RaY

Research at the University of York St John

PUBLIC SPACE OR PUBLIC SPHERE? AN EXAMINATION OF FACEBOOK AS A NEW SPACE FOR POLITICAL TALK THROUGH ONLINE ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT DURING A UK GENERAL ELECTION

SUSAN GREENWOOD

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement of Staffordshire University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

November 2018

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

Copyright

Abstract:

This thesis considers the place of Facebook within the public sphere by focusing on whether the social network provides new, distinct spaces for political discussion. In doing so, the study makes an original contribution to knowledge by assessing the role of Facebook in enabling or limiting political debate. It considers whether the corporate cultural development of Facebook's architecture influences such debate, set against broader interpersonal political communication and social capital theory.

While other studies have considered Facebook's contribution to the public sphere by studying the role of the internet generally or of social media more broadly, this research focuses on Facebook itself, arguing that the scale, reach and corporate ecology of Facebook necessitates studying it as a political actor in its own right.

The research hypothesised that Facebook's corporate ambition and its global scale and dominance of online social debate potentially created a new form of social public sphere - one that is the product of today's more horizontal networked society (Castells, 2010). The thesis argues that it is this social aspect of using Facebook, coupled to the company's commercial focus on what an individual may be (or should be) interested in, that has the potential to affect public opinion and thus political actions.

The study used data collected during the 2015 UK General Election, supplemented by additional material gathered during 2017's "snap" UK General Election, to look at how citizens engage in political talk on Facebook. The mixed methods research includes quantitative surveys alongside qualitative online ethnographic study and direct intervention via a case study to test theory.

By focusing on particular online spaces (political candidates' public Facebook pages) and a particular time period (the month preceding a general election) when political debate might be expected to happen, this research assesses whether Facebook's architecture encourages or discourages such debate. The thesis explores whether these online spaces – political candidate's public Facebook pages - offer a 21st century version of Habermas's 18th century coffee houses and salons as a place where debate among peers is expected and encouraged.

However, the study finds that, even in these favourable circumstances, debate is less likely to happen, with Facebook's architecture having a chilling effect on political talk. Users are more likely to avoid debate than to engage in it via Facebook and, while the scale and connectedness of Facebook has enabled protest or para-political movements from Occupy to The 48% group to quickly gather momentum, the commercial ecology of its architecture is not able to sustain debate leading to broader civic action, within the context of a Habermasian public sphere.

Further, Facebook's architecture may undermine the public or civic sphere, not only by discouraging reasoned debate but by making it less likely that users will be exposed to opposing views or new ideas with which they might want to engage.

None-the-less, the thesis hypothesises that the presence of particular users on a candidate's page (the "right" people - defined as visible leaders, supportive policers, aware producers and engaged openers) can counter the negative effects of Facebook's architecture to enable political talk, albeit within limited parameters.

Finally, the thesis concludes that Facebook is not part of the Habermasian public sphere, rather it has undermined or disintermediated the public sphere as it is largely understood.

List of tables and figures

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Why Facebook?

On February 1, 2012, Facebook announced its initial public offering of shares (IPO). Founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg set out his company's global communication aspirations in a letter to investors:

> At Facebook, we're inspired by technologies that have revolutionized how people spread and consume information. We often talk about inventions like the printing press and the television – by simply making communication more efficient, they led to a complete transformation of many important parts of society. They gave more people a voice. They encouraged progress. They changed the way society was organized. They brought us closer together…There is a huge need and a huge opportunity to get everyone in the world connected, to give everyone a voice and to help transform society for the future. (Zuckerberg, 2012)

Leaving aside the question of whether mass communications media have "brought people together" or instead created societies obsessed with amusements and distractions (Postman, 1985)[1], that statement reflects the ecology and ambition of a company and its founder who believes that what he has built in Facebook[2], is not

---

[1] Postman argued that television had turned the dissemination of all civic and public affairs – from politics to news – into entertainment, as "congenial adjuncts of showbusiness." With society "a people on the verge of amusing ourselves to death" (1985: 4). That reliance on media as amusement and distraction may be seen as particularly prevalent in social media which, as discussed further on page 13, may be the ultimate time-passer.

[2] Zuckerberg recounted, in an interview in 2016, how he and his roommates at Harvard did not set out to build a company in designing Facebook but "kind of followed what people wanted", i.e. a directory which enabled people to connect with each other and find out about each other: "at some point…we decided to turn it into a company and go for this mission of connecting the world. But that's not where we started." See Zuckerberg, M. (2016a).

simply a popular communications tool but a *transformational* communications medium. Facebook, according to Zuckerberg, is helping to change how society is organised by giving people, globally, a voice and connecting those voices with each other.

But a voice to do what, and to be heard by whom? And, on being heard, to transform whose societies and in what ways? Does Facebook represent a unique opportunity to rail against power and hegemony, or would the company's business practices and culture always limit the effectiveness of debate?

Focusing on one societal reorganisation opportunity - the General Election in the UK - this thesis considers how and if Facebook provides that transformational communications medium, and whether it is being used to engage in politics and change the civic sphere. The research considers whether Facebook – as uniquely large and socially embedded communications media – enables or discourages political talk within the democratic process.

In doing so, the research is located within debates around what constitutes the public sphere (or even whether it exists) in a world in which communicative spaces are increasingly fragmented and becoming increasingly filtered, and within ongoing debates on the nature of deliberative democracy, particularly within online spaces. The thesis also addresses issues around the quality of debate and the importance of informal political conversation, rather than focused deliberation, in supporting political engagement. What Habermas referred to as the 'more sobering 'is'' of real-world political talk, against the 'demanding 'ought'' of academic theory too rooted in ideas of what political deliberation should look like. (2006: 411).

Thus, the bulk of the data gathered during this four-year research project is focused on online ethnographic watching of real political conversations as they happened, contributing to an identified need for more academic study of political talk unfolding in everyday public spaces (Eliasoph, 1997; Jacobs et al, 2009; Eveland et al, 2011; Chambers, 2012). And, in identifying the civilising role women were seen to play in those political conversations, the research also contributes to the work of academics investigating gender differences in how people engage with politics, and the emergent area of diversity theory within deliberative democratic theory (Chambers, 2003).

The research also considers and contributes to ongoing work on the range and form of public deliberation or debate necessary to democracy, including the importance of disagreement (Gutmann and Thompson, 1996); of opinion and reason-giving (Chambers, 2012); of civility (Papacharissi, 2004); and of rhetoric and the personalisation of opinion (Benett, 2003; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).

Facebook's goal to transform human relationships and communication is still at the core of the company's mission. From the company website: "The phrase "this journey is 1% finished" is posted on our walls, reminding us that we've only begun to fulfill [sic] our mission to bring the world closer together."[3] Zuckerberg (2016) has spoken of his company's 'Ten Year Roadmap' and the three big changes it wants to see in the world (and is working to enable). These are 1) getting everyone in the world on the internet and connected by the internet; 2) ubiquitous AI (artificial intelligence) and developing it beyond a commercial data tool to benefit humankind; and 3) the development of the next (post-smartphone) computing platform. Facebook

---

[3] See "Our culture" at https://newsroom.fb.com/company-info (accessed 6 November, 2018)

saw this next platform as virtual and augmented reality (VAR) because of its capacity to create a more immersive, vision-led experience.

Facebook is a company that is taking everything it has learned about how people communicate with each other, and how to track that communication, into its vision of a future in which everyone is connected and – through VAR – everyone has the capacity to step into each other's life, instead of just watching or reading about an experience or event.

This thesis argues that Facebook's corporate ambition; the scale of its user base; the interconnectedness of its networks; and its dominance of online social media, makes this wholly-commercial company a global political actor in its own right. It has the capacity to create a new form of public sphere - one in which political talk is both public *and* social. It is this social aspect, coupled to the network's extraordinary focus on what an individual may be most interested in, that delivers Facebook's potential to influence change in public opinion.

In exploring that hypothesis, this study goes further than existing research by considering the role of Facebook in the public sphere. While other studies[4] have considered Facebook's contribution to political debate by studying the role of the internet or of social media more broadly, this research focused on Facebook itself on the basis that the unprecedented scale, reach and corporate ecology of the social media service necessitated independent study

---

[4] See sections 2.6 and 2.7 for examples.

1.2 Scope of research

This research project set out initially, at its inception in 2013, to consider whether Facebook's rapid rise represented a technological paradigm or only a phenomenon, and to hypothesise that the rapid growth of Facebook – its scale and global reach - had led to the creation of a new form of public sphere.

By 2014, that broad and perhaps over-complex research question had narrowed to focus on Facebook's role within the public sphere[5], using the forthcoming 2015 UK General Election as an anchor point for data collection. As the research progressed, other strands emerged which began to re-link those two early elements – Facebook as market dominant social technology and Facebook as a social dominant network for public discourse.

The research strategy enabled new questions to emerge and be explored, allowing for a constant comparison between what was observed in the field and existing theory around the public sphere and how people engage socially in political talk. Thus, by late-2014, the research question had coalesced around the place of Facebook within the public sphere and whether it was providing new, distinct spaces for political discussion. A mixed methods research strategy was agreed (see chapter three) focused around three stages of data gathering:

---

[5] While this paper makes reference throughout to "the" public sphere, this is a literary shorthand. The thesis does not assume a single entity public sphere but accepts a more multi-faceted construct which may consist of several multi-dimensional public spheres (Dahlgren, 1995; McNair, 2000; Temple, 2006; Perloff, 2018) and which Habermas himself acknowledged (Calhoun, 1992) may not helpfully be spoken of as "one" public sphere.

- Stage one quantitative surveys conducted with 253 targeted participants in order to gather information about pre-election political engagement on Facebook;

- Stage two qualitative, online ethnographic research monitoring public Facebook feeds of candidates in four target constituencies in the month preceding the 2015 UK General Election, with around 3,500 posts and comments read, logged and assessed;

- Supplemental material in the form of screenshots of Facebook material on election day, submitted by volunteers and follow-up questions and interviews with MP candidates or their agents;

- Stage three data collection in the run-up to the May 2017's "snap" General Election in the form of an interventionist case study built around direct engagement with political content production.

However, as data emerged the question became more focused on whether this massive new communication space Facebook provided was encouraging or limiting such discussion. Was Facebook capable of operating within the public sphere or was its scale, reach, and in particular its corporate ecology, changing the nature of both political talk and the public sphere? A new hypothesis began to emerge that, rather than creating a new public sphere, Facebook may be undermining or even disintermediating the public sphere.[6]

---

[6] For brevity, a broadly Habermasian concept of the public sphere underpins references to "the" public sphere within this thesis but a more nuanced concept is acknowledged which allows for multiple spheres (see footnote, page 5), and which accepts the limitations of the theory in terms of who may be able to or encouraged to participate in public political discourse.

While these are still perhaps overly-complex questions to answer in one research project, it was felt that by focusing on an event and time period (around a General Election) when more political discussion would reasonably be *expected* to occur in everyday conversations, and in spaces (political pages on Facebook) where such discussion would reasonably be expected, it should be possible to see more clearly if and how political talk happened on Facebook.

Further, these spaces – political candidate's public Facebook pages – could offer a 21st century analogy with Habermas's 18th century coffee houses and *salons* as places where public debate among peers is expected and encouraged. Is Facebook delivering a uniquely large and global Habermasian *salon,* or a behemothian missed opportunity for progressing civic societies? Does Facebook represent a new space and opportunity in which to rail against elitist power and men-in-suits hegemony, or will its architecture, commercial interests, and user culture necessarily limit the effectiveness of debate?

As the quote on page one outlined, the social and global ambition of Facebook as a company is to create not simply a popular communications tool but a *transformational* communications medium. One that will give people a voice through delivering a new space in which to 'speak' and connecting those voices across the globe to transform society.

There have been other studies which have considered Facebook's contribution to political debate – as outlined in chapter two of this thesis – but they have concentrated on the role of the internet generally or of social media more broadly, or have looked at other aspects of Facebook, such as its network effects, privacy concerns, or at how individual political actors use the network. However, this

research focuses on Facebook itself, arguing that the scale, reach and global corporate ecology of Facebook necessitates studying it as a political actor in its own right.

Chapter two also points to academic work that has looked at how users interact with each other on Facebook and how the technology itself changes with the behaviours of its users. However, this study makes an original contribution to that pre-existing work by focusing on one particularly difficult area of communication – political talk – to look at whether Facebook as communications platform, linked as it has been to a number of seismic political events, is enabling political debate that might lead to civic action.

This research project makes a unique contribution to the debate around the power and influence of Facebook by focusing on one societal reorganisation opportunity - a UK General Election - and looks at whether Facebook is able to deliver that space in which to speak, to connect those voices, and to engage people in political debate.

The research tested the type and quality of debate seen in order to ask whether Facebook's architecture enabled or discouraged political discussion or was neutral. In exploring that hypothesis, this study has gone further than previous research by considering the role of Facebook in the public sphere. In thus assessing the quantity and quality of political talk, the research contributes to the broader research question in political and media communications disciplines, which is whether Facebook is delivering effects which are, on balance, to the benefit or detriment of Western civic society and democracy.

1.3 Chapter outlines

References to that broader research form part of chapter two's literature review, which looks at the key literature underpinning this thesis – from the development of the internet, to social media, to Facebook's near-ubiquity; with reference to applicable technology, social and media theory. It considers studies of social media and the internet as transformational social technologies and charts the development of the internet into a communicative and social network and the subsequent rise of Facebook.

Chapter two also looks at literature around the public and civic spheres[7] and the effect of the internet and the social media on engagement in civic and political society. It highlights the limited literature around Facebook's place within global civic society and on considering Facebook as new communications media.

It considers literature and research which looks at how Facebook's architecture may affect political debate by filtering content towards people's cognitive ease[8], and positions that against research into how Facebook may be reducing "degrees of separation"[9] between individuals and increasing interpersonal engagement. And it

---

[7] In particular, Habermas on the public sphere and Dahlgren on civic spheres

[8] A reference from Daniel Kahneman's 2011 book 'Thinking fast and slow', it refers to theory around how easy it is for a person to understand a piece of information or complete a task and the corresponding level of motivation to do so. How easy or difficult something is (for example completing a level in a videogame) affects how hard the brain has to work and thus the motivation, with too easy being perceived as just as problematical as too difficult. Achieving the correct state of "ease" means achieving the correct level of motivation – thus the concept has gained particular relevance in marketing.

[9] Travers and Milgram's (1969) "six degrees of separation" experiment tested how far one individual is separated from any other individual by sending a postcard, routing it person-to-person only via people they knew. The experiment concluded that a maximum of six people (4.4 to 5.7) (degrees of separation) were needed for the postcard to reach its final destination. For Facebook's updated "degrees of separation" experiment see page 331.

considers literature which looks at why and how citizens discuss – or more usually do not discuss – politics.

Chapter three outlines the mixed methods approach taken to gathering data for this project, while addressing the limits in being able to independently collect data within Facebook's commercial "walled garden"[10] architecture.

The chapter outlines the chronological stages of the data gathering, beginning with stage one which consisted of quantitative surveys of targeted participants in order to gather evidence of pre-election engagement in Facebook. The four surveys, involving 253 respondents – mostly young people – sought to gather information on people's willingness to discuss socio-political issues and whether they are more or less likely to discuss such issues on Facebook.

Stage two focused on the 2015 General Election itself with data collected from qualitative, online ethnographic research through monitoring public Facebook feeds of candidates in four target constituencies between April 27th and May 13th, 2015. During this stage, around 3,500 posts and comments were read, logged and assessed, and other material was included in the form of follow-up questions and interviews with candidates or their agents.

The final, stage three data collection provided "bonus" material. The calling of a "snap" general election in May 2017, provided an opportunity to look at changes in Facebook in the intervening two years - a period which had seen increasing state and

---

[10] The phrase "walled garden" has evolved to describe closed software and systems which control who can access what. For example, a school might restrict access to some websites for its pupils, or a tech company such as Apple or Facebook might control the way third party applications are integrated into their system.

media criticism of Facebook as encouraging so-called "filter bubbles", delivering users more of the political content they or their friends appeared to be interested in, rather than a spread of opinion and news.

Concerns about the potential effect of this algorithmic editorialising, particularly where extremist or inaccurate material had been filtered in, were beginning to be raised in relation to the results of the 2016 US Presidential election and the UK vote on remaining in the European Union. The media and then-governments in both countries were surprised by the election results and, in looking for reasons for the vote outcomes, Facebook's role as information conduit during the elections came under the spotlight. Thus, during the five-year period of research for this thesis, the issues under consideration became increasingly relevant to both the discipline and to a broader media and political discourse around Facebook.

As chapter three notes, that also made this research project more difficult. The frequent changes to Facebook's architecture; the growing criticism of that architecture in encouraging particular behaviours; the investigative work of journalists such as Carole Cadwalladr into whether those behaviours were managed by third parties for political ends; meant that the research project was constantly subject to new information and the need to keep evaluating that information against the original research question – Facebook as public space or public sphere for political talk.

Alongside being able to note changes in Facebook's architecture between the two elections, stage three enabled the addition of an interventionist case study. This focused on the Facebook page of a candidate in one of the four constituencies and included both direct intervention – producing content in order to test its effect on

debate – and further study monitoring the actions and effect of the page's administrators in encouraging or curtailing debate.

Chapter four steps through data gathered from each research stages and analyses the results. The analysis draws on literature within the areas of social capital and rational choice theory to look at why and how people use Facebook.

Finally, chapter five summarises the results of the research and the conclusions reached, while suggesting ways forward for further research and for exploring related areas. The project delivered four conclusions – detailed in depth in the chapter:

1. Facebook's architecture has multiple chilling effects on political talk, and on debate in particular.
2. Facebook's corporate concerns drive content algorithms which tend towards the creation of filter bubbles, and bias that can be bought by third party influencers.
3. The likelihood of debate comes down to the positive actions of individuals (the "right people") vs the negative influence of Facebook's architecture.
4. Facebook is not a new public sphere, rather it has undermined or disintermediated the public sphere as it is largely understood.

1.4 Facebook's sphere of influence

The starting point for this thesis was to argue why it is that Facebook, rather than social media or the internet more generally, should warrant independent study as an

autonomous communications media, and specifically why it warrants study in relation to its potential to transform engagement between the public and the political and civic spheres.

Facebook is a global mass communication phenomenon. Founded in 2004, it has grown from a tool used by a few hundred students at Harvard University to share their self-edited profiles, to a communications medium actively used by two billion people each month[11] to chat, share content, organise events, flag locations and interact with people they largely already know.

Users are occupied or distracted by engaging with people they largely know. It is a time eater but not necessarily a time engager. It makes the present richer by episodically showing users what people they know are up to, but that information may not necessarily engage. Miller compared Facebook to living in a reality soap opera (2011: 193), while Jones a decade earlier had warned about the internet's insertion into day-to-day life, and its displacement of peoples lived ("being") time and functional ("doing") time (1997: 13). Similarly, van Dijk warned of the expectation placed on people of being always online and therefore always available. Not only in time pressure but pressure to communicate (2006: 227).

However, Facebook's emphasis on the here and now delivered through a potentially vast network does mean that news stories can travel very quickly, and that creates an unprecedented opportunity for thousands, even millions, of people to comment on or act upon that story. Thus, this ultimate time eater has come to be credited with at least partial responsibility for a string of recent political upheavals –

---

[11] Monthly active users 2.27 billion as of September 30, 2018, according to Facebook newsroom Statistics: https://newsroom.fb.com/company-info (accessed November 6, 2018)

the Brexit decision in the UK, the election of Donald Trump in the US, and the loss of Theresa May's parliamentary majority in the 2017 UK election.[12]

In addition, as sections 2.2 and 2.3 explore further, time spent on Facebook may be rewarded in bonding or bridging social capital[13]: information and/or support from both close and weak-tie acquaintances, which in turn may encourage more engagement. This section also explains how research into the inter-relationships between Facebook users suggests an increasingly linked global population with the degrees of separation between individuals being shown to have reduced as Facebook has extended its reach. The effect is to encourage feelings of interconnectivity among users and to facilitate the speed and range of travel of "viral" content – the epidemiology of how messages may spread, infection-like, through media (Gladwell, 2000).

Facebook has built a successful global business[14] on the back of building a phenomenally successful social communications tool. However, this thesis asks

---

[12] See 'Cambridge Analytica helped 'cheat' Brexit vote and US election, claims whistleblower': Politico, 27 March, 2018: https://www.politico.eu/article/cambridge-analytica-chris-wylie-brexit-trump-britain-data-protection-privacy-facebook. One of several similar claims made and reported during UK parliamentary committee investigations into Cambridge Analytica and Facebook (accessed November 6, 2018).

[13] There is no clear, single definition of social capital but it is generally understood as the value of the relationships and links between people and the benefits delivered to the individual, a group or society more broadly, by the effectiveness and durability of those networks (for a useful summary of definitions and literature, see: https://www.socialcapitalresearch.com/literature/definition/ (accessed November 6, 2018).

[14] Facebook's 2016 Annual Report showed the company earned over $27.6billion ($10.2bn net) – against $17.9bn in 2015 (43.7bn net) and $12.4bn ($2.9bn) in 2014. Source: https://s21.q4cdn.com/399680738/files/doc_financials/annual_reports/FB_AR_2016_FINAL.pdf (accessed November 6, 2018).

whether the social network site is also being used - or is capable of being used - as a place for civic and socio-political debate and the advancement of democracy[15].

Before moving on to consider that question, it is important to understand that Facebook is not simply a social network, nor should it be described (as it too often is) as *a* social network within a basket of social networks. The scale and reach of Facebook is so far beyond that of Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, WhatsApp and competing social networks that, while all online social networks have core elements in common (as the next chapter outlines), Facebook stands alone in its transformational potential.

Compare Twitter's 326 million MAU (monthly active users)[16] or WhatsApp's 1.3 billion (as April 2017), and Instagram's 100 million MAU against Facebook's two billion. Then add to Facebook's numbers the figures from the other social networks the company now owns – including WhatsApp (bought for $19bn in 2014) and Instagram.[17] What these figures represent is that, in a *polysocial* world in which

---

[15] Whether one sees democracy as a series of actions focused around the act of adults voting for their agents and representatives, or in grander terms: "democracy is.. the idea of community itself" an ideal state towards which society travels but may never arrive (Dewey, 1927: 148), or a chaotic process beset by a mythical concept of "will of the people" and 18th century idealism (Schumpeter, 1976: 253).

[16] For Q3 2018, according to the company's investor report. See: https://investor.twitterinc.com/static-files/b9402133-be92-4ea4-ac2b-db20be19d1cd and https://investor.twitterinc.com/ (both accessed November 6, 2018).

[17] Throughout this thesis, in referring to Facebook as a company, the reference is to the company as a whole – including its ownership of other social networks such as WhatsApp. However, in referring to Facebook as it is used, i.e. its architecture and the way users engage with the social network (including the data gathered and analysis of use in chapter four) the focus is only on the Facebook platform itself, not on how users may also use WhatsApp or Instagram.

people can choose from multiple online social media, the majority choose to only use Facebook or a combination of Facebook-owned social media.

Facebook's reach as a communication company is phenomenal. A comparison would be if one-in-six people around the world used the same private telephone company to communicate with each other; and if that telephone company also delivered most of the news and media its users watched or read every day; and if that telephone company also kept very, very detailed records on who its users spoke with; who they preferred to hear from; what content they shared and with whom; what videos they chose to watch and how long for; and what subjects generally engaged them the most. And if that telephone company then used that data to encourage users to phone the same people more often, and to give them more of the news and media they seemed to prefer.

> We invest in this huge testing framework. At any given point in time there's not just one version of Facebook running in the world, there's probably tens of thousands of versions running because engineers [at Facebook] have the power to try out an idea and ship it to, maybe ten thousand people, or a hundred thousand people…They then get a readout on how that version performed compared to the baseline version of Facebook … on everything we care about. How connected people are; how much people are sharing; how much they say that they're finding meaningful content. Business metrics like how much revenue we make, and engagement of the whole community. (Zuckerberg, 2016a)

There is nothing like Facebook in terms of a single, private communications company having that scale, that ambition, and that societal embeddedness. A company with a business success metric based not just on revenue, but on how much its users engage with each other on its network. Those three aspects – scale, ambition,

and societal embeddedness, together deliver the *potential* for Facebook to create a new public sphere through its global reach; its network effects; and its ownership of a mammoth, transnational, dataset on individuals and communities and how they communicate with each other.

Facebook is also unique in that, unlike other social network sites, its focus is on communication between people who already know each other. Facebook's rejection of the anonymity of predecessor sites such as MySpace (Papacharissi 2009, Gehl 2012) in favour of moving offline relationships online (Ross et al, 2009) creates trust and encourages normative behaviours mirrored in offline social engagement. These offline-to-online social mores were prevalent in the conversations studied during the stage three and stage four research phase of this project, as detailed in chapters four and five.

While academics and the media have referenced Facebook as playing a part in democratic action – the 2008 anti-Farc protests in Columbia for example (Kirkpatrick, 2010), the question being considered in this thesis is whether Facebook enables debate precipitous to democratic action, or simply provides an accessible communications tool for organising action.

Miller (2016) questioned whether Facebook – or any social media site – was able to influence action. Rather than look at the affordances such platforms lend themselves to, he suggests that the robustness of genres of content – playground chat, pub banter, discussions between mums – transform the social media, rather than the other way around. Thus, Facebook becomes simply the carrier of political talk – as the telephone may carry conversations rather than encourage particular types of conversation. It is necessary therefore to assess whether Facebook is capable of

21

encouraging particular types of discussion as the first step in assessing whether Facebook is able to deliver a new medium for enabling political talk.

In addition, for Facebook to form part of the public sphere as it has been defined, what its users discuss has to be noticed by the state and society at large – whether directly or mediated by the media (Habermas, 1962, 1996; Dahlgren, 2005a). Facebook demonstrates its corporate ambition here too, with CEO Zuckerberg saying in 2016 that his company is not a traditional media company, but "a new kind of platform" and an "important part of the public discourse."[18]

Facebook is all about the words, pictures, videos and links its members create and share across its platform and the millions of websites and applications now connected to and through it. Users are simultaneously producers and consumers of the content carried on Facebook ("prosumers" Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010; "produsage" Bruns, 2008). It is this - the way that Facebook is used, alongside the scale of its use, which warrants study.

People communicate with each other in myriad ways: face-to-face talk; electronic emails; letters, phonecalls, mobile phone text messages; online instant messaging, Tweets; via WhatsApp, Snapchat, Instagram, and dozens of other digital spaces for sharing photographs, events, actions, thoughts, updates and news with their shifting social networks and groupings. This digital third space is creating a digital public sphere through which publics have greater access to political information (Gaber, 2016).

---

[18] In a one-to-one video conference filmed with Facebook CEO Sheryl Sandberg and published to Zuckerberg's Facebook page on December 21, 2016.

Yet within this plethora of today's communications options, around 30 percent of the global population choose to share those communications through a single, private, American, wholly-commercial website. That people do so is linked to a number of theories across several academic sectors: technology network effects which value a social network based on who else is participating; social capital benefits gained from relationships with people in the network, and media communications theory around why and how people communicate with each other and with elites.

It should also not be underestimated how much Facebook and its social network site (SNS) peers are seen as a place to spend time and to be entertained. A place of play, rather than work. To quote Mark Twain (1876): "Work consists of whatever a body is obliged to do, and play consists of whatever a body is not obliged to do." However, it might be argued that Facebook for most of its users has become play which they do feel obliged to do.

As a social space therefore, Facebook has benefits for its users and, in socialising in that space, it would be expected that users will discuss the same range of topics as they may in analogous social spaces in which friends, almost-friends and acquaintances might mix – the local pub, for example. In that context, a small percentage of the discussion (Almond and Verba's eight percent, for example[19]) would be expected to be political talk.

However, in social spaces in which political discussion is encouraged (Habermas's 18th century coffee shops, for example) more political debate might be expected. Similarly, at times of heightened political interest (such as around a

---

[19] Almond and Verba, in their 1963 study on civic culture, concluded that around eight percent of everyday conversation was political talk.

national election), an increase in political talk would be expected. This research looks at whether, given that encouraging time, Facebook is also able to provide that encouraging place.

Similar issues have been considered in relation to the potential for the internet to create a new public sphere for political engagement, although academics have largely looked at the internet as a whole rather than one website. For example, Papacharissi (2002) said that the internet had created a new public space for politically oriented conversation, but that whether this public space transcends to a public sphere is not up to the technology itself. None-the-less, the internet had the potential to "revive the public sphere" (2004: 280).

That an extraordinary number of people communicate with each other via Facebook would make it a public space (depending on how 'public' a public space has to be – an issue tackled further in chapter two). However, it is other factors – the quality and type of discourse happening in that public space; the structural and representational role of the actors in that space; the result of interaction - that need to be proven, within the epistemology of the theory, before a public space transcends to public sphere. The research considers whether Facebook is just another public social space, like the local pub or church, and no more or less likely to encourage citizens to engage in debate.

As a wholly-commercial organisation, it may be that what happens on the social network site (SNS), including political talk, is simply a by-product of a business ecology designed to link as many people as possible in order to map and profit from those links. Simply "making communication more efficient", as Zuckerberg's letter to investors had pledged, does not in itself transform society. For the new media

technologies to give "everyone a voice", as Zuckerberg suggested, if governments and corporations cannot hear that voice or are ignoring it will not in itself change society. But connecting and giving voice to over two billion people across the world presents a hitherto unique transformational opportunity. This paper argues that, until Facebook, there has not been a single media business with the scale to deliver a public space capable of becoming a transforming public sphere and asks how that potential might be tested.

However, the research is not simply arguing that Facebook has the capacity to create a new public sphere, but tests whether, given the convergence of political time and space around a UK General Election, all the things that make Facebook so attractive as a communication medium for so many people will also make it attractive as a space for engaging in political talk. By looking at what users say (in surveys) that they do on Facebook and considering that against evidence (from ethnographic study) of what users are saying and doing in some of its online political spaces, this research sets out to test how encouraging an environment Facebook is able to provide for political talk, and from that data to consider its potential within the public sphere.

The original contribution of this thesis is to show that the reality is that Facebook has a *chilling* effect on political talk and on debate in particular.

Chapter 2: Theoretical and historical context

In looking at how citizens engaged in political debate on Facebook and at Facebook's place in encouraging or discouraging that debate, several areas of theory informed the literature review. These range from the socio-historical context of the internet as transformational technology and its development into a communicative and social network (Abbate, 1999; Jones, 1997; Papacharissi, 2002; boyd and Ellison, 2007; Castells, 2010); theory around the public and civic spheres and the effect of the internet and the social media on engagement in both (Bohman 1996 and 2004; Papacharissi, 2002; Downey and Fenton, 2003; Dahlgren, 2005; Benkler, 2006; Shirky, 2009, 2011; Khan et al, 2012; Miller, 2016); and literature which looks at how Facebook's architecture may affect political debate both by filtering content and by increasing interpersonal engagement (Williams and Gulati, 2007; Gustafsson, 2012; Halpern and Gibbs, 2013; Silverman 2015). And finally, theory around why and in what circumstances people engage in, or more usually avoid, political talk (Bennett et al, 1995; Eliasoph, 1997; Bohman, 2004; Kahneman, 2011; Jackson et al, 2013; Graham et al, 2015).

This literature review begins by charting the development of the internet into a communicative and social network and the rise of Facebook. It looks at how personal computing delivered a new personal communications system, and how this led to the rise of online social networking, and then to Facebook's (current) global dominance of online social networking.

It goes on to consider the technological distinctiveness that created the network effects driving the SNS's growth. It looks at literature around bonding and bridging social capital and social networks and the particular pull of Facebook in encouraging users to spend more time within the SNS.

Section 2.5 considers Facebook against technological determinist theory and asks whether scale or type of use of Facebook is sufficiently radical to suggest the emergence of a new technological paradigm.

The final sections look at the literature around the public and civic spheres and the effect of the internet and the social media on engagement in political and civil action. And, as the research also considers one consequence of Facebook's use as a global communication medium is the possibility that it may deliver a new public sphere, literature around the public sphere and global civic society is also reviewed.

2.1: How the internet got social

Abbate (1999) in her seminal book on the development of the Internet, argued that it was the arrival of the Internet that placed computers at the center of a new communications medium:

> Between the 1960s and the 1980s, computing technology underwent a dramatic transformation: the computer, originally conceived as an isolated calculating device, was reborn as a means of communication. (1999:1)

Two things had happened – the arrival of the internet pushed the technological trajectory of computing to shape the use of the personal computer as a new communications media, while user demand-pull took the trajectory further towards a new *social,* communicative use of the internet. The internet's success as a mass communications media, she argued, is linked to its flexibility and diversity which meant it could be shaped by user demand-pull:

> The Internet's identity as a communication medium was not inherent in the technology; it was constructed through a series of social choices. (1999: 6)

The internet not only placed computers at the center of communications but changed the nature of personal computing from a predominantly solo to a predominantly social, and potentially global, activity. Users wanted their PC to do more than deliver information; they wanted it to aid communication. So, as Abbate noted, the personal computer as calculator was reborn as communicator, and the internet developed as a further response to inherently human social and connective needs. It is this, rather than any specific technological leap forward that has driven online social networking – available technology has been demand-pulled to be used in more social and networked ways.

The internet itself is an old technology, having been around since 1969, but it took the development of the World Wide Web from the mid-1980s and specifically its launch in 1992 as, effectively, a user operating system for the internet, that led to its near-ubiquity as global communications media. The internet, argued Jones (1997) is a "piggy-backed medium", following already known technological paths yet delivering a fluidity of movement through time and space that has become a dependency. The flexibility and inbuilt user-responsiveness of the internet has enabled both its rise as information and communications tool, and its development into a connective media able to link individuals across disparate cultural groups in potentially transformational ways.

Castells (2010) went further, arguing that a shift from traditional mass media to horizontal communication networks via the internet had created a fundamentally new form of society – "the network society" in which information has become an

independent source of productivity and power (1996). The network society, formed from the digital networks of the Information Age, has enabled expansion beyond traditional boundaries, undermining nation-state control in favour of global agents. However, the network society is not something with a fixed beginning (or indeed end) point, rather it is part of a longer-term evolution in which human society is in the process of becoming information and network societies (van Dijk, 2006: 21).

While social networking platforms are defined by having architecture designed to encourage social activities such as profile sharing and articulated social networks (boyd [correct] and Ellison, 2007), they are also defined by technology which relies on its users creating their own content to meet their own needs - providing a closed but open communications loop between users, their social networks, and the businesses and advertisers seeking access to those networks.

The visible display of social connections is a "crucial" component of social network sites. according to boyd and Ellison's definition. Social network sites are both technologically and socially defined, they are:

> web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. (2007:211)

boyd and Ellison use the term "social network" rather than social networking to emphasise the articulated social network as a critical organising feature. It is about the user showcasing their existing network of friends, not about them meeting strangers.

However, boyd and Ellison's definition is focused on the connective network and the "showcasing" of that network, not on the content that is shared across that network. While that may have been the focus of social network sites in 2006, over a decade later, the emphasis has shifted from "here are all the people I know" to "here are the people who like me enough to respond to the content I post". The articulation of networks has become less important than the content and *acknowledgement* shared across those networks. Positive responses to content posted becomes the reward for network connectivity – delivering proof of personal worth to the network.

2.2 The rise of Facebook

Whereas early online communities such as Usenet were structured around topics and shared interests, social network sites and platforms are egocentric networks structured around the individual and their connections. They are primarily organised around people, not interests (boyd and Ellison, 2007), mirroring unmediated social structures, where "the world is composed of networks, not groups" (Wellman, 1988)

The first social network site was SixDegrees.com, launched in 1997 (boyd, 2008; boyd and Ellison, 2007) as the first to combine the three defining elements of profile, articulated connections, and traversable connections ('Friends'). It was followed by LiveJournal, Asian Avenue, Black Planet, MiGente and CyWorld. The launch of Ryze, in 2001, headed a wave of new social network sites (Ryze, Linked In, Tribe.net, and Friendster) founded by individuals who were themselves part of the same real world social network. (Kirkpatrick, 2010). An explosion in SNS launches after 2003 saw variants of the same model, with a 'top-up' feature – frequently

focused on demographic or interest communities, or on adding social networking features to content sharing (eg FlickR, Last.fm, Tripadvisor, Foursquare, or Pinterest).

MySpace, launched 2003, grew rapidly, in part by picking up former Friendster users that had become disillusioned with a combination of technical difficulties, social collisions, and a rupture of trust between users and the site (boyd, 2006). After News Corporation bought MySpace in 2005, previously lukewarm press interest in the site changed to massive media attention. Friendster (launched 2002), MySpace (2003) and Facebook (2004) were the most important of the pre-2005 SNS and shaped both the way the web developed and beyond it "the business, cultural, and research landscape." (boyd and Ellison, 2007).

Thefacebook – the initial, Harvard-based version of Facebook - launched on February 4th, 2004, and its simplicity of design and purity of focus contrasted sharply with its rivals, notably MySpace's chaotic look and feel (boyd, 2007).

Another competitor, Campus Network at Columbia University, had much of Facebook's functionality ahead of Facebook. Co-founder Wayne Ting, in a BBC radio interview (2011), described how Campus Network took off fast, signing up most of Columbia's students within a few months: "One reason is speed, the other is who's on your network." As Campus Network tried to expand into other universities however, they began to meet competition from newcomer Facebook. Ting said: "In places where we did have competition, the simplicity of Facebook really won."

That simplicity of focus continues in Facebook today with architecture which, as this thesis argues, encourages users to build large networks of acquaintances rather

than focus on small – and more manageable and therefore more comfortable - friends and family groupings.

The company officially became Facebook on September 20, 2005, and soon after began to gradually open the network beyond colleges to American high school students. By April 2006, Facebook had over a million US high school users.

Facebook's standardisation encouraged simple user actions (invite someone into your network; share a picture – introduced 2005; "like" something – introduced 2010) that are familiar. Gehl (2012) compares it to the sanitised shopping mall versus the street market on the "bad side" of town and suggests that the implication in danah boyd's work that "educated whites fled MySpace for Facebook" echoes his assertion that mass audiences chose Facebook because it did not "inadvertently present them with the Other or ask them to do complicated work". (2012:113)

In the BBC radio series, 'The Secret history of Social Networking' (2011) Bebo co-founder Michael Birch said why he thought MySpace lost its position at the top of the social networking tree, above Bebo and Facebook: "We both thought that MySpace was a great site [at that time] but it wasn't that good a product." He said MySpace was hobbled by poor build and that NewsCorporation had had to re-architecture it several times, soon after buying into MySpace for $580m, adding substantially to the company's costs.

