

# THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE 2015 BRITISH GENERAL ELECTION

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The paper discuss the use of social media platforms in British General Elections from systemic point of veiw. Social media platforms are here to stay and directed voters' thoughts and views of certain government policies and respective political parties and their members. Article analyzes primarily Facebook, as it is used by millions of people as a discussion platform every single day. Secondly Twitter and also any other social media platforms such as YouTube and Instagram will be discussed throughout this paper, in order to build a judgement upon how where social media platforms put to good use by all stakeholders involved; namely being; voters; politicians; thought leaders and any other people that harnessed the use of social media as a tool for discussion or cohesion of the general election.*

## **KEY WORDS**

*social media, 2015, elections, United Kingdom, system approach*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Not so long ago back in March of 2015, Ipsos Mori who are the second largest market research company, formed by a merger of Ipsos UK and MORI, two of Britain's leading survey companies in October 2015, reported that 'one third of 18-24-year-olds living in Britain thought social media would influence the way in which they vote' (Willis 2015), considering which party is the best and which party represent themselves the most from a political perspective. So to introduce this paper, I thought it best to primarily focus upon the use of social media from the perspective of the younger generation, who we can mostly agree are the main representatives and main users of social media in today's society and who actually uses social media in many other ways (Boehmova & Malinova 2013).

In addition, the most prolific social media platforms that directed voters' thoughts and views of certain government policies and respective political parties and their members can be seen to be Facebook, primarily as it is used by millions of people as a discussion platform every single day. Secondly Twitter, another discussion platform; where I will be talking about the influential use of hashtags and also prolific tweeter and how these tweeters can become thought leaders concerning specific topics, and how they can relate to thousands if not millions of other tweeters through their influential modes of contact. And also any other social media platforms such as YouTube and Instagram will be discussed throughout this paper, in order to build a judgement upon how where social media platforms put to good use by all stakeholders involved; namely being; voters; politicians; thought leaders and any other people that harnessed the use of social media as a tool for discussion or cohesion of the general election.

Taking into consideration all of the above and the context of what this work will be, conclusion of this paper is specifically which parties gained the most from the use of social media. This will not just take into consideration the amount of likes say the Green Party has on Facebook or the quantity of hashtags that the UKIP Party gained on Twitter. It will also take into account the way in which certain political parties used their own initiative and good will through practice, by harnessing the opportunities that say

YouTube has; by creating sometimes comical if not policy-specific actions that relate to a certain target audience, which will take us on to the first specific area of discussion concerning social media platforms, which is YouTube.

So why is it that party leaders themselves use Facebook? Is it for self-propaganda of their own political party, or is it to target a wider audience with a means of addressing certain issues? Is it even ethical?(Sigmund 2013) There hasn't been much focus upon such questions, as really everybody uses some form of social media, so why must they be explained. However, Marcus Beard, a political analyst at Brandwatch, an international social intelligence firm had said that "Party leaders can use social media to circumvent traditional media and communicate directly with the public"(Suliman Adela 2015) . So it is obvious that communication, which will definitely work alongside self-propaganda, is the main reason as to why social media platforms are used by party leaders. Whilst the old yet not so outlived methods of public speaking require some gutsy determination, not to mention a good public speaker, social media offer a different way in which party leaders or members can let their voices be heard, and rather directly too.

Furthermore when we discuss the uses of social media platforms by the respected government bodies, it is important to understand who they are targeting and how is it possible to target them. Again, Marcus Beard offers us a light and easy to understand demographic explanation; "56 % of 18-24 year olds spend in excess of six hours online each day, making them a ready audience for online communication" and that "Often young people are caricatured as being apathetic about politics and social media has critical organic less hierarchal new spaces, which political institutions cannot afford to neglect". What we can interpret from this is that the platforms already exist for political activists to make us of, but it is about targeting each age group or voter in a different light, whilst maintaining specific political propaganda. (Smutny et al. 2013)

In a different light, one of the stand out uses of social media this general election was an attempt to attract the attention from non-British people in London during election campaign. The latest impact of social media on the elections has been more tangible with the iconic tourist attraction the London Eye, which faces the Houses of Parliament, lit up each evening in political party colours to reflect the number of times each party is mentioned on Facebook.

## **YOUTUBE**

YouTube is an excellent tool to reach out to potential voters for example, as it almost a face-to-face transaction or way of communicating, and one party that made a prime example of this was the Green Party. Now the Green Party in recent years have become one of the important political parties within the United Kingdom, gaining 16.4% of the vote in May 2015 (Perraudin 2015). The Green Party was always outshone by other major political parties such as the Conservatives, Labour or the Liberal Democrats, and lately they have joined forces with the ever so compromising United Kingdom Independent Party (UKIP). This recent political prominence in my opinion is definitely due to their excellent broadcasting appeals via YouTube. Many political parties in recent years have used YouTube as a way of broadcasting their policies by using their best public speakers and recording at times serious and anticipated videos, but in this specific case of the Green Party, a different approach was opted for; the Green Party decided to change the tune of party political broadcasts by uploading a spoof advert to YouTube portraying the Conservatives, Labour, the Liberal Democrats and UKIP as members of a rather questionable boy band. A much-derided strategy, it still gained more than twice as many views as the Conservatives' similar appeal titles "It's working – don't wreck it", and eight times the number of views achieved by Labour's flagship "Ed Miliband: a portrait"(Willis 2015) .

So consequently, from a comparative perspective one can dually acquire the knowledge taken from the statistics mentioned above that the actual influence a party broadcast through the use of YouTube as a social media platform can most definitely work in the favour of the political party in question. Therefore the growing prominence of the Green Party can be thanks to their different stance to appealing to the masses of Great Britain; a truly inspiring.

