There were grumbles from some local parties that the new Corbynite supporters were not interested in the hard work of the traditional doorstep campaign (Chakelian, 2017). Ultimately, though, such fears seem to have been misplaced. Labour’s official campaign, assisted by advisors from the Bernie Sanders grassroots US presidential bid, was heavily supported by new Corbyn-inspired activist networks, most notably Momentum. Formed initially to bolster Corbyn’s leadership

position and battle-hardened from his recent leadership re-election campaign, Momentum provided both online resources and ground-level co-ordination that other parties lacked. They helped launch online tools such as My Nearest Marginal, allowing supporters to find their nearest swing seat and join with other activists (Shabi, 2017). Phone canvassing apps were also deployed along with the traditional door-knocking days. Momentum claimed that a quarter of all UK Facebook users saw Momentum videos in the last week of the campaign. Much of this was done at low cost with Momentum capitalising on volunteer skills and allowing individual supporters to create DIY campaign material.

Additionally, Labour also benefited from having its message amplified through the growth of leftist social media news sites such as The Canary, Evolve Politics and Paul Mason News, who were also able to gain considerable shares online and motivate left-leaning activists. To some extent, supporter networks and social media sites enabled Labour to bypass and to counter negativity of mainstream ('MSM') outlets (Al-Kadhi, 2017; Littunen, 2017).

6. The Impact of the Social Media Campaign

Previous UK election campaigns have usually begun with an overhype of technology and ended with disappointment about its limited impact. The 2017 campaign followed a somewhat different pattern with less initial hype followed by an assumption that social media made a significant impact in two ways: the mobilization of additional younger voters especially for Labour and the challenging of the mainstream media agenda and more specifically newspaper attacks on Labour and Corbyn. Reflecting on the outcome of the election, Corbyn himself expressed little doubt about the importance of social media:

...whilst a number of the print media were incredibly hostile to Labour... in reality social media has far greater reach... Those who follow Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat and so on really helped to get the message across and it certainly resulted in the voter registration that was so important... (Daly, 2017)

There is plenty of circumstantial evidence that social media driven campaigning facilitated the turnout of younger voters and helped with some surprise results. In the case of voter registration, certainly social media played a role in targeting harder to reach younger people. The formal registration drive conducted by the Electoral Commission used social media extensively, even joining forces with Snapchat to launch a geofilter entitled “Find Your Voice”. However, importantly, it was not only the usual formal political channels promoting voter registration but a host of sources, including: celebrity videos; citizen initiatives such as Rize-up.org; a crowd-funded registration project from online campaign group 38 Degrees; as well as numerous local reminders from Universities and colleges. Labour underpinned this by consistently urging people to register to vote – mentioned in all Corbyn’s rallies. In contrast, strikingly, the Conservatives only sent a single social media appeal to vote.

In addition to a registration boost, one prominent argument that surfaced after the campaign was how social media was becoming an increasingly influential alternative to mainstream media. A YouGov survey sheds some perspective on the supposed social media - mainstream media divide. It provided evidence of generational shifts in media consumption and of the increasing influence of social media amongst 18-24 year olds. A range of social media outlets have now become popular with young adults as regular news sources (notably, Facebook, Twitter and BuzzFeed). These are already more important than magazines and newspapers (with

the exception of *the Guardian*). Startlingly, not a single 18-24 year old in the survey saw local papers as regular news sources. Nevertheless, mainstream BBC News remains by far and away the most dominant source for all age groups. Similarly, television is seen as the most influential media on vote choice; although for 18-24 year olds, it is closely followed by social media. All age groups believe that the digital age has diminished the influence of newspapers, but the press remains important for those over 40 (Mayhew, 2017c; YouGov, 2017).

Conclusion

Despite the growth in popularity of social media, mainstream media is not yet politically redundant. Television, particularly BBC News, remains hugely important for all ages. The divide between MSM (especially TV) and social media is somewhat of an artificial one. Mainstream media events such as the set-piece interviews (like Neil on the BBC and Ridge on Sky), leaders' television appearances (*The One Show*) and the formal leadership debates were all important in shaping social media discussion. Rather than being parallel universes, the digital sphere and mainstream media increasingly overlapped and fed off one another in this campaign. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that Labour capitalised on the reach of social media into their target audience of young and new voters. It marks the first time in the UK that social media was properly at the heart of a party election campaign. It has been noted for some time that Internet works best for the swift mobilisation of oppositionist movements that fitted well with the reinvigorated grassroots networks of Corbyn's Labour Party.

The Conservatives lacked both the leader and the messages to engage and enthuse audiences online or off. Perhaps even more crucially, they lacked the

energized digital networks to share and spread their message. The continued decline of the party's membership base and its ageing nature suggest that this structural disadvantage is unlikely to disappear soon (Chadwick, 2017). However, Labour's success in both overcoming press hostility and dominating social media platforms still didn't deliver victory. Moreover, in an era where support and partisanship need to be constantly maintained and rebuilt, Labour cannot automatically expect to maintain this advantage nor would the oppositional movement type approach necessarily work if they were to gain office in the near future. As Charles (2017) noted, the rise of social media means the only certainty is to expect the unexpected.

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