Chris Cox, then VP Product for Facebook, told the same programme that one of the things that was different about the period pre-2003 was that most internet sites and services were focusing on delivering information rather than interaction: "You

could find the GDP of Spain but you couldn't find out what your friends from school were up to."

Birch's comment about the architecture problems faced by MySpace, and Ting's position that his Campus Network lost out to the simplicity of Facebook, support the argument that Facebook was different enough to other SNS to win market share, and that the reliability and usability of the social networking service for users were key factors.

Kirkpatrick (2010) makes several references to how Mark Zuckerberg and his Facebook co-founders followed Friendster's rise and fall with interest and tried to learn from its mistakes in building Facebook, particularly in relation to growth vs technical capacity. Similarly, they made design decisions intended to avoid the technical and cultural problems that undermined MySpace. Being the follower technology rather than the leader meant that Facebook's developers would have been able to watch and learn to gain market advantage over earlier-to-launch rivals.

But technical strength is not enough, users have to not only want to be in that online space but to be there frequently for a social network to grow at the rate Facebook has. The money NewsCorp spent on MySpace's re-architecture may have been wasted because the company vision was to simply build a more robust version of the existing, profile-focused SNS, when what users were looking for from social networking had already moved on to the interaction-focused offerings of Bebo, Facebook, and Campus Network.

Following Facebook's 2004 launch, social network platforms such as YouTube (launched 2005), Twitter (2006), Tumblr (2007), Pinterest (2010), Instagram (2010),

and Snapchat (2011) have focused on sharing more limited content (limited by content type such as videos, photographs, visibility, or length - i.e. 140 characters). These later competitors emphasised the fast and easy sharing of information and content above the articulation of networks: what information a user can read and access on Twitter (and who sent it) rather than showcasing a user's network of followers.

What made Facebook different – and ultimately more successful - than rival MySpace and predecessor Friendster, is architecture designed to encourage users to grow online social networks that reflected their offline networks; to interact with that network; and to share their content with it. While at the same time delivering valuable data to Facebook (and subsequently advertisers and partners) about the network's real-world identities, connections, and preferences. The "free" information and services that Facebook delivers is not really free, it is paid for by Facebook users in the data they willingly give away and, as Keen remarked (2007), in a user's time - "the most valuable resource" spent online.

Facebook "took off" when it launched the sharing of tagged photos in October 2005 (Kirkpatrick, 2010) and thus linked content and the articulation of networks. Facebook's founding team decided photographs should be tagged with just one thing – the names of the people in the photograph. As Kirkpatrick writes: "It sounds elementary, but it had never been done before" (154). Photo tagging was instantly successful:

> [I]n a minute or so they [Facebook developers] started seeing photos of girls – girls in groups, girls at parties, girls shooting photos of other girls. And these photos were being tagged!…Girls were celebrating their friendships. (Kirkpatrick, 2010: 155)

It is also an example of Facebook's developers reinforcing what mattered most – who everybody is and who knows who. Details that are normally written on the back of a snapshot or added to a picture archive: such as when a picture was taken, where it was taken, what it's a picture of, are all dropped in favour of focusing the network and the user on *who* is in the picture (and perhaps also articulating who in that network was not there and joining in the photographed fun).

By focusing on who is in the picture and encouraging users to "tag" each other (a user is only able to tag and so identify someone who is also a Facebook member), Facebook's architecture accomplishes another task – collecting data on *relationships* between users who may not be in the same network (network data that has value to third parties). Ordinary photos had become, in effect, more articulate. When it was tagged, a photograph on Facebook expressed and elaborated on a set of relationships.

That linking of one user's network to another, initially through photo tagging and then through other Facebook and third party applications, marked a turning point for the service. The team began to talk about the "social graph" of users connecting with their friends. Zuckerberg (2016b) said that helping new users go from signing up to connecting to "the people you care about most" is "one of the most important things that we can do", signaling the company's focus on encouraging users to build and expand their network of friends and acquaintances.

When, on May 18, 2012, Facebook made its Initial Public Offering (IPO) on the New York Stock Market, it had around 900 million active users. Documents filed as part of the IPO showed that the company had broken even financially by the end of 2008 and had sales of $3.7bn ($1bn net) in 2011. The company was valued in advance of the IPO as worth between $75 billion and $100 billion - "eye-wateringly

high multiples", according to an editorial in The Economist (February 4, 2012). The $38 share price on IPO day meant an actual valuation of £104 billion.

According to the Economist, those valuations rested on two assumptions; rapid spread of internet connectivity growing Facebook's potential global market; and the rise of the mobile phone and with it increasing user access to Facebook via mobile. These two together could propel the number of users beyond one billion, the article suggested. In fact, Facebook announced it had hit the one billion monthly active users figure on October 4, 2012, just a few months after its IPO.

Initial concerns post-IPO about whether Facebook could keep growing and keep making money for its investors, were overtaken by rising mobile access to Facebook, which the SNS was able to take advantage of. By October 2013, a tipping point of 48 percent of users accessed Facebook only through their mobiles (Techcrunch, 2013), and by April 2014, two-thirds of daily users accessed Facebook only from their mobile phone. As a technology designed to encourage content sharing with people in their social networks, Facebook would have failed had its technical design not responded to that changing preference for interaction via mobile devices rather than fixed location devices such as PCs.

The next stage for Facebook, as Zuckerberg has made clear (2015, 2016) is preparing for a future in which everyone in the world is connected to the internet and via Facebook ("the world's biggest internet service" – 2015), through a future artificial intelligence and/or augmented reality (AI/AR) computing device, delivering more immersive and intuitive experience. To do that, Zuckerberg said, requires changing underlying assumptions about how the world works in determining what the next computing platform will be; what energy will power it; how the internet will

be managed (Facebook has been criticised for plans which challenge the democratic neutrality of the internet in order to build their user base[20]) and how it will be delivered (e.g. beamed down from space) and paid for – all big picture scenarios that the company is publicly investing in.

2.3: Social capital and the pull of the network

As the previous section outlined, the concepts of online social networking are not new and many components of the early Facebook were pioneered by its predecessors. As Kirkpatrick (2010: 66) noted, Facebook is heir to ideas that had been evolving for forty years. Yet as a service it has not only outlived its peers but grown to a position of user dominance and, through technical initiatives introduced over ten years, become a platform delivering services and connections way beyond the Facebook site itself. While some of the reasons have been outlined in the preceding chapter (simplicity of architecture, robustness of service, emphasis on real-world relationships) there are broader reasons which may underpin Facebook as a socio-transformational media.

Gehl argued that MySpace's failure (against Facebook's success) was down to failing to create real software abstraction for users, and thus an architecture of

---

[20] See 'Facebook's satellite went up in smoke but its developing world land grab goes on', Emily Reynolds on Facebook, net neutrality and its internet.org space programme in the Guardian, September 5, 2016

abstraction that could appeal to advertisers. Facebook has created an effective system for its users to happily produce the data that marketers need:

> Facebook has associated social and technological elements into a *real software abstraction*, thus managing its users as immaterial laborers in the affective online marketplace. (2012:100)

Researchers such as Papacharissi (2009) and Gehl (2012) emphasised that Facebook's insistence on using real names (and real email addresses, initially via harvard.edu) from the beginning, was the key difference between Facebook and other SNS at the time it launched. Validating people's identity in this way made Facebook both fundamentally different to the anonymised culture of internet use before 2004, but also provided the real-world data that would form the basis for Facebook's subsequent business success.

Papacharissi (2002:21) also said that people's real-world social relations drove society to repurpose the internet to create spaces for private and public expression. The rise of 'social' in the online world is the inevitable result of taking offline interactions onto the web. She suggested (2009) that a social network site's effectiveness relies on delivering architecture which encourages freer social interaction, while at the same time guiding users towards agreed behavioural norms. Facebook's "glass house" public-ness is tempered by architecture providing tools (for example 'Like' buttons) with which individuals may construct and leave behavioural cues for each other (2009:215).

Thus, Facebook grew by offering an online version of offline, real world social interactions – communication with people users actually know about things they are

actually doing. Stripped of the freedom to misbehave that anonymity offered[21], users chose to apply offline social norms to Facebook interaction and Facebook offered a safer, recognisable social environment than rivals such as MySpace.

Research by Facebook itself (2012) into 721 million users suggested that users' friends on Facebook tended to be of a similar age, experiences and living in the same country. It is understandable that users' work or university colleagues, offline friends and former schoolfriends should be the starting point for building Facebook friend groups. However, it does tend towards the concept of Facebook as composed of local, heterogeneous social groups.

The issue of Facebook heterogony in relation to political influence is explored further in this thesis however, it should be noted that, long before Facebook, researchers Katz and Lazarsfeld had already found that – perhaps not unexpectedly – people tend to vote the way their associates vote (1955:32). That is, people politically influence people they know well - offline heterogony has travelled online.

Cheung and Lee (2010) studied a convenience sample of students and noted that social identity and subjective compliance (everyone they knew was on Facebook) drove individuals to join Facebook. Other studies have added perceived usefulness of

---

[21] As summarised in Rowe (2015:124), extensive academic work exists, particularly in the 1980s and early '90s, into how the high level of anonymity afforded by other computer-mediated communications (CMC) encouraged anti-normative behaviour characteristic of deindividuation (the psychological theory around why people in groups may lose their sense of self and engage in acts as a group that they would refrain from as an individual). Reduced social cues and reduced social context within CMC, it was suggested, made it more difficult for users to adjust their tone and behaviour. Van Dijk described this period of academic research as being overly focused on the objective defects of CMC (2006: 226) as compared to the perceived superiority of face-to-face communication.

the network (Kwon and Wen, 2010) to social identity as the key reasons for joining Facebook.

The ways in which individuals use Facebook and the type of content they spend their time on, becomes a factor in the social capital users gain as their reward for time spent on the SNS. Bonding (emotional support) and bridging (novel information) social capital describe the different benefits individuals may gain from their relationships with people in their social network (Katz and Aspen 1997; Rosenberg 1989; Wellman and Wortley, 1990). Close friends and family may deliver more emotional support, while weak tie acquaintances may deliver more useful information (job opportunities, exposure to new ideas or opinions).

Facebook delivers both bonding and bridging social capital according to the individual user's Facebook network; their use of that network, and the content they choose to focus on (Burke, Kraut and Marlow 2011; Ellison, Steinfeld and Lampe 2007).

Some academics have pointed to Facebook's value in strengthening social capital for users with weaker social capital and/or social skills. Steinfeld et al (2008) showed that young people with lower self-esteem benefited from Facebook in terms of bridging social capital – being able to watch and learn, rather than gain emotional support (bonding social capital), from their peers. While Burke et al (2011) found that users with weaker social skills benefited from the passive consumption of "social news" i.e. reading status updates by friends, while this had no effect on the more socially adept users.

Ross et al (2009) had similar results when they compared Facebook users against the Five-Factor Model of personality (as developed by McCrae and Costa, 1985) and saw that while extraverts[22] may belong to more groups on Facebook, they did not necessarily have more Facebook friends than neurotic personalities, who also preferred to passively consume social information. (2009: 582).

This is part of the 'pact' users have with the SNS (and indeed many other web-delivered services which collect and sell user data) – exchanging personal privacy for social usefulness. Even in 2005, explaining why investors had just given around $13 million to grow Thefacebook, Mark Zuckerberg knew that it was because of his company's access to that data:

> [W]e have so much data about what people are doing on the site and how people are using it, that it just makes it that we can really enhance the experience and target [advertising] towards those peoples in ways that no one else has really been able to do before. (2005, Zuckerberg interviewed by Bambi Francisco).

The issue of people's willingness to give up that data, moreover to give up the privacy rights they expect in the offline world, is one that has engaged academics and the media almost since Facebook's inception. As Miller notes:

> If there is one thing that shocks those who either rarely use or do not use Facebook, it is the awareness of how little regard people may have for Facebook's potential to destroy privacy. (2011: 172)

---

[22] Outgoing, socially-confident individuals. The Five-Factor Model uses five broad traits to determine personality: Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism and Openness to Experience.

Facebook is extremely public compared to its antecedents (Miller, 2011) and despite this (and despite users' understanding that Facebook is not a private space – see survey results in chapter four) it has become a common medium for expressing private and intimate thoughts and actions. Users may rant, declare their love, discuss their depression, post photos of embarrassing incidents, signal the end of relationships; all the while knowing that these messages will be seen by people they may barely know.

A year before that 2005 interview with Zuckerberg (previous page), Facebook's co-founder displayed a rather more disquieting attitude towards the willingness of users to give up their data, in an online chat with a college friend[23]:

> Zuck: I have over 4,000 emails, pictures, addresses, SNS
>
> [Redacted Friend's Name]: What? How'd you manage that one?
>
> Zuck: People just submitted it.
>
> Zuck: I don't know why.
>
> Zuck: They "trust me"
>
> Zuck: Dumb fucks.

2.4: A merging of online and offline worlds

---

[23] Source: BusinessInsider: 'Well these new Zuckerberg IMs won't help Facebook's privacy problems', May 13, 2010. Email exchange is as quoted in the story: https://www.businessinsider.com/well-these-new-zuckerberg-ims-wont-help-facebooks-privacy-problems-2010-5?IR=T (accessed November 6, 2018).

Albrechtslund (2008) coined the phrase "participatory surveillance" and suggested online social networks had introduced a participatory approach to surveillance, which can empower – and perhaps not necessarily violate – the user. Albrechtslund argued that there is no sharp distinction between users' virtual and real worlds and that online social networking operates as a mixed world relating to both online and offline activities. This makes sense if the online activity is largely a recording space for the lived experience offline – family photographs; messages between friends; party arranging, and so forth. But it is also important to ask how far the online experience influences offline behaviour. Could, for example, that ready acceptance of online surveillance encourage acceptance of offline surveillance by police and security forces, governments and their agents?

The boundary between people's experience of the online world and the offline, 'real', world is not a wall but a permeable membrane, with ideas and actions moving relatively easily between the two. Reading a post online may reinforce a political perspective which leads the reader to then join a political group or donate to a campaign, which may be picked up as an action online (such as an 'I voted' or 'I funded…' button), and seen by others who may (or may chose not to) follow suit.

In a 2015 panel discussion, Zuckerberg spoke of how society had been organized around big, top-down institutions but that the emergence of the internet had given people the ability to change that; to organise the world from "people first and our own relationships". To give people a voice by enabling them to share content and ideas and build relationships, "all the way up to greater civic discourse"

> We're going to work on tools that make it so that people can share content they create elsewhere, or whatever they see elsewhere, and can share that with

all the people they want. This is the mission of the company – to give every person in the world the ability to share as much of what is important to them as we can, and to connect people through that…That's what we're here to do." (2015)

In the ongoing (at the time of writing) global anthropological study 'Why we post', led by Daniel Miller (http://www.ucl.ac.uk/why-we-post), researchers noted that, rather than social media changing the way people communicated, people were changing the way the social media operated by using it in ways that the developers may not have expected. For instance, young Muslim women using WhatsApp's private networks to directly communicate with young Muslim men. While within Facebook's broader social networks, people tended to be more conservative and avoid posting anything which might offend friends and relatives. Miller noted in an earlier study:

> Facebook never exists in isolation; it is never the totality of the lives of the people we meet. It is not surprising that it is at least as often the complement to offline lives as the expression of offline lives. (2011: 174)

Rather than helping to "transform" society, as Zuckerberg had pledged in 2017 (see page one), Facebook delivers an online version of offline lives. Albeit perhaps with a more simplistic version of complex human communication, as chapter five explores.

Miller (2016) also questioned whether any social media platform was able to influence action, suggesting that it is the robustness of genres of content – playground chat, pub banter, discussions between mums – that transformed the social media, rather than the other way around. These genres of content pre-date social media and are affected by the social mores of different cultures and nations (2016:2). Where

Miller did see societal transformation was in Facebook's younger brother – WhatsApp[24], with its emphasis on privacy rather than publicness enabling women in more patriarchal societies to be freer to communicate. He cited young Muslim women being able to use WhatsApp to directly contact young men "maybe for the first time in history", sending hundreds of messages a day in some cases (2016:4).

This thesis focuses on Facebook but the SNS has to be considered within the context of Facebook as global business and global platform. This is a company with an ecology to change the world it inhabits - and to make as much money as it can while doing so. That latter part is important. Facebook is not a public service, Zuckerberg may talk about connecting the world and transforming the way people communicate, but the ambition does not begin or end at better communication.

Facebook is not a free service, its users pay with access to their data, their connections, their privacy and, to some degree with their political opinions; the architecture of the platform encourages polarisation and a narrowing of access to new people and views. This too is a concern, as explored further in section 6.2; the combination of that data, that uniquely large user base, and Facebook's commercial willingness to sell access to both, means third parties also have routes to direct

---

[24] WhatsApp is a messaging application which lets users set up multiple chat groups (for example different family, friend or work groupings). Text, images, video and audio can be exchanged within the groups and each group is separate and, at least in the start-up phase of WhatsApp, private with messages encrypted. The product launched in 2009 and became popular as mobile smartphone usage grew as a free alternative to texting. In 2014, it was bought by Facebook for an £11.4bn package of cash and shares (see: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-26266689). During 2018, both co-founders left WhatsApp and Facebook, accusing the company of trying to weaken the encryption and undermine users' privacy by making data available to Facebook and third party partners (see: https://techcrunch.com/2018/04/30/jan-koum-quits-facebook/ and Parmy Olson for Forbes (in media references). Links accessed November 16, 2018.

content to users in ways which encourage political polarisation in order to direct political actions. The user's experience of Facebook cannot be divorced from their actions in the "real" world, and the user cannot be separated from the many actors – from advertisers to political groups to civic agents – with an interest in those actions.

Kranzberg's "Third Law" states that technological paradigms are composed of packages or systems which cannot be studied in isolation but "one must also look at the interaction of these systems with the entire social, political, economic, and cultural environment." (1986: 550). The scale of Facebook and its interconnectedness with and between its users has to be looked at within that social, political and cultural environment, the question becomes how far Facebook is – or has – affected change in those areas.

2.5: Technological determinism, trajectories and the pull of the network

The difficulty with considering Facebook as a next step along a path of similar technologies – ie one among many social network sites, is the risk of technological determinism which only sees Facebook as a progression along the same technological path (as Gehl suggested, 2012). The question is whether Facebook is simply a progression along the technological path of online social networking - a progression on the technological path of the internet, and by extension personal computing; or a new paradigm in computer-mediated communications.

While this broader question is beyond the focus of this study, which concentrates on the narrower concern of Facebook as mediated space for political talk, it is worthwhile to consider the key literature around technological paradigms in order to

further assess Facebook's place and importance in socio-technological history. In considering the rise of online social networking sites (SNS) and Facebook, it is also necessary to consider literature that relates both to how SNS developed and why they developed - the "technology-push" and "demand-pull" pillars of technological change.

Academics, as noted previously, have argued that technological change is affected by demand for that technology, and that how the technology is then used shapes how it then progresses (Rosenberg and Mowery, 1978, Rosenberg, 1994, and others). Dosi (1982) argued that technological development is driven both by demand-pull from user preferences and the technology-push of what is possible at that stage.

That push-pull concept was a step forward of the technological determinism of Ellul (1964) and Winner (1977) who saw technology as autonomous, its development pursued for its own sake, without regard to human need, and the prime factor in shaping society.

The underpinning theory in determining the importance of an individual technology to technological change is that of Dosi (1982), who defined the technological paradigm as the common outlook and core knowledge base understood to be involved in that technology. Thus, Facebook might be a step change on a trajectory that saw the internet evolve into the social web and social media sites develop along common standards. A technological paradigm progresses through continuous change – defined by Dosi as the "technological trajectory", and each paradigm progresses according to its own technological and economic factors. However, where radical rather than continuous change happens, that signals the emergence of a new technological paradigm.

Continuous changes are often related to progress along a technological trajectory defined by a technological paradigm, while discontinuities are associated with the emergence of a new paradigm. (1982:14)

Freeman described the shift from technological change to paradigm as characterised by falling relative costs and rising universal availability (1988: 10), with the cheaper processing of information as the paradigm's raw material.

Castells (2010: 70) argues that the information technological paradigm displays five core elements: technologies that act on information; technologies that are pervasive; technologies that grow through strong networking logic; technologies that are flexible; technologies that become part of a convergent, integrated system, wherein in old and new technologies become interdependent and indistinguishable.

[T]he information technology paradigm does not evolve toward its closure as a system, but towards its openness as a multi-edged network. It is powerful and imposing in its materiality, but adaptive and open-ended in its historical development. (2010: 76)

However, it is difficult to apply Castell's definition to Facebook in and of itself. It is multi-edged in the myriad ways in which users may access it, on different devices and through third parties, but its openness is limited and skewed to commercial interests. Similarly, while Facebook acts on information it would be more accurate to say it *mines* information as a resource, rather than acts upon it.

It is certainly pervasive - powerful and imposing in its scale and reach but limited in its adaptability – this is pretty much the same Facebook, with the same set of things a user can do (share pictures, post content, find people) almost since inception. And, while it is difficult to imagine a near-future world without Facebook and its products, it is not difficult to imagine a more distant future without them. There has

been a shift in its user base towards older users[25] and the company finds itself increasingly criticised by lawmakers and government agencies which may ultimately curtail its growth (see pages 66-68).

Perez (2004) added a broader view, arguing that technological paradigms – or "revolutions" – occur every 50 or 60 years. Her theory of long-wave phenomenon economics coupled techno-economic change with socio-institutional change to affect, she argued, the entire structure of global society over decades of gradual change.

Rosenberg (1994) posited that it is only with historical analysis that the importance of a technology becomes clear because technological change often takes place in information-poor and uncertain environments. Technological change is "path-dependent":

> one cannot demonstrate the direction or path in the growth of technological knowledge merely by reference to certain initial conditions. (1994:6)

Thus, future growth in technological knowledge is not predetermined but is affected by events that happen along the way. The place of Facebook, or indeed the shift in computing technologies towards increasingly communicative and social uses, is part of a long-wave trajectory that society is still moving through, and which will ultimately only become measurable with historical hindsight.

---

[25] A 2018 report by eMarketer, widely reported in the press, suggested that the over-55s were the fastest growing demographic for Facebook in the UK with younger users drifting away from the service. (See: https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/feb/12/is-facebook-for-old-people-over-55s-flock-in-as-the-young-leave, accessed November 16, 2018).

As previously argued, users influenced the technological development of the internet to meet inherently human communicative needs. It is this, rather than any specific technological leap forward that has driven online social networking. As technology has become available (pushed into the market) it has been demand-pulled by users to be more social, more networked – in short, the technology reflects its use.

Dosi (1982) and Rosenberg and Mowery (1979) concluded that both push and pull (supply and demand) factors were necessary to technological innovation, with paradigms arising from the push of emerging technology driving progress, or from demand from users for a particular technological option or way of using the technology. Dosi (1982, 1988 and Dosi et al 1993) and other evolutionary economists such as Molino (1999) and Malerba & Orsenigo (1997), saw a technological determinism with technology push leading to both the creation of new technological paradigms and determining change within paradigms. Technology push drove change, not user demand, with demand-pull only selecting between different paradigms and thus affecting the trajectory of those selected.

However, Van den Ende and Dolfsma (2005) suggest that at distinct periods during the 20th century, either demand-pull or innovation-push played the bigger role in shaping computing technological paradigms. Both factors played an equally important role in what they saw as the current Kondratieff Wave[26] of computing technology development. Van den Ende and Dolfsma argued for an amended

---

[26] An economic theory first expounded by Nicolai Kondratieff in 1925, which sees major economic or sectoral change in 40- to 60-year 'supercycles' moving from high growth to slow growth and vice-versa. The theory is controversial, for example in determining when a 'K-wave' cycle begins and ends, or the optimum cycle length.

evolutionary economics theory approach which looks for influences and patterns in developing technologies. Rather than focusing on demand-pull/technology-push in relation to the *sources* of innovation, the theory needs to consider changes in technological knowledge and demand factors on the *development* of technological paradigms. By asking whether an adopter would have adopted a technology earlier had it been available to them, it is possible to establish whether absence of supply (technology-push) or lack of demand (demand-pull) was the deciding factor in actual adoption time.

Therefore, one way to determine the importance of Facebook would be to ask whether the SNS would have reached the same level of take-up had it been available ten years earlier. The difficulty with that question would be trying to divorce Facebook from wider technological advances between 2004 and 2014 which enabled, for instance: easier taking and uploading of photographs, or anywhere/anytime access to the SNS via smartphones.

New technologies are often thought of in limited terms as simply supplements to an existing system or invention – Rosenberg cited the success of the Sony Walkman which was based not on any radically different engineering design, but on the "imaginative leap that identified an important market niche" (1994:3-5). Thus, one might see Facebook's development as a continuation along a path of social media-led technological development, but that its success represents an imaginative leap.

Evolutionary economics theorists of the '80s and '90s saw technology paradigms as primarily physical (microchips, computers, telecoms) not as systems (software, the web). However, the development of non-physical elements of the information age, in particular the internet, could be seen as a technological paradigm in the radical

change it introduced to how computers and mobile technology would be used as new communications medium.

Personal computing as a technological paradigm has continued to progress along a trajectory which has seen smaller devices carrying more capacity, and usage which includes personal communications, entertainment, information gathering and physical tasks - the twin pillars of technology-push and demand-pull. But this thesis suggests the internet delivered a shift in personal computing radical enough to be seen as a technological paradigm in its own right, regardless of its lack of physicality, and shows the influence of technology-push and demand-pull in its own, concurrent, Kondratieff Wave.

A computer network that connects people is a social network (Wellman, 1997) but the simple act of social connection is not enough to suggest a paradigm shift in the technology. That has to be assessed against the changes in behaviour and, perhaps, societal changes, that follow on from the emergence of social media networks out of computing and the internet.

The technology to deliver the internet was in itself a significant change but, as part one of this chapter outlines, it was demand-pull from users that radically changed the trajectory of personal computing to social network-led computing. Users selected the internet as their preferred new communications medium (rather than, for instance, cable TV which in the early '90s was also being heralded as a radically new and promising means of communication) and by doing so influenced it as a social medium - in turn influencing its development as the web via HTML protocols.

Cusumano (2011) argued that social media networks are new kinds of computing platforms built to facilitate communication. Social media networks are platforms because they enable computing through access to different applications and databases and, by that definition, do some of the jobs of other platforms (eg Microsoft, Nokia Symbian, Google GMail) and, Cusumano suggests, compete with those other platforms. Seeing social network sites as platforms rather than websites or software might in part explain their success – users can do more through a single internet access point: their Facebook log-in (2011:31).

Successful platform attributes, according to Cusumano, include having a technology strategy that can be described as open but not open, or closed but not closed, in that it gives controlled access to application developers or platform users to import or share content across different systems. Allowing access in this controlled way also delivers modularity and richness through third parties being able to add functionality or create and add compelling products, services or content – for example games[27]

Facebook opened its platform to third-party developers in May 2007 – a revolutionary move for the time, and many Facebook colleagues and analysts saw it as an incredibly risky move by Zuckerberg (Kirkpatrick, 2010). However, within a year of launching Facebook Open Platform, 24,000 new applications had been added

---

[27] Zynga games alone, including Farmville, delivered 15 percent of Facebook revenues in Q1 2012 (Techcrunch), however the percentage of income from games has fallen in recent years and Facebook has become more dependent on advertising revenue (Reuters, 2016)

and 400,000 external developers had built new "social experiences" (Facebook, 2008) for Facebook's users.

Third party developers have been crucial to Facebook delivering a platform that is richer in terms of user and advertiser services and more connected to the rest of the web than its competitors. The traditional IT company model would have been to take on more developers and build in-house, but by opening his platform to third party developers just four years after launch, Zuckerberg created an ecosystem of innovation that enabled that richer, more integrated environment to be built faster and cheaper. At the same time, the risk to Facebook's market position is mitigated by its "open, but not open" structure of proprietary software (eg the Facebook Connect APIs) and its own mark-up languages, which third party application developers are then locked into using.

The more Facebook offers services that its users could access elsewhere, e.g. location-based or news services, the more it is able to encourage users to stay within the Facebook "house" and continue to feed data about themselves into that network, now shared with third-parties. Its post-IPO strategy of buying up competing social utilities (e.g. WhatsApp, see page 43) is a more traditional business response to this need to provide the richness and connectivity that will keep both users and advertisers locked into Facebook's platform. Part One of this chapter outlined the pull of the Facebook network in building social capital, but the counter to what is gained is what might be lost by leaving the network.

Cusumano argued that the winner in any technology platform "race" has to have strong network effects – something Facebook has through peer relationships driving membership. This indirect network effect keeps users in the system because of

Facebook's usefulness to them as a personal communication tool within their network. But a winning platform must also make it costly for users and external developers to use more than one platform – similar to the concept of switching costs[28] as a market driver. Facebook users are therefore less likely to switch to another platform if they have years of accumulated content on Facebook. (2011: 33).

Rohlfs' (1974) fundamental assumption that an individual or household's willingness to pay for telecoms is dependent on who they would use the telecoms to communicate with is a *direct* network effect. Rohlfs developed a formula to account for the process by which consumers decide whether to join a network set – the *uniform calling model* which suggests that the utility of the service to any one individual depends only on the number of individuals who also subscribe, rather than on who is subscribing and the desire of the user to communicate with that subscriber set. Rohlfs suggested that unlimited growth in the market is both unlikely and undesirable, what is required instead is a "desirable equilibrium" based on attracting subscribers of sufficient worth (w) that have value to individual subscribers, at an acceptable price (p) (which in today's terms might be privacy or time constraints). Those subscribers who are put off by p or not interested in w will leave the network, leaving the subscribers who are more likely to attract new subscribers: the desirable equilibrium.

---

[28] Switching costs or switching barriers is abroad definition of the costs incurred by the consumer in switching to a new product or service provider. Those costs may appear more prohibitive in terms of time and effort (for example notifying people of changing in telephone number), rather than financial costs such as exit fees in changing an energy supplier.

Schmalensee revisited Rohlfs 1974 study of how network effects impact demand for telecoms goods and services in the context of new web-based businesses such as Facebook and YouTube to argue that they too rely on network effects, suggesting Facebook's university-based launch strategy could have been cribbed from Rohlfs' discussion of launching a new service in a population consisting of multiple groups with strong intra-group affinities. Schmalensee goes further and links social network businesses to Rohlfs' model as also having direct network effects in that the value of being a participant in any particular social network depends on who else is participating (2011:15).

Gladwell (2000) tells us that ideas, products, messages and behaviours spread among communities just like viruses do, and that the most important factor in virus spread is speed of change and "that one dramatic moment in an epidemic when everything can change all at once is the Tipping Point." (2000: 9) He argues that word-of-mouth is key to creating Tipping Point for ideas or behaviours, but that who delivers the information is equally important: "success of any kind of social epidemic is heavily dependent on the involvement of people with a rare set of social gifts" (p32). Thus, he echoes Rohlfs and Schmalansee in suggesting an individual's decision to join a social network site such as Facebook is based not only on the volume of acquaintances already using the site, but also on the recommendation of a particular type of trusted acquaintance, i.e. Rohlfs' "w" high-network-worth subscriber.

For Katz and his colleagues writing in the 1960s, the spread of a new technology or innovation was not that of the aggressive-sounding virus or infection, but of "diffusion". A process which sees the adoption over time of a specific innovative

item ("an idea or a practice") by individuals or groups, which Katz et al (1963) saw as necessarily linked to social – rather than mass media - channels of communication passing on information about that item, and to the social structures and values of the adoptees (1963:239). This had led to a revival of interest in the importance of interpersonal relations in the flow of influence and innovation (245).

Cannarella and Spechler (2014) applied infection modeling to explain user adoption and abandonment of Facebook. The research attracted a lot of press interest on its release because it suggested that Facebook had passed peak growth and was beginning an infection-like cycle of immunity (in the sense of reduced activity) among existing users which would lead to them abandoning the social network. Using quantitative methodology, the researchers looked at weekly search query results for "Facebook" and "MySpace", as published by Google Trends. They concluded that a reduction in searches for the term Facebook signified reduction in take-up and use of Facebook. However, they did not address whether Google search is a valid way to measure interest in Facebook as an increasing percentage of Facebook users access the SNS direct, via mobile phones, apps and plug-ins from websites, rather than via Google.

As previously argued, the place of Facebook within the current long-wave trajectory of increasingly social computer-mediated communication (CMC) may only become measurable with historical hindsight. However, the combination of two things: using real-world identities, and opening the platform to third-party development, is sufficiently radical to suggest the possibility of Facebook as a new paradigm within CMC, alongside delivering the network effects and the richness of content and data that have driven Facebook's phenomenal rise.

So far, these theories concentrate on the network effects of Facebook's technology, but Facebook as a business has also benefited from types of network effects. Ferrary and Granovetter (2009) suggested that one reason Silicon Valley (Facebook's birthplace and home) has been so successful, and so consistent, in spawning innovation and successful high-tech companies is because its entrepreneurs, investors and other actors are part of a complex, real-world social network. They concluded that the embeddedness of the entrepreneur and the start-up in that network directly affected the start-up's economic success (2009:337).

Castells pointed out a similar effect at play in 1970s' Silicon Valley, when the clustering of technological expertise around companies such as Intel led to development of the microprocessor, the personal computer, and on to the development of new telecommunications networks and the internet. This technological shift was not, he argued, socially determined, but was technologically induced (2010: 60). However, once the technological shift towards that networked society had begun, further technological development became shaped by historical and social context:

> By the 1980s, capitalism (specifically, major corporations and governments of the club of G-7 countries) did undertake a substantial process of economic and organizational restructuring, in which new information technology played a fundamental role and was decisively shaped by the role it played. (2010: 60)

For Castells, Ferrary and Granovetter, the influence of Silicon Valley and its place in technological/social determinism is not just about the inventors and the tech companies, but about the infrastructure – the venture capitalists and bankers and their links into government and politics; the universities and institutions and their role in

filtering the next generation of Silicon Valley's "movers and shakers"[29]. It was also about the milieu of minds meeting and companies forming, changing, spinning out and buying out – a constantly shifting technological primordial soup from which new ideas and powerful companies could not help but emerge.

Facebook is very much a part of that Silicon Valley soup and the history of venture capitalist involvement with Facebook is dominated by Silicon Valley-headquartered investors – from seed funding by Peter Thiel to second and third round investors Accel, Greylock and Meritech. As the next section explores, it is easy to become seduced by the PR image of Facebook as media game-changer led by its maverick young inventor, but the reality is that Facebook has influence and power that is not confined to the technology.

2.6: Technological determinism and the Facebook effect on society

McLuhan (1964) argued that technology, specifically media technology shapes societies. This theory of technological determinism argues that, rather than having free will to interact with technology, each new media technology determines how we will act and think as individuals and as a society (McLuhan, 1964; Postman, 1992).

Stepping further back in terms of technology transforming society, it was Havelock (1982) that showed how it was the development of the alphabet, around

---

[29] Indeed, Silicon Valley exists because of the work of Stanford University Dean of Engineering, Frederick Terman, in establishing Stanford Industrial Park in 1951 and choosing who would set up business there.

700BC in ancient Greece, that made it possible for Western civilization to move from spoken to written language and thus make possible conceptual discourse (from Castells, 2010: 355) and in so doing, separating the alphabetic communication and sensorial storytelling. But the internet and electronic communication, argued Castells, has reunited written, oral and audio-visual modalities of human communication into one integrated, interactive system to fundamentally change the character of communication (2010: 356).

Castells was writing in broader terms about the emergence of online communication rather than specifically about the new internet-delivered social networks such as Facebook, but the fundamental communication change the social web delivered was users seeking out and communicating with strangers around shared interests. Sharing information and content, playing games together, debating ideas and joining forums, groups and campaigns with people they did not know in the offline world, as part of an explosion in the number or range of people an individual may communicate with.

In his assessment of why people willingly gave up so much of their time and attention to TV in the 1980s, Castells could easily be describing why around two hours a day (Nielsen, 2016) is given over to smartphone-delivered communication:

> [T]he television modality of communication is a fundamentally new medium, characterized by its seductiveness, its sensorial simulation of reality, and its easy communicability along the lines of least psychological effort. (2010: 361)

Castells (2010) references Neuman (1991) in explaining the rapid rise of television and TV-mediated communication of ideas and politics as being basically

down to people's unwillingness to put effort into engaging with their media, whether because of tiredness or laziness: "the first decision is to watch television, then programmes are scanned until the most attractive is selected or, more often, the least boring." (2010:359). Television viewers were choosing to give their time, but not necessarily their attention to the medium, and the emergence of so-called 'second-screen'[30] activity is perhaps a natural outcome of the emergence of the internet, with viewers passing time with multiple media rather than only with one media.

Postman (1985) argued that television represented a return to pre-alphabet communication, to oral and visual traditions of storytelling and information sharing that was predisposed towards entertainment, and the "overarching presumption that it is there for our amusement and pleasure." (1985: 87)

Many of the respondents in the interviews and questionnaires for this thesis expressed similar thoughts in relation to their use of Facebook and their enjoyment of it expressed in TV-like terms of watching and entertainment. They watched "funny videos", or videos that are posted "such as vines", they used it to "see what people I know are doing"; to catch up with "games updates, celebrities, K-pop idols"; but also for "killing time". Facebook is an easy place, a no-effort place to consume, often visually, information about people and what they're doing, to be entertained or at least to kill time.

---

[30] Whereby TV viewers will watch a programme while also engaging with it on their smartphone or other internet-enable device, including tweeting or posting about what they're watching while they watch it; taking part in advertising or programme sponsored activities, or searching for related information. Castells too noted in relation to television consumption that it was rarely an exclusive activity but an "almost constant background presence, the fabric of our lives. We live with the media and by the media." (2010: 362)

But many also said they used it for outwards communication – them to others – something TV could never deliver. They were organising events, keeping in touch, passing on information and promoting their own blogs or activities through Facebook: "Organisation between players in a brass band"; "event planning & storing photos"; "keeping in touch with family. Also to communicate with work"; "friends all over the world can be contacted quickly and easily"; "Keeping in touch with people I will probably never meet again"; "I run a compound conversation RPG [role-playing games] using its messenger"; "Communication with students and networking". Facebook entertains but is predisposed towards communication.