## FACEBOOK

The many uses of Facebook are evident to everybody and they need not be explained. Therefore to analyse the way in which Facebook has been harnessed during the general election I can make numerous related points, with some statistics, to give varying analyses' of what political party has gained the most from the use of social media, if any. Firstly as wrote newspaper 'The Independent' we can primarily see who appears to have reached out to the most people concerning the amount of likes for political posts. For instance, UKIP have hammered all the main parties in this category, with an average of 7,000 "likes" for each post on their official Facebook page. Labour trails behind with just 1200, while the Liberal Democrats saw a pitiful average of 250 "likes" per post.(Burrell 2015) So again from a comparative perspective we can see that one party has outshone the other parties with its approach to using Facebook as a platform for social media discussion. Personally I believe this is due to the amount of people who use Facebook, people of all ages, who are attracted to what UKIP stand for, which is very different and far to the right.

The below graphic explains just how much Facebook attention each party has managed to maintain.



**Figure 1:** Number of Facebook friends and followers (Rothwell 2015)

To take it to another level and one from the perspective of the wider public, we can see where each party stands from a representative perspective again, but with the amount of likes that each party has itself and for its profile page. Aljazeera news (online) writes about this very correlation, and when we take it into account we can begin to understand which party is best represented by the people on Facebook itself. So on Facebook, the Conservatives had more than 450,000 likes for their page, and the UK Independence party (UKIP) was close behind with more than 445,000, while Labour had about 290,000 likes. (Suliman Adela 2015) Now although these figures literally don't mean anything, they can be used as simple tools of propaganda for each party.

## TWITTER

So much like Facebook, the amount of chatter that political parties gained using Twitter was also closely monitored, thus we can see what charismatic leader came out on top with Twitter. For example, the

major parties have tweeted more than 15,000 times in the campaign. The most active account of all - just by a whisker - is the Liberal Democrats, who tweeted more than 3,200 times in five weeks. The Conservatives were a very close second place with 3,199 tweets between March 30 and May 06 2015. More than 3,200 tweets in over 5 weeks highlights not only how much online credibility that these parties and specifically the Liberal Democrats are trying to attain, but it also underlines how seriously that these parties are now considering the use of social media to be.

The Prime Minister (David Cameron) is a clear winner in the popularity contest on Twitter, with nearly one million followers to Ed Miliband's paltry 460,000. Nick Clegg is a distant third with 230,000 followers - and just ahead of Nigel Farage's 220,000. Welsh dragon Leanne Wood is the most obscure party leader on Twitter, with a comparatively feeble 27,000 followers. We can therefore see that each political leader has and is still trying to convince people to follow them through various different communication techniques as well as tweeting as frequently as possible, as let us not forget that social media is a non-forgiving platforms, as users have the discrepancy to follow and un-follow people day-by-day, as they wish.

The use of social media platforms in this year's general election was very similar to that of the Obama campaign within the United States. The whole idea of using social media is a way to communicate, but also it is a technique to mobilise supporters, getting people getting together and getting them to join up. So throughout the election we can see that each party used social media and the various platforms available to promote their own rhetoric and their various parties.

## CONCLUSION

So to conclude, we can analyse which parties had gained the biggest threshold of different social media platforms and then make a comparison between the amounts of votes each party won in correlation. Yet firstly, I think one of the most imperative discussion point that we have to distinguish is that political advertising on television and radio is banned in the UK. But during the general election campaign, parties were placing paid-for political adverts and campaign videos on social media to attract a potential audience of millions. The videos - some of which have been attacked for their negative campaign messages and much like The Green party YouTube broadcast I mentioned above, are not regulated by the broadcast regulators Ofcom and the Advertising Standards Authority. So furthermore social media has become one of the greatest communication tools available to political parties as side stepping from banned campaign slogans that were previously used on the television and radio has had to be maintained in recent years. (Pavlicek 2013)

In evaluation of everything that I have mentioned, we can therefore suggest that from the perspective of Facebook, we can see that the United Kingdom Independence party (UKIP) has won the 'race for likes' category, with their unprecedented score and like for like ratio over its' competitors. Personally I don't really understand why, as UKIP stand for neo-liberalism amongst a mixture of not so attractive policies that would be introduced if they came to power; namely the United Kingdom would slowly and surely become an independent state, out of the reach of the European Union. Not only would such an implication takes its toll on the many industries of the country that are maintained by domestically born workers, but also workers from outside of the United Kingdom who have rightly taken advantage of the relaxed borders that go hand in hand with the 'free movement' policy we know all too well about.

In addition, although the amount of votes won by The Green party is not a fair representation of their excellent voting campaign, they definitely won the vote for originality. With a well strung out comical sketch mimicking other party leaders, the party appear to have taken online communication to another level. It is however a shame to see that The Green party has still not managed to wage a significant political war upon other big political parties. They did however; win the 'Social Media War' from a YouTube perspective.

From a tweeting perspective, the good old-fashioned and rather boring Liberal Democrats won the Twitter war by finding their online feed in the eyes of their vast amount of followers, because of their tweeting strategy by overloading their followers' feeds! But rightly so, average voter would rather

follow Nick Clegg on Twitter than Ed Miliband for example, who, as being the leader of the labor party, had a PR problem for eating a bacon sandwich while looking like a complete fool, for which social media tore him to pieces and Ed Miliband eating a bacon sandwich became an infamous internet meme. (Wikipedia.com 2015)

So, as a result of social media being ever more useful for political parties and their respected leaders, it will be interesting to witness what further political upsets and carnage will be a resulting impact for those involved. It will be interesting to monitor, if the new Prime Minister himself actually tweets directly from his iphone onto his Twitter profile. If he does, social media may have got in the way of politics slightly, and politics may have become more of a social benefit for its day to day users, and not so much the thought leaders that it creates in the political sphere.

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