Silverstone (2005) and Livingston (2009) suggested a theory of mediation with media technology transforming society and being socially shaped in return. Recently, academics have suggested that such technology does not follow a single trajectory but offers a range of affordances which are shaped by local social and cultural norms of users (Hutchby, 2001; Madianou and Miller, 2012; Miller et al, 2016).

That technical design is shaped by social values is a generally accepted academic concept (Abbate, 1999; Bowker et al, 1997; Friedman, 1997; Feenberg, 1995, MacKenzie and Wajcman, 1985). The concept of technical code, as developed by Feenberg (1992, 1995), sees cultural and social assumptions embedded within a technology's physical and structural form. This social constructivist theory[31] of

---

[31] Social constructivism as theory was developed by post-revolutionary Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky. Vygotsky argued (1978) that cognitive functions originate in (and must therefore be explained as products of) social interactions; that learning was not only about what is learned - the acquisition of new knowledge – but how it was learned - the process by which learners were integrated into a knowledge community. Thus, technology too is not simply the what of the technology but the

technological design is neatly summarised by Flanagin et al (2009: 180), who then extend the theory to the internet, arguing that the internet's technical design encouraged new forms of collective action by favouring open access, personalisation and collective social activities. They argue that the internet has not only encouraged social and networked activities but generated a shift towards greater individual interconnectivity that undermines the power of the traditional mass media in favour of the individual:

> the technical code of the internet exhibits an enhanced sense of empowerment, in as much as internet users feel their collective efforts result in desired outcomes. (2009: 186)

However, the authors also point out that the same technologies that increase individual agency can diminish it via commercial or political exploitation of individuals' security, privacy, freedom, or expression. The positive potential of the internet is balanced against passive acceptance of restrictions on, or monitoring of, its use. (2009: 191)

For Bennett and Segerberg (2012), the internet and social media in particular had delivered a new form of collective action – "connective action" – supporting and in many instances supplanting traditional, face-to-face collective action through enabling personalised political action and delivering large-scale action networks. Thus, social fragmentation in western democracies, had led to young people in

---

how – how both a technology's development and its use are shaped by social interactions and cultural assumptions.

particular engaging with politics as "an expression of personal hopes, lifestyles and grievances" (2012:743).

Abbate suggests the internet shares the protean character of communications media (1999: 4) in that users focus on its delivery of information, rather than the technology. The technology delivering information via the TV, radio, or PC is dematerialised and the communications media become systems that transmit ideas rather than electrons. She quotes Donald Davies, who co-developed the internet's underpinning technology and noted at the time:

> Even though there is a communication system and a computer operating system, the user must be able to ignore the complexities. (Davies, 1966: 2)

Thus, Facebook's users expect to be able to use its services and access their content wherever they are on whatever device they choose to use. New technology needs be unlimited in usefulness while appearing simple to the point of magical. Users will ignore the iceberg of privacy, legal and access issues below Facebook's sparkling sea of usefulness in so long as it continues to be both useful, accessible, and – crucially - free.

That question of privacy versus magical usefulness is increasingly exercising governments, agencies and analysts. As Bernt (2010) points out, Facebook is of particular concern because it is both the world's largest social network provider and its business model is dependent on user data driven advertising. Able to deliver a vast amount of data about its users with the added benefit that most of that information is freely given up by the users themselves. Facebook has become, she notes, a "Rorschach test" for expectations of privacy in social networks. Laws and regulations on privacy were not designed to protect individuals who willingly give away personal

data and information. Consequently, lawmakers have played catch-up – creating new limits, testing existing ones, while Facebook itself continually pushes the envelope on what its users will share.

That Facebook is coming under increased scrutiny from lawmakers and government agencies is a reflection not only of such privacy concerns but of the maturing of Facebook as a technology. There are four drivers of technological change: the technology itself; the way users use that technology and change it to fit their own behaviour; the response of changing markets, and the response of governments and lawmakers in the form of regulation of the technology.

Greenwood (2017) describes this as the "truck of change" with its four wheels – technology, behaviour, markets and regulation.

> Think of it as a front-wheel driven truck, with technology and behavior pushing the speed [of change], and markets and regulation chugging along behind, sort of stabilising the load. (2017: 19)

Thus, in April 2018, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg appeared before a US Congressional hearing to answer questions on his company's use of data and Facebook was facing dozens of class action lawsuits in relation to its links with Cambridge Analytica (see page 14), as well legal challenges in multiple countries. Facebook's SEC 10-Q[32] (the formal statement of business and financial health American companies submit to the Securities and Exchange Commission) for the

---

[32] See SEC Filing April 26, 2018: https://investor.fb.com/financials/sec-filings-details/default.aspx?FilingId=12705651 and pdf here: http://d18rn0p25nwr6d.cloudfront.net/CIK-0001326801/c867f5bf-e958-4d4d-bbd0-cfb1caae55a3.pdf (accessed November 6, 2018).

first quarter of 2018, dedicated large sections of its Risk Factors analysis to the market and regulatory challenges the company was facing.

Those legal challenges included: restrictions on user access by the governments of China, Iran and North Korea; challenges led by Irish lawmakers to the 'Privacy Shield' agreement covering data transfers between Europe and the US; a challenge by the Supreme Court of India following changes to data sharing between Facebook and WhatsApp; "multiple inquiries, investigations, and lawsuits in Europe, India, and other jurisdictions" in relation to the August 2016 change to WhatsApp's terms of service; the impending application of GDPR law across the European Union member states (Facebook was subsequently sued, along with Google, as the new law came into effect in May, 2018); "actions, investigations or administrative orders" initiated by multiple EU data protection authorities; the U.S. Federal Trade Commission and other government inquiries in the United States, Europe, and other jurisdictions, alongside "multiple putative class action suits" initiated as result of the Cambridge Analytica data "misuse"; "a number of" intellectual property lawsuits; "numerous other" lawsuits and class action lawsuits; claims relating to information published on Facebook and its products (for example defamation, hate speech, intellectual property rights); and ongoing battles with the IRS over tax liabilities.

> Orders issued by, or inquiries or enforcement actions initiated by, government or regulatory authorities could cause us to incur substantial costs, expose us to unanticipated civil and criminal liability or penalties (including substantial monetary fines), or require us to change our business practices in a manner materially adverse to our business. (2018:46)

Regulation, that fourth "wheel of change", had become less a steadying influence on Facebook's rapid growth than a check on the rate of growth as – according to

Facebook - a potential threat to its business. However, one might also argue that the volume of lawsuits faced by Facebook is a sign of a company that has attracted litigation because of questionable business practices, rather than as natural next stage in its maturation. Facebook is not the victim here.

2.7: Political talk, the public sphere, and Facebook

> Kranzberg's First Law reads as follows: Technology is neither good nor bad, nor is it neutral. (1986: 545)

Kranzberg was an early advocate of the concept that technology has unintended effects on the social ecology, and those effects may change when the technology is used in different contexts or in different ways.

> Many of our technology-related problems arise because of the unforeseen consequences when apparently benign technologies are employed on a massive scale. Hence many technical applications that seemed a boon to mankind when first introduced became threats when their use became widespread (1986: 546)

The examples Kranzberg gave were of the simultaneously beneficial and harmful effects of DDT crop-spraying and the Industrial Revolution. It is perhaps too soon for academics to fully understand what effect the widespread use of Facebook as communications media in the 21st century is having on social interaction, politics, the media, economies, etcetera – what Kranzberg called the "entire sociocultural milieu". (1986: 548)

Several academics have noted that engagement with mass media is not a one-way process. It is not simply about receiving messages, including messages about how to think or what to think about, but of whether that message is actually heard; how it is interpreted; and whether the message results in an action (e.g. the re-sharing of the message, or the buying of an advertised product). The mass media audience is an active not passive receiver of media (Castells, 2010; Croteau and Hayes, 2000; Eco 1977) and therefore, noted Castells, "the notion of mass media refers to a technological system, not to a form of culture." (2010: 364) Instead, mass media (and Castells had television rather than the internet in mind) is the framing medium for who and what citizens should know about.

In addition, media segmentation, channel "surfing" and the growth of channels and TV providers, meant that a uniform message became harder to deliver. In choosing what to watch and when, the viewer created his or her mosaic view of their preferred world.

> Every cultural expression, from the worst to the best, from the most elitist to the most popular, comes together in this digital universe that links up in a giant, non-historical hypertext, past, present, and future manifestations of the communicative mind. By so doing, they construct a new symbolic environment. They make virtuality our reality. (2010:403)

Thus, Castells describes a mass media which delivers a virtual version of the reality its users exist in (or perhaps would prefer to exist in); one which captures reality in such a way that the on-screen virtual reality becomes the lived experience. (2010:404)

In September 2016, as criticism built around Facebook's algorithm-driven promulgation of so-called "filter bubbles" and possible effect on political change in

the US and UK, Zuckerberg posted a message arguing that the social media had encouraged rather than hindered the sharing of diverse ideas. Social media, he wrote[33], was the most diverse form of media that had every existed. Research[34] showed that Facebook users were exposed to a much broader set of people than they would been pre-internet and, whilst it is "human nature to gravitate towards people who think like we do", Facebook users he suggested were being exposed to a greater mix of viewpoints. Regardless of that optimism, Zuckerberg and his team spent increasing time and resources in 2016 and 2017 attempting to filter out false information, clickbait, fake news and extremist views to deliver something like the plurality of opinions Zuckerberg's post promised.

Academics have previously pointed to people's willingness to believe a convenient untruth or a truth-like statement, rather than have their biases or perceptions challenged. Psychologist Daniel Kahneman (2011) defined as "cognitive ease" people's avoidance of facts that would challenge them to think deeper or work harder in forming an opinion about an issue. And, as has previously been noted, academics have also identified people's willingness to put concerted effort into avoiding politics (Eliasoph 1997, Jackson 2013), even while they may simultaneously be involved in local issues and civic action. Indeed, the more "public" the space, the

---

[33] Taken from Buzzfeed, original Zuckerberg post can only be viewed through a Facebook account: https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/zuckerberg-said-facebook-could-be-better-at-filtering-fakes?utm_term=.tqgxBJBQq#.xfo0VXVDn (accessed November 6, 2018).

[34] It is likely that Zuckerberg had in mind research by Bakshy et al, (2012, 2015) which found that most users had Facebook friends with opposing political views and that News Feeds would generally reflect those diverse views. The research (as Facebook's own research arm) concluded that the majority of information shared by users came from weak tie (distant) contacts and that those contacts were more likely to share novel information, including news and political information and thus increase the spread of novel information and diverse viewpoints.

more likely it is that citizens either avoid political conversation or engage in more negative or less public-spirited discourse (Eliasoph, 1996).

Eli Pariser's "filter bubble" (2011) warned against the race to personalise the web experience, arguing that the result would be to deliver a bias towards news people seemed to prefer, rather than stories that would challenge existing views. That filter bias extends from the web to online social media – according to Reuters 2016 report on UK digital trends, social media had become sources 24 percent users regularly used to share news stories with Friends and the stories they chose to share were predominantly ones they approved of or agreed with (Reuters, 2016: 11).

Jonathan Albright researched how Google's (and Facebook's) algorithms drive people towards particular news stories and, more worryingly, how those algorithms can be 'gamed' by organisations, including political bodies, to push individuals towards false stories or extreme viewpoints. Mapping connections between right-wing websites, the academic and data journalist found a dark ecosystem of fake news and alt-right propaganda using web trackers to "bleed through" into top news and search results on Google and Facebook, completely surrounding mainstream media (Medium, 2016).

Silverman (2015) researched how false news stories spread around the internet and over social media:

> Rather than acting as a source of accurate information, online media
> frequently promote misinformation in an attempt to drive traffic and social
> engagement. The result is a situation where lies spread much farther than the
> truth, and news organizations play a powerful role in making this happen.

Returning to the question of Facebook as public space vs public sphere, it is necessary to look at what might constitute a public sphere 'test'. Habermas's grand theory defined the public sphere as people's public use of their reason within a network for communicating information and points of view between state and society (1989). A test might therefore be whether communication within Facebook is both public and reasoned and is accessible to both state and society.

Dahlgren (2005a) echoes Habermas in focusing on both the publicness and quality of the communication but adds a result – the formation of political will:

> In schematic terms, a functioning public sphere is understood as a constellation of communicative spaces in society that permit the circulation of information, ideas, debates – ideally in an unfettered manner – and also the formation of political will (i.e., public opinion). (p.148)

Eliasoph (1990) also saw the publicness of the debate as central to a functioning political society.

> The substance of political life is public discussion; even if a person can experience feelings of political concern without having a language for giving those feelings socially recognizable meaning, the feelings do not matter if they only remain private. (465)

Bohman (2004:133) saw the necessary pre-condition for democratic significance as that the forum exists as a social space in which speakers show willingness to hear each other with equal respect and mutual expectation of being listened to. The online space, opening the speaker up as it does to an indefinite audience, also made her or him accountable to that audience's objections and "answerable to demands to recognize their concerns" (2004: 136). Each communications technology, Bohman added, has expanded this indefinite audience until computer-mediated

71

communication has delivered "many-to-many" communication and increased interaction without the cost of mass-media mediation.

Habermas saw the formation of public opinion as a cornerstone of the public sphere. Evolving from the "world of letters" (coffeeshop clubs, salons and the press), public opinion would "put the state in touch with the needs of society" (1989: 30). This suggests a test of whether Facebook delivers a public sphere should include the structure of the communication ("public", "unfettered"); its quality ("reasoned", "ideas", "debates"); and its result ("formation of political will", forming "public opinion"). Thus, study of political beliefs and actions became a search for a process.

> [A] process of conversation that cultivates or impairs citizen's abilities to talk, think, and imagine together. (Eliasoph, 1997: 606)

Public opinion is not only formed but achieves something - in the Habermasian model telling the state (public authority) what society (its public) need. Although this "test" does not include that the state should act on this knowledge – Castells (2010) points to the "backlash of the disaffected" against nation states and global powers, facilitated by the horizontal communications networks of the web and mobile media.

Habermas saw the mass media (primarily the national press) as the structural lynchpin of the public sphere (Khan et al, 2012) acting as the conduit of public opinion to the state – representing the views of the public to the state who would govern them. However, well-documented issues - from market forces to the rise of the public relations industry, had undermined that role even before the emergence of the internet, and Habermas himself had doubts about the value of a consumer-focused, commercialised mass media:

> The world fashioned by the mass media is a public sphere in appearance only.
> By the same token the integrity of the private sphere which they promise to
> their consumers is also an illusion. (1989: 171)

Habermas in his later work saw the public sphere as having become more limited
with the rise of the mass media and subsequent decline in critical debate (1989: 201).
He doubted the democratising potential of the internet because he saw its
development as led by commercial rather than social interests (Papacharissi, 2008: 4).

Downey and Fenton noted Habermas saw the bourgeois public sphere of the 20th
century having become one of vertical communication of mass media influenced by
the state, capital and consumers, rather than horizontal communication between
citizens (2003: 186). However, they point out that political activity in the 1980s
which saw, for example, the development of the Green Party in Germany and the rise
of community and localised media, prompted Habermas to revise his pessimistic
opinion of the public in favour of a "pluralistic… much differentiated mass public"
(1992: 438) able to create its own political interventions (2003: 187).

Dahlgren argued for a normative ideal of public sphere beyond Habermas which
referred to the more generic democratic goals and responsibilities of the media and
civic life (2005a). He defined a three dimensional test of the public sphere[35]:

> These three dimensions – the structural, the representational, and the
> interactional – provide an analytical starting point for examining the public

---

[35] This three-dimensional test may also be seen as a refining of the six-dimensional "test" Dahlgren
wrote about in 2003 as necessary for healthy civic culture. Dimensions of knowledge, values,
identities, affinity, experience and discussion

sphere of any given society or analyzing the contribution of any given communication technology. (p.150)

The interactional dimension is key for Dahlgren, Habermas, Dewey (1927) and others, in determining what constitutes a/the public sphere:

atomized individuals, consuming media in their homes, do not comprise a public…democracy resides, ultimately, with citizens who engage in talk with each other. (Dahlgren, 2005: 149)

Publication is partial and the public which results is partially informed and formed until the meanings it purveys pass from mouth to mouth. (Dewey, 1927: 219)

Any public sphere test for Facebook therefore may be primarily interactional by assessing the type and quality of interaction among users, but Facebook as an entity would also have to pass structural and representational tests. The discourse being tested within Facebook would have to pass Habermas's "reasoned" debate test, but Facebook itself would also have to pass Habermas and Dahlgren's structural tests in relation to the institutional (including control, funding, legal framework), architectural (accessibility) and political ecology features of the business.

Jacobs, Cook and Delli Carpini (2009) in summarising the arguments for deliberative democracy (that is the deliberation between citizens necessary to a healthy democracy) came up with a not dissimilar "test" in determining five conditions of deliberation: universality, inclusivity, rationality, agreement, and political efficacy[36]. This "discursive participation" in politics may not lead to political

---

[36] Bohman (1996) focused on three conditions for deliberative democracy based on public agreement with the emphasis on public. He called them the non-tyranny, equality and publicity conditions.

actions such as voting but delivers "discursive capital" (2009:3) of benefit to the individual, the collective, and in building a healthy democracy[37].

> Public talking contributes to the formation of public opinion, to the identification of the interests and values that citizens have "at stake" in the political process, and it helps motivate citizens to pursue them. (p4)

For both the deliberationists and the Habermasians, public political talk is seen as central to a healthy democracy[38]. However, whether it is the reasoned and reasonable debate of the Habermasians or the reason-giving and reliant on reason public talk of the deliberationists, there is no allowance made for the partisan, passionate or irrational.

That in itself may be further criticism of the public sphere and political deliberation as the domain of the white, privileged, educated male (Fraser, 1992; Kohn, 2000; Mouffe, 2000; van Zoonen, 2003) and the way they prefer to conduct debate. And by favouring the rational over the emotive and personal, political discussion is separated from the lived experience and ignores that it is frequently how much a person is emotionally affected by an issue that drives them to engage with it politically. Further, that it is the point of politics to reconcile divergent – often deeply divided – views and that requires accepting the nonrational. (Perrin, 1971). Citizens

---

[37] Of course, this rests on an assumption that democracy is healthy, or that it is by default beneficial to societies. Critics of democracy – as Jacobs, Cook and Delli Carpini point out – argue that citizens lack competency in being able to form considered, reasoned opinions, relying instead on subjective response to issues, emotion and irrational prejudice (see Schumpeter, 1976, in particular).

[38] Indeed, as Perloff notes, deliberative democracy theorists see deliberation as helping citizens view the public sphere as a "vital arena in which they can contribute" (2018: 39)

speaking with each other is valuable in and of itself because "it is through talking that thinking becomes doing and doing becomes thinking" (1971: 145).

For Eliasoph (1996) the discourse is not just about the quality of the political conversation but the ways in which individuals shift and change according to the space in which the conversations happened: how public is the forum and the speaker's relationship to the forum itself. The political conversations an individual will engage in in one space may be entirely different to other spaces and governed by collective, tacit understandings of what can be said where and when.

Temple (2014) saw the public sphere as all the places in which matters of public interest might be discussed or shared from "chatting about immigration in a pub" to a town hall meeting. It is the fact of discussion rather than the quality or result that matters. That debate may have moved online and onto the social media, is a reflection of a desire to search out a wider range of opinions than represented by mainstream media where the "narrow focus of broadcast news and the national press belongs in the past" (p196). Even if those opinions are those of "fruitcakes and fascists".

The issue of how able Facebook is to act as representational conduit of public opinion, is even more complex. The fragmented structure of interaction on Facebook, which can be both very private as messages between two people, and very public - across Group Pages for instance, negates against a traditional Habermasian concept of a single channel of communication between a collective public and their collective governance, mediated via a homogenous mass media.

Papacharissi (2002) sets the bar higher than both Habermas and Dahlgren. In defining the public sphere online as the 'virtual sphere', she sets the test as being the positive effect of online discussion on democracy:

> As public space, the internet provides yet another forum for political deliberation. As public sphere, the internet could facilitate discussion that promotes a democratic exchange of ideas and opinions. A virtual space enhances discussion; a virtual sphere enhances democracy. (p.11)

The internet, she further argued (2008), may not deliver a public sphere in the Habermasian sense because it is not necessary for it to do so in order to enhance democracy. The public sphere is a metaphor for a mode and ideal of civic participation, rather than a plan, and online technologies need their own "virtual sphere" test: "It is not online technologies that fail the public sphere test; rather it could be the other way around" (2008: 12)

This returns the discussion to the quality of the interaction – not just a forum for discussion of political issues, but an exchange of ideas and opinions that "enhances democracy". However effective Twitter[39] may have shown itself to be as a rallying point for dissent, the character limit on interaction will limit it as a platform for reasoned debate[40].

However, the evidence is that democracy is influenced by multiple social network sites – the videos posted on YouTube by Saudi women of themselves driving, plus

---

[39] Twitter's 140 character limit was increased to 280 characters in November 2017

[40] Of interest however is Twitter's role in what Vatnoy (2016) describes as the *rhetorical arena* of social media, particularly in relation to Twitter and his research into the Norwegian "Tweetocracy" of established voices and pundits from the media, politics and academia using Twitter as an arena for freer, more self-ironic, but also more values-led political "chatter" (2016: 128-9).

their tweets, and bloggers, and Facebook posts, all contributed to an online grassroots campaign capable of attracting the attention both of potential participants and potential lawmakers.[41]

In addition, Papacharissi is asking her reader to test not only the quality of the interaction but its normative effect in that it must "enhance democracy".

But whose democracy - the democracy in every one of the countries in which Facebook is the top social networking site – and how is "enhance" to be measured? Any test of whether a particular debate led to action in a particular country and which (eventually) led to political change or decision-making in that country, may not be an accurate test of whether a communications medium which operates in many countries is delivering a public sphere to each of them. As Khan et al (2012) noted, it seems inappropriate to compare the 21st century public sphere of globalised, networked societies linked by information technology and social software to Habermas's public sphere of the 18th century. Public spheres do not need to be spatially bounded by nation state but can be issue-based across transnational public spheres - for example the Occupy movement[42]. Khan et al argued for a modern, transnational public

---

[41] See multiple media reports over several years, including this from 2011: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/business-13928217/saudi-women-turn-to-social-media-for-right-to-drive, this from 2016 https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/05/11/a-social-media-campaign-to-get-saudi-women-driving-finds-support-but-also-mockery/?utm_term=.d51205af76c0, and this after the ban was finally lifted in 2018: https://edition.cnn.com/2018/06/19/middleeast/saudi-women-driving-ban-intl/index.html (accessed November 6, 2018).

[42] The Occupy movement began in 2011 as a response to the dominance of large corporations and financial organisations in controlling the world in ways the protestor argues benefitted a rich minority rather than "the 99%" majority, in way that undermined democracy and social cohesion. The movement spread across 82 countries and hundreds of cities within months; each protest being localised and separately led. For example, Occupy Wall Street, believed to have initiated the

sphere, which represents a paradigm shift from Habermasian nation-state focused spheres to a global public sphere which includes, as structural precondition, communicative networks which enable broad participation across state borders (2012: 44). This condition has been met in capability – Facebook is used by enough people in enough countries - the issue is whether it has been met in reality.

The question of whether a democracy has or has not been enhanced by discourse is also problematic. Judgment of what constitutes a healthy democracy is subjective; based on cultural norms, lived experience and perhaps wishful thinking. In testing whether public sphere interaction has enhanced a democracy one might decide whether it is proven by more people being able to vote, or more people choosing to vote, or more people choosing not to vote, or more people debating whether to vote. All of these are valid judgments on a democracy but it would be difficult to identify instances in which discussion on Facebook definitely led to one of these outcomes, not least because democratic changes take place over long periods.

> ..the potential of social media lies mainly in their support of civil society and the public sphere – change measured in years and decades (Shirky, 2011:3)

Zhang et al echoed that concept in a study (2010) that showed that heavy use of social network sites had a positive effect on civic participation but not on political participation.

The forming of public opinion – and the enhancement of democracy by the delivery of that opinion, is not the same as political participation. Brady (1999: 737) defined political participation as "action by ordinary citizens directed towards

---

movement, focused on the role of Wall Street and multinational corporations in the financial crisis of 2008, leading to years of recession and austerity (source: http://occupywallst.org/about/).

influencing some political outcomes." But for most citizens, the political outcome is of limited importance against the weight of the everyday life (Jackson et al, 2013) that occupies time and attention, and the culture of political avoidance that pervades much social interaction (Eliasoph, 1997). Engaging with politics becomes unnecessary and largely irrelevant to our going about our daily business. Dahlgren (2006) asked whether it was "sociologically realistic" to expect more people to engage with public life and argued for a rethinking of notions and expectations of citizenship. To devise a test based only on democratic actions therefore is at odds with the everyday experiences of most people most of the time.

Several academics have considered the role of the internet in delivering (or not) a new public sphere. Benkler (2006) used the term "networked public sphere" to describe the potential of the Internet to produce a more communicative, more active public able to engage both in participatory politics and in creativity. Negroponte (1995), Bohman (1996) and Rash (1997) were among the first to argue in favour of the internet's democratic potential, while Graham and Wright (2014) suggested internet forums can deliver third spaces (Oldenburg, 1989[43]) important to political talk and community formation.

Others, including Papacharissi (2002), drew on research into online communication and the potential it delivers for miscommunication and the venting of emotion, rather than for reasoned debate. She references Jones (1997) who suggested

---

[43] Oldenburg defined the "third place" as spaces outside of home and the workplace in which people gather informally, voluntarily and regularly in "happily anticipated gatherings" (1989:16) as important areas of public and civic life and crucial to the development of communities and citizenship.

the internet allows us to shout more loudly without any evidence that we are being heard. While Abramson et al (1988) saw the internet encouraging hasty opinions rather than rational discourse and argued that we needed to study the content, diversity, and impact of online discussion in order to determine whether democracy had actually been enhanced (2002: p.18) And for Perloff, that debate is mostly rational and thoughtful is enough.

> The public sphere is the amorphous arena – frequently online – where people talk, argue (sometimes angrily and harshly), but ideally in a thoughtful fashion. (2018: 39)

Poster (1995) argued that rational debate was not possible online because the internet encourages shifting, protean identities which are not consonant with forming a stable political community. Dissent leads to a profusion of different views, rather than to a commitment to seek consensus. Similarly, Breslow (1997) concluded that the web's anonymity was a barrier to it becoming a public sphere: "when the chips are down, will people actually strip off their electronic guises to stand and be counted?" (p.255)

There are two issues here – firstly, the contrast between the anonymised web of newsgroups and forums that Breslow knew in 1997 and the 'this is me' social web that is experienced now. Secondly, for the commercialisation of the social web to work – in particular Facebook, dependent as it is on gathering and using data about users, those users need to have real online identities. This transparency, however, goes one way – outwards from the user. As previously noted, there has been criticism of Facebook's structure in relation to privacy and data collection almost since the

social network launched as (effectively) a way to "snoop" on fellow students[44]. That issue becomes even more important if Facebook is becoming a space for global democratic debate and dissent.

Fernback remarked that true identity and democracy are found in cyberspace "not so much within the content of virtual communities, but within the actual structure of social relations" (1997:42). So, who users know – the relationships and networks articulated in Facebook - has value alongside what they say to each other. Which Friends' posts are read most frequently (i.e. listened to) reflects who the Facebook user trusted and whose opinions they valued most.

Zuckerberg notes that Facebook's commercial potential is based on the "Holy Grail" of trusted referral: "Nothing influences people more than a recommendation from a trusted friend". (2007) How powerful, therefore, might be the recommendation to think, say or do something when it comes from someone whose opinion is trusted? If a friend suggests joining them in signing a petition, or taking part in a march, that is likely to be more influential than a stranger handing out a leaflet, or talking about an issue on TV.

Shirky (2011) referenced the work of Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955 and 2006) who found a two-step process in forming political opinion via similar 'friend' interaction:

---

[44] The 2004 home page of Thefacebook told students at Harvard University they could use the service to "Search for people at your school; Fine out who are [sic] in your classes; Look up your friends' friends; See a visualization of your social network" (see: https://www.forbes.com/pictures/fi45eefdgd/2004-welcome-to-thefacebook-com-2/#150a17c32e3c Accessed November 16, 2018)

Opinions are first transmitted by the media, and then they get echoed by friends, family members, and colleagues. It is in this second, social step that political opinions are formed. This is the step in which the Internet in general, and social media in particular, can make a difference. (p.6)

The work of Katz and Lazarsfeld is also useful in looking specifically at Facebook as mass media. They found that not only were interpersonal relations important in forming political opinion, but who people are communicating with and the quality of that association matters. Individuals are more likely to be influenced by people they know if they associate with them frequently; if they share their norms and standards; if they have shared access to the same sources of political information; if those sources have a route to the mass media. (1955, 2006 and Katz 1957[45]). These parameters apply to the majority of communication in Facebook where the architecture is designed to encourage users to interact with "Friends" with whom they share current or past association, family ties, hobbies or common interests – the social sphere of people who influence the forming of opinions.

Several academics have noted that the internet, Facebook included, encourages weak social ties (Donath and boyd, 2004; Leung and Lee, 2005) characterized by low levels of commitment and focused on entertainment (Jones, 1997; Calhoun, 1998; Gladwell, 2010). Others, particularly Granovetter (1973) insist the weak ties that tend to characterise online communications also have value, not least in supplementing other forms of friendship and maintaining relationships that might otherwise falter and fail (Wellman et al, 2001; Cumming et al, 2006). Facebook is built in such a way that these weak tie links are encouraged – half of all Facebook users have more than

[45] See also Almond and Verba (1963), and Verba (1972) on strength of primary groups and interpersonal communication.

200 'friends' (the Guardian, 2014) - Facebook itself determines the nature of the social contact (Lewis & West, 2009) and, as Charles (2010) notes, friendship as a friend count; as quantifiable commodity, may not be friendship at all.

The issue of the quality of the social network – the strength or weakness of the tie and the level of trust between individuals, is not a part of the normative Habermasian concept, focused as it is on broad categories – the press, the public, the state - and discourse between them. However, an assessment of the role of Facebook as public sphere has to include consideration of whether the quality of the social tie impacts on the quality of the discourse – it takes "bravery" to talk politics with strangers online (Jackson et al, 2013) and "cultural work" to take any political position (Eliasoph, 1997). Real political action such as the high-risk activism of the American civil-rights movement or the fall or the Berlin Wall, are strong-tie phenomena, requiring the support that only strong person-to-person relationships can deliver (Gladwell, 2010).

Katz and Lazarsfeld also highlighted relationships and the sub-set of individuals they termed "opinion leaders". These were people who had greater personal influence on those they knew and who shared a stronger exposure to the mass media, so that political ideas flowed from the mass media, via these opinion leaders, to less politically active people (1955:151). They developed their theory of this two-step flow of ideas from the mass media, via interpersonal influence, before Habermas had published his public sphere concept and it is interesting to see the role each assigned to the mass media as conduit (Habermas) or originator (Katz and Lazarsfeld) of public ideas and opinion.

Kirkpatrick attaches a 'gift' concept to users' contributions on Facebook[46]: gifting views, comments and ideas via their real names and real-world identity as a gift of opinion into the polity which, he suggests, may ultimately strengthen civic culture (2010: p.288). Users are rewarded for their participation in public debate by reciprocal contribution of friends and strangers – and that encourages ideas and protests to quickly develop and spread via the social sphere.

> Facebook has now become one of the first places dissatisfied people worldwide take their gripes, activism, and protests. These campaigns on Facebook work well because its viral communications tools enable large numbers to become aware of an issue and join together quickly. (p.290)

Kirkpatrick offered an example of Facebook activism – the 2008 anti-Farc protests in Colombia when the setting up of a Facebook campaign group led, within a month, to ten million people taking part in street protests against the rebel group. Yet in 2016, the majority of Colombians, probably including many who had joined those 2008 protests, voted against ending the 52-year war with the FARC rebels[47]. Facebook may be able to deliver an extraordinary political action, but its ability to encourage continuing debate and engagement with complex political issues is the subject of this thesis.

---

[46] Jenkins et al (2013) wrote of the gift economy of social media in which users not only produce much of the content but play and active role in sharing and spreading it – gifting it – creating a more participatory culture.

[47] The reasons for the (close) vote against ending the war were complex and neatly summed up in this article on Harvard Business Review: https://hbr.org/2016/10/the-leadership-clash-that-led-colombia-to-vote-against-peace. Subsequently, negotiations continued between Farc and President Santos' government with the signing of a peace deal in June, 2017:
https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/27/colombia-farc-weapons-war-government (both accessed November 6, 2018)

The fact that activists use Facebook is not evidence that Facebook turns more people into activists. (Miller, 2011: 189)

2.8: Facebook in the political sphere

Facebook is not just enabling communication with people users more-or-less know, it is giving users a route into a public sphere that traditional media had previously controlled. Kirkpatrick quotes Chris Cox, vice-president of product at Facebook, in interview:

We want to give to everyone that same power that mass media has had to beam out a message. (2010:296)

Facebook has form when it comes to 'beaming out' powerful messages. In the 2006 Midterm Elections in the US, the company created Facebook Profile Pages for all congressional and gubernational candidates (whether the candidates wanted the page or not, used it or not). If a Facebook user liked or followed a candidate's page, a notification was sent to their Facebook friends. The company displayed that support and then calculated the percentage of "votes" that candidate had. The privacy of the polling booth had become a shared and social experience.

As Williams and Gulati (2007) noted in their research into the Facebook election intervention some 1.5m – 13 percent – of its user base, became connected to a candidate or an issue as a result. Further, the researchers saw a correlation between support on a candidate's Facebook page and their final share of the vote, noting that this support provided a proxy measure of the underlying enthusiasm and support a candidate attracted. The research for this thesis showed similar results in the 2015

UK election (see page 226) with a correlation noted between supporter activity on a candidate's Facebook page/s and likelihood of that candidate winning the contested seat. All the winning or second-placed candidates in the four constituencies studied were also the candidates who – personally or through their agents - were most active on Facebook[48].

The 2006 US election was, noted Ancu and Cozma, the first time that social network sites had been part of the "campaign media medley" (2009: 567). They studied how and why citizens chose to friend candidates' MySpace profiles during the 2008 US primaries, applying uses and gratifications theory to the selection of MySpace as media in which to engage politically. Ancu and Cozma concluded that voters were drawn to candidates' pages largely in order to interact with like-minded supporters, and only additionally to seek information or access political content.

Research by Weeks and Holbert (2013) found similar results in Facebook users who choose to Friend journalists and news organisations. Their secondary analysis of data from Pew's 2010 survey of news engagement in the US, focused on social media news reception and found that friending particular journalists and news providers, made it more likely that a user would receive news and information from that source.

---

[48] This echoes research into 16 constituencies in southern England (Gaber, 2017) which, while focused on the use of Twitter by candidates rather than Facebook, found a correlation between activity in the form of responding to incoming tweets and relative electoral performance – albeit with a number of caveats. The pilot project had limitations, as the researcher points out, not least the technology used to analyse tweets and Twitter's limitations as a research tool from which broader conclusions about digital media reception can be drawn.

That should be obvious – friending indicates interest in hearing from that source and the likelihood of being more actively engaged with the news and information provided. However, Weeks and Holbert also found that whether a user then disseminated – shared – that news or information with their own network was influenced by their degree of partisanship. Political partisanship may draw Facebook users to particular content they but not necessarily to disseminate that content. They might visit Pages to gather information and news stories that reflect and reinforce their partisan views, and would be more likely to receive that news, but not necessarily to share it. Whereas, non-partisan Facebook users would be more likely to disseminate stories they found interesting or engaging.

The strength of the links between friends also affected user actions. Research during the 2010 US congressional elections found that Facebook Friends had limited effect on political actions compared to the influence of close, offline friends. The research team (including Adam Kramer of Facebook's Data Science team) tested whether feeding Facebook users messages encouraging them to vote would have the effect of actually encouraging more of them to vote. Over 60 million users were shown a "social message" package of information about where to vote; who among their Facebook Friends had voted; an 'I voted' button, and a counter of how many Facebook users had already voted[49]. The result was a marginal (0.39%) increase in the numbers of people voting. However, seeing closer friends voting or receiving information from closer friends had a stronger result (280,000 extra votes) than

---

[49] See https://www.facebook.com/notes/government-and-politics-on-facebook/facebook-focused-on-helping-voter-participation/448310010881/ for Facebook's announcement of the initiative. Note – only accessible through a Facebook account. (Accessed November 6th, 2018).

simply receiving the social message (60,000 extra votes). The researchers concluded that close friends matter more than Facebook Friends:

> Online mobilisation works because it primarily spreads through strong-tie networks that probably exist offline but have an online representation. In fact, it is plausible that unobserved face-to-face interactions account for at least some of the social influence that we observed in the Kramer experiment. (Bond et al, 2012: 298)

Research into the 2006 congressional elections (Williams & Gulati, 2007) was more positive. Facebook directly intervened in the elections by setting up Profile Pages for all candidates. Users who visited and supported a candidate's page had that information shared with their Facebook friends. While the researchers did not assess whether this resulted in any increase in the vote share, they did note that there was a correlation between support for a candidate's page and their final vote share, concluding that there was a "compelling case" that Facebook had played a significant role in the elections and that social network sites have the capability of affecting the electoral process.

The Williams and Gulati research supports the results of this project, which as previously noted, saw a correlation between the candidates who were most active on Facebook and the candidates who did best in the 2015 election in the four constituencies studied. In addition, this paper argues that there is link between the presence of the candidate (whether real or through their agent) and the activity of supporters on the candidate's page. The more visible the candidate, the more likely they are to encourage engagement from page visitors, whether in the form of supportive comments and actions or willingness to engage in political talk (see section 5.4.5).

2.9: Towards a public sphere test for social media

In his study of 50 Swedish Facebook users, Gustafsson (2012:1122) found that Facebook does not prompt political participation but it does operate as a latent tool for political communication and information sharing. In developing a public sphere test, the concept of a *pre-public sphere* state may therefore be more relevant. Habermas described the evolution of a critical-reasoning public sphere via a "literary precursor" state, described as:

> The training ground for a critical public reflection still preoccupied with itself – a process of self-clarification of private people focusing on the genuine experiences of their novel privateness. (1989:29)

People focused on their own novel privateness and engaged in self-clarification might describe the majority of Facebook communications and could therefore signify that reasoning on Facebook is mostly in that precursor state of self-absorption. This is especially important when we consider the demographic of Facebook users in the UK is more women than men (around 53% to 47%) and particularly women in the 23 to 37 age-range[50]. This is not Habermas's lettered, male bourgeois and therefore their discourse should not be judged in the same way. Indeed, criticism of Habermas's view of the bourgeois-initiated public sphere can be summarised as being overly dependent on privileged men debating in socially-restrictive spaces[51].

---

[50] Source Statista: https://www.statista.com/statistics/507417/number-of-facebook-users-in-the-united-kingdom-uk-by-age-and-gender/ (accessed November 16, 2018)

[51] It is also acknowledged that similar criticisms can be applied to democracy itself with its "systematic bias" (Jacobs, Cook & Delli Carpini, 2009) in which the voices of the politically

Anyone over the age of 13 can join Facebook and, except in a handful of countries which block it, Facebook is accessible for over-13s in any country to join. Those who join can choose to set differentiated limits on who can see the content they post. Similarly, group and organisation pages on Facebook can choose to be public or not. In addition, these privacy settings will limit what content appears on the internet outside of Facebook – a Google search for that individual or organization may deliver none or some of their Facebook content.

In hypothesising on whether Facebook has created a new public sphere, the question of whether it is a public medium is key. Equally, it is also necessary to ask what is meant by 'public' in relation to a public sphere. Facebook's walled garden technology has created a semi-permeable public space, with users being able to manage – to a degree - their own public and to differentiate access to their own content.

Public is necessarily always limited, whether by space, geography, gender, or class - the whole world could not crowd into one of Habermas's 18th century coffeeshops to debate, yet around 30 percent of the global population[52] currently "crowd" onto Facebook; sharing content and engaging in conversation through a ten-year-old commercial public space.

---

marginalised, including women and ethnic minorities, are not present or are not heard (see also Kohn, 2000). It can be argued that, just as there is no truly open debate in which all voices might be heard and given equal weight, so there is no truly open democracy in which all people's interests and perspectives will be heard and given equal weight by decision-makers.

[52] According to www.internetworldstats.com, the figure at June 30, 2017 was 26.3% global penetration, with Africa lowest at 12.9% of population and North America highest at 72.4%

It should also be noted that the Habermasian coffeeshop of a level debating space, of deliberation between peers, is an ideal that has never reflected the reality of citizens separated by gender, class, income, race and/or education. Equality, as Kohn noted "must be fought for rather than assumed" (2000: 417). Social standing matters and while Facebook may offer the possibility of some leveling of the online space, it will also reflect offline social structures in the way discussion may be encouraged or inhibited. Critics such as Fraser (1992) and Mouffe (2000) argue that the concept of the public sphere itself is exclusionist; homogenous rather than pluralist; and romanticised in its championing of the power of rational debate. Kohn (2000) suggested that Habermasian deliberative discourse – deliberation - was not necessary for democratic politics, only an "abstract notion of consensus" via discursive democracy. She challenged the consolidation of deliberation as normative ideal within democratic theory as reinforcing an elitist status quo.

Poster (1995) was more positive, arguing that while the gathering places of the public sphere – the coffeehouses, Greek agora, village squares &c, had never included everyone and by themselves could not determine the political outcomes, the public sphere none-the-less contributed to "the spirit of dissent" underpinning a healthy democracy. A place where people could talk as equals, where status did not exclude frank discussion, where "rational argument prevailed, and the goal was consensus". Schudson however, (1997) questioned the very existence of the public sphere and argued that public discourse is not the cornerstone of civil society and offers no magical solution to the problems of democracy.

Dahlgren pointed to a precursor state in the pre-political reasoning of what he terms the parapolitical online domain where "politics is not explicit but always

remains a potential". (2005a:153) The parapolitical domain could be applied to hundreds of thousands, possibly millions, of groups and pages on Facebook where issues and social topics are focused on and – to a greater or lesser degree - discussed. Dahlgren considers the place of the advocacy/activist domain of online public spheres and the potential they hold for fostering civic cultures:

> Discussion here may or may not always take the form of Habermasian deliberation, but what is more important is the reciprocal dynamics that it can generate, reinforcing the parameters of civic culture and the impact this may have on the larger political situation. (2005a:159)

For Bennett et al (1995) the issue was the importance of political talk in itself, not as precursor to political action but as political action: "To talk with others about politics is to participate in the political life of one's community or nation" (1995: 279) Political talk was a necessary "horizontal" activity of citizens engaging with each other, rather than the vertical political action of citizens interacting with government and political elites. In a society which, from the 1970s onwards, has become more preoccupied with self rather than collective, with "highly personalised forms of identity politics" anchored in consumerism (2003:139), citizens have become distanced from conventionally organised politics.

Downey and Fenton saw new media, specifically online, as having contributed to the destabilising of a public sphere-dominated mass media, state and capital, and leading to the emergence of counter-public spheres. New forms of fragmentation and solidarity had emerged, they argued, presenting "both opportunities and dangers to the theory and practice of democracy" (2003: 200)

93

Facebook has become the entry point both for people's experience of democratic action through the information they receive that informs their understanding of what that action might be. However, the Facebook user has been left to navigate a flood of information, including news, that may or may not be truthful; that may or may not be partisan. That user may choose to believe some of it, or may decide it's easiest to reject all of it – if some news is "fake", why not assume all news is fake? But in doing so, their ability to interpret, deliberate and act on that information is weakened.

Silverman (2015) researched how false news stories spread around the internet and over social media, but was also critical of the mainstream media's own role in extending the influence of "fake" information on the public sphere of the virtual world in his report into how journalists may amplify misinformation and "lies, dam lies, and viral content" through unquestioning reporting and sloppy or absent verification of material.

Both the 2016 and 2018 Reuters Institute Digital News Reports pointed to decreasing trust in journalists and in the news they consume online with over half (54% in the 2018 report) saying they were concerned about what is real and fake on the internet and 75% of respondents saying that it is the responsibility of the news publishers and platforms (i.e. not Facebook) to fix the problem. This is because, according to the report, people are mostly unhappy about biased or inaccurate news from the mainstream media rather than about fake content distributed by foreign powers or other agents. Indeed, news consumption via Facebook had declined according to the 2018 report – down nine percentage points in the US and down two points in the UK – particularly among younger people. Although Reuters noted that

this decline may be down to Facebook having changed its algorithm[53] to deliver less news to users, rather than users choosing not to engage with news via Facebook.

A loss of trust in the media tends to be mirrored in a loss of trust in the state. In 2015, pollsters Gallup reported that Americans' trust in the mass media had declined to just 40 percent having a "great deal" or a "fair amount" of trust. In the same period, Gallup found that Americans had also lost trust in federal government (only 38 percent trusted their government to tackle domestic problems). There's a similar pattern in the UK, with just 21 percent in 2016 trusting politicians to tell them the truth, against 25 percent trusting journalists.[54]

In a public sphere which relies on the state and the mass media as the bridge between state and people bridge between people and state, a loss of trust in both "pillars" is of concern to a properly functioning – or perhaps traditional functioning – democracy.

> When democracy falters, journalism falters, and when journalism goes awry, democracy goes awry. (Carey, 2001: 19)

2.10: Summary

---

[53] In January 2018, Facebook announced it was to change its news feed algorithm to prioritise "news" from friends and family, rather than news from news organisations and others: https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/12/technology/facebook-news-feed-changes.html (accessed November 6th, 2018).

[54] Ipsos MORI Veracity Index 2015: Trust in Professions, January 22, 2016

In this chapter's consideration of the key literature underpinning this thesis, the question of whether Facebook is on balance a positive or negative influence on democratic engagement is frequently referenced but not answered. In reality, it may be some time before academics are able to answer that question with authority.

However, this study makes an original contribution towards answering the question through assessing the role of Facebook in enabling or limiting political debate. In particular by considering Facebook's place within the public sphere and whether it delivers a new public sphere, an adjunct to the public sphere, or whether it undermines the public sphere.

The chapter set out to explore understanding of the public sphere through key literature, concluding that a public sphere "test" for Facebook would be primarily based on assessing the type and quality of interaction among its users – whether there is Habermasian reasoned debate - but that Facebook as an entity would also have to pass structural tests in relation to the institutional (including control, funding, legal framework), architectural (accessibility) and political ecology features of the business.

From looking at the development of internet, to the rise of the social web, to Facebook's dominance as social media technology, this chapter references key literature in technology theory to consider the technological distinctiveness that has driven Facebook's rise to near-ubiquity as new communications media. The chapter also looked at social capital theory to show how users are encouraged to spend more of their time within Facebook and to explain their willingness to give up personal data in return.

It argued that it is Facebook's scale, coupled with global corporate ambition and societal embeddedness, that delivers the potential for Facebook to create a new public sphere and to be considered a transformative political actor in its own right. The chapter considered literature around the public and civic spheres and the effect of the internet and the social media on engagement in political and civil action.

Finally, the chapter introduced the concern that Facebook's corporate culture-driven architecture; focusing on commercialising user data; filtering content towards people's cognitive ease or bias; encouraging users to build one-to-most networks of weak tie acquaintances; would influence both the likelihood of debate and the quality of debate - issues dealt with further in chapters five and six.

Chapter 3: Research strategy

3.1: Introduction to Facebook and its difficulties

Before looking at the research strategy and data collection, it is necessary to outline how Facebook works and what the user sees and does within its walled garden. It should be understood that the description that follows may vary in details as Facebook frequently changes the layout of the home page (or News Feed) and other aspects of how the site operates, however the following has remained core to the user interface.

New subscribers create a Facebook account. They have to give key information such as name and email address, date of birth, gender identification, and location. It is possible to give a false location, gender, birth date, etc. but giving a false name would defeat the object of Facebook which is to connect people who know each other.

Users create a password and may or may not add other security information (such as mobile phone number) and may or may not choose to link their Facebook account to automatically open on their smartphone, personal computer, or when visiting other websites.

Users will add a small profile picture and may add a larger picture to the top of their home page (or News Feed) – akin to the banner or header image on a website – and changes to either of these images count as actions which user's Facebook

Friends[55] are notified of (i.e. This person has updated their Profile picture). Users may also add other information to their Profile – a couple of sentences about who they are, their relationship status, and can post (at any time) updates on their status (sometimes called the 'Wall') about what they're thinking or doing.

The user will look for 'Friends' on Facebook and send Friend requests. Currently they will be prompted to send requests by Facebook showing them 'People you may know' pictures and links. This is core to the business model of Facebook, and by-and-large to its success. Facebook is based on real-world identities, rather than – as previously discussed – the anonymised social networks of MySpace and other early SNS competitors. Zuckerberg spoke about the value of those real-world connections between "trusted" and known friends. In 2007, announcing Facebook's wholesale move into social advertising, he said:

> People influence people. Nothing influences people more than a recommendation from a trusted friend. A trusted referral influences people more than the best broadcast message. A trusted referral is the Holy Grail of advertising. [56]

Users can also apply to join public or private Groups, and Like public Pages produced by individuals (for example celebrities), organisations and companies. Once a friend request or request to join a Group is accepted, status updates, posts and comments from those individuals or groups will become visible in the user's News

---

[55] Note that throughout this thesis, terms which relate to specific areas of Facebook's architecture – for example Friends, Posts, News Feed, Comments, and so forth, are capitalised in order to distinguish these from the 'real world' use of and understanding of friends, pages, comments, news, etc.

[56] Quoted from techcrunch.com: 'Liveblogging Facebook advertising announcement', November 6, 2007. http://techcrunch.com/2007/11/06/liveblogging-facebook-advertising-announcement/ (accessed November 6th, 2018).

Feed. The News Feed is the core content a user will see. Delivered via Facebook's shifting algorithms the feed is, according to Facebook[57], the result of three "signals" of relevancy – with news posts prioritised according to how much a user is seen to interact with that person or news source and that type of content (eg video or links); and how much other people have interacted with that post, i.e. does it already have a lot of Likes or Comments. As such, what a user sees in their News Feed should, by-and-large, reflect what they have already signalled to Facebook that they are most interested in seeing.

However, as this research found, which updates are shown, by who and when from is not strictly chronological or determined by the user, and may not necessarily reflect what the user is interested in. Facebook's commercialised algorithms may prioritise particular advertisers or organisations, for example through "boosted" posts (as explored in the final data collection stage of this research), to the user selecting which Friends s/he wants to mostly hear from, to Facebook's algorithm prioritising a competitive content circle which will see content with lots of Likes or Shares promoted more widely and thus attracting even more interaction. The issue of what content a user sees is problematic, both for this research project (as detailed later in this chapter) and for Facebook itself which is frequently criticised for the lack of transparency in how its algorithms select what users get to see.

The key challenge in determining research methodology was one of access to data. The research, investigating how citizens engage in political talk on Facebook, and whether Facebook's architecture encourages or discourages genuine debate,

---

[57] For a fuller description, see https://www.facebook.com/facebookmedia/solutions/news-feed (accessed November 6th, 2018)

100

required access to 'watch' debate between Facebook users. For validity, that access needed to to debate that was uninfluenced by the process of being watched.

In addition, the question of whether Facebook's phenomenal rise has brought with it a new public sphere requires – as discussed previously - an assessment of what constitutes a public sphere in order to judge whether interaction on Facebook is indicative of a public sphere rather than a public space. The "test" needed to be based on the epistemology around public sphere theory and the Internet as public or virtual public sphere. As discussed in chapter two, the literature largely argued that for communication within Facebook to be indicative of a new public sphere it must be: a) public; b) reasoned; c) accessible to both state and society; and d) able to form public opinion – a collective will.

The forming of public opinion is not the same as political participation. The hypothesis is tested by looking at whether debate happening on Facebook leads to a) forming of shared (public) opinion on political, civic or global civic issues; and b) the delivery of that opinion to state or global leaders. And that both are enabled by Facebook because of its structure; its interaction focus and, as with the traditional mass media, a recognition that it is representational of the views and opinions of a/the public - i.e. is Facebook representational as a conduit of public opinion analogous to traditional mass media[58]?

---

[58] While the focus is on the role of the media as representing public opinion, it is accepted that to greater or lesser degrees media play a part in also shaping opinion. That for most media and political communication academics, the issue is not whether media have an effect but what kind of effect media have (Savigny, 2017: 13).

There is therefore a further issue, that of whether Facebook is seen as an important conduit of public opinion by politicians and decision-makers, or whether its importance has been over-estimated, perhaps in media reporting of political events, such as the two elections which form the basis of this research. While users and the media may over-estimate the relevance of Facebook to decision-makers, it may also be true that decision-makers, not least because of their age, race and social position, underestimate the validity of opinions formed and shared on Facebook to its younger and more diverse users.

Is Facebook merely enabling its users to "shout more loudly" (Jones, 1997) with behavioural norms and weak-ties emphasis which discourage real debate because of fear of being out-of-step with the group norm? Is, as Miller suggests (2011), Facebook merely another medium for facilitating political action rather than a transformational politics? Or is it, as Papacharissi suggests (2008), part of a new virtual public sphere which is forging new ways of communicating and delivering civic action?[59]

The particular challenge, as stated, in research around Facebook is access to real-time data. Most of the research strategies considered in the early years of this project proved unviable either because of structural barriers in accessing data or ethical concerns. For example, the Trending Topics test (detailed in the footnote on page

---

[59] Conversely, Fuchs criticises Papacharissi as "reducing collective action to individual action and the public sphere to the private sphere" in empathising the virtual sphere over physical collective action. Social media cannot, he argues, replace collective action but can support protest organisation (2017: 228)

112) and an early idea based around attempting to manipulate the political content users were exposed to in their News Feed.

Facebook does not have Twitter's publicness. Each user operates within their own walled garden Profile of Friends, Groups and Pages they have chosen to connect to. There are pathways, via Friends in common, leading from each user's garden to another (journalists and others have become skilled in navigating these pathways in order to access newsworthy content). However, there is no general access to people you do not know unless that user creates an open public Profile, Page or Group[60]. Facebook is a system built to communicate with people users have real-world ties with. Therefore, gaining access to the accounts of strangers, to watch what they say to each other, is difficult unless all the parties have open, public accounts.

Because Facebook, both as a technology and a company, controls access to its users and their content, being able to conduct large-scale experiments across broad user groups or large datasets requires Facebook's permission and help. Without that help, it is not possible to, for instance, access large datasets to track keywords Facebook users search on which might indicate interest in discussing political and civic issues. A 2010 experiment involving Adam Kramer and Facebook's own Data Science team looked at whether feeding particular messages to Facebook users during the 2010 election in the US would have the effect of actually encouraging

---

[60] This thesis uses Facebook's own terminology in defining each of these. Friends are "people you connect and share with on Facebook"; a Profile is an individual user's "collection of the photos, stories and experiences that tell [their] story"; Pages allow "businesses, brands and organizations to connect with people on Facebook". https://en-gb.facebook.com/help/219443701509174 (accessed November 6th, 2018).

more of them to vote. The experiment, (previously detailed on page 90) involved over 60 million users – again, a dataset only Facebook can access.

A similar mass dataset project was published by Kramer and his colleagues in 2014. This controversial research used a massive dataset of 689,003 randomly selected individuals producing posts over one week in January 2012. The project was again conducted by Facebook's own Data Science team, with access to Facebook-owned data. The research tested whether "emotional contagion" – the transference of positive or negative emotions between individuals – could occur outside of face-to-face contact among the weak tie links of Facebook, via exposure to emotional content in a user's News Feed.

In the experiment, posts were determined to be positive or negative if they contained at least one positive or negative word, as defined by Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count software (LIWC). In total, over three million posts were analysed, containing over 122 million words, 4 million of which were positive (3.6%) and 1.8 million negative (1.6%). What made the experiment controversial (to the degree that the publisher was forced to add an editorial expression of concern[61]) was that the team manipulated users' feeds in order to alter the amount of negative or positive

---

[61] The 'Editorial Expression of Concern and Correction', signed by PNAS editor-in-chief Inder M. Verma addressed questions of concern around the lack of consent. The research participants were not informed that they were the subject of an experiment; did not give consent; and were not offered the option to opt out – contrary to best practice (the "common rule" in the US) for experiments involving human subjects. The editor notes that a private company Facebook was under no obligation to adhere to the common rule and that the researchers had been able to conduct the experiment within the terms of Facebook's Data Use Policy, to which users agree prior to joining Facebook.

material they saw – and did so without the subjects being made aware of the experiment or giving permission for their feed to be monitored or manipulated.

The findings were striking. When positive expressions were reduced in a News Feed, people produced fewer positive posts and more negative posts themselves; when negative expressions were reduced, the opposite occurred. Emotional contagion was happening and happening without the need for in-person interaction and nonverbal cues as had previously been thought. Kramer's team concluded that seeing other people being positive had a reciprocal positive experience, which could have positive benefits for users' health and well-being.

However, the paper chose to focus on the positive benefits of positive messages and, as the following chapter explores further, the effect of negative messages and of negative political messages should not be underestimated within the context of this emotional contagion experiment. If, as Kramer et al concluded, "[o]nline messages influence our experience of emotions, which may affect a variety of offline behaviors" (2014:3) then the weight of positive or negative emotions expressed in a forum such as a political candidate's Facebook page may also affect political actions and behaviour offline.

One investigative route considered during this research was whether debate would be encouraged by positive feedback from Friends (for instance "Likes"[62] on a post). It was not enough to find a Facebook user posting about a political issue - if they were 'testing the water' among their Friends by making a political comment, did they need to get a warm response before debate would happen? Moreno et al (2011) analysed

---

[62] From Facebook: "Clicking Like is a way to give positive feedback and connect with things you care about."

200 Facebook user profiles and found users that talked about depression and got responses were more likely to disclose depressive behaviours again. Facebook is a social network: social effects matter at least as much as network effects.

As mentioned, the 2014 "emotional contagion" experiment received a great deal of criticism at the time[63] because users were being tested upon without their knowledge or (explicit[64]) agreement. This was a concern in devising the methodology for this research project, too. Two early ideas had been rejected – one to monitor political content and watch interactions on the News Feeds of students who participated in the Stage One surveys, and the other was to "push" political content into selected users' News Feeds to monitor the effect[65]. Even had Facebook allowed access to user feeds for either or both of these proposals, the lack of determinism on the Facebook user's part would raise significant ethical considerations.

A further concern was that any mass dataset would only show what is happening at that point in time and could be skewed by events happening in the real world – such as a particular news story - and may not show change over time, i.e. whether Facebook was becoming more of an arena for debate as election day drew closer.

The concept of measuring search results data to gauge interest in a subject is an accepted way of identifying trends, used by both researchers and marketeers and it

---

[63] Article: http://mashable.com/2014/07/03/facebook-data-research 'Will Facebook Backlash Kill Scientists' Data Dream?'. See also footnote 52, previous page. (Accessed November 6th, 2018).

[64] In the paper, the research team had argued that, because the content posted couldn't be seen by researchers, the privacy of Facebook users was safeguarded and "it was consistent with Facebook's Data Use Policy, to which all users agree prior to creating an account on Facebook, constituting informed consent for this research".

[65] It should be noted however that a version of this "push" content strategy was able to be employed in the supplementary research phases around the 2017 election.

was felt that this could be a way of measuring interest within Facebook by users in a particular subject. For instance, searching on the words "election" or "Labour" would indicate interest in those subjects and thus interest levels might be gauged from popularity of search terms, adjusted for location and time, within Facebook.

The issue, again, became one of access - Facebook as a company chooses what data to release on the search terms its users use and, by-and-large, the company focuses on trending topics in relation to stories of the day or to commercial interests. At the time of writing, there is no Facebook equivalent to Google publishing Google Trends, the search engine's simple and public summary of most-trending keywords in searches. Whilst there is both free and paid-for social analytics software available which can track brand mentions and other marketing analytics across particular social media (such as hashtags[66] on Twitter or Instagram), software able to track trending keywords on Facebook was not available during the data collection period.

Facebook's Trending Topics feed, which appears on a user's home page, was also investigated[67] early on in the research to see whether it could offer a viable

---

[66] A word or phrase preceded by a hash sign (#), used on social media websites and applications to identify messages on a specific topic. The hash sign creates a metadata tag which means instances of the hashtag used on other social media sites can be found in a search or linked together as data.

[67] The thinking had been that Trending Topics could encourage political debate by reflecting what a user showed they were most interested in. Or could discourage debate by ignoring user actions in favour of paid-for political content or may be neutral in responding to simple triggers such as links, Likes or hashtags. To test whether this was a route worth investigating, an initial test asked four users to follow a series of steps (nine stages). Starting by picking a current campaign news story related to the 2015 election then creating a post about that story which mentioned the organisation but did not include a hyperlink to it or hashtag. The testers were given the campaign by nota.org (to vote 'none of the above') as an example they might use but were free to choose another. They were asked to monitor their Facebook newsfeed over 24 hours to see whether the action of mentioning the campaign was picked up by the algorithm and produced any changes to the Trending Topics or adverts they were shown. If no changes (which was the case), they were then asked to take a series of increasingly

alternative to tracking search terms, given that it was meant to reflect the popularity of topics[68]. However, initial tests proved disappointing and, over the course of the period spent 'watching' Facebook feeds, there was no evidence that Trending Topics was reflecting the interests or posted content of the individual user.

It should be noted that in the 2017 version of Facebook, the 'Trending' stories feed (the word 'Topics' had been dropped) now gave information on the provenance of a story by saying where it had come from, and there appeared to be a greater reliance on news stories from reputable news sources. This was presumed to be a response to criticism of Facebook in the years between 2015 and 2017 for showing and giving equal weight to so-called "fake" news stories from partisan or unreliable websites alongside mainstream news sources (see page 70).

These concerns aside, the idea of conducting any form of mass dataset experiment was finally dropped when a request to the academic relations team at Facebook to access the data was rejected. This is not unusual; the company does not, in general, give access to researchers from outside or working on research not authorised by the

---

proactive steps, including posting a link to the organisation, Liking it, and asking people in their Facebook Friends group to comment on the post. At each stage they were asked to wait 24hours and monitor any changes. Although only a small pilot group, none of the participants saw any changes at any stage, suggesting that the Trending Topics algorithm was not responding to individual actions. It was generalised, rather than personalised. It was therefore felt Trending Topics did not have sufficient validity as a test of Facebook's personalisation algorithms.

[68] From Facebook: "Trending shows you a list of topics and hashtags that have recently spiked in popularity on Facebook. This list is personalized based on a number of factors, including Pages you've liked, your location and what's trending across Facebook."

company. Researchers who try to 'scrape' or access data without permission are liable to be sued.[69]

3.2 Comparable research methodology

Of more interest was the methodology chosen by Jackson et al (2013) and Graham et al (2015)[70] in assessing the level of political talk among everyday citizens online. While that research did not include Facebook (it sampled three online public forums), by setting out to measure quantity and quality of political debate it had analogies with this project.

The two teams of researchers used quantitative content analysis of datasets with qualitative narratives on actual political talk, selecting large forums with broad interest in key aspects of everyday life: saving money (HotUKDeals in 2013 paper and MoneySavingExpert in the 2015 paper), entertainment and media (Digitalspy), and family life (Mumsnet). Demographics were broadly representative of Internet users but the sites also offered scale of activity and membership far exceeding explicitly political sites.

The sites were monitored during non-election periods and threads (discussion strands) collected on different days and at different times. In the 2013 research, 1,620 threads were collected by Jackson and his colleagues, equating to 9.5 percent of total posts during period. Each thread was categorised according to whether the opening

---

[69] Pete Warden is an entrepreneur and blogger who experimented with "scraping" Facebook data to gather research information and was consequently threatened with legal action by the company's lawyers. Source: http://petewarden.com/2010/04/05/how-i-got-sued-by-facebook (accessed November 9, 2018)

[70] Daniel Jackson was a researcher in both teams

post appeared to invite explicit or implicit political discussion[71], or was non-political, with the bar "deliberately set high" on what constitutes political talk (and following Schudson, 1997). The aim was not simply to look for political talk, but for political *debate*. Debate that, as Schudson argued (1997), was among people "acquainted by virtue of their citizenship… under norms of public reasonableness", rather than simply social interaction.

It was again a research method that could not be directly applied to this project, because posts on Facebook are not public in the same way that posts on the three forums would be. Further, Jackson's 9.5 percent sample would be an impossibly large number of posts and comments to scan on Facebook, representing billions of posts over the period studied, and would require a very different technical approach.

However, the core concept in Jackson - that of reading what people are actually saying and assessing the relevance of what they say, made sense within the context of this research. It also had analogies with the methodology used by boyd [correct] in her work. In particular her own PhD dissertation (2008) which looked at how young people engaged with each other on social networks via a case study of MySpace. She produced an ethnographic study of American teens' engagement with social network sites and the ways in which their participation supported and complicated three practices—self-presentation, peer sociality, and negotiating adult society

---

[71] Explicit required direct reference to a political agent (e.g. an MP, parliament, government policy) Implicit political talk used words and expressions that referred to political systems, structures and participants (Hay, 2002). All posts coded as explicitly or implicitly political (115 found) were then analysed qualitatively, along with randomly selected every tenth thread from non-political OPs

boyd [correct] used a qualitative research strategy; inductive (rather than deductive) in that the theory developed emerges from the data collected rather than is tested through it. Inductive research strategy is more typical of a qualitative research approach with its emphasis on data collection through structured and semi-structured interviews rather than large-scale fact finding (Bryman, 2008). boyd had been broadly constructionist in that her research had a bias towards teens determining how they interact on MySpace rather than the social network site determining their interaction. However, this project took an objectivist position by looking at Facebook as a social entity with a reality external to its users. The hypothesis is based on the assumption that Facebook has external reality because the technology it chooses to offer its users and the way it decides to run its business drives (causes) user engagement levels and interaction.

Ethnographic data for boyd's research was collected through field study - observation and interviews over time, to develop theory about the culture and behaviour of that group within the context of the field. She used participant observation and interviews within the community (teens online) that she was immersed in over the period of her study. She referred to this approach as "deep watching" (2008). Being able to watch what people are saying on Facebook, even if within a fairly controlled area of individual profiles and groups, became central to this research project. It became important to be able to follow the path of a debate - when it began; what prompted it, and how it concluded.

Nina Eliasoph's research into how groups of citizens engaged in local civic and political action also took an ethnographic approach. While not concerned with online interaction (her research took place around the time of the birth of the worldwide

web), Eliasoph did follow a similar ethnographic fieldwork pattern. Her 1995-7 study on how and why people avoid politics, even when they may be engaged in civic (political) action, was a two-and-half-year fieldwork and interview study of groups of volunteers, activists and citizens in an area on the US West Coast. Through observing (deep-watching) interactions, interviewing people, and analysing news reports, she concluded that people have to work hard to keep the wider world at bay, and their focus on issues that are "close to home" is a reflection of perceived powerlessness and not apathy.

Eliasoph also noted that, at the time of her study, no other researcher had analysed actual political conversations as they unfolded in real time, in everyday spaces and within existing groups and emphasised the importance of recording and studying actual political conversations and "public-spirited talk" (1997: 263). She noted also the danger in research which was too focused on interviews[72] when interviewees may feel their words are being taken "abnormally seriously" and thus affect the context of the interview (1996: 285).

An earlier study by Eliasoph explored the different responses to questions individuals would give in surveys and in interviews, according to level of publicness of the material. By pretending to be a radio journalist asking questions, Eliasoph sought to add the publicness of the media, and the interviewee's awareness of that, to

---

[72] As example, the work of Perrin (1971) which, while it included many examples from actual discussions to illustrate how citizens talk about politics, used as source material discussions within targeted focus groups on a series of hypothetical scenarios. Whist these were actual existing groups (eg sports, church, union) and their real-time conversation was being monitored, they were debating in everyday, real world situations.

create a "stand-in" for the public sphere (1990: 467). In doing so, she sought to survey public – rather than private – opinions on political issues, contrary to most public-opinion research of the time which she argued tried to avoid public displays of opinion; to avoid the question of what political positions people take in public.

However, in today's social and web-enabled, "always-on" public the concept that any interviewee would not presume a level of publicness and self-publicising awareness in their answers would seem naïve. Even with a promise of anonymity, most people would assume that someone, or perhaps more accurately some bot, would 'hear' their view on an issue.

Daniel Miller (2011) also followed an ethnographic approach in his study of small groups of individuals living in different countries and cultures, and the different ways that they chose to engage with Facebook. In doing so, he noted the difficulties in abstracting what he saw in the Facebook 'Tales' of each individual studied into creating an overall theory of Facebook. While each chapter highlights particular aspects of behaviour via Facebook, each also represent that individual's multiple worlds, each with its own Facebook and its own consequences:

> What is more difficult to ascertain at this stage is whether the use of Facebook, and the internet more generally, changes, as well as consolidates, particular patterns of cultural expression. (2011:2013).

Two other studies used methods external to activity on Facebook but were none-the-less concerned with Facebook. Zhang et al (2010) conducted a telephone survey to examine the extent to which reliance on social network sites engaged citizens in civic and political activities. Interviewers contacted 998 people (randomly selected from database of residents) in an un-named midsized city in the US SouthWest and

113

30.2% participated. The research used three measures of social capital: civic participation, political participation and confidence in government. Research questions assessed both political variables and reliance on social networking sites to each of the three measures.

The authors themselves acknowledged their findings relied on a survey of a community that is more conservative than the rest of population. Plus, respondents who agreed to participate were not representative – generally older (median age 52), with some college education and mostly female (64.8%) and white (74.4%) - perhaps reflecting pre-existing interest in the subject matter, or just people who had more time to participate.

Gustafsson (2012) set out to test attitudes to political content on Facebook and whether this differed according to pre-existing level of political activity or interest among users. He used six focus group interviews involving 50 individuals. Two groups were made up of members of political parties; two of members of interest groups; two groups comprised people who were neither active in politics nor members of interest groups. One group in each category worked online and one offline with the online group using a discussion tool and the offline group meeting face-to-face. Both groups were fed the same questions. The online group members were recruited using snowball sampling[73] resulting in demographic of 19-34-year-olds, mostly university-educated people or current students.

He found that using social network sites alone did not drive previously politically inactive users towards political participation. Those who were already politically

---

[73] Initial subject provides names of others in accepted technique, particularly when dealing with 'hidden' or isolated groups, that takes advantage of individual's social network.

114

active found social network sites to be useful tools for sharing information and further participation, whereas the politically inactive were more likely to avoid sharing political views through social media.

Vraga et al (2015) conducted similar research during the 2012 US election cycle, focused around in-depth interviews with twenty 18-29-year-olds on their perceptions of the Facebook political climate and their willingness to engage with it, including looking at and discussing with them their Facebook feed. Whilst a small sample[74], the researchers found the young people generally avoided engaging in political talk, not because they did not have opinions on politics, issues or candidates, but because of a fear of "drama" and conflict, coupled with the unknowability of who on Facebook would see material.

Focus groups and in-depth interviews are useful when the object is to study individuals' thinking and experiences; explore a new field; or generate hypotheses (Rezabek, 2000; Stewart and Williams, 2005: 398). The Gustafsson study explored the reasoning of individuals, against the Civic Voluntarism Model, so the focus group interview method was appropriate.

For the Vraga et al project, the interview stage helped to develop hypotheses to be explored further via the surveys. However, while the method could offer a route to investigate the reasoning of individuals, focus groups can encourage individuals to react to each other (Hundley and Shyles, 2010: 410) – participants may influence

---

[74] The researchers followed up this interview stage with a convenience sample survey, using respondents via Amazon's crowdsourcing service Mechanical Turk, to complete paid-for questionnaires to further test hypotheses. They used material from 231 respondents who matched the qualitative interviews pool.

each other by encouraging mirroring behaviours. For validity, evidence of interaction on Facebook, needed to be seen in a "natural" setting with individuals engaging in political talk unprompted and unaware that the interaction was being monitored.

Lewis and West (2009) also used snowball sampling to look at social interaction on Facebook, in particular Friending and the quality of interaction and strength of ties. They conducted semi-structured interviews with 16 students, recruited via snowballing, controlled to limit the group to a particular type of user (purposive sampling). Each student had joined Facebook in 2005 when the site was made available to UK students, and had experienced the opening-up of the SNS to non-university users in 2006. All said they were regular users of Facebook of from 20 minutes to several hours each day. From their analysis of the data gathered from the students, the researchers concluded that Facebook promotes mainly weak, low-commitment ties. However, the small sample size would have led to wide variations in use and management of Facebook among the 16 individuals, despite their similarities as a cohort. The snowball sampling method may be more likely to deliver a bias (i.e. like-minded friends) and knowing they are being recruited in relation to the subject of the research may mean the recruiter tries to influence debate.

Cheung and Lee (2010)[75] criticised the predominance of Facebook research that relies on "convenience samples"[76] (such as Lewis and West's project) and argued for more gathering of participants via "random walk"[77] models to strengthen validity.

Several researchers have chosen to interview political actors in order to analyse how they use the internet to reach voters. Gibson (2014), talked to candidates, campaign managers and journalists about the use of interactive 'Web 2.0' tools in the 2010 General Election, while Davis (2010) interviewed 100 politicians, bloggers and journalists in looking at the influence of the internet on institutional politics.

Davis found the internet had enabled political activism to spread outwards; to create what he termed a "fat democracy" of more engaged political actors on the edges of institutional political groups "akin to a sort of middle-management expansion of UK politics" but conversely an expansion that was adding to the disengagement and exclusion of most citizens (2010:746). This "middle-management" expansion may also in part be to blame for what Williamson termed the "rather boring" playing out of the 2015 UK General Election on social media:

---

[75] See also Gjoka et al (2010) and Mai, Y (2010) who raised similar concerns and argued for Metropolis-Hasting Random Walk (MHRW) (see footnote 65) as be the least biased sampling method.

[76] A convenience sample, also called a non-probability or opportunity sample, is one in which the researcher uses any subjects that are available to participate in the research study. This could mean stopping people in a street corner as they pass by or surveying friends, students, or colleagues that the researcher has regular access to. Typically, only justified if researcher wants to study the characteristics of people at a certain point in time or if other sampling methods are not possible.

[77] In statistics defined as a route consisting of successive and connected steps in which each step is chosen by a random mechanism uninfluenced by any previous step. In probability theory, random walk is a process for determining the probable location of a point subject to random motions, given the probabilities (the same at each step) of moving some distance in some direction. Random walks are an example of Markov processes, in which future behaviour is independent of past history.

In general the two big parties, and most candidates, used social media as a battering ram of pre-prepared pronouncements, videos – which they vainly hoped would somehow go viral; they didn't – and a range of choreographed attacks on the opposition (2015: 29)

None-the-less, between the 2015 and 2017 elections, the political battleground had moved from mass to social media (Bakir and McStay; Chadwick 2017) with parties and progressive campaign groups (such as Momentum and 38 Degrees) focusing their messages through social media and Facebook in a bid to engage younger voters which by and large worked: in 2015, 43% of 18-24-year-olds voted (Ipso Mori), in 2017, the figure was 59% (YouGov[78])

In the US, Halpern and Gibbs (2013) focused on messages and comments posted to the Facebook and YouTube sites managed by the White House in order to assess the quality of deliberations, within broadly Hambermasian indicators, and the civility or otherwise of the discourse – finding that the majority, 72% of over 7,000 posts analysed tended to be polite and that people were more polite on Facebook than in YouTube's anonymised space[79]. Rowe (2015) similarly found that comments posted to The Washington Post's own website (where posters were afforded a relatively high

---

[78] Source: https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2017/06/13/how-britain-voted-2017-general-election (accessed November 9th, 2018). However, it should be noted that other analysts had put the figure higher – up to 72% for 2017.

[79] By contrast, Oz et al (2018) conducted similar research, using quantitative date to analyse and compare responses to tweets by the White House and White House Facebook posts. They found people were more deliberative in their responses to White House posts on Facebook than on Twitter, but that there was no overall difference in terms of incivility or politeness. Concluding that variance may simply be a reflection of the two sites attracting different audiences

level of anonymity) were significantly more likely to be uncivil and impolite, compared to comments posted to The Washington Post's Facebook page.

Johnson and Kaye (2014) looked at the credibility of social network services in relation to political information, asking how much users trusted the information they found via Facebook and other SNS. They surveyed politically interested Internet users, posting an online survey two weeks before and two weeks after the 2008 presidential election. The survey was promoted via politically-orientated websites, newsgroups, mailing lists etc. (convenience sampling) and respondents were encouraged to 'snowball' the survey to politically interested family and friends. Over 4,000 surveys were completed – 37.6% of those who opened the survey – and just over threequarters of the respondents claimed to be very knowledgeable of and interested in politics.

Johnson and Kaye set out to test perceptions of credibility – trustworthiness – among SNS users who were pre-disposed to be interested in politics. They found that users ranked SNS significantly lower in credibility than other media, including other Internet sources such as YouTube. This, the researchers noted, is "curious" given the intense reliance on the Internet and SNS by the Obama campaign and the acknowledged effectiveness of that approach for Obama in 2008 (dubbed "The Facebook election" - Fraser & Dutta, 2008; Johnson & Perlmutter, 2010). One reason, they suggested, may be that the SNS is seen as a social space rather than an informational space thus users were more likely to seek out ("pull") information and opinions from the SNS that supported their world view, and discount "pushed" material from unknown Friends or sources.

The work by Johnson and Kaye, and also by Gustafsson, did prompt the question of whether it was necessary within this research project to find "hidden" groups - people scattered across linked friendship, family or interest groups who share thinking rather than social ties. An individual is likely to share political views with close friends and family (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955), but may not share those same opinions with the weak tie Friends in their extended Facebook social group – something that emerged from the surveys for this project. The question becomes whether politically-minded or debate-minded individuals are more or less likely to be "hidden" on Facebook – i.e. more-or-less likely to engage in political talk when they could not be certain exactly who, within their average Facebook group of 300 Friends (Pew Research Center, 2014) would read what they say.

This became a key area for investigation. Will people who are interested in political and civic issues, and in debating such issues, use Facebook to seek out like-minded people – those regular visitors to the Habermasian coffeehouses and salons as metaphor. It should not matter whether everyone is using Facebook to engage in political talk, it is more important that the people who would want to engage in such talk, and perhaps go on to engage in civic and political action, are enabled to do so by Facebook. As Bennett et al noted, people tend to talk politics with family and friends and most political conversations go on between "like-minded souls" (1995: 293).

This propensity for people to discuss politics largely with people who agreed with them might be seen as undermining democracy in encouraging weaker discussions. However, Bennett et al (2000) argued that surveys of a number of US and British

elections[80] showed that people who talked politics were up to twice as likely to be more knowledgeable about politics and civic issues, regardless of who they talked with.

Ancu and Cozma, in their research into voters' use of candidate MySpace Profile Pages (2009) showed that users visited candidate's pages mainly for social interaction – the primary gratification was to interact with other supporters of that candidate, not necessarily to interact with the candidate his or herself. Through a series of invitational surveys, they sought to measure political interest, campaign involvement and campaign interest alongside the uses and gratifications for visiting a candidate's MySpace profile.

Dimitrova et al (2011) went further, testing whether the type of digital media (e.g. visiting news website vs visiting candidate's social media pages) was a factor in both the reason voters visited a candidate's page and the effect of visiting. They hypothesized that social media use would have the strongest effect on political participation, while news site use would have the strongest effect on political knowledge. Their panel studies found that use of all the digital media had only limited effects on political knowledge, but that use of social media, particularly linked to political parties and candidates, had significant and positive effects on political participation (2011:110).

---

[80] In work comparing data from Almond and Verba's 1959 Five Nation study, the 1987 General Social Survey, 1992 American National Election Study, 1992 British General election Study and material from the 1984, 1986 and 1994 American National Election Studies and the 1992 Eurobarometer 37 study (2000: 100)

3.3: Identifying research groups and methods

It is valid to focus on those who are predisposed to debating political or civic issues. The "coffeehouse" public sphere metaphor would seem to assume that those who attended were there to take part or active listen, unlike in other more general social spaces such as a Public House. It was a self-selecting public space and as such encouraged debate. It is therefore reasonable to investigate whether Facebook, because users self-select who they accept as Friends or which Groups and Pages they Like, might similarly encourage debate within the user's social network – their "accepting" space. Chapter five explores this concept of a "safe" debating space more fully.

Because Facebook's demographic is more likely to be under 30 and female[81] – this also provides an opportunity to monitor people who are less likely to be politically active but may none-the-less be interested in and willing to debate issues of national or global civic society - people who, given a comfortable space and encouragement might go on to become politically engaged. The research therefore sought to focus on those willing or wanting to debate, rather than any broad representative sample and measuring of debate within an "everyman" group.

One element considered in this research was whether to focus on Facebook Group[82] pages, rather than on individual user Profiles. Would people interested in particular issues be more likely to gather with like-minded individuals on Pages or in

---

[81] Facebook 2015 demographics showed the SNS was used by 83% of women (against 77% of men) and 88% of 18 to 29-year-olds (Source: Pew Social Media Update, 2016)

[82] From Facebook: "Groups are private spaces where you can keep in touch with people by sharing updates, photos or documents". Pages "enable public figures, businesses, organizations and other entities to create an authentic and public presence on Facebook".

Groups? By using an issue-led Group as a starting point – sampling from users who join that issue group – would it be possible to then move outwards from them to see if their engagement in the issue leads to discussion with and among Friends in their own Facebook network? However, while joining an issue-based Facebook Group may be an indication of support for the issue it is not necessarily an indication of ongoing interest in the issue or of a desire to get involved beyond what has been termed "clicktivism" – political engagement limited to low-cost, low-effort actions such as signing an online petition or commenting on a meme[83] (Gladwell, 2010).

Beyond that, there are practical and ethical considerations in following individuals from a Facebook Group Page to their personal page in order to read everything they post in the hope that some of it may contain political content. Being able to read an individual's Newsfeed posts relies on them either accepting the researcher as a Friend, or on them having kept their Profile public (i.e. without privacy controls to restrict access to their content). In either scenario, the Facebook user would be watched without their knowledge.

Ethics aside, there are practical issues in reading everything an individual may post, and everything their Friends post in response, and in monitoring chatter over a period of time without missing the 'important bits'. How long is long-enough in order to judge whether someone is interested in debating political and civic issues?

Because Facebook is a social network it is important to investigate whether its social-ness was a factor - is getting a positive response to a political post important;

---

[83] A meme has two meanings according to the Oxford Dictionary but in relation to social media, and in this context, it is its second meaning that applies. That of "an image, video, piece of text, etc., typically humorous in nature, that is copied and spread rapidly by Internet users, often with slight variations".

does being 'rewarded' by reciprocal contributions (Likes or supportive comments) affect the quality and spread of debate and pre-political reasoning?

The result of this analysis of methodology used in other relevant research was to devise a *mixed methods* approach. Including qualitative online ethnographic fieldwork and interviews, and quantitative surveys questioning a representative cohort on specific elements.

Surveys were used to assess predisposition to debate; whether and how individuals within the target demographic use Facebook to find out about issues and whether they feel they are encouraged or discouraged in discussing such issues on Facebook. The surveys - carried out at the end of 2014 and beginning of 2015 and using Qualtrics software, were targeted at groups who might reasonably be expected to have a higher level of interest in politics, global and civic issues. Thus, students studying journalism, politics and social sciences in several UK universities[84] were invited, via their lecturers, to take part. In addition, a control group of games design students also took the survey. In total 253 students completed the survey.

A further group of 15 students and graduates participated in follow-up research, contributing content from their own Facebook Newsfeeds, gathered on the day of the UK 2015 General Election.

The bulk of the data gathering however was focused around the period of the 2015 election. This consisted in the main of field work and "deep watching" (boyd, 2008) selected individual and Group Facebook Pages, Profiles and Newsfeeds over

---

[84] Leeds Trinity, Birmingham City University, University of Central Lancashire, City University, and also via a mailout to academic members of the Association of Journalism Educators.

16 days pre- and immediately post-election. This online ethnography was particularly suited to open-ended exploration of the reality of debate on Facebook. According to Whitehead (1965, 1967, 2005)[85] it is an approach particularly suited to situations in which people construct complex realities differently expressed according to the context of the situation:

> It is through observing, interacting with, and participating in their activities that the ethnographer is able to place his or her study participants into socio-cultural contexts that have meaning for them. (Whitehead, 2005: p6)

Field observation methodology took a constant comparison approach[86] in looking for debate and political talk. All the content looked at on Facebook was made available either because it was on public Pages, or sent as screenshots of content by participants, to tackle ethical concerns.

This was followed by semi-structured follow-up interviews with some of the candidates[87] from the four election constituencies monitored. Interviews focused on

---

[85] See: 'Basic Classical Ethnographic Research Methods Secondary Data Analysis, Fieldwork, Observation/Participant Observation, and Informal and Semi-structured Interviewing' Tony L. Whitehead, 2005: http://www.cusag.umd.edu/documents/workingpapers/classicalethnomethods.pdf (accessed November 9, 2018). Original theory published in Social Problems, 12(1965), pp. 436-45 and later as Chapter V in Glaser, B.G. & Strauss, A.L. (1967). The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for qualitative research. New York: Aldine DeGruyter.

[86] Constant comparison was chosen rather than, for example the analytic induction method, because of the method's suitability for generating complex and developmental theory from a broad range of data: "This method...especially facilitates the generation of theories of process, sequence, and change pertaining to organizations, positions, and social interaction." Glaser (1967).

[87] All the candidates were emailed a series of follow-up questions post-election and asked if they would be interviewed. However, only a handful responded and just four candidates or their election agent answer questions. This should be put into context however - the majority of candidates disengaged with their campaign after they had lost the election, and several had closed the email account linked to their campaign.

whether the candidate had had a strategy for using Facebook to engage potential voters, and attitudes towards political discussion that took place on their own campaign page.

Finally, the calling of the "snap" general election in 2017, provided another research opportunity to look at how debate on Facebook may or may not have changed in the intervening two years. It was decided to take a more direct, interventionist approach by attempting to control the content users might see to test whether posting particular content could encourage debate. This intervention took the form of creating and posting a number of political posts targeted at voters in a single constituency and sent via candidate's Facebook Page (to which access had been given). Some posts were further boosted[88], to reach voters not directly linked to the candidate, using Facebook's commercial advertising tools. The results in terms of actions (Likes, Shares, Comments) were monitored. Activity took place between April 20th and the day of the 2017 election on June 8th.

Whilst a relatively small number of posts were created and tested (23 in all, including geographic variants of posts) statistics showed the posts were seen by many thousands of Facebook users over the period. However, the interventionist case study shared some of the ethical concerns of Kramer et al's 2012 emotional contagion experiment (see page 108) in that people viewing and responding to the posts were not specifically told that this formed part of a research project.

---

[88] 'Boosting' is the process by which a business user can pay to have content seen by more people and/or by targeted groups of people, particularly people who would otherwise not come across that business's Page. https://www.facebook.com/business/help/240208966080581 (accessed November 9, 2018).

To mitigate against this, explanation of the research and an open invitation to ask questions or raise concerns was posted to the researcher's Facebook page (see Fig. 1) and members of the candidate's social media team were informed. It was also felt to be important that all the posts were relevant to and supported by the candidate and did not constitute any 'extreme' positions that, while potentially useful for research purposes, would not be helpful to the candidate and the local party. That is, posts needed to have a positive political intention which suited their location as on a new Labour candidate's election campaign Facebook page.

Overall the aim was to find the least problematic way of being able to monitor users' response to reading political messages. As detailed in the next chapter, this decision was largely because of changes within Facebook that had occurred over the intervening years that had made it difficult to take the same approach as in 2015. Facebook had made architectural changes which had meant users' pages were much more 'locked down' and most of the 2015 candidates and their Facebook sites had gone. Additionally, it was felt that the second election provided an opportunity to test theory into the effect of positive political messages on user engagement (Kramer et al, 2010).

Thus, this mixed methods approach delivered data from surveys, fieldwork, interviews, direct interventions, and Facebook material submitted voluntarily by participants. Data could therefore be cross-referenced while the mix of data increased validity.
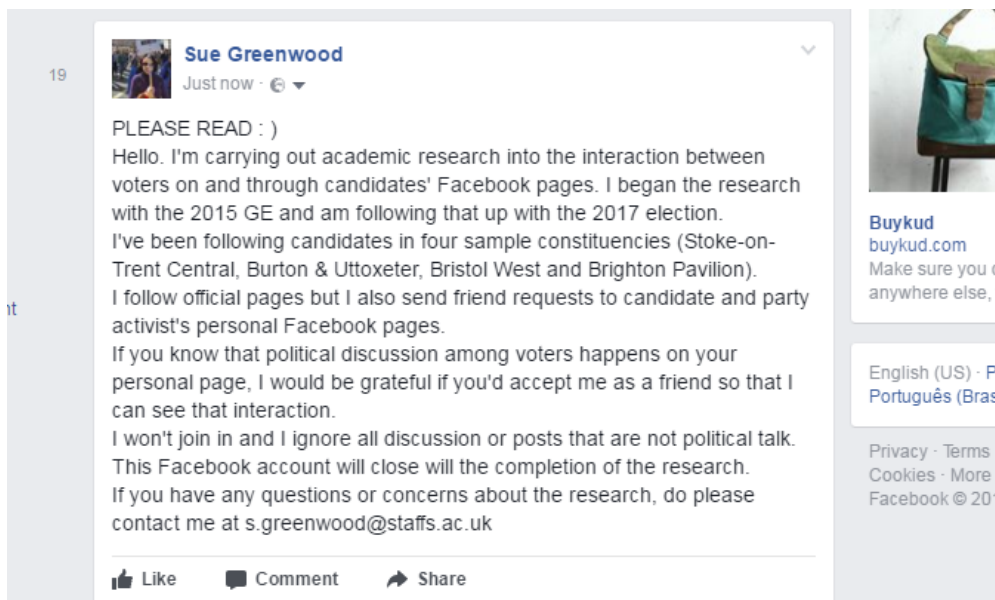
Figure 1: The notice pinned to the 2017 Researcher Profile on Facebook

Chapter 4: Data collection and key results

4.1: Introduction

Stage One of the research consisted of four separate group surveys conducted with a total of 253 participants. The four groups consisted of 1) Journalism students at Staffordshire University; 2) Humanities students at Staffordshire University; 3) Journalism students at other universities; 4) Games Design students at Staffordshire University. Participation in the surveys was voluntary and each group of students was given the same set of survey questions.

Stage One also included a review of the methodology options, including unsuccessful approaches to Facebook and the Trending Topics test referred to on page 112. It should also be noted that the final group surveys were produced after a substantial period of exploration, including drafting a number of different surveys.

One early questionnaire sought to focus on interpersonal communication, influenced by the work of Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), to investigate which method of communication (e.g. telephone, social media, face-to-face) was mostly used by which age group to communicate with which level contacts (i.e. influencers). While it may have delivered interesting data, the survey idea was rejected as not being sufficiently relevant to the research question. Another rejected survey idea had focused on politicians and sought to ascertain how they used social media and their understanding of its influence (see Appendix 1). This survey, worked on in the summer of 2014, came close to being put into the field. Its question blocks, focused as they were on Facebook and social media as a potential space for debate and the sharing of public opinion, influenced the design of the final Facebook surveys.

The politicians' survey was finally rejected because it was felt that the likelihood of being able to collect enough relevant data was low – not least because politicians would be unlikely to respond to such a complex questionnaire and in sufficient

numbers to make the data viable. However, the process of designing that survey was particularly helpful in creating the final set of surveys – this time aimed at potential voters as users of Facebook, rather than political candidates.

The stage two data collection focused on the General Election itself, with the Facebook feeds of candidates in four selected constituencies monitored between April 27th to May 13th. In all, around 3,500 posts and comments were scanned in looking for evidence of political talk and this material formed the bulk of the data. Debates were monitored and recorded but also interrogated in relation to how people began, continued or ended debate within social norms that might be specific to Facebook and its architecture.

Additionally, stage two included material from individual voter's News Feeds on election day (including some people who had participated in the surveys), submitted by volunteers, and questioning of candidates after the election on their use of Facebook.

Stage three was an unexpected bonus. As previously mentioned, the calling of a "snap" general election in May 2017 provided an opportunity to look at changes in Facebook in the intervening two years in relation to how users and the site engaged with the UK general election. This data collection stage focused on one particular aspect – whether users' engagement in political discussion could be encouraged by posting particular political material on Facebook.

4.2 Data stage one: surveys

Four surveys were conducted. Survey One was conducted in December 2014 with journalism students at Staffordshire University. Students were invited to complete the survey by a class lecturer or by email from their award leader. No credits or academic reward was given, and it was made clear to the students that their participation was voluntary and the surveys would be anonymised at the individual student level (i.e. only their course of study and gender might identify them). Around 150 students were approached and 84 (56%) completed the survey.

Survey Two was conducted with Humanities students at Staffordshire University, also in December 2014. Students studying history, international issues, social studies and politics were invited to take part by email from their award leader and 39 students completed the survey. Survey Three was conducted with journalism students at other UK universities in January and February 2015 (see footnote page 130). Again, students were invited to take part by email from their tutor or award leader and 96 students participated.

Surveys one to three had targeted groups who, because of their choice of study, might reasonably be expected to be more interested in political and civic issues, more aware of the role of media in raising issues, than other young people in their age group[89]. This was important because the aim was not to ascertain where a randomised group of young people might be more likely to debate social and political issues, but whether young people who might reasonably be expected to be predisposed to debate such issues would be more or less likely to do so via Facebook.

---

[89] It should also be noted that undergraduates were chosen because previous research had indicated that education was a factor in whether a person was more likely to talk about politics (Bennett et al, 1995; Bennett et al, 2000)

In common with their peers, the groups could also reasonably be expected to be comfortable in using and navigating social media, including Facebook, and therefore not likely to be discouraged from using it as a forum because of knowledge limitations.

The final survey – number Four - was conducted with Games Design students at Staffordshire University and again invited by email from their award leader or tutor - 34 students chose to participate. That survey took place in January 2015. This group was chosen to act as a control group because, while their age would suggest they would be as comfortable as the other students in using and navigating social media[90], and they were at the same educational level (i.e. undergraduates) their choice of study would not reasonably suggest any particular interest in or engagement with the media, political or civic issues[91]. They were comparable to the other three student groups in all aspects except choice of study.

Thus, a set of four survey groups were created on Qualtrics; including one formed as a combined group of the 84 Staffordshire University journalism students; 39 Staffordshire University Humanities students and 96 Journalism students from other universities – the Journalism and Humanities survey group – a total of 217 responses. Survey results were looked at first as the combined Journalism and Humanities

---

[90] Ofcom's 2014 'Adult's Media use and Attitudes Report' showed 96% of 16-24-year-olds are regular users of social media (an increase on 2013), and 98% of that figure were regular Facebook users.

[91] It is accepted that a student, or indeed any individual, may have an interest in political or civic issues regardless of their choice of study. None-the-less it was felt that both the choice of study and the subject matter taught on Journalism and Humanities courses meant it was reasonable to assume that more of those students would be predisposed towards interest in political and civic issues than students on a Games Design course.

students group set against the control group results, and then as individual group surveys compared against each other.

The combined Journalism and Humanities students group (hereafter called group JH) included a total of 215 completed survey responses after the removal of incomplete surveys. Of the 215, 206 students said they currently had a Facebook account and of the nine respondents that said they did not have a Facebook account, seven had previously had one. The two who said they had had no involvement with Facebook were excluded from the rest of the survey.

The students each completed the same survey (see Appendix 2), regardless of which student group they were in. Questions were banded into groups in order to determine their engagement with Facebook and the likelihood of them using Facebook as a platform on which to discuss political and social issues that concerned them. Thus, the first set of questions sought to identify the level of embeddedness of Facebook in their day-to-day life, with further sections on how engaged they were with social and political issues, and then how likely they were to discuss such issues on Facebook.

Questions largely used a Likert scale approach, with each section stepping the respondent through increasing levels of thinking through their attitude towards posting material on Facebook. Thus, question four simply asked them to judge how much time they spent on Facebook each day, while question five asked them to think about the depth of their relationship to Facebook – from "I feel out of touch when I haven't logged on to Facebook for a while", to "I would be sad if Facebook shut down".

A quarter of the JH Facebook users said they spent between half-an-hour and an hour on Facebook each day, while almost as many - 24% - said they spent on average one to two hours a day on Facebook (Fig. 2). Fifty-two-percent agreed, and 32% strongly agreed, that Facebook is part of their everyday activity. However, the embeddedness of Facebook in their lives was not as complete as one might assume. While 49% of the JH group agreed or strongly agreed that they felt out of touch if they had not logged into their Facebook account for a while, almost as many - 46% - disagreed or strongly disagreed that they feel out of touch when away from Facebook. Moreover, 44% said they would not be sad if Facebook shut down, against 40% who said they would be sad (15% answered "don't know").
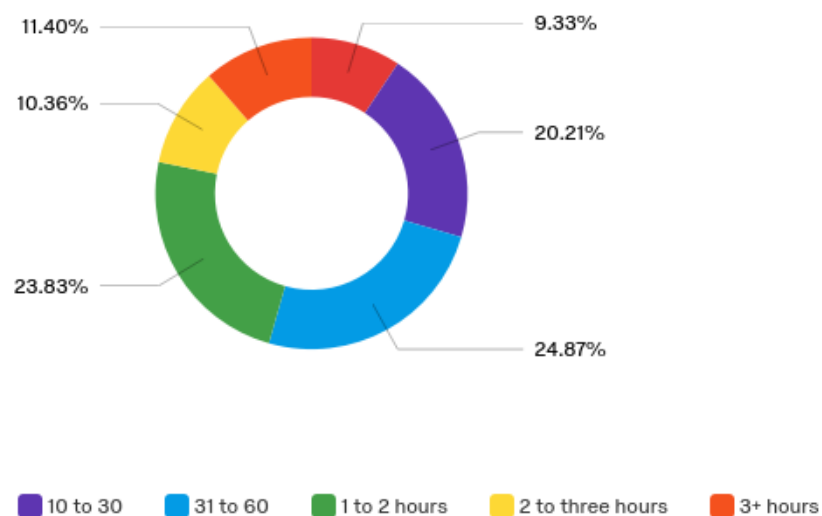
Figure 2: JH group response to question 4: "On average, approximately how many minutes per day do you spend on Facebook?"
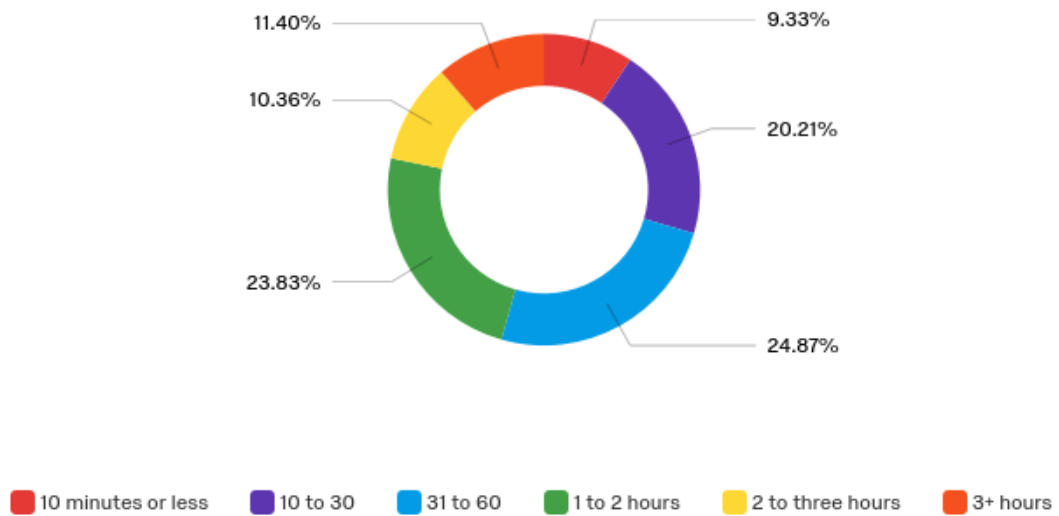
Figure 3: CG group (games students) response to question 4

All 34 respondents in the control group of Games Design students said they currently had a Facebook account, with this group generally spending more time on Facebook - 46% said they spent between one and three-plus hours a day on the site, and 84% agreed or strongly agreed that Facebook was a part of their daily activity.

This group was also more Facebook-active in other ways too - the majority (43%) said they belonged to six to 10 Groups on Facebook (against group JH with the largest cohort - 45% - belonging to just one to five Groups). Interestingly however, the Games Design group showed a similar ambivalence in relation to the importance of Facebook - 52% said they did not feel out of touch when they had not logged into

Facebook for a while, and 38% said they would not be sad if Facebook shut down (however, 44% said they would be).[92]

Both groups displayed a mature approach to managing and navigating their use of Facebook, agreeing that it was important to stay on top of their privacy settings (91% group JH; 79% control group), with 77% in group JH and 62% in the control group saying that the usefulness of Facebook was not enough to stop them worrying about how their data was being used by the company. In the control group, 38% of respondents agreed and 38% strongly agreed with the statement: "I don't post anything on Facebook without thinking about who might see it". Within the JH group, 43% agreed and 36% strongly agreed with that statement.

Finally, in answer to whether they use Facebook more now than a year ago; 45% of group JH replied: "less now" and 41% said "about the same". The control group had more active involvement (52% "about the same", and 31% using it more often than a year ago). This may be a reflection of the smaller cohort (34 respondents in the control group against 215 in group JH), or a reflection of self-selection bias, with individuals having elected to take part in their survey on the basis of already having a more active interest in Facebook.

The undergraduate status of the respondents was also reflected in the reasons they gave for using Facebook. While most (42% JH; 48% control) said they mainly used it to chat with or keep up with people they know, they also gave work-related reasons such as "professional contacts"; "group projects at university"; "work – marketing";

---

[92] For full survey and questions see Appendix 2. For comparative results, see Appendix 3

and promoting or organising events. For many of the students, their course or peers had set up Facebook groups in order to communicate course-related information or encourage peer-to-peer chat.

The results across the first set of questions relating to use of and attitudes towards Facebook indicate a maturity of understanding about Facebook among all four student groups, in terms of its place in their everyday life; its usefulness vs its importance to them; and their willingness to actively manage their Facebook site around concerns about privacy and data use.

The next set of questions looked at the students' attitudes towards issues, politics and the media. Question 11 (see Fig. 4) was particularly key to the research project in that it sought to ascertain their level of interest in issues and their pre-disposition towards debating politics and issues. Thus the question asked them to rate, between strongly disagree and strongly agree, whether they get upset about some of the things that are happening in the world and whether they are more interested in global issues than in national or local politics; whether they usually joined in when they heard people debating politics and whether they enjoyed debating serious issues.

The question also tested media interest by asking the students whether their main source of news was the people they knew and how interested they were in watching the news on TV. The combined group of Journalism and Humanities students not surprisingly said that if the news comes on TV they usually find themselves watching it (41% agree, 27% strongly agree), with 20% disagreeing. The position was a little more mixed among the games design students - 28% said they would not watch the news if it came on TV, while 43% agreed and 14% strongly agreed that they would watch it. Asked whether they "get upset about some of the things that are happening

in the world", the games designers appeared the more compassionate - 64% said they

do (against 54% of the journalism and humanities students). A quarter of the games

design and just over a third of journalism and humanities students said they did not

get upset.

Both group's answers on questions about their interest in politics was more

nuanced. Among group JH, 39% agreed that they were more interested in global

issues, against 47% who said they were more interested in local or national politics

(16% did not know). In the control group, 39% were more interested in global issues

and 32% in local or national politics, with 29% "don't know". However, it must not

be assumed that the don't knows are an indication of apathy - it could just as easily

reflect an "it depends" response, i.e. "it depends on the particular issue as to whether

I am more interested in local, national or global politics". Both groups said that what

politicians had to say mattered to them. Of the statement: "I don't feel that what the

politicians have to say has anything to do with me", 69% of the control group and

55% of group JH disagreed (8% of group JH and 4% of the control group strongly

agreed).

The last two statements in the survey question 11 were designed to test the

student's interest in and willingness to debate issues. A majority in both groups

expressed willingness to debate with 40% of group JH agreeing and 27% strongly

agreeing that they really enjoyed taking part in a good debate about serious issues. In

the control group, 54% agreed and 7% strongly agreed that they enjoy a good debate

too. Asked whether they would usually join in when they hear people debating

politics the response was more reticent. Within group JH a majority - 40% agreed and

19% strongly agreed - that they would join in. While in the control group the response was split, 43% saying they would join in and 46% saying they would not.

That reticence becomes more evident when the debate transfers to Facebook. In a later set of questions (Fig. 5), the groups were asked whether they tend to be wary in commenting on "serious" issues on Facebook. Among the Journalism and Humanities students, 56% agreed they are wary, along with 57% of the games design students. Asked whether, if they were angry or upset about something in the news, would they would usually say something about it on Facebook, 70% of the Journalism and Humanities students and 71% of the games design students said they would not raise it on Facebook.

Figure 4: Screenshot of question 11 in the surveys

Note that survey logic was set to randomly display the order of the questions to each student

Figure 5: Question 16 sought to test a student's willingness to take action, via Facebook, in relation to a serious issue that they or a Facebook friend was concerned about

But while the majority of the students had expressed that they personally were unlikely to raise serious issues on Facebook, they were torn on whether they thought other people should be more willing to raise issues. With both groups split almost 50:50 on whether they agreed or disagreed that "We don't talk enough on Facebook

about serious things that are happening in the world", and a similar split on whether to support a friend making a good point on a serious issue (Tables 1 and 2).

Perhaps more encouraging is that both groups – JH and the control group – were clear that Facebook was not their main source of information. The statement "I find out about what's going on in the world mostly through Facebook" was disagreed with by 61% of the respondents.

This reluctance to use Facebook as a platform for serious issues was echoed in some of the responses sent in during the Stage Two data collection, with several screenshots of posts exhorting Friends to avoid Facebook on election day, and one journalism student commenting in an email response:

> A majority of my friends did not have anything to do with the election on
> their facebook. Only a couple of dozen posted anything throughout Friday
> [election day].
> What was interesting is that I was on Twitter and my friends who did not
> comment on Facebook, where [sic] commenting a lot more on Twitter. Using
> hashtags e.t.c. I was on Twitter more during wed-fri as I was live-blogging it
> and I saw a lot more commentary by my Twitter followers (Many of them
> also my friends on Facebook) than I did on Facebook.
> I spoke to some people and a lot of people on the 7th turned Facebook off
> effectively because they were fed up with the 'I voted in GE2015' statuses
> that Facebook posted for you if you clicked on the button.

#	Field	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Don't Know	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	When I'm angry or upset about something in the news I'll usually say something about it on Facebook.	28	45	10	16	7
		26.4%	42.5%	9.4%	15.1%	6.6%
2	If a friend makes a good point on Facebook about a serious issue, I usually Like it or reply.	42	36	10	70	29
		22.5%	19.3%	5.3%	37.4%	15.5%
3	I think it's important to respond when someone asks a question on Facebook about something in the news.	14	48	33	69	22
		7.5%	25.8%	17.8%	37.1%	11.8%
4	We don't talk enough on Facebook about serious things that are happening in the world	14	64	38	53	18
		7.5%	34.2%	20.3%	28.4%	9.6%
5	I tend to be more wary about commenting on serious issues on Facebook.	14	37	31	80	24
		7.5%	19.9%	16.7%	43.0%	12.9%
6	I often feel I need to "dumb down" when I write stuff or comment on Facebook.	25	41	17	81	23
		13.4%	21.9%	9.1%	43.3%	12.3%
7	I find out about what's going on in the world mostly through friends on Facebook.	43	91	9	38	6
		23.0%	48.7%	4.8%	20.3%	3.2%

Table 1: JH group answer breakdown to question 16. Note fields 2 and 4

#	Field	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Don't Know	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	When I'm angry or upset about somethingin the news I'll usually say something about it on Facebook.	13	7	4	3	1
		46.4%	25.0%	14.3%	10.7%	3.6%
2	If a friend makes a good point on Facebook about a serious issue, I usually Like it or reply.	1	4	2	18	3
		3.6%	14.3%	7.1%	64.3%	10.7%
3	I think it's important to respond when someone asks a question on Facebook about something in the news.	3	8	7	8	2
		10.7%	28.6%	25.0%	28.6%	7.1%
4	We don't talk enough on Facebook about serious things that are happening in the world	3	9	5	8	3
		10.7%	32.1%	17.9%	28.6%	10.7%
5	I tend to be more wary about commenting on serious issues on Facebook.	1	6	5	13	3
		3.6%	21.4%	17.9%	46.4%	10.7%
6	I often feel I need to "dumb down" when I write stuff or comment on Facebook.	4	7	9	7	1
		14.3%	25.0%	32.1%	25.0%	3.6%
7	I find out about what's going on in the world mostly through friends on Facebook.	7	11	2	8	0
		25.0%	39.3%	7.1%	28.6%	0.0%

Table 2: Control Group answer breakdown to question 16

The surveys had been conducted several months ahead of the 2015 general

election but at a time (December 2014) when the majority of respondents would be

exposed to news about it. They were asked about their voting intentions with 64% of group JH and 61% of the control group saying they intended to vote. However, 32% of the control group and 13% of group JH were clear that they did not intend to vote, citing a variety of reasons, including:

I feel I have more important things to think about

I wouldn't vote without knowing what I'm voting for, and I don't have time to research

Not really bothered

I don't feel I know enough about politics to make an informed enough vote Currently at a stage in my life where politics has little impact upon me

Among the 23% of group JH who said they were not sure whether they would vote, most of the reasons given also related to lack of knowledge about the issues. For example:

Policies are constantly changing in regards to issues I am concerned about - eg family issues, childcare etc. I would vote for the most confident and articulate leader. I voted Lib Dem in 2010 and therefore I am more cautious of making a rushed decision based on 1 or 2 policies

Feel I don't have a full enough understanding of each of the main parties' campaigns

I haven't had a thorough look through policies as of yet.

I like to see what my options are. As there is still months left, I am currently waiting to see which party I most agree with.

I want a strong effective centre left government to implement realistic policies for improvement. I don't know yet if the current Labour administration are capable of doing that. I might vote for the Green Party instead who represent things that I am passionate about and have more integrity than the mainstream parties.

Of those who said they had already decided who to vote for, the results were markedly similar to the final election results. Of the JH set, 46% said they already knew who they would vote for, with 33% intending to vote Labour, 16% Conservative, just 4% Liberal Democrat, 31% Green party and 13% saying they intended to vote UKIP. Within the Control Group, albeit a smaller number set in comparison, 88% said they had already decided who they would vote for, with the majority (33%) saying they would vote Green Party, followed by Labour on 20%.

According to Ipsos MORI,[93] there had been a similar swing from Liberal Democrat and Conservative to Labour among 18 to 24 year-olds, with 43% of young people voting Labour in 2015 against 27% Conservative and just 5% for Liberal democrat. Analysts noted that the collapse in the Liberal Democrat vote share had been across the voting pool but fell sharpest among under 34s, which was seen as a reaction to the Liberal Democrats U-turn on tuition fees, and among private renters, who are the most likely to vote Green (Ipsos MORI).

However, despite the expressed concern for issues that might matter most to them, young people did not turn out to vote in significantly greater numbers in 2015. The importance of the student vote in relation to the election predicted by analysts

---

[93] 'How Britain voted in 2015' Ipsos MORI news report: https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/how-britain-voted-2015 (accessed November 9, 2018)

(Fisher and Hillman, 2014: 84), may have played its part in the loss of votes to the Liberal Democrats but it was not otherwise significant, with 43% of young people likely to have voted in 2015, against 44% in 2010.

The collapse seen in the youth vote since the Millennium, from 60% in 1992 to around 40% in 2001, 2015, 2010 elections had continued into the 2015 General Election (Sloam, 2017). It was not until the Referendum on European Membership, a year later, that young people in the UK began turning out to vote in larger numbers. A survey by Populus (see Sloam, 2017) noted that 18-24 year-olds were more likely to vote in the 2017 election than they had been in 2015, with 57% saying a month before the 2017 election that they would vote compared to 46% in 2016 – the same figure as the JH students' survey.

A combination of disappointment with the EU Referendum result (around threequarters of young people voted to remain); the rise of Corbyn and the emergence of clearer ideological divisions between the Labour and Conservative parties had galvanised younger voters. All of which made it even more interesting to monitor changes between the 2015 and 2017 elections on Facebook in this research.

Unfortunately, as noted on page 129, ethically and technically it had not proved possible to follow the same young people from the JH/CG surveys through the 2015 election and the 2017 election. To be able to see material posted on their Facebook page by the survey respondent and their Friends would have required access to that student's Facebook page. Privacy concerns meant that Facebook in 2015 (and much more so in 2017) was becoming more 'locked down' by for instance switching from the default 'public' setting which meant anyone could see anything a user posted on their Facebook page, to restricting access to their Friends. That meant that, unless the

researcher was accepted as Friend by an individual, it was not possible to see much of the material posted.

In addition, there are significant ethical concerns in asking a student to accept a lecturer (whether one of their teachers or not) as a Friend and giving them access to all discussions and posts on their Facebook page, including discussions with Friends who may also be students. Whilst the intention may be to only gather evidence of debate on political and social issues, all material posted over the research period – including conversations with people who are close to the individual – would be seen and logged. The voyeuristic element was a significant concern.

Further, because such "watching" of conversations would not have been possible without the knowledge and agreement of the survey participant, the likelihood was that data would be compromised because the student would know that their Facebook conversations were being monitored and would consciously or subconsciously adjust what they said or did on their Page.

Whilst several of the respondents said they would be willing to be contacted for follow-up surveys or activities, the decision was taken that follow-up material should be limited to screenshots of content they saw in their Facebook News Feed on election day and which they self-selected as interesting or typical posts around the election.

The emphasis on young people and the link with students' views in Stage One data collection was however followed through into the next stage in informing the choice of constituencies on which to focus.

4.2 Data stage two: The 2015 online ethnographic study

The next stage of the research focused on the election itself and how individuals discussed the election, the issues and the candidates on Facebook. During the period April 27th to May 13th, over 50 hours were spent in closely observing the Facebook pages of candidates contesting four selected constituencies. This included following discussion threads and looking at the Facebook Profile pages of individuals involved in relevant discussions.

While this was not 24/7 immersion in these online communities, in the classical ethnographic sense (Wolcott, 1995; Whitehead, 2005),[94] it represented a substantial period of time spent in the 'field'. On average three hours at a time was spent with each candidate's Facebook page and discussion threads, before moving to the next candidate, and pages were visited at different times in the day and evening. Most days around six to seven hours was spent watching and noting activity on candidates' pages, following comment threads, and looking at Profile pages of the commenters. None of the candidates or individuals thus "watched" were aware of the research – the researcher role was as non-participant, focused observer.

In all, around 3,500 posts and comments were scanned in looking for evidence of political talk. Debates were monitored and recorded but also interrogated in relation

---

[94] In 'Basic Classical Ethnographic Research Methods' (2005), Whitehead argues that 24/7 immersion is not necessary, or even practical, for fieldwork but that: "Spending long periods of time in the field is considered the crucial aspect of the classical ethnographer's ability to comprehensively describe components of a cultural system as accurately and with as little bias as possible."

to how people began, continued or ended debate within social norms that might be specific to Facebook and its architecture.

Finally, all the candidates who had been active on Facebook during the election were approached afterwards and invited to comment on their use of the social network. While only a handful responded and agreed to answer questions or be interviewed, this was none-the-less useful material. That low response also perhaps justified the earlier decision to abandon the politicians' survey (see page 136).

Four constituencies were selected for monitoring - Bristol West, Brighton Pavilion, Stoke-on-Trent Central, and Burton & Uttoxeter, selected for a number of reasons. Firstly, because the stage one data collection had focused on students, it was felt that youth element should be carried through to stage two data as far possible. Research published around the same time for HEPI, the Higher Education Policy Institute,[95] (Fisher & Hillman, 2014) suggested that the student vote would be particularly important in the 2015 General Election. Thus, constituencies identified in the report as likely to be affected by the student vote became the starting point for selecting which constituencies to focus on.

The Fisher and Hillman research had argued that students and young people, would turn their backs on the Liberal Democrats in favour of Labour as a result of tuition fees policies[96], and that the resulting switch of votes could determine the

---

[95] http://www.hepi.ac.uk/2014/12/01/hepi-students-tip-balance-power-2015-election-long-register-vote/ (accessed November 10, 2018).

[96] The Liberal Democrat Party had repeatedly promised to vote against rises in university tuition fees. However, the Party, led by then leader Nick Clegg, sided with the Conservatives in 2010 to agree a

outcome in around 10 constituencies – including Bristol West and Brighton Pavilion. That research suggested two constituencies would flip from Liberal Democrat to Labour (including Bristol West); two from Lib Dem to Conservative and six from Conservative to Labour. The prediction was part correct - the Conservatives held onto five of their six seats predicted to swing to Labour, with increased majorities, but the Liberal Democrats did see double-figure collapses in their share of the vote.

The four constituencies were also selected to reflect potential voting intentions, with each one having been previously held by one of the four parties the student survey respondents had said they were most likely to vote for. In voting intention order: Labour - Stoke-on-Trent Central; Greens - Brighton Pavilion; Conservative - Burton-on-Trent; Lib Dems - Bristol West. There was also a convenience factor. Burton-on-Trent and Stoke-on-Trent, while they were not identified in the HEPI/Fisher/Hillman research as constituencies likely to be affected by the student vote, did have a location link to the researcher and it was assumed therefore that that may make it easier to be accepted as a Friend by those candidates and thus gain access to their Pages and content.

Bristol West was one of the seats the HEPI report had predicted would swing away from the Liberal Democrats to Labour as a result of students voting for the party they felt would be most likely to support them. The Bristol West seat had been chosen for this research on the basis of that prediction - if students and young people are more likely to be users of Facebook, and they have more influence on a local

---

tripling of tuition fees. That 'broken promise' was widely believed to have led to collapse in young people voting Liberal Democrat in 2015. See http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-19646731 and https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/may/12/nick-clegg-university-tuition-fees-norman-lamb (access to both checked November 10, 2018).

result, candidates in that constituency might be expected to be more active in trying to engage with young voters via Facebook and other social media.

However, that was not in evidence. None of the four constituencies looked at had all candidates using Facebook as part of their campaign. The one that came closest (with all but one candidate using Facebook to reach voters) was Burton and Uttoxeter, the constituency that had been chosen as the "control" because it did not have a particularly youthful demographic and was not identified as likely to be affected by changes in the youth vote. The higher Facebook activity in Burton and Uttoxeter must therefore have been for different reasons – perhaps the personal experience of candidates of Facebook and therefore being comfortable using it; or a response to the high Facebook activity of the incumbent MP Andrew Griffiths and a perceived need by his competitors to respond in kind[97].

There were two preliminary steps to beginning this stage of the research. First, researching whether each candidate had a Facebook Profile or Page – either personal, campaign or both. This took some time as the information was not readily available

---

[97] A potential area for future research would be to compare the active use of Facebook by an MP to their use of other communications media. Auel and Umit (2018) looked at take-up by MPs of the Communications Allowance and found that the MPs who spent most on communicating with their constituents were those who a) planned to stand for re-election, and b) represented urban and densely populated areas, and c) were active MPs (described as *workhorses* in the study) who attended more votes in Parliament and rarely rebelled against their Party. They argued that for an MP to invest the time in communicating with constituents (give that financial resources were made available through the Communications Allowance), it had to be in the interest of the MP to make that investment. Thus, MPs who most needed to signal trustworthiness to their constituents in order to be re-elected – those in marginal seats, or in urban areas with more fluid populations, or in junior roles – were more likely to invest in communications.

for independent candidates or candidates from fringe parties. Such candidates also tended not to have administrative support or central services to call on which meant it was also difficult to find email addresses, contact details and, in several cases, initially difficult to even pin down who was standing.

In total, 27 candidates stood for election across the four constituencies and 31 Facebook Profiles and Pages were found that linked to them[98]. While this may sound promising, in fact only 13 candidates (48%) had personal campaign Profiles or Pages (or both). Rather than have their own campaign Pages, five candidates only used their local party campaign Pages for election posts (i.e. their posts grouped with other candidates in an area), and nine candidates - one third - did not use Facebook at all as part of their election campaign.

In 2017 (the final data stage), there were fewer candidates standing – 21 across the four constituencies, but a higher percentage - 66% (14 candidates) had personal campaign Profiles or Pages. The lower number of candidates seemed to be a combination of parties deciding to make way for other candidates (UKIP stepping aside for the Conservatives in Burton & Uttoxeter and Bristol West; the Liberal Democrats deciding not to stand against Caroline Lucas in Brighton Pavilion), and perhaps smaller parties having insufficient funds to fight another election so soon after the 2015 General Election and the 2016 EU Referendum campaign. Indeed, two of the Green party candidates Followed – Adam Colcough (Stoke-on-Trent Central) and Simon Hales (Burton & Uttoxeter), were running Kickstarter campaigns to fund their election costs.

---

[98] For a full list of the candidates and Facebook pages sourced, see Appendix 4

What was interesting (and discussed further in the following chapter) is that <u>all</u> of the 2015 winning candidates, and three out of four of the second-placed candidates, were in that first group: i.e. candidates with active personal campaign pages on Facebook. That is, candidates who did best in the 2015 election in the four constituencies studied were the candidates who also – personally or through their agents - were most active on Facebook. For example, Andrew Griffiths (Burton and Uttoxeter):

> "On a day-to-day basis [Facebook] has become my primary way of communicating with people. I have a good team of supporters but as people's interest in party politics wanes, the potential reach of social media is greater. There's no way a campaign can reach people now through traditional leaflet drops but you can through social media." (Interview with Griffiths, July 2015)

Access to candidate pages was gained via a "clean"[99] Facebook personal Profile (hereafter the Researcher Profile or RP), set up specifically for this research project and with no pre-existing Friend or Group links.

In some cases, a request to Follow or Friend a candidate had to be made in order to see their campaign or personal Profile or Page where that Page had not been made Public. Setting up a personal Profile page was important therefore not only to gain access to the candidate and material on his or her site, but in order to monitor whether Facebook's architecture positively or negatively affected the Friends, Pages,

---

[99] In that there was no pre-existing Facebook site or Profile; no Friends or Groups already attached, and information limited to geography (location of where I lived and where I worked), but not my job or interests, and no indication of political affiliation. In 2017 however, the Profile did include some political information in order to test whether this made a difference to candidate Friend response. In both 2015 and 2017, information was posted to the Profile page to make clear it was part of a research study.

Comments and news prioritised in a Feed, as an indicator of how Facebook's algorithm may be operating to deliver content to a user's News Feed.

Facebook Pages[100] were monitored in a structured way with ethnographic (or netnographic - Kozinets, 2002) data collected in field notes for each constituency, detailing what content was showing on arrival at the Researcher Profile (i.e. what Facebook's architecture selected to show[101]) and what was showing on each candidate's site.

The 20 most recent posts made by each candidate were logged as either local campaign (LC); national campaign (NC); local news (LN); national news (NN), or unrelated to the campaign. The number of Likes, Followers or Friends each site had accrued was noted, as was how many Likes, Shares or Comments each post had attracted at that point (updating these figures in subsequent days if they changed markedly).

Comments on posts and in timelines were opened and scanned (in the case of Caroline Lucas, Brighton Pavilion, this was often in the hundreds of Comments) looking for debate, or invitations to debate issues, and for questions directed at the candidate from citizens. Where any of these were found, the personal Facebook

---

[100] For convenience, the term Facebook page is being used to collectively refer to Profiles, Pages or Groups belonging to candidates, political parties or groups, and to individual users, including the researcher.

[101] The issue of how Facebook selects what content to show each user, out of a possible 1,500 items, has been the subject of controversy and is discussed in more detail in the next chapter. (See: "The filtered Feed Problem": http://techcrunch.com/2014/04/03/the-filtered-feed-problem. Accessed November 10, 2018)

Profiles of the individuals involved were investigated for further evidence of interest in politics and/or in debating political issues.

In around half of these cases[102], the individual's privacy settings prevented access to all or most of their posts. Where an individual had not changed their privacy settings, their site was treated as if public and the last 20 posts scanned for political content or debate. In addition, the list of Groups the individual had joined and Pages they had Liked were scanned for evidence of ongoing interest in political or social issues.

Detailed field notes were made, jointly collecting, comparing and analysing data (Glaser, 1965, 1967), and screenshots of particularly interesting posts or discussions were taken and saved. Overall, 170 such screenshots were saved for further analysis.

In defining categories against which to compare data (the Facebook posts and comments) other research studies that had categorised content against political talk, in particular the work of Jackson et al (2013) and Graham et al (2015), Gerhards & Schafer (2010)[103] and Schudson (1997) were used. Schudson's definition of political talk as essentially public, problem-solving, reasoned and reasonable became a key definition:

> …democratic conversation is conversation not among intimates nor among

---

[102] By 2017, this had increased to the majority of Profiles, reflecting a change in Facebook's architecture to encourage privacy controls; in itself a response to criticism of Facebook's prior default 'public' setting.

[103] Gerhards and Schafer used one topical subject of content – human genome research – to compare old and new media in relation to Habermas' concept of an open public sphere for debate. Using quantitative content analysis methodology, they coded content into 85 elements: "ideal-type arguments", used by speakers.

strangers but among citizens who are acquainted by virtue of their citizenship....
Democratic conversation.... is a facility of public communication under norms
of public reasonableness, not simply a facility of social interaction. (1997:306)

That concept of public reasonableness, of conversation aiming at communication rather than of oratory or soapboxing was core to assessing whether debate was happening and whether that debate was representative of a Habermasian public sphere.

While Jackson's work (2013, 2015) sought to discover political talk within everyday conversation, the target for this research was places where political talk was likely (i.e. on candidate campaign pages in the days before a general election) in order to determine whether, given all these positives – shared interests, network links, public political spaces – political talk would be supported and encouraged by being on Facebook. Jackson was looking for evidence of political talk within everyday conversations at a non-election time, this research went further in looking for evidence of political discourse that led to, or invited, reasoned, public debate.

Just as the survey had selected young people who might be expected to be more likely to engage in political debate, so public spaces within Facebook were selected on the basis that political debate might be more likely among people defined by Schudson (1997) as "acquainted by virtue of their citizenship", or by Eliasoph (1996) as the sociable "civic practices" whereby citizens create context and etiquette to enable public political conversation.

While Zhang et al (2010) had found reliance on social network sites encouraged civic participation but not political participation[104], they (and before them Katz and Lazarsfeld, Eliasoph, and others) found that one-to-one discussion did encourage political action. The issue then becomes not the effect of Facebook's loose ties and bridging capital on political engagement, but Facebook's effect on interpersonal communication and bonding capital in encouraging political and civic engagement.

In short, if millions of people are choosing to interact through Facebook and more interpersonal interaction is taking place as a result by a combination of scale and Facebook's cultural architecture, it would be reasonably to expect that interaction to include political discussion to a similar level and extent as in the offline world. The question then becomes one of whether Facebook is enabling such discussion and whether, because of scale or by virtue of Facebook's unique corporate cultural and technological architecture, it might be enabling more or enabling more effective discussion.

4.3 The search for enabled political talk

Returning to both Schudson and Habermas, what this research sought to identify was evidence of political talk that was public, participatory and reasoned

---

[104] The researchers defined civic participation as activities that address community concerns through non-governmental or non-electoral means such as through voluntary or community work. Whereas political participation was activities aimed at directly or indirectly influencing the selection of elected officials and the public policy development or implementation (2010: 76)

debate rather than oratory; that circulated ideas or information with the aim of helping form opinions; that was indicative of a process of opinion formation of pre-voting democracy (Jacobs, Cook & Carpini (2009); Chambers, 2003). The task therefore was to code content in ways which would distinguish between political talk that invited debate and talk that was simply opinion sharing or airing[105].

The starting point was to code each candidate's Facebook page on the basis of how public it was – i.e. how easy it would be for any Facebook user to see the content. Candidate pages were coded across three levels from Level One open-public: no action or only minimal action in the form of Follow the page necessary to see content; Level Two monitored-public wherein content is only available to Friends but the Friend request is easily accepted[106]; Level Three - not public; either clearly a private, personal page unrelated to their candidacy, or researcher's Friend request is rejected or ignored[107].

---

[105] It is acknowledged that the sharing of well-argued opinions can also influence the reader and may also affect political actions. However, for the purpose of this research, a stricter focus on the idea of discussion, deliberation and reasoned debate – as argued in the literature review - was adhered to.

[106] The 'test' being whether a Friend request to a candidate was accepted within 72-hours, based on the candidate having no information about the researcher other than where I lived and worked. For three of the constituencies studied, this would make clear the researcher was not a local voter. In all cases there were no pre-existing personal links with the candidate or prior engagement with them on social media. Because the Researcher Profile (RP) was set up as a new Facebook account, the RP also showed no Facebook Friends and, until candidates began accepting Friends requests from the RP, no Friends in common. The candidate would have no reason to accept the researcher as a Friend unless they had an open-to-most-of-the-public policy on accepting Friend requests.

[107] However, it may be the case that requests were ignored because the researcher was not seen (by the Profile) as an obvious supporter of that candidate or Party and/or was not living in the constituency, and thus of no interest to the candidate and their agents. During the 2017 research, I sought to make my position more obvious by posting information about the research on the page and adding a picture of me engaging in political action in order to assess whether that influenced which candidates accepted the Friend request (see Fig. 1, page 134).

The assumption was that the majority of content on a candidate's Page was likely to be circulating political ideas and/or information, but it was also important to consider whether the "local-ness" of that content was a factor in engaging Followers and Friends and in encouraging debate – an issue that was tested further in the 2017 data collection stage.

In addition, the level of participation by citizens in a candidate's page was assessed in terms of actions taken by visitors in the form of Likes, Shares or Comments. Wherever possible, comments participating in or instigating debate were investigated further in order to assess whether they were made by local or non-local citizens, or by party workers or activists – that is, links were followed through to the commenter's own Facebook page and, if visible, to Groups they supported or other material they had posted.

Finally, comments posted by Followers/Friends on a candidate's page were coded according to whether they seemed to invite participation in political debate or information sharing, and whether comments were expressed as reasoned and reasonable debate, i.e. was this simply oratory or was it a public invitation to debate?

Comments were thus coded as O, D or S. S being comments that only expressed support for the candidate, or added their agreement to a comment made by someone else; O being comments that were oratory with the commenter simply wanting to have their say or make their point rather than invite debate or ask a question (Schudson's "declarative views" (1997: 300)). While D were comments which were either couched in terms that invited debate or asked a relevant and reasonable question in the expectation of a response, or which led to a debate. O and S comments were simply noted, while D comments were analysed further as examples

160

of political conversation.

In all, around 3,500 comments and posts were read and among these, around 170 threads (5%) showed evidence of reasoned debate. Of the rest, the majority were S - people positively expressing support for the candidate or for comments another contributor had made. It was also noted that O - oratory - was more common on the UKIP Pages looked at; that D - debate - was more common on the Green candidate Pages; and S - support - more common on the Conservative Pages.

In many cases, comments had elements of S and O and a judgment had to be made on which code primarily applied. The conversation pictured at Fig. 6 was one such example, as described in the excerpt below from the Field Log of 28 April, 2015, noted at 5.30pm on Brighton Pavilion UKIP candidate Nigel Carter's page (Level One open-public):

> Both commenters [Brigitte[108] and Margaret] shared UKIP and other
> campaigns on their own FB [Facebook] feeds. Brigitte posts comments on
> several other posts, usually is only one commenting. The mention of her case
> being "so very wrong" could be seen as an invitation (i.e. to ask her what was
> wrong about her case) but I felt it was not a direct enough invitation to count
> this comment as D. Similarly, while both comments are supporting the party,

---

[108] The thesis acknowledges the recommendations of the Association for Internet Researchers (https://aoir.org/ethics) in choosing to add a level of anonymity to individuals, despite those individuals having commented or posted on a public Facebook page, acknowledging that: "People may operate in public spaces but maintain strong perceptions or expectations of privacy" (2012:6). Balancing the need to indicate who was being quoted in respect of flow of conversation and the gender of each speaker with that potential expectation of privacy, the decision was taken to use only first names (or chosen first names) from posts/comments. This is also the case in the screenshots of actual online conversations which have been altered to hide surnames and delete or obscure profile pictures.

they do not relate directly to each other or the news story. Both comments therefore classed as O

By contrast, an earlier thread from Brighton & Hove UKIP's campaign page (see below) began as O – oratory (Fig. 7), but was eventually counted as D - debate – (Fig. 8) because participants' comments related directly to the issue being discussed (UKIP's manifesto pledge on animal welfare) and, while there was grandstanding, participants did engage in conversation in a reasonable way and appear to invite debate by asking questions. From the Field Log notes of 28 April, 2015:

> Overall, I counted this thread as D - debate - for these reasons: most of the comments directly related to the original post (a meme about UKIP's animal welfare policy); several commenters either responded directly to another commenter or invited a response with a question (eg the exchange between David and Gillian).

This exchange demonstrates not only the difficulty in making an assessment of whether online conversation is debate, but of dealing with conversations which – because of architecture or culture – tend towards discursive rather than deliberative.
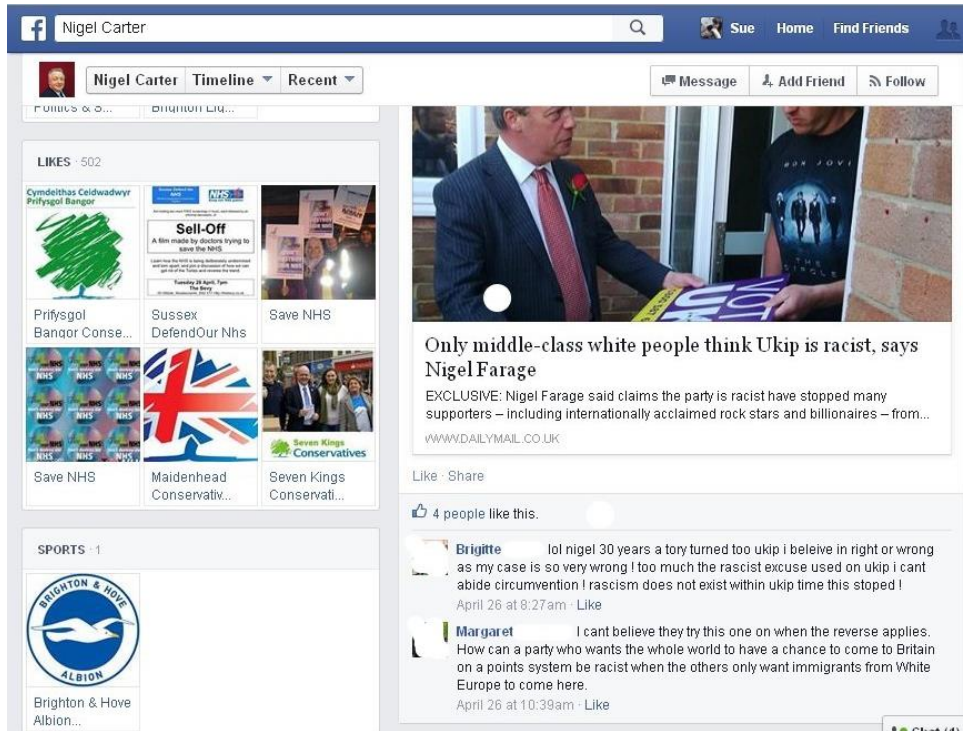
Figure 6: Screenshot of the conversation between Brigitte and Margaret
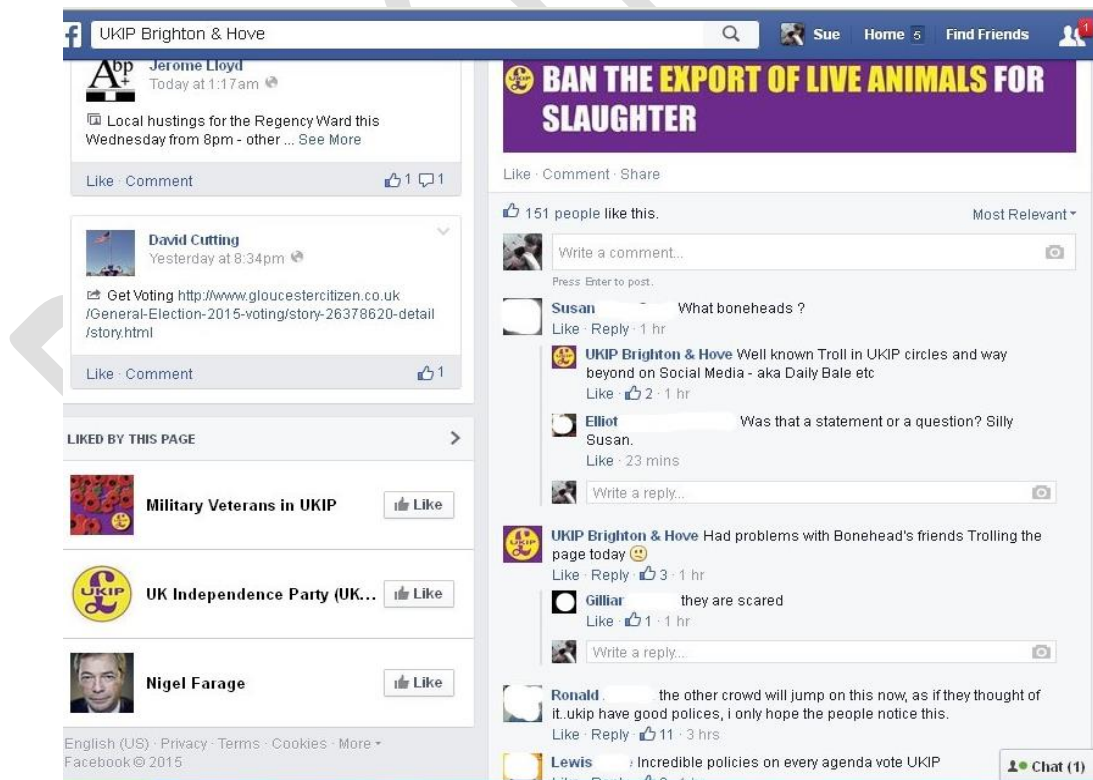
Figure 7: This conversation was initially code O – oratory

Figure 8: When comments from non-UKIP supporters were noted, the conversation code was changed to D - debate

Alongside the detailed analysis of conversations and debates outlined in the next chapter, this stage two data collection showed the following in relation to candidate activity.

1. The candidates most actively personally[109] using Facebook to engage with local voters in each constituency were:

Brighton Pavilion: Caroline Lucas (Green)

Bristol West: Stephen Williams (Liberal Democrat) and Thangam Debbonaire (Labour)

Burton & Uttoxeter: Andrew Griffiths (Conservative)

---

[109] Candidates responding directly to comments or participating in debates on their Facebook page (or appearing to respond directly - it is possible that an agent was responding as the candidate).

Stoke on Trent Central: Ali Majid (Cannabis Party)

2. The most popular candidate pages in each constituency in terms of volume of Likes or Friends:

Brighton Pavilion: Caroline Lucas (Green)

Bristol West: Stephen Williams (Lib Dem)[110]

Burton & Uttoxeter: Andrew Griffiths (Conservative) (on Personal campaign page[111])

Stoke on Trent Central: Tristram Hunt (Labour)

3. The candidate pages showing most activity (engagement) from site visitors in each constituency:

Brighton Pavilion: Caroline Lucas (Green)

Bristol West: Darren Hall (Green)[112]

Burton & Uttoxeter: Andrew Griffiths (Conservative)

Stoke on Trent Central: Tristram Hunt (Labour)

---

[110] However, the volume of Likes for Williams stayed relatively constant at around 200, whereas other candidates showed evidence of growing support - eg Debbonaire going from 955 to 1,086 Likes and Hall from 1,651 to 1,879 during the 16 days their sites were studied. It should also be noted that Independent candidate Dawn Parry had 1,911 Friends on her closed to the public Facebook profile and attracted just 204 votes (0.3%).

[111] Griffiths actively ran two pages - his personal profile and his campaign page. The campaign page had a top figure of 3,280 Likes during the research period, while his personal page had 1,742 Friends.

[112] Activity in the form of Likes, Shares and Comments on posts was generally two or three times that attracted by Debbonaire, his closet rival in terms of user activity.

4. The candidate pages in each constituency showing most activity from site visitors who also appeared to be local voters[113]:

Brighton Pavilion: Caroline Lucas (Green)

Bristol West: Darren Hall (Green) and Thangam Debbonaire (Labour)

Burton & Uttoxeter: Andrew Griffiths (Conservative) (on Personal profile page)

Stoke on Trent Central: Ali Majid (Cannabis Party) and Paul Toussaint (Ubuntu Party)[114]

5. Candidate Facebook pages in each constituency showing with debate (D content):

Brighton Pavilion: Caroline Lucas (Green)

Bristol West: Stephen Hall (Lib Dem) and Thangam Debbonaire (Labour)[115]

Burton & Uttoxeter: Andrew Griffiths (Conservative) (on Personal profile page)

Stoke on Trent Central: Paul Toussaint (Ubuntu Party)[116]

In Bristol West, the three frontrunners for the student vote - Labour, Green Party and Liberal Democrat candidates, were using Facebook (three out of the seven

---

[113] However, in many cases it was not possible to see enough information on a user's personal Facebook page to be able to work out whether they lived in the constituency. These figures therefore reflect those users commenting on or Liking posts on candidate pages that could be determine as definitely local, measured against those as definitely not local.

[114] On numbers, Hunt was highest but the percentage of people from Stoke-on-Trent Liking or commenting on posts on his site was low - around 20% of all activity.

[115] While Darren Hall had the most activity in terms of comments, the majority were S - supportive.

[116] However, it was a particularly poor field in Stoke-on-Trent with so few of the candidates (three out of eight) actively using Facebook. It must also be noted that, because Majid and Toussaint (unlike Hunt) responded to questions posted by site visitors debate results were weighted towards them.

candidates). Brighton Pavilion also had three out of seven candidates using Facebook for their campaign (Green, Labour and UKIP), while Stoke-on-Trent Central, despite having a university in the constituency, had the lowest ratio with three out of eight candidates using Facebook and only one of the three from a mainstream party represented in parliament (Labour - Hunt).

Nor were the concerns of young people - and students in particular - a particular factor in the debates. Only a handful of posts seen appeared to be from, or about, students. On the candidate sites that had the most active users (Griffiths, Lucas, Hall, Hunt) there did seem to be evidence that people in their 30s were more likely to comment, however the issues they discussed were wide-ranging (i.e. not specifically student or youth orientated) and only one instance was seen of debate about tuition fees - that on Williams' page (Bristol West, Lib Dem) (figs. 7 and 8).

That discussion was interesting. Sparked by a post from Williams linking to a feature from a student writing about why students should vote Lib Dem, it involved three protagonists none of who were local voters according to information on their own Facebook profile.

What is also interesting is that the only woman in the three stepped out of the debate at an early stage. Her point: "Labour introduced tuition fees, Torys [sic] were only prevented from unlimited tuition fees by the Lib Dems and the Greens are lucky if they get one MP, so the option is??" isn't directly responded to. In fact, Kevin's "Alas Nardia" reply and swift return to his own point about why students should not vote Liberal Democrat undermines her and dismisses her question. The two men then continue the discussion, albeit with little debate on the issue, more attempts to argue down each other's point of view, or more accurately parts of points.

Figure 9: The three protagonists in the student fees discussion

Figure 10: The continuation of the debate between Kevin and Mark

The issue of people coming together to debate, or perhaps to look for debate, on a page belonging to a candidate they were not able to vote for was something seen often during this research and is dealt with in more detail in the next chapter.

The debate thread is also an example of how "public reasonableness" is demonstrated in choice of language and willingness to reply to the point being made. There is civility in the language ("You can't make any argument for the Tories I'm afraid mate" – Kevin, Fig. 9), even when civility is edged with sarcasm: "Well you have your view mate and I have mine and never the twain shall meet." The blokey use of "mate" is an invitation to talk and a signal that no offence is intended but can also be sarcastic as in 'you will never actually be my mate as long as you hold opposing views to me'.

The conversation between Kevin and fellow protagonist Mark showed further evidence of this civility through their willingness to respond directly to the point each was making. Holding opposing views on increases in tuition fees, they none-the-less manage to discuss the issue without becoming argumentative. Mark's misuse of the ellipsis at the end of posts ("student financing…", "in the future…") could be read as an encouragement to Kevin to follow on with a point of his own, to continue the unfinished thought thread - which he does. For example

> Mark: Voting labour as a student simply doesn't make sense at all – you can make an argument for the other parties…sort of…

> Kevin: You can't make any argument for the Tories I'm afraid mate. Labour introduced tuition fees, the Tories have raised them to 9 grand a year. Totally

> unjustifiable and if you support that policy mate then I'm afraid mark I
> couldn't possible agree [continues]

Mark and Kevin were not people looking for an argument; they were people on opposite sides of the political fence but "acquainted by virtue of their citizenship" and, whether they actually hoped to change each other's mind through their reasoning, they were willing to engage in reasoned debate. The language, the use of "mate" and addressing each other by their names – all of these signaled a willingness to debate and, alongside use of other social language (including more specifically social media emojis and 'LOLs'[117]) were devices seen in use time and again during the field work.

The ways in which debaters used language to signal their willingness to debate is dealt with in more detail in the next chapter, but the use of "irony, personal narrative, aesthetic interventions, theatricality and visibility" had been identified by Kohn (2000:425) as indicative of discursive, rather than deliberative democracy and as more reflective of real-world political talk than Habermasian bourgeoise debate ideals or the deliberationists – the champions of deliberative democracy – of the 1990s and early 2000s.[118]

---

[117] LOL (short for laugh out loud) is also an example of language that has migrated from text and short messaging systems (SMS) into written speech, particularly on social media. As an area for future research, the ways in which emojis and acronyms such as LOL are used in social media communication is interesting. This 'text speak' moving into posts on Facebook and other social media may help in creating a comfortable participatory space. By giving permission to use language which is less elitist, more inclusive; signifying that using the correct spelling and grammar is not important, what matters most is the sentiment. They represent a personalisation of language.

[118] Jacobs, Cook and Delli Carpini (2009) provide a succinct summary of the flowering of deliberative democracy as a theory within political studies from around 1998 to 2008, in which "deliberationists"

Another reference to tuition fees was seen in screenshots of material on election day sent in by volunteers but did not include any debate. The self-selected nature of the material sent by the volunteers also made it difficult to see the context of the comments from Andrew and Rob (figs. 11 and 12) in arguing that the Liberal Democrats had been "tarnished" by their tuition fees U-turn, despite the Party having done "good work" and a "decent job".

The final set of 2015 data used to inform the research was the material submitted by 15 Facebook users from within the target "more likely to be engaged with politics" group. This consisted of screenshots, such as figures 11 and 12, from their personal News Feeds of comments and conversations that took place on election day. Because this material was self-collected and to an unknown degree self-selected,[119] and because it was sent in after the event, it was not possible to follow debates or gather information about the debaters in the same way as in the fieldwork. None-the-less, the screenshots did help in reinforcing observations about language used, gender and age differences in how debates are conducted. For example, the exchange below, submitted as screenshots by a woman in West Yorkshire, between two other women in response to a news story about David Cameron's positive election Exit Polls:

---

saw citizen deliberation as a process of elevating citizen political understanding, citizen power, and partnerships between citizens and officials to deliver improved accountability and shared governance.

[119] They were given a brief by email which asked them to check into their Facebook account on May 6, 7, and 8, 2015 (the election was May 7) and if they saw any election or politics-related conversations in their timeline on those days, to screenshot the thread and email it back. They were told that it did not matter who was posting or commenting, but that what was being looked for is discussion which involved more than one person saying something.

Tracy: Dan has just had a meltdown after seeing the final count when he got in from school…cheers Cameron you absolute arse! Now you have got an 8 year old boy worrying about the NHS…[Fist punch emoji]

Louise: I'm seriously worried about the NHS…He's not alone [Sad emoji] xxx

Tracy's anger is real, but she ameliorates it with the use of the emoji and the displacement to her son. Note also how Louise's response to her Facebook Friend is thoroughly supportive of the political comment. Not only agreeing with the sentiment but supporting Tracy as a mother (your son is "not alone" in being upset) and wrapping up the post with an emoji and kisses. As noted several times in this thesis, women were much more likely to offer personal support[120] and to respond to what was actually said (they "listened" more), and to signal that support through the use of emojis, kisses and emollient language.

---

[120] Jackson et al (2015) noted a similarly supportive discursive culture in the "less macho" public spaces of MoneySavingExpert and Netmums, where political talk was more grounded in help and support.
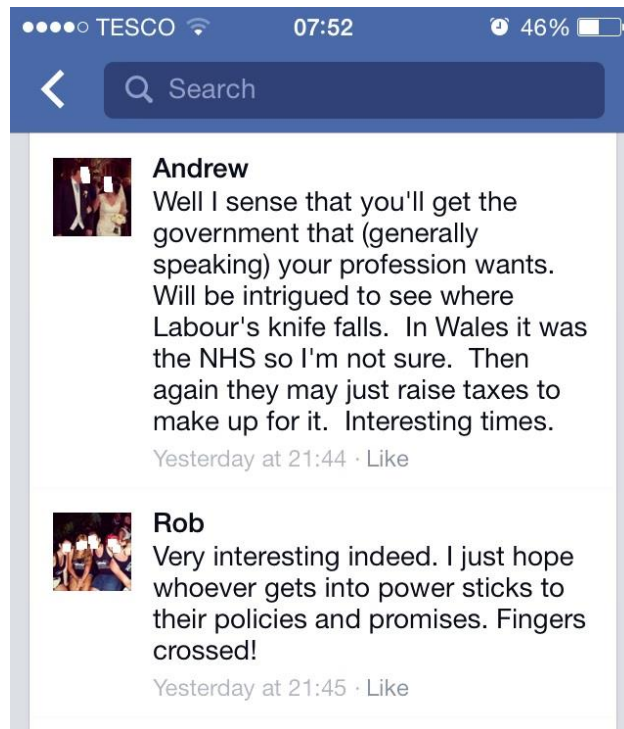
Figure 11: Start of conversation (note: Facebook mobile phone view)
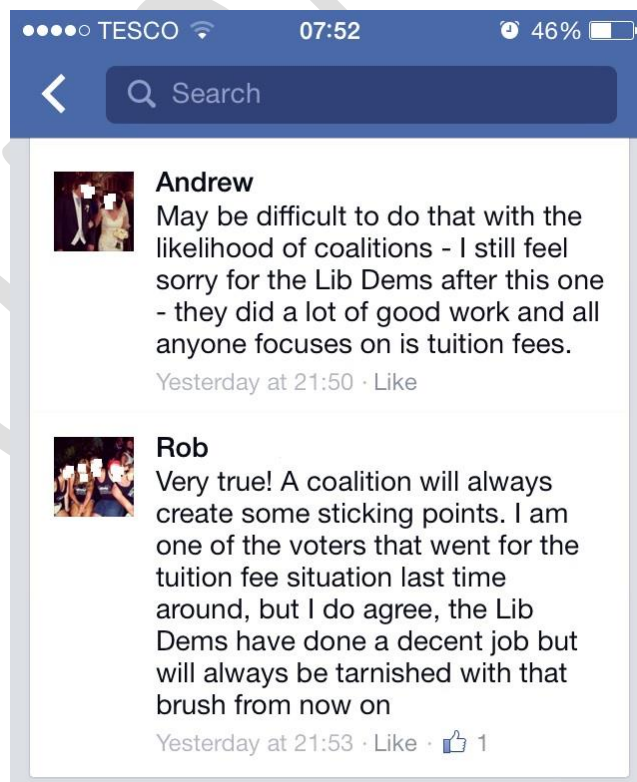
Figure 12: Continuation of tuition fees conversation

The interviews conducted with candidates after the election result were also helpful in understanding what they or their team had set out to achieve in terms of reaching potential local voters through Facebook, and gave some insight into their viewpoint, as participants in the public sphere, on political debate on Facebook. From Andrew Griffiths (Conservative, Burton & Uttoxeter) who spoke about Facebook becoming an "integral part" of his campaign in 2015, to Darren Hall (Labour, Bristol West) who used a mix of campaign volunteers and, in the last few weeks an experienced social media expert, in a social media campaign designed to be "upbeat…engaging and provocative", and Mike Green (UKIP, Staffordshire) who saw social media as "like screaming in a vacuum" but none-the-less a "powerful tool" for the future that he actively engaged in.

4.5 Data stage three: The 2017 intervention

On April 18, 2017, Theresa May called a General Election – a so-called "snap" election in that it was to happen earlier than expected (a General Election was not due until 2020) and with no procedural need to call an election. She did so for political reasons, as was widely reported at the time, to capitalise on what was perceived as a weak Labour Party in opposition and, according to Theresa May[121], to counter "division in Westminster" causing "damaging uncertainty and instability to the country" and to Brexit negotiations. The date set for that snap election was June 8, 2017.

---

[121] Full announcement speech by Theresa May on the BBC website https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-39630009 (accessed November 11, 2018)

The result of the election is part of history, with Theresa May and the Conservative party losing 13 seats against their pre-election total and having to negotiate a deal with Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party in order to maintain a parliamentary voting majority sufficient to stay in power. The longer-term result, in relation to negotiating Britain's withdrawal from the European Union; Theresa May's longevity as Prime Minister, and the strengthening of the Labour parliamentary base, is still being played out as this thesis is being written.

However, the announcement of the June 2017 election provided an opportunity to gather more data in relation to this thesis and a number of steps were taken in order to determine what form that additional data might take.

The first step was to resurrect the Facebook account used for the 2015 election online ethnographic research and to clarify which, if any, of the candidates in constituencies studied in 2015 were also standing in 2017 and whether they were using the same Facebook candidate pages. There had been significant changes. One 2015 candidate had died[122]; one had resigned soon after being re-elected MP[123]; thirteen new candidates were standing in the constituencies against three MPs elected in 2015; and a number of candidates from fringe parties had decided not to stand again. In addition, UKIP had decided not to field candidates in all constituencies, with the Party saying at the time that the decision was taken to assist Conservative

---

[122] David MacDonald, Liberal Democrat candidate for Burton on Trent & Uttoxeter, died suddenly, a few months after the 2015 election: http://www.burtonmail.co.uk/tributes-paid-future-star-liberal-democrat-party/story-27559643-detail/story.html

[123] Tristram Hunt (Labour) had retained his seat in Stoke-on-Trent, then resigned as an MP, forcing a by-election in 2016 (heavily contested by UKIP's Paul Nuttall) and re-won by Gareth Snell for Labour (albeit with a reduced majority).

candidates. Consequently, there was no UKIP candidate in 2017 in two of the four constituencies studied – Burton & Uttoxeter and Bristol West.

There had also been changes within Facebook which had affected both the look and feel – the experience – of the content delivered, and the way its algorithms assessed users and the links between users. For example, the excerpt below from the Field Log of April 20, 2017, and the screenshot (Fig. 13) taken at the time.

> I noticed that FB's understanding of who I am had changed markedly. Whilst previously it showed me pictures of [my] Staffs uni students, this time it also showed me pictures of former, non-uni colleagues – in particular Saima Mir, a journalist I worked with at the Bradford T&A [Telegraph & Argus newspaper]. Whilst it was nice to see her … I was a bit taken aback – I had a different name then and my FB profile includes no mention of Bradford or the T&A (actually my profile is deliberately empty – it doesn't even say where I live), so where did FB gather that information from – and within minutes of my logging in for the first time in two years?? It also showed me friends I hadn't seen in years (Jane Arnold) and current friends (Margaret Taylor), and current colleagues and friends (Jo Goodall). I did wonder whether this was (also was?) a reflection of people who had searched for me on FB?
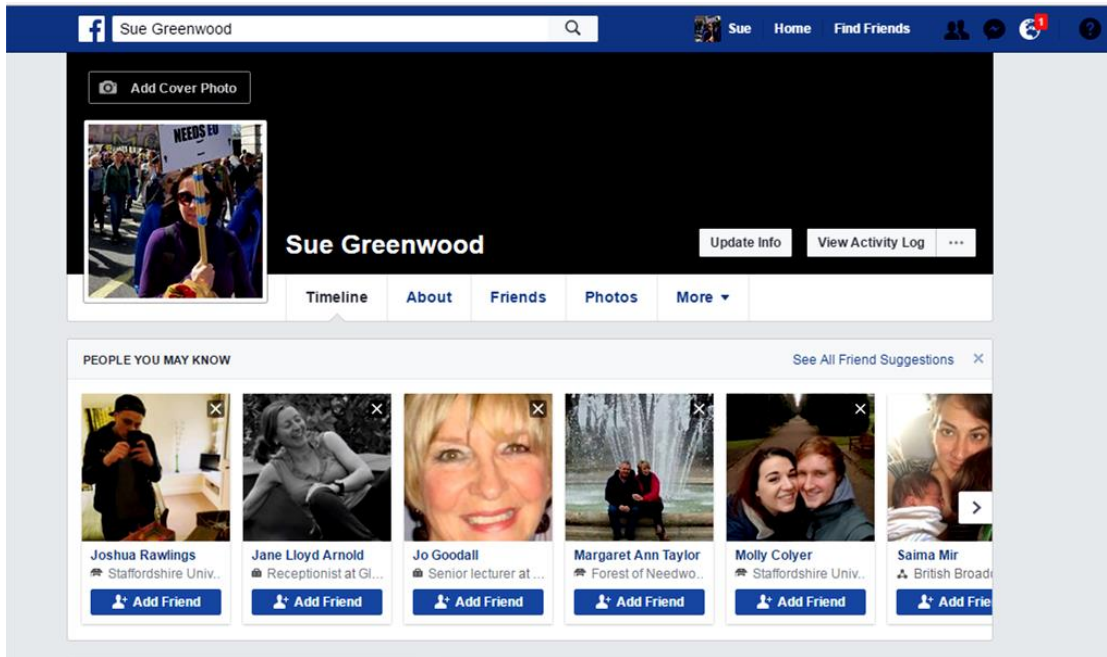
Figure 13: Screenshot of resurrected RP Page, taken April 20th, 2017
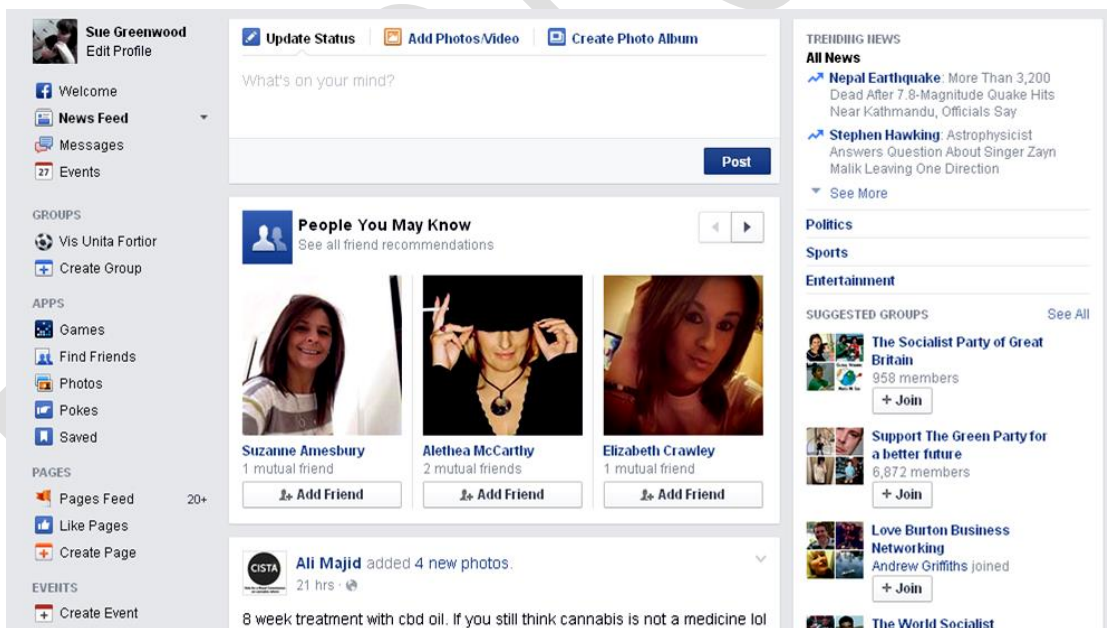
Figure 14: Screenshot of RP Page from 2015

By contrast, the RP from 27th April, 2015 (Fig. 14) shows a Facebook less able to make those links – none of the suggested "People you may know" were known. The associative link appeared to be only through Facebook's algorithmic assessment of possible mutual friends on Facebook itself, rather than – as in 2017 – looking for clues in material posted across the web. Because, to make the link with current or previous workplaces, Facebook would need to be doing the equivalent of a Google search on the user's name (to bring up information posted to LinkedIn, blogs, etc,) and/or – as suggested in the Field Notes – draw in all the people who might have searched for that user on Facebook in the past.

Note also how the 2015 Profile page is more focused on content – Trending News, the News Feed, the lists of suggested groups etc. While the 2017 Profile page focuses the user on adding more connections, and thus more weak tie links.

As well as those design changes, Facebook had also made significant changes to its News Feed algorithms in 2016, announcing[124] (in response to criticism) plans to do a "better job of filtering out false information or clickbait"

Facebook had also tightened its privacy procedures by removing the default "public" setting for personal pages and posts, in part in response to growing criticism of the site in the intervening two years. And the company had introduced additional

---

[124] In a blog post to mark the 10th anniversary of News Feed (6 September, 2016) Zuckerberg responded to criticism about the volume of "fake" news and information, including from partisan political actors, and the role of Facebook in creating "filter bubbles" of ideas (see page 69) by quoting research from Pew to argue that people were exposed to a larger and more diverse set of opinions because of social media, but none-the-less the company would work harder to filter out false material and "make Facebook a place for all ideas".

emoji-responses (not emoticons[125]): as well as the thumbs up to Like a post or comment, there was now a heart ("love"), laughing face ("Ha Ha"), angry face, and a thumbs down.

Issues around so-called "fake" news were beginning to emerge, as were concerns around the way political and governmental agencies had been able to "game" the algorithms to deliver false or polarised political content to users, potentially affecting voting behaviours in both the US and UK (an issue returned to in the next chapter).

The result of all this change, in particular the tightening of privacy controls, made it much more difficult in 2017 to monitor users and to follow conversations out from a candidate's page onto the commenter's page. Facebook had become even more locked down as a data resource. In addition, because the majority of candidates in the four constituencies studied were new, many of them either had no candidate page on Facebook or had pages that had only recently been set up and consequently there was very little activity to see. By May 2017, it had been possible to Follow or Friend only a handful of candidates. Only four individuals had accepted a Friend request, and it had been possible to Follow just eight candidates' official Pages (from 21 candidates standing across the four constituencies). It had become clear that the approach to

---

[125] Although both emoji and emoticon are often used interchangeably to describe the little icons (emotion icons – emoticon) added to emails and messages, according to Encyclopaedia Britannica there is a difference. Emoticons are the older form – the letters, numbers and punctuation marks found on keyboards and used to create, for example the sideways winking or smiling face added to an email. While emojis are the more recent invention (1999, by Shigetaka Kurita) and are complete pictographs (i.e. rather than keyboard characters) to signify particular emotional responses. Emojis are Unicode creations which enables them to be shared across different formats, including whether the Facebook page with the emoji is being viewed on a Windows laptop, and iPad, or a Samsung mobile phone.

data-gathering that had been used in 2015 may not be possible or relevant in the Facebook of 2017.

As has been noted, scrutiny of how Facebook selects content to show a user has become a developing area of research - both for academics and for news organisations seeking to reach their audience on Facebook. While working on this study, I had also been involved in other research[126] which had included interviewing news organisations about how they reach an audience which increasingly accesses its news and information via social media. That project noted that whether a story or piece of content is seen by a user depends on Facebook's own algorithms – their understanding of what content might interest that user, based on knowing who they are (demographics); what they appear to be interested in (Liked, shared and time spent with a piece of content); what Friends of that user appear to be interested in; and of course, the advertisers seeking to reach that user.

> There is no guarantee for the news or information provider that any particular Post will make it into a particular Facebook user's News Feed. Constantly tweaked algorithms select what Facebook believes will most interest each user – from Posts by favoured Friends to news stories more of your Friends have shared, to paid-for content Facebook believes is more likely to be relevant to you. It prioritises "engagement" – content that will keep you coming back and spending more of your time in Facebook. Because if the algorithm can't do that; if it keeps showing content you're not interested in or Posts from people you don't care about, you'll visit Facebook less often. (Greenwood, 2018)

---

[126] The research was published as a book: 'Future Journalism: Where we are and where we're going' (2017, Routledge) investigating and analysing where journalism has come from, where it is now and where it might going in the future, through a range of case studies and interviews with individuals and organisations pushing the traditional boundaries of journalism.

This had already emerged in 2015 when, in Field Logs of the time spent gathering data on Facebook, (see section 5.6.1) a mismatch was frequently noted between the content that would appear at the top of the News Feed and the content that Facebook's algorithms should have recognised as being of more interest.

This issue of what content is prioritised in a user's News Feed, as the next chapter explores further, became even more relevant in 2017 as Facebook's place in both Russian government-backed "trolling" and accusations of Cambridge Analytica-led "data farming" began to come under investigation. In the period between the 2015 and 2017 elections, the company had come under increasing criticism because of the way its algorithms may, or may not, have influenced voters in both the UK and US elections.

Taking these changes into account: Facebook's changing algorithms and tighter privacy controls; the number of new candidates with "young" Facebook accounts and the low number of candidates giving RP access to their campaign page, it no longer made sense to follow the same data-gathering pattern as in 2015.

Coincidentally, an opportunity had arisen to become directly involved in a candidate's page and to produce content for it. This created a scenario for direct intervention to look at whether feeding particular political content into News Feeds could influence political actions – analogous with the projects by Adam Kramer (2010, 2014) and his team at Facebook in testing the effects of exposing Facebook users to particular types of content. The intervention took several forms:

- Creating a number of political posts targeted at voters in the Burton-on-Trent & Uttoxeter and posted to the (new) Labour candidate's Facebook Page[127];

- using Facebook paid advertising tools to "Boost" some posts in order to reach voters who had not supported the candidate's Page (i.e. had no Facebook link to the candidate);

- monitoring the effect of the Page administrators' active engagement with people posting comments on the candidate's Page.

In total, 23 posts were written and added to John McKiernan's candidate Page (Labour, Burton-on-Trent & Uttoxeter) between May 28th and June 7th, 2017, with the majority of the June posts Boosted[128], plus comments, stats and discussion on the

---

[127] Disclosure: It must be noted that I had joined the Labour Party in 2016 and was a voter at the 2017 election in this constituency. My decision to volunteer to write this content for my local Labour Party candidate was driven by a personal desire to see Labour win more votes in the constituency, as well as by my interest as a researcher in monitoring the effect of this content on Facebook users who saw it. It should also be noted that my husband also became involved in the campaign at the same time and was one of the four page administrators and took a key role within that team in responding to and encouraging comments. However, while I produced the posts I deliberately did not get involved in the page, Facebook administration, in handling comments, or in the decision on which posts to boost, all of this was left to the team. I choose, because of this research, to limit my own role to producing content (posts with images) designed to encourage interaction.

[128] Part of Facebook's commercial offering. It enables a user to pay a fee to Facebook to have their Post pushed out ('boosted') to users across selected target demographics and locations (ref: https://www.facebook.com/business/help/240208966080581?helpref=page_content, accessed November 11, 2018). It is a simple level of commercial engagement with Facebook and basically pushes a post out to people who are already Friends or Followers of a particular Facebook Page, or have a connection to Friends or Followers of that Page. As an advertising tool it may appear simplistic, but its effectiveness is based on being able to make use of the complex web of connections and links between Facebook users – to tap into that "trusted" Friends network while also segmenting that network by demographics and interests. As such it is another aspect of what The Guardian called the "dark art of political advertising online" (2018) and a successor to the first online political ads - banner adverts on the New York Times homepage in 1998.

page were monitored over the 12 days, pre- and post-election, during which the intervention took place.

Posts were sometimes suggested by the candidate, for example a Post about cutbacks to rail services prompted by a "model" press release sent by the central Party administration to local candidates. However, the majority of posts and subject matter were decided either by me as the post writer or suggested by the small group of three Page administrators (volunteers) leading the social media campaign. These administrators also made some posts themselves, as did the candidate, although these largely took the form of reposting national party material from Labour. In the week before the election, a Facebook strategy was also produced with day-by-day suggestions on subjects to focus Posts on; agreeing how the volunteers would encourage Comments and engagement by visitors; and how to deal with negative comments.

As example a series of Posts were produced on projected cuts to teaching staff at local schools (using graphs and data supplied by schoolcuts.org.uk), which proved particularly successful in attracting Likes and Comments, were also geographically Boosted to target Facebook users living near to those schools. Despite being a series of Posts, each was written in a different way so that Facebook users who saw more than one of the schools Posts, perhaps because of geographic overlap in the Boosts, would not see the same text. For example, this more general Post:

> Independent research has exposed the reality of the Tories pledge to cut £8.9 BILLION from school funding, with cuts to EVERY school in Burton and Uttoxeter.

In Burton, Abbot Beyne High faces losing 11 teachers, Paulet High seven teachers and Rykneld Primary five. Check how many teachers your kid's school will lose if May's Tories get back in at schoolcuts.org.uk

And this location-specific Post (also see example at Fig. 15):

Do you live in Rolleston? This independent report* shows that Theresa May's education plans will mean the loss of four teachers at John of Rolleston Primary School.

Rolleston Primary will have £330 less to spend per pupil if the Tories are re-elected. That's on top of taking away the youngest children's right to a free school lunch and replacing it with a 7p breakfast. If you live in Rolleston, please think about these issues and ask yourself whether you can honestly vote for cuts to your school's budget?

No vote is better than a bad vote.

Figure 15: Screenshot of example of localised and Boosted school funding cuts Post

Every Post included an image; a link to the source of the data and, particularly in later posts, hashtags and some sort of sign-off "call to action". This varied and was not consistent, as in the examples, encouraging people not to vote rather than vote Conservative: "No vote is better than a bad vote", or encouraging people to think about the issue: "Stop. Think. Vote.".

The first school funding cuts post produced used comments that the headteacher of a local school had made to a national newspaper[129] to highlight the issue. It was also the most successful of the interventionist posts, reaching 27,400 Facebook users (4,500 through paid Boosts). To put that reach figure into context, the candidate at the stage the Post was published had only 685 Followers (albeit up from 113 on May 16th, when Mckiernan's Page was first noted in the Field Log) and yet the William Shrewsbury School Post reached over 25,000 people. That only 4,500 of them were reached via paid Boosts means that the majority of people were reached because a Facebook Friend had Shared, Liked or Commented on the Post, or because Facebook's algorithms had selected to serve the Post into their News Feed.

That latter point is interesting in itself. Did Facebook serve the Post into thousands of users' News Feeds because its algorithm determined; perhaps because of user geography, perhaps because of interest in key words in the Post text, that this was something those Users would be interested in? Or did it serve the Post to users because of links between Friends (the "people you may know" factor)? Or did Facebook serve the Post to more people simply because it happened to be from an organisation that was paying to boost some of its posts? All of these options are likely and all of them are likely to have been at play within Facebook's myriad algorithms. In addition, it would make sense for Facebook, as a commercial organisation, to build into its algorithm a reward for organisations paying to promote

---

[129] Bernadette Hunter, headteacher of William Shrewsbury High School at Stretton had spoken to the Mirror newspaper about a potential loss of £100,000 from her budget, describing it as "devastating" for the school. Her quote was used as the focus for the post and included in it.

content for the first time by inflating the effect of Boosted Posts through "extra" network circulation.

Around one-quarter of the total traffic on the two Facebook pages (the candidate's campaign page and the constituency Labour Party page) gained in the three weeks running up to the 2017 election came from paid Boosts, however the overwhelming majority came from organic (not paid for) traffic. That suggests that a key driver was not the campaign paying Facebook to Boost Posts (albeit that may have been a factor, as noted above), but the quality of the message in the Post. Posts that chime with the reader are more likely to be interacted with (e.g shared or Liked by them) and that activity is picked up by Facebook's interaction-first algorithm and pushed out to more Friends in that user's network.

Taken as a whole, the 2017 data collection took the form of a case study focused on activity on a candidate's page and the opportunity to explore how content quality might affect engagement. However, the difficulty is that, while it is reasonable to assume that well-written content, crafted to encourage debate and interaction, is more likely to be shared on Facebook, it is not possible to determine with certainty whether or by how far paying to Boost some Posts caused Facebook's algorithms to Boost unpaid Posts too. This would be an area for further investigation in the future.

What was seen, and is discussed further in the next chapter, is that a combination of the quality of the Post and the enthusiastic engagement of the local social media team in the News Feed in responding to Comments, did encourage more debate, more interaction and consequently increased visibility of the candidate's page.

Another example (Fig. 16, and Post in full at Appendix 5) targeted Mckiernan's Conservative candidate rival, Andrew Griffiths, the Post designed to attack him by using his Parliamentary voting record on key issues to suggest Griffiths was an uncaring MP. It linked to a screenshot of results searchable and available through TheyWorkForYou[130].

It was deliberately written as an attack Post to test the response to negative posts about rival candidates, and it attracted a great deal of engagement. The Post attracted 75 emoji responses (the majority positive), 47 Shares and dozens of Comments, many of them separate conversations happening on the individual's Facebook Page but visible on Mckiernan's Page because of the way the social network site operates.

---

[130] A website, launched in 2004 by the charity mySociety, aimed at making democracy more accessible. It takes data from parliamentary schedules and sources and adds tools to make it easy for citizens to navigate the information to find, for example, how their MP has voted on key issues, or speeches s/he has given in parliament, or mentions of particular topics, by any MP, in parliament back to 1930. www.theyworkforyou.com (accessed November 9, 2018)

Figure 16: Screenshot of Griffiths "attack" Post

This is because the Post was Boosted for each of the towns the two MPs were contesting in the constituency, so the majority of people were seeing the Post in their own, or a Friend's, News Feed, not on the candidate's Page. That is, the Post was being seen by people outside of the candidate's page and who may never have visited the candidate's page. Which is the likeliest explanation for why Gareth (Fig. 17) can criticise Mckiernan for "standing on the shoulders of someone else so you can call

yourself tall" and Steven can ask: "But seriously, who are the other mps [candidates] for burton?" and the comments are seen on Mckeirnan's Page.

That discussion continued, with one participant submitting a link to a story in the local newspaper (the Burton Mail) introducing each of the four candidates for the constituency adding: "Hope this helps", and others arguing that Griffiths' record as a hard-working local MP was founded on good PR.

> Anna: Andrew Griffiths is, quite simply, very good at PR. He's become experienced at getting his face in the paper giving people the impression that he's doing good for the town. But his voting record – which is fact that can be denied by nobody – tells a different story. Anybody who votes to reduce benefits for the disabled is not someone who has his constituents best interests at heart

> Gareth: Anna [surname deleted] I agree he is very good at PR which is why everyone is aware that he is always out and about doing something. Is it a bad thing to try and show that you're at least attempting to earn the salary the public pay for? I have also seen his voting record. Do I agree with every decision he's made? No of course not but that's life. If we all agreed with everyone else 100% of the time then there wouldn't be any need for any of this.

John Mckiernan -
Burton and
Uttoxeter

Home
Posts
About
Videos
Photos
Likes

Create a Page

47 shares

Gareth I don't really know anything about you as before this election I had never heard of you but what I can say is that so far, nearly every post of yours that I have seen has been you telling us what Andrew Griffiths doesn't do properly rather than what you're going to do.

Needing to stand on the shoulders of someone else so you can call yourself tall is not an admirable trait.

None of us are perfect and we will all have opinions that others may not agree with but I'm not aware of a single other MP that has worked as tirelessly for a community as Andrew.
Like · Reply · 4 · 7 hrs

Hide 21 Replies

Tre Tre Yeah like saving Burton hospital, which was not under threat, nothing like scaring your constituents to make you think your working g on their behalf, Andrew Griffith's is a creep who only works for those wealthy few, the brewers and other big companies on the pretense of encouraging employment, the reality is low wage unstable employment, for the few. His voting record is appalling and demonstrates his contempt for the poor, sick and disabled, if you continue to support him you should hang your head in shame.
Like · Reply · 11 · 7 hrs

Gareth Tre Tre I have seen Andrew's proof over the potential A&E closure and I am happy that this was genuine. No one will shame me for my political beliefs the same as I won't attempt to shame others for theirs.

Interestingly I actually agree with some of the labour manifesto points but could never vote for a party that demonises people that have worked their arse off to better themselves.
Like · Reply · 2 · 7 hrs

Steven Quite right Gareth ! I can't find any other politician from burton. All I ever hear is how bad our current MP is.

What are they expecting ?

But seriously, who are the other mps for burton?
Like · Reply · 1 · 7 hrs

Figure 17: Some of the critical responses to the Griffiths attack Post

The debate continued in a similar vein with a number of participants. At times it became soapboxing but most of the time the thread showed Labour supporters responding with pertinent points and addressing criticism.

Over the period of the Stage four data collection, the number of people who had Liked Mckiernan's candidate page rose from 111 on 16th May 2017, to 238 on May 28th, the start of the intervention test period, to 666 on June 9th, the end of the period

– a five-fold increase in supporters in 12 days for a candidate largely unknown outside of the Burton Constituency Labour Party. This rapid rise did not continue after the election (which Griffiths locally and the Conservatives nationally) won – as of August 9, 2018, the page had just 679 Likes.

The increase might also be attributed to the 'Corbyn bump' (which saw a rise in interest in and support for the Labour Party nationally, building towards the 2017 election[131]). While the slow-down post-Election might be attributed to a natural tailing off of interest in someone who may or may not be the local Labour candidate for MP at an as yet unknown future election date.

However, other data is more significant in terms of the intervention and its focus on engaging content and proactive interaction. The number of people who engaged with the Page in a day by clicking on a story or responding to it rose each day a new post was released (understandably so) but increased significantly in the last days of the campaign as the volume of posts and of Boosted posts increased. So that, on 16th May, 2017, 54 unique users engaged with content on the Page; on May 28th, 279 users engaged but on May 29th, the day the first post in the intervention was published, 640 people engaged with the candidate's Page.

---

[131] The Labour Party saw a surge in support in the weeks preceding the vote. By election day, Corbyn had over one million likes on Facebook compared to just over 400,000 for May, with videos of Corbyn rallies attracting millions of views. As Shephard notes (2017): "Online the public seemed more interested in an upbeat party with things to offer than a party with less to offer and more negative ads."

In the last three days of posting, unique user engagement[132] was in three figures, with the largest number – 3,108 on 7th June; the day that also saw the biggest spike in new users Liking the Page (111), and the highest number of impressions (views) for people who had seen content associated with the Page. On that day, 35,622 unique users saw content from the candidate's Page. Of those 35,622 views, 13,494 – just over one third - came from paid views, i.e. users saw a Boosted Post including a link to the candidate's Page, with the rest coming from organic views. By contrast, the user engagement figure for May 29th, the day the first Post in the intervention was published, was 6,403 (albeit that figure was itself three times the figure on any preceding day).

What all these figures reinforce is that positive engagement with a candidate's Facebook Page can be relatively easily manufactured. The hypothesis is that engagement is created by a combination of factors: positive content written or otherwise produced to encourage support; active management of Comments with the aim of encouraging further responses; paying to Boost Posts beyond the candidate's Page to target user groups.

As caveat, the data on views and engagement is supplied by Facebook as part of the commercial package of paying to Boost content. It should therefore be looked at in the light of a commercial company with an interest in persuading an advertiser to buy more advertising. However, while that may undermine the validity of individual

---

[132] Defined by Facebook as the number of people (unique users) who have seen any content associated with the page. That will include any post or comment on posts which appear on the user's own Facebook page as well as on pages belonging to Friends in their network (and they see the content).

figures, the data pattern as a whole is one of sustained and significant growth in both content views and engagement over the period of the intervention and not only for the paid Boosted posts.

Those record figures for the page on June 7th were the result of a number of elements coming together. Firstly: a carefully written Post designed for emotional engagement; secondly a Boosted post to maximise reach; third timing – this was to be the last Post before the much-anticipated election result. And finally, a Post coming towards the end of a frenetic increase in engagement with Page visitors through responding to comments, encouraging local Party members to share content, and increasing the volume of content by re-posting and re-sharing older Posts.

As the next chapter explores further, the content produced over the 28 Posts of the intervention varied from attack posts against rival candidate Andrew Griffiths, to negative stories about Conservative policies, to positive stories about Labour policies or the candidate's values, and while attack posts tended to attract most comments, they also attracted most criticism, particularly when Boosted outside the candidate's network. For that reason, the final Post (see Fig. 62 in Appendix 5) was written to be a positive, Henry V-esque[133] 'call to arms' from the candidate to Labour supporters and voters to do everything they can to get out the vote in the final hours: "Post leaflets, chip in on the phone bank, drive a neighbour to a polling station, Facebook

---

[133] As in Shakespeare's Henry V Battle of Agincourt St Crispin's Day speech: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/11946012/Henry-V-St-Crispins-Day-speech-in-full.html (accessed November 12, 2018)

friends, workmates, children, parents and ask them to vote tomorrow for the Britain we need."

Overall, this final stage of data collection was a useful test both of how Facebook might be 'gamed' to produce more particular responses – something that had raised concerns among media analysts such as Craig Silverman (see page 70), but also of how human intervention in the form of content written to engage (*aware producers*) and the positive handling of Comments (*supportive policers*) could encourage interaction and debate, as detailed in the next two chapters.

Chapter five: Analysis and conclusions

5.1 Introduction

Taking as its theoretical underpinning Habermas's grand theory of the public sphere and its importance to democratic society, this project set out to consider the place of Facebook within the public sphere by focusing on how people engaged in political discussion on the social network service around a national political event.

The mixed methods data gathering included surveying Facebook users on how they think they use Facebook; using online ethnographic study to watch how people used it; and direct intervention to study the effects of particular uses, all within a fixed political context of the run-up to a UK General Election.

The thesis posed two inter-related questions – is Facebook, as phenomenally successful new communications medium, new public space or new public sphere? And, as phenomenally successful commercial communications medium, is Facebook capable of delivering the civic interaction necessary to an effective public sphere? Over the following sub-sections, these two questions are tackled alongside deeper investigation of the research results in relation to how people engaged in political talk.

The original contribution of this research is therefore not just to consider whether Facebook has the capacity to create a new public sphere, but to test whether, given the convergence of political time and space around a UK General Election, will the things that make Facebook attractive as a communication medium for two-billion-plus users also make it attractive as a space in which to engage in political talk?

The study hypothesised that Facebook's corporate ambition and its global scale and dominance of online social debate potentially created a new form of *social* public sphere - one that is the product of today's more horizontal networked society (Castells, 2010). As chapter one outlined, the company has set out to create not simply a uniquely popular communications tool, but a transformational

communication medium, built to encourage everyone over the age of 13 to communicate with each other on and through its services[134].

Talk, including political talk, is thus connected, is public (to degrees) and is social. Facebook, as one MP interviewed for this thesis noted, is with its users when they are at their most relaxed "on their sofa…in their own home" and thus primed to listen and engage with him and each other. It is this social aspect coupled to Facebook's commercial focus on what an individual may be (or should be) interested in that has the potential to effect change in public opinion. It is this potential that prompts the question of Facebook as public space or public sphere.

However, the counter to that potential is Facebook's cultural architecture. It may have been built to connect the world, to "give everyone a voice" as its executive officers are fond of saying, but it was not built to give them a voice to say anything in particular. Facebook's architecture (as chapter three detailed) encourages weak tie links between people who know each other in the offline world but who may not know each other well. It is designed to encourage people to make connections with as many people as possible, in order that the information data underpinning those connections (who knows who and how, what and who they have in common, what interests them, and so forth) can be mined and sold on. Further, Facebook's corporate concerns drive content algorithms which tend towards the creation of filter bubbles, and bias that can be bought by third party influencers.

---

[134] References throughout this thesis to Facebook "services" are, as previously clarified, references to the social media services operated by the company, Facebook Inc. These are Facebook predominantly but also WhatsApp and Instagram – all social network services bought by the company and integrated into its network and advertising models.

The connectedness of Facebook is to people users know of but not necessarily to people they know well or trust. This is not a safe space for open debate or dissenting opinions because it is a space shared not only with close friends and family, but with a great many people users may know but do not particularly care about, or even like. That creates a number of behavioural barriers for the user wanting to engage in political debate. Firstly, the risk to the group equilibrium of close friends and family and the fear of upsetting the people who matter most to the user[135]. There is a cost in disagreement. So, Facebook encourages normative behaviour (Miller, 2011) with language, including emoji and visual prompts, designed to ameliorate and soften the political argument being made.

Secondly, the reputational risk to the user in being seen as "too" political ("I'm not one to comment on my Political Views via social media but…" a user warns his Friends). In this, Facebook may simply be reflecting a continuing decline in the value placed on politics and political action (Dahlgren, 2003; Eliasoph, 1997; Couldry 2005) and a fashionable cynicism towards political institutions and elites.

And thirdly, the discomfort risk of finding oneself in argument, rather than debate, with people the user may not trust or know well or may even not know at all. Facebook's architecture, as this chapter explores further, means a Post made on a user's own Page, or in a "safe" space such as on a candidate's or a political group's

---

[135] Concern around upsetting group relationships by discussing politics was noted back in 1963 by Almond and Verba who, in surveying American voters on their civic and political attitudes, found that the main reason given for avoiding political discussions was that it was unpleasant or disturbed personal relationships.

Page, may travel outside of the space and time in which it was posted and be seen by unknown people in their own "homes".

Unsurprisingly then, most of the 253 people surveyed in the stage one data gathering said they deliberately avoided talking about "serious" issues on Facebook, regardless of whether these were issues they cared about. And time and again in the online ethnographic study and supporting material, people expressed their reluctance to debate politics, or to raise political points, even when in an overtly political space such as on a candidate's Facebook page. Across the 3,500 conversation openings seen, only 5 percent included reasoned political debate, with most other comments and posts simply expressing support for a candidate or a point made.

For all the opportunity presented by Facebook's global connectedness and unique scale as a public space, the reality shown in this research is that it is ineffective as a Habermasian public sphere. Users are more likely to avoid debate than to engage in it via Facebook, particularly when that five percent is compared with the seven percent of explicitly or implicitly political online conversation seen by Jackson et al in their 2013 study, or eight percent of everyday conversation noted by Almond and Verba in their 1963 seminal work on civic culture, or the 15 percent of British voters and 13 percent of American voters claiming to discuss politics most days in Bennett et al's multi-election research (1995, 2000), or the one fourth of Americans engaging in face-to-face forums and public meetings in Jacob et al's survey (2009: 26).

While the scale and connectedness of Facebook has enabled protest or political movements to quickly gather momentum (see chapter two and next section), its architecture is not able to sustain or encourage debate leading to broader civic action

199

within the context of the public sphere. Rather, Facebook's architecture has multiple chilling effects on political talk, and on debate in particular.

Further, this thesis concludes that Facebook's architecture may undermine the public or civic sphere not only by discouraging reasoned debate but by making it less likely that users will be exposed to opposing views or new ideas with which they might want to engage. A network designed to link people through shared connections – people and interests in common – will tend to create pools of the like-minded.

There is a multiplier effect at play among Facebook users. Normative behaviour offline in which people will avoid political talk is increased online because of the public risk to group norms or individual reputations[136]. And political debate that does happen is further truncated by Facebook's technical architecture which favours expansion-to-most over creating a "safe" space for person-to-person communication[137].

5.2 Facebook as new media paradigm

---

[136] Ofcom, in its 2017 survey into Adults' media use and attitudes noted that 44% of the social media users they questioned agreed that they were put off from posting content because of the potential for abusive comments or responses. Some of the older participants in the qualitative element of the Ofcom research also expressed concerned about the impact of sharing content on their reputation among friends and family, and some of the younger people about the impact on future job prospects.

[137] See also research by Rowe (2015) and Halpern and Gibbs (2013) which argued that the lack of anonymity on Facebook had encouraged more civil, normative behaviour among posters of comments to Facebook and other sites run by The Washington Post and the White House, respectively.

Chapter two's literature review began by identifying Facebook's place within a technological shift that saw personal computing reborn as personal communications, through the development of the internet as new communications medium.

The internet created a further shift, from traditional and top-down mass media to the horizontal communications media of Castell's "network society" undermining nation-state controls. With the rise of social network sites, the internet became an increasingly social space, a mirror of offline social networks but also a space for new networks to form based around shared content and shared interests.

Whilst not the first online social network site, Facebook's founders were the first to see their service as creating a "social graph" articulating the real-world links between its users. Who people are, what they do, what they say, who they know, who they care about most, who they listen to most; the articulation of these links, this graph, became an information resource to be mined by advertisers and other third-party Facebook clients. In return, Facebook's users gained bonding (emotional) and bridging (informational) social capital through using the network, and access to a service which was equal parts entertainment media and useful technology.

That latter point is important in understanding the ubiquity of Facebook. That it is not only new media but is also information technology. It not only broadcasts to users what people they more-or-less know are doing or saying, it stores a record of each user's life in pictures, video and words. It is the networked archive of over two billion people's lives in status[138] updates and Posts. Facebook's legacy may be its

---

[138] A user's Facebook status is a small piece of information posted by the user on what they are doing or feeling at that point in time. It is not the same as posting content to their News Feed, albeit the

witnessing of what people have done and said, rather than its ability to change what they do.

> We have reached the point where Facebook may be regarded as providing a crucial medium of visibility and public witness. It gives us a moral encompassment within which we have a sense not only of who we are but of who we ought to be. (Miller, 2011: 180)

One early question posed in this thesis was whether Facebook, because of its scale and reach, represented a new technological paradigm; a significant step change on an information technology trajectory that saw the internet evolve into the social web and social media sites develop common standards and a common outlook (Dosi, 1982). Certainly, Facebook would seem to display the core elements of an information technology paradigm as defined by Castells (2010). It acts on the information provided by its users; it is pervasive in scale and use; it has grown through strong networking logic in its focus on real-world relationships and weak ties; it is flexible in having given access to third party technology providers and buying up and absorbing rival social network services; it is a convergent, integrated system which operates on multiple devices and formats.

But in each of these areas Facebook is also limited. Its corporate culture is one of driving network expansion in order to mine ever more valuable data from its users. Its technological flexibility is also focused on network expansion both through reaching new users (seeking to connect people in offline parts of Africa to the internet, for example) and through developing ways to win more of the attention of

---

information could be the same. The difference is that status updates are normally notified all Friends in that user's network, whereas who gets to see a post is rather more haphazard.

existing users (developing new tools for live video streaming, virtual reality, and so forth). Similarly, openness and flexibility are skewed to and limited by its commercial interests, there is a pay-to-play factor for advertisers and developers wanting access to Facebook's users or their data.

Whilst Facebook displays some of the technology push and demand-pull factors of technology paradigms as identified by Dosi (1982, 1988) and Rosenberg and Mowery (1979), it is also a technology built on pre-existing technologies (and rival services) and little changed from its inception. It is still about the content users post, and is still primarily about the words and pictures they post, despite the more recent growth of video in posts (in itself driven by a corporate decision to target video as being something users tend to give more time and attention to).

Facebook is part of the still-developing technological paradigm that is online social media, but this thesis concludes that it is not a paradigm in its own right. It has been able to make best use of technological shifts, such as the easier uploading of photographs or the rise of smartphones but becoming the market leader – even the runaway market leader – does not of itself represent a paradigm shift in the technology. The question therefore should perhaps not be whether the emergence of Facebook represents a new technological paradigm on the information and communications technologies trajectory, but whether Facebook represents a new media paradigm and a shift in mass media communications which is shaping society.

Moving away from technological determinist theory to the media determinism of McLuhan (1964), Postman (1992), Havelock (1982) and others, posits Facebook as a new media technology which is changing how people act and think. In this scenario,

it is Facebook's strength of scale and network effects, rather than the uniqueness of its technology, that is driving societal change.

Whether through Facebook's architecture encouraging Pariser's "filter bubbles" (2011) or Kahneman's "cognitive ease" (2011), or Cadwalladr's exposure (2017, 2018) of the company's culpable negligence in enabling extremist groups to manipulate public opinion and subvert the democratic process in the US and UK - or all of these. The point remains that Facebook's *one-to-most architecture*, creating connections through people and interests in common, creates pools of the like-minded.

So, regardless of whether the user seeks it out, they will be shown more of the material they appear to like by Facebook. More Posts on subjects they have previously spent time reading; more Posts by people they have Liked or responded to; more videos on subjects that have held their attention to the end, or that they have Liked or shared with Friends. Facebook's architecture is weighted to show more of the subjects a user is already interested in; it is weighted to create cognitive bubbles. Except when, as the final research stage of this project demonstrated, it is paid to deliver new material.

It could equally be argued that this is no different to other mass media in that, as argued further in section 5.4.4, the audience has always picked their side. A Daily Mail reader or a Guardian reader; a Radio Four listener or a Smooth FM listener; Channel Four News or The One Show; Swapshop or Tiswas[139]. Postman (1985,

---

[139] Rival Saturday morning UK children's TV shows in the 1970s, BBC's Swapshop https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0236914/ and ITV's Tiswas https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0071061/ (accessed November 16, 2018)

1992) is one of many media theorists to link the desire to be informed by the news with the need to be entertained by it - and people are rarely entertained by things they fundamentally disagree with[140].

It is therefore likely that, even had Facebook's architecture not encouraged users to stay within their cognitive bubbles, users would elect to do so. Indeed, Zuckerberg himself had said it was human nature to "gravitate towards people who think like we do"[141], while insisting that because of Facebook people were exposed to a broader range of people and ideas than pre-internet. The pity is that Facebook does not encourage that diversity. The company could elect to "tweak" its News Feed algorithms with the aim of encourage more interaction through broadening the material a user sees so that those bubbles are more frequently popped.

This research set out to examine how citizens engaged with each other in political talk on Facebook. As communications phenomenon – with over one-in-four people across the globe actively using it – it is crucial to investigate not only how people engage in political debate on Facebook, but whether Facebook's architecture is able to encourage reasoned debate.

---

[140] Indeed, van Zoonen argued that Conservative and Labour parties in the late '90s and early 2000s, supported by the mass media, had incorporated the soap opera format and characters into political campaigns and coverage, including soap opera style election broadcasts and soap opera stars backing campaigns. The soap opera had become an "ubiquitous" frame of reference for presenting and understanding politics (2003: 100). Bennett too (2003: 144) noted that politicians and interest organisations had adopted highly-personalised rhetoric of choice and lifestyle values (rather than old values of sacrifice and collective good) to communicate their political messages to citizens.

[141] Source: Buzzfeed, original Zuckerberg post can only be viewed through a Facebook account: https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/zuckerberg-said-facebook-could-be-better-at-filtering-fakes?utm_term=.tqgxBJBQq#.xfo0VXVDn (accessed November 12, 2018).

This is the single largest mass media in the world. Facebook alone has as many daily active users as YouTube and Twitter combined (source: Statista, July 2018). During the week of the 2017 General Election, 48 million people visited the BBC's website or news app (source: BBC Annual Report) a record number for the broadcaster. But over 15 million Facebook users shared or engaged with content posted on the Labour Party's Facebook page alone (Lilleker, 2017).

Facebook is central to the political media landscape and a media which is not simply reflecting how citizens engage in political talk, but is changing the nature of that engagement.

5.3 Facebook as new (social) public sphere

Transcending the original purpose of a commercial public space such as Facebook to deliver something capable of influencing democracy through civic action depends both on what users choose to discuss in that space and on whether those discussions affect their thinking and actions. In addition, for that public space to enter the public sphere in the Habermasian tradition, what people say in it and what they may do as a result has to be noticed by the state, either directly or mediated by the media.

As chapter two outlined, there are a number of academic theories and assumptions underpinning the concept of the public sphere and, in order to apply those ideas to Facebook it was necessary to look at what might constitute a public sphere "test". The elements are broadly structural, representational and interactional (Dahlgren, 2005a), with the interactional dimension key to a functioning democracy. Thus, a public sphere "test" for Facebook as new media would be primarily assessing the

type and quality of interaction among its users, but Facebook itself would also have to pass structural (architecture, accessibility of technology) and representational (publicness but also corporate control, legal framework, etc.) tests.

Are people discussing matters of public interest, politics or civic issues on Facebook? Is that debate reasoned, unfettered and (reasonably) public? Is it leading to the changing of minds or the development of opinions and ultimately to the formation of public opinion? Is that public opinion being passed on to the institutions of state and governance (regardless of whether it is heeded by them)? These are the questions that would determine whether Facebook is operating as public sphere, rather than a public space in which debate may sometimes happen.

Further, what is meant by "reasoned" debate in this context? As outlined in the introduction to this chapter, there was very little debate at all and what there was tended to be short-lived. The literature is unclear on what constitutes "reasoned" in terms of quality and even less clear on what it constitutes in terms of quantity – four back-and-forth exchanges? Eight sentences exchanged? Conversational threads on Facebook tend towards discursive rather than deliberative for reasons that, as already outlined, have much to do with the architecture. Responses to a Post can be split over time and spaces – carried from one person's Facebook Page to a Friend's News Feed, to a Group Page, and the discussion picked up again by new people several days later. The ability to respond to a counter-argument is impeded.

The complexity of this "test" of Facebook's public sphere worth, lay behind the decision to focus on the 2015 UK General Election in terms of data gathering. Broadly speaking, the research sought to analyse whether, given the confluence of a) people pre-disposed to be interested in political and civic issues; b) people

207

comfortable communicating on Facebook; and c) a major political event (the UK General Election) seeking their attention, would reasoned debate happen on Facebook. By focusing on this confluence, the public sphere 'test' became a search for process of conversation, echoing Eliasoph:

> Focusing on the public sphere transforms the search for a static product – that laundry list of [democratic] facts or beliefs – into a search for a process, a process of conversation that cultivates or impairs citizens' abilities to talk, think, and imagine together. (1997: 606)

While other research has looked at Facebook's role in substantial democratic events such as the so-called Arab Spring (e.g. Markham, 2014), or the 2008 anti-Farc protests in Columbia (Kirkpatrick, 2010), the question is whether Facebook enabled the debate that caused minds to be changed or opinions to be formed, and thus precipitated the democratic actions, or simply provided an accessible communications tool for organising actions. However, while Facebook's network scale may have enabled such protests to quickly gather momentum, the evidence from this research project is that the combination of architectural and corporate limitations on the technology with the self-censoring behavior of its users, means Facebook is not able to sustain reasoned debate leading to democratic action, within the traditional context of the public sphere.

Rather than look at seismic democratic events, this research project focused on a significant yet comparatively mundane political event - that of a UK General Election, in which two-thirds of the electorate were expected to participate (British Election Study, 2015). The 2015 election (unlike 2017's "snap" election) was part of the normal elections cycle, an opportunity therefore to look at "everyday" political

talk in the run-up to an election which pundits had predicted would be a close-run result.[142]

However, in the research surveys, people said they avoided discussing serious issues on Facebook. In the emails and screenshots sent in by volunteers, people said they avoided Facebook at election times, in the thousands of posts read on political pages, people demonstrated how they generally avoided debate, choosing either simple messages or actions indicating support, or engaging in rhetoric or polemic.

Which leads to a further problem. Facebook may not be part of the traditional public sphere, but it is part of democratic change. There may be very little reasoned debate, but the scale of Facebook means very little may still be a substantial amount. And, whatever the final effect might be of Facebook's tendency to create pools of like-minded people and filtered opinions[143], the capacity for political ideas and memes to reach massive audiences "on their sofa" is influencing democratic actions.

It could be argued that Facebook as public space is little more than the successor of the town square – the place where any person might come to shout out their views, whatever they may be, and be heard by whoever was interested enough to listen. It is simply the largest town square in the 21st century's interpretation of free speech. And yet, if a person were to walk to the centre of their home town and argue loudly that

---

[142] 'Britain's election surprise', The Economist, May 8, 2015: https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2015/05/08/britains-election-surprise (accessed November 12, 2018).

[143] As caveat to this, the research of Bakshy et al (2015) which examined how over 10 million Facebook users interacted with socially shared news and information, concluded that users were exposed to material shared by Friends with ideologically opposing viewpoints and it was the action of users in choosing their Friends and in choosing what material from their Friends to read or respond to that had the greater effect on limiting their exposure to cross-cutting content. That is, their argument was that it was user actions driving algorithms rather than algorithms driving user actions.

the Apollo 11 moon landings, or indeed the Sandy Hook massacre, were faked; or that childhood measles vaccinations cause autism; or that senior Washington Democrats are running a paedophile ring, that person may find a handful of people gathered in that square who listen to and agree with their conspiracy theory. But s/he would not find 40,000 people who agree[144].

Facebook's scale means a vast number of people could crowd into that virtual town square, while its algorithms ensure that those people who believe, or have the *potential* to believe, in a crackpot theory will get to hear of it and will have their sympathy towards that idea reinforced by hearing from many other supporters. Schumpeter[145] perhaps pre-empted this chaotic demi-democratic state in describing the political "will" of citizens as composed of a "bundle of vague impulses loosely playing about given slogans and mistaken impressions." (1976: 253)

> [E]ven if there were no political groups trying to influence him, the typical citizen would in political matters tend to yield to extrarational or irrational prejudice and impulse…Moreover, simply because he is not "all there", he will relax his usual moral standards as well and occasionally give in to dark urges which the conditions of private life help him to suppress" (1976: 262)

Facebook as media paradigm has produced a shift in the type of information, including the type of news, users have access to. In controlling what users get to see,

---

[144] See this 2018 article for a recent outline of why conspiracy theorists find it easy to grow large groups of supporters on Facebook – including the 40,000 members of the largest of the QAnon conspiracy Facebook group : https://qz.com/1348635/facebook-is-a-perfect-home-for-conspiracy-theories-like-qanon (accessed November 12, 2018).

[145] Schumpeter (1976) was generally scathing in his criticism of citizens as well as their "will", arguing that the typical citizen had neither intelligence, nor interest enough to make rational political judgements. Whilst 'Capitalism, socialism & democracy' is an important work of social theory, there is a heavy bias against the usefulness of citizens and public debate to democracy.

including what they get to see from traditional news media organisations, Facebook is exerting control over the mass circulation of ideas which may influence public opinion and thus democratic actions. In that sense it is part of the public sphere.

However, this thesis has already argued that Facebook is not able to operate within the grand theory of the Habermasian public sphere because it is not able to sustain reasoned debate as precursor to democratic action. The question then perhaps for future investigation would be to ask how necessary is reasoned debate to democracy? For Facebook to be seen as part of the public sphere there needs to be a re-thinking of what the public sphere is, rather than what it should be. The scale of use of social media means that debate between citizens is mostly taking place on social media, rather than in pubs and workplaces for example. Yet that debate itself is, as this research has shown, more limited or truncated than it might be between colleagues in the workplace or neighbours in the pub.

Social media, particularly Facebook and its subsidiary Instagram, are increasingly visual rather than literate media. Ideas are presented as picture memes or GIFs[146] and it is the process of acting on that idea – sharing it, Liking it, commenting on it, adding it to a Post on the subject, that has become a new visual language of debate. Facebook's limitations in relation to enabling reasoned debate may have given rise to the "clicktivism" of low input democratic action (Gladwell, 2010), but that is to presume that a user sharing a political meme within the fluid borders of her/his

---

[146] A format for sending images, particularly moving images, as a compressed file to save memory and speed but without loss of quality. Created by a team at CompuServe, led by Steve Wilhite, in 1984. GIF stands for Graphic Interchange Format but the word itself has come to define the type of funny, short moving clip most often shared as GIFs.

Facebook page does not carry risk and therefore a personal cost. As section 5 of this chapter explores further, the need to mitigate that personal risk has encouraged the greater use of images, GIFs and emoji and changes in the way people "speak" to each other on Facebook. It has shifted how people interact socially and that includes how they engage in political talk.

It may therefore no longer be relevant, or as relevant, to argue that democracy resides with "citizens who engage in talk with each other" (Dahlgren, 2005: 149), but to focus on Dahlgren's wider concept of the public sphere as "constellation of communicative spaces" in which information, ideas *and* debate circulate (2005: 149). It is the reciprocal dynamics in the exchange of that material that matters (2005: 159). Similarly, as Bennett (2003) notes, while the personalised, what matters to me, politics of the late modern period has created distance between individuals and conventional political systems, looking beyond government we find new forms of "sub-politics" including large-scale actions, anti-globalisation protests and politically-motivated consumer choices (2003: 139).

Habermas too (1996) began to see the public sphere as a shifting and evolving constellation of communicative spaces delivering conversational webs of political talk and information sharing as underpinning potential future political action.

To accept Eliasoph's argument that "feelings" of political concern expressed publicly, even when expressed "without a language for giving those feelings socially recognizable meaning" are the substance of political life (1990: 465) repositions Facebook as part of a more ephemeral *social* public sphere. A constellation of online communicative spaces able to act at the family, group, local, national and global

level, and which enable the expression of political and civic concerns, ideas and information intended to be shared publicly and with the hope of reciprocation.

The material shared may be images or video rather than words and the expectation of reciprocation – Likes, Shares, comments etc. is the political dynamic at work, rather than the expectation of debate. The ability of those ideas or information to travel further and faster because of Facebook's architecture and corporate ecology is what may ultimately lead to political action or democratic change.

These, however, are areas for future research and, as chapter six discusses further, areas that may only be provable through the collection of a great deal more data on the dynamic movement of ideas across Facebook and into the offline political world. It is not yet possible to say what part the movement of ideas on Facebook played in the "surprise" election of Donald Trump or the vote on Brexit, compared to the also surprising election of Barack Obama as America's first black president, or the unexpected surge in young people voting in the 2017 General Election[147]. It is possible however to say that Facebook is enabling people to express and share their political concerns, opinions and ideas, rather than to debate them, and that the dynamic nature of that expression on Facebook represents a new, social public sphere.

5.4 Facebook and political talk

---

[147] Analysts put the number of 18 to 24-year-olds voting in the 2017 election at 72 percent, compared to just 44 percent in 2015. Source: 'UK Election Analysis 2017: Media, voters and the campaign'.

At the 2010 General Election, Facebook was six years old, still a private company and, with just under 500 million worldwide users - one-fifth of its 2015 size. In 2010, Facebook had an estimated 26 million active users in the UK[148] and by the 2015 election there were around 32 million UK users[149] - a figure worth noting against the 30.7m votes cast[150].

By the 2017 election, growth was slowing with some analysts suggesting Facebook use was leveling out in the UK, although Facebook itself said that 30 million people in the UK were visiting Facebook every day via their mobile phone alone.[151] Most analysts accept that half the total UK population, around 33 million people, have a Facebook account. Whilst it would have been wonderful to be able to monitor 33 million Facebook user's News Feeds in the weeks before the two elections to gather data on political talk that, as previously explained, is neither possible (through Facebook) nor ethically desirable.

What this research project was able to focus on was capturing a snapshot of political talk by focusing on public spaces on Facebook – the Pages of a representative sample of election candidates – where political talk might be more likely. The focus on candidates' pages also meant that it was possible to observe the effect of candidate interaction with page visitors in the enabling of debate, and to

---

[148] Sources: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-10713199 and http://newsroom.fb.com/company-info/ (access to both checked November 12, 2018).

[149] Facebook does not release country-by-country statistics and numbers of users tend to be estimated and based on sample surveys, and therefore vary. UK user statistics for 2015 varied from 30 million to 35 million across different sources.

[150] Source: Rallings, C. and Thrasher, M. (2015), 'The 2015 General Election: aspects of participation and administration', Elections Centre report, Plymouth University.

[151] Source: Facebook press release for advertisers: https://www.facebook.com/business/news/summer-advertising-on-facebook# (accessed November 12, 2018).

note the correlation between that activity and the final election result for the candidate. As already noted, of the 27 candidates across the four constituencies studied, <u>all</u> of the winning 2015 candidates[152] and three out of four of the second-placed candidates were also the candidates who had the most active personal campaign Pages. That is, candidates who did best in the 2015 election were those who – personally or through their agents – were seen to be most active on Facebook.

This echoes similar research by Williams and Gulati on the 2006 Midterm election in the US, which saw a similar correlation between activity on a candidate's Page and the result of the vote.

> Active engagement by the candidate and a well-maintained site can make the candidate more accessible and seem more authentic. It also can encourage a more professional discussion among supporters…. Facebook puts a face on the other supporters and facilitates interpersonal connections around activities other than politics. (2007:19)

Williams & Gulati noted, however, that that link may also be a reflection of enthusiasm for a candidate in the offline world, in terms of on-the-ground activity by supporters and increased media coverage around the most popular candidates. None-the-less, their research echoes feedback from candidates in interviews for this thesis that Facebook had helped to make a personal link between the candidate, the potential voter, and that voter's social network. Andrew Griffiths, Conservative

---

[152] It should be noted that, while the wining candidate for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Tristram Hunt) had an active Facebook page, he did not appear to take part himself in the activity on the page. As noted on page 282, the activity was by-and-large from people – perhaps Party activists or workers – outside the constituency and there was evidence that neither the candidate nor his agent was engaged in the campaign page.

candidate for Burton and Uttoxeter, was very active on Facebook both in the 2015 and 2017 election (and won the seat both times). It had been a conscious decision to make Facebook an integral part of his 2015 campaign and to build that more authentic profile:

> What Facebook allows us to do is to become more human. Because its peer-to-peer, friend to friend, neighbour to neighbour, it makes it more human. I always write and do things in good humour on Facebook, just sharing. (Griffiths interviewed July 2016)

Williams and Gulati focused their 2006 research on Facebook because those midterm elections in the US were the first in which Facebook became directly involved by setting up profile pages for candidates and encouraging users to visit them. The prompt may have been commercial – at a time of heightened election interest it makes sense for Facebook to find ways to encourage people to engage with or find out about candidates on their media platform.

By the 2015 UK general election, Facebook was being actively used by candidates, parties, lobbyists and government offices to mobilise voters: a campaign between the Electoral Commission and Facebook prompted users to register to vote on national voter registration day, while Facebook's "I voted" button was clicked by 200,000 voters an hour on May 7th.[153] Over one million extra people registered to vote between December 2014 and May 2015, although no information was available at the time of writing as to whether the register to vote campaign running on Facebook UK on February 5th, was a factor.

---

[153] Source: The Independent, May 7, 2015 'I'm a voter: Facebook and Twitter launch buttons to allow people to share that their vote has been cast' (accessed November 12, 2018).

In 2017, Facebook's involvement was – at least on the surface – limited to pushing out that "I voted" prompt button. However, it should be noted that whilst the concept of a prompt to vote may seem an innocuous and perhaps even a positive move by the company in encouraging democratic actions, the use of the button has attracted criticism[154]. It represents direct involvement in elections by Facebook (as opposed to its indirect involvement by for example, giving access to organisations seeking to influence the outcome of elections). The button's effectiveness has only been analysed by Facebook, and only Facebook knows who saw the button. And only Facebook controls who gets to see the button and which version they see. Evidence released by Facebook showed a positive effect on voter turnout (see page 91), but the converse of that is that a bump in voting could be influenced by Facebook selecting who to feed the button to.

However, while a campaign to encourage people to register vote may be measurable in terms of effectiveness by Facebook, in the same way the company might measure the effectiveness of an ad campaign for a customer, being able to measure whether Facebook is able to encourage people to engage in politics is a much more difficult proposition.

Thus, this research sought to focus on whether people who might reasonably be expected to be pre-disposed to debate issues[155] were more or less likely to do so on

---

[154] For a good outline of concerns about the button, see Hannes Grasesegger, writing in The Observer, April 15, 2018: https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/apr/15/facebook-says-it-voter-button-is-good-for-turn-but-should-the-tech-giant-be-nudging-us-at-all (accessed November 12, 2018).

[155] Either because they had shown interest in politics by visiting a candidate's Page (the ethnographic study) or because they had said they were concerned about serious issues and interested in debating issues (the surveys).

Facebook. Because if being on Facebook is a disincentive to engage in political debate, the positive democratic effect or otherwise of that "I voted" prompt is more of a concern. Actions that are focused only on the casting of a vote, rather than on the process of deliberation in choosing how to vote, limit and potentially weaken democracy.

As the following sections detail, a number of issues emerged from the research in relation to whether and how people engage in political talk on Facebook. The data showed that people are unlikely to engage in political talk on Facebook, even when visiting the page of a political candidate. However, what was also noted is that debate can be encouraged by the actions of the candidate and his/her supporters or agents on Facebook.

In summary, the conclusion from the research is that the likelihood of debate comes down to the positive actions of individuals vs the restrictions of Facebook's architecture. The five key enabling factors are:

1) the visibility of the candidate or influencer on the Page (*visible leaders*);

2) the visible management of debate (*supportive policers*);

3) material (posts, videos, comments) produced to encourage debate (*aware producers*);

4) more young, female visitors and/or liberal thinking visitors to the Page or thread (*engaged openers*);

5) the safety of conversing with like-minds (*comfortable space*).

Zuckerberg was echoing Katz in reminding his advertisers[156] that people influence people and that may often be the case in the decision to vote or buy or share a meme, but the higher personal risk involved in engaging in debate means trust and visibility are equally key to whether debate happens. Thus, whether this a comfortable space in which to debate, managed by supportive policers and with a visible leader reduces the personal risk of engaging.

Whether debate happens depends on the right people being involved. The right people are trustworthy – Friends, candidates, Page managers who are visible and exhibit the behaviour visitors want to see. The factors outlined above and below do not have to all be present at all times on a Page for debate to happen, but any one of the factors being present makes debate more likely.

The right people may be the *visible leader*, the candidate or other influencer on the Page who shows themselves to be both open to debate and also open to hearing different opinions to their own – as long those opinions are expressed politely.

The right people are also the *supportive policers* who, whether or not they initiate debate, are open to encouraging participation and to managing 'wrong' debate. They are mindful of netiquette and normative behavior in that space as supporting contributors and want to create a safe space for engagement.

Graham et al (2015) saw similar effect at work in their four-year research project looking at political talk on (non-political) online forums. They noted that political

---

[156] Quoted from techcrunch.com: 'Liveblogging Facebook advertising announcement', November 6, 2007. https://techcrunch.com/2007/11/06/liveblogging-facebook-advertising-announcement/?guccounter=1 (accessed November 12, 2018).

talk was significantly more likely to lead to political action on forums[157] where there was an active forum management team, and who occasionally encouraged or facilitated political action, on a forum which emphasised helping and supporting participants.

The *aware producers* are also the right people - purposeful, they have a reason to be there and to engage in or initiate debate. They are the sharers of challenging memes and videos, the raisers of key issues (often personalised with "I" and "we" and "you"), the responders to requests for information, and the challengers that respond to negativity with positive information, rather than barbs. They know they are addressing the people watching, rather than the people engaging in debate.

The *engaged openers* may play the same role as the aware producer or the supportive policer, but frequently move between those roles. They are there as curious and engaged citizens, either initiating debate or joining in, but clearly signaling how the debate should proceed – light, non-threatening, clear netiquette.

The *comfortable space* and lowered risk of being with like-minded people is not always essential. That space can be very temporary – comfortable for just this debate and while just these (right) people are involved, or it may be the longer-term space provided by special interest Group pages, such as the 48 percent group that blossomed after the Brexit vote.

---

[157] Specifically, NetMums and MoneySavingExpert which have a culture of sharing information and giving advice and support to members. The research project focused on how such help and support linked to discussions around personal experience of austerity might lead into political talk around the issue and then to political action.

Facebook creates opportunities that should make it more likely that the right people are there – its scale, the connectedness of its network, its ability to link people to what may most interest them. Those same elements also make it easier for like-minded people to find each other and to converse in those safer spaces.

However, while Facebook's architecture might help the right people to get together, it tends to work against them in then engaging in debate (rather than oratory) because people are not conversing face-to-face[158] or necessarily talking to each other in real time. As previously outlined, people and threads are split by time and virtual geography. Debate may start one day but not be seen in a newsfeed until hours or days later, making conversation between two protagonists less likely. Debate may start on one page or even in another technology (eg in Instagram) but be seen on an entirely different page or geography.

Thus, debates are short on Facebook because either netiquette, or the loss or lack of right people, and the time and geography limitations of its architecture, limits the length and depth of engagement and tends to focus contributions to debate on oratory.

The following sub-sections focus on aspects of the elements that enable debate, weighed against these limitations on debate. In spaces that should be comfortable, provided by and policed by political candidates and their supporters, at a time when those candidates would particularly want to present themselves as trustworthy and open to voters, and a time when people pre-disposed to be interested in politics would

---

[158] As noted by Jacobs et al in their surveys of people engaging in the public deliberation, face-to-face discussion tended to be more tolerant and reason-based - geared towards discussion based on expert evidence and orientated to reaching agreement (2009:65)

be expected to seek out such safe spaces in which to engage in politics, is debate happening?

5.4.1 Want to talk, daren't talk

One element that emerged strongly in the early part of the research was people's unwillingness to engage in discussion about political and civic issues on Facebook. Young people in particular who self-identified as interested in serious issues and keen to debate issues, none-the-less said they were reluctant to do so on Facebook.

The research had looked at whether young people in particular - those aged 18-24, who make up both the bulk of Facebook users and the group least likely to vote in a General Election[159] would make use of the new arena presented by Facebook in which to engage in political talk. The majority of survey participants (58% Journalism and Humanities and 75% of the Games Design student groups) said they were aged 18-24. This age group was also active on Facebook, with 95% of the Journalism and Humanities students and 100% of the Games Design students saying they spent between 30mins and two hours on Facebook every day.

Across the survey groups, the results also showed that these were young people who said they were interested in local and global issues and wanted to debate them. Asked whether they got upset about some of the things that were happening in the

---

[159] The British Election Study predicted a turnout in the 18-24 age group of 58% against 70% total turnout (the 2010 18-24 figure was calculated as 44%). However, despite the expressed concern for issues that might matter most to them, young people did not turn out to vote in significantly greater numbers in 2015, with 43% of young people likely to have voted in 2015, against 44% in 2010, according to IPSOS Mori: http://www.britishelectionstudy.com/uncategorized/will-younger-voters-turnout-to-vote-by-ed-fieldhouse (accessed November 12, 2018)

world, 65% said they did, while 59% said that what politicians have to say matters to them, and 66% said that they really enjoyed taking part in a good debate about serious issues. Thus, the surveys had accurately identified a target group of young people pre-disposed to be interested in political and civic issues and comfortable communicating on Facebook. The question became whether Facebook was enabling that communication to become political talk.

The stage one research – the surveys - showed that even young people who were interested in politics and in debating serious issues were wary about doing so on Facebook. The stage two field research indicated that, even when people interested in politics come together in political spaces on Facebook (i.e. candidate's sites) they will none-the-less normally avoid debate. Across the 3,500 posts and comments seen on candidate's sites during the period, only in 170 posts did citizens attempt to initiate debate by asking a question, or actively engaged in debate.

Asked whether they tended to be wary about commenting on serious issues on Facebook, 56% of the journalism and humanities students said yes, they were wary (see table 1) as did 57% of the games design students (table 2). The 'wariness' factor was actually higher among the students who wanted to debate serious issues – 60% of those students who said they enjoyed debating, said they avoided doing so on Facebook. Among the Journalism and Humanities students who strongly agreed that they enjoyed debating serious issues, 67% were wary about doing so on Facebook.

Asked whether, if they were angry or upset about something in the news they would generally say something about it on Facebook, 69% of the journalism and humanities cohort and 71% of the games design students said they would not.

The surveys had shown that these were engaged young people, two-thirds of whom wanted to debate socio-political issues, yet they routinely avoided commenting on issues on Facebook – even when moved by an issue or news story that they cared about. However much they might enjoy taking part in a "good debate", and however much they might want to reward friends who talk about serious issues[160], they were not comfortable starting debates with their Facebook Friends group - they were *'want to talk, daren't talk'*.[161]

The issue then becomes whether this response is specific to Facebook or reflective of other social forums, such discussions in a pub or in the works canteen. Academics have pointed to people's unwillingness to discuss politics – with a big or a small 'p' – in social forums. Eliasoph (1996) in her study of public meetings and civic groups noted that people were more willing to express views and deeply held beliefs than to debate them (p282), further that people often worked hard to deliberately appear political disconnected and focused only on their own, or their family's interests (1997: 640).

Bohman (2004: 136) wrote about the need for the social space to be a mutually accountable forum in which the speakers show themselves to be willing to hear each

---

[160] Overall, 53% said that if a friend made a good point about a serious issue on Facebook, they would usually Like it or reply. While, it could be argued that the question itself was skewed, in that the respondents might think "it depends" in relation to the point being made, none-the-less actions such as Like are rewards which may reinforce bonding social capital (see page 38).

[161] A similar effect was noted by Vraga et al (2015) who in their research with young people around the 2012 US elections found a reluctance to engage in political debate on Facebook because of an association with "ranters" and seeing political provocateurs deliberately stirring up trouble, coupled with wariness about who might see material posted on Facebook. These factors contributed to discomfort around politics on Facebook for all but the respondents identified as having low conflict avoidance; that is those who enjoyed engaging in conflict and political disagreement.

other and to listen with equal respect. The indefinite space offered online negates against that; the speaker becomes accountable to an indefinite audience and the greater risk that presents[162]. In an earlier treatise, pre-Internet as public forum, Bohman argued that public deliberation succeeds when participants in it feel they have contributed to and influenced the outcome, "even when they disagree with it". (1996:33)

Facebook is an online social space wherein its users share information on their day-to-day life, friendship groups and social events. It is about presenting aspects of oneself, rather than the entirety; about fitting into a median behaviour level.

The 'Why We Post' anthropological survey in global use of social media (2016) found a similar reticence around discussing politics on Facebook. Costa, one member of the research team, found that even when social media users lived in a politically contentious geographic space (the Kurdish town of Mardin, in Turkey on the contested Syrian border) and at a politically contentious time (the 2014 local elections), people still avoided discussing politics on Facebook. However, this could

---

[162] Conversely, work by a number of academics writing in the 1980s (see Rowe, 2014:124 and van Dijk 2006:) tied the relative anonymity of computer-mediated communications (CMC), including email and the early worldwide web, to increased anti-normative behaviour, arguing CMC was liable to produce more self-centred, un-self-regulated and less social acceptable behaviour (Sproull and Kiesler, 1986) because of the protection afforded by anonymity.

However, a decade later this "deficit approach" to the affordances of CMC had been replaced by a more positive, people-focused view of academics who saw users compensating for CMC's technical limitations to produce information-rich social environments online, linking and building online and offline social relationships. (van Dijk 2006: 239)

be as much a reflection of fear over who, from state agencies, might be watching as an indication of users avoiding upsetting social norms by introducing political talk.

The researchers found that, across all the geographic sites studied, political talk was less likely to happen on social media than offline. Concerns with maintaining relations with their social media networks, coupled with (in locations such as Mardin) fear of state monitoring of the social media, meant that social media became a conservative space for expressing shared political values and social norms, rather than for debate. (2016: 146)

But for the young people surveyed for this research, the fear of who may see what they post is more about who among the people they *know* will see it. Miller (2016) spoke about how the people he studied were most concerned with avoiding posting anything on social media that might offend relatives and friends, it was just "not sensible [for them] to talk about politics in such a contentious space" (Borgerson and Miller, 2016: 4).

Perhaps the issue is one of privacy. Almost all the survey respondents (91%) agreed or strongly agreed that it was important to manage their privacy settings on Facebook, and 79% said they did not post anything on Facebook without thinking about who might see it. There is a self-censoring of what is and is not posted; what is and is not revealed about the user's "true" life and feelings. And within that, one of the things these young people choose whether to reveal or not to reveal to their (on average) 300 Facebook Friends, is their political thinking.

Albrechtslund (2008) wrote of the "participatory surveillance" embedded in online social media, with users aware of and accepting that they are watched. That

awareness, he suggested, could be empowering with users choosing what and how they presented themselves to that online gaze. Knowing they are being watched, they may construct or reshape their online identity, meet people, and gather information to reflect an online persona.

But this awareness of online surveillance and people's readiness to accept it in return for the usefulness of social media, may also induce a readiness to accept increased surveillance in the offline world by police and security forces. The necessity to provide a safe space online, managed by those supportive policers of debate, is in that sense no different to feeling able to raise an issue in a comfortable offline space, whether that be the home, workplace, or the local pub. The wanting to talk and the likelihood of talking is tied to the perceived safety of the forum, and the safety of the forum is tied to who is present.

These young people are interested in issues, sometimes passionate about them, and keen to debate serious topics, but who spend a great deal of their day-to-day life within Facebook and other social media. If, within that space they are, as the survey results suggest, continually self-censoring what they choose to comment on, then the online world they are building will necessarily become more a surface, ephemeral and politically disengaged world than they actually want.

5.4.2 We're all Friends here (comfortable spaces)

Between the 2015 and 2017 elections, there was a shift in the creation of those online safe forums, with an increase in the compartmentalization of social media by users for different purposes. WhatsApp, the closed groups communications network

bought by Facebook, almost doubled its active monthly users between April 2015 and July 2017 – from 200m worldwide to 1300m (Statista).

By 2017, 44% of UK adults were regularly using WhatsApp, against 69% using Facebook and 29% Twitter[163]. A similar report by Ofcom, in 2017, noted that while the number of adults with a social media profile had not increased between 2015 and 2016, the number of site or apps on which they had a profile had increased markedly, with an increase in the social media users who had a profile on six sites or apps – including 45% of users having a profile on WhatsApp, up from 28% in 2015, and 31% on Facebook-owned Instagram (up from 22%).[164]

The ability to tightly control who was in a WhatsApp group, and to belong to multiple groups for different purposes, may have created safer spaces in which debate might happen. However, the nature of WhatsApp and similar services such as Facebook Messenger (also with 44% UK market penetration) is short messages and therefore short conversations. Future research might determine whether the ability to hold conversations in closed messaging groups of friends or relatives enables debate.

People may be part of multiple WhatsApp groups, use message boards, online forums, Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook as communicative spaces and the audience within that particular space determines the content that is shared. The spaces and the content are compartmentalized.

In the "polymedia" (Madianou & Miller, 2012) world of multiple social media spaces and new media communication services, users are able to create or find safer

---

[163] Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Digital News Report 2018

[164] Ofcom Adults media use and attitudes report 2017

spaces in which they might – *might* – feel freer to raise the sociopolitical issues they care about. Madianou and Miller gave the example of users moving from the indeterminate publicness of Facebook to a private messenger group if a quarrel began, or if they wanted to raise personal or emotional issues. This choosing of different interpersonal communicative media – this polymedia approach – represented, they argued, a shift towards a more socialized and holistic conception of media.

The caveat to that is Dahlgren's point that whilst it is understandable that groups may want to coalesce internally before presenting their ideas to the broader public sphere, such "cyber ghetto" may threaten the shared culture and integrative societal function of the public sphere (2005: 152)

Political action as a result of such interpersonal communications depends not on volume (how many people support a candidate) but on who is supporting that candidate. It is not enough that a user is notified by Facebook when one of their friends has voted, or Liked a candidate's Page, or joined an issue Group. What matters more is whether that is a trusted friend.

Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955, 1957), in their research into who influences decision-making within personal social networks, noted that the flow of political messages was more effective when communicated via a trusted friend. Those influencers are not necessarily obvious (e.g. close family members, best friends) but the people whose opinions are trusted most.

In the surveys for this research, the students were asked whether they "look out" for key people in their Facebook timeline ("when they post something I always read

it") and 79% said they did so. While this response is a reflection of who they were interested in as individuals – i.e closest friends, partner, class mates, etc., the research by Katz, Lazarsfeld, Bond et al (2012) suggests these could also be the people likely to have most influence on a Facebook user.

As an avenue for potential future research, that link between "favoured" Facebook Friends and the sharing of socio-political views would be worth exploring. If Facebook offered mechanisms to more effectively "sort" and prioritise friendship groups (in the way, for instance, that its subsidiary service WhatsApp does) rather than only focusing on building one-to-most networks, then users may be more willing to engage in political talk.

However, Schudson (1997: 299) spoke of the need for democratic debate to happen in "profoundly uncomfortable" public spaces, among people of different values and backgrounds. The process of being exposed to and willing to debate differing views is key.

Facebook Friends are not generally homogenous; as well as having varying values and backgrounds, around 23% will have an opposing political ideology (Bakshy et al, 2015). It is, as previously outlined, an uncomfortable semi-public space and if, as Schudson suggests, uncomfortable is necessary to democratic debate then sorting interpersonal groups into comfortable and uncomfortable spaces for political talk would not deliver the open arena of an effective public sphere.

Zhang et al (2010) echoes this sentiment, concluding that to stimulate civic and political participation "we need to focus on encouraging citizens to engage in interpersonal discussion about politics" (p87).

Schudson spoke of the need for truly democratic conversation to be among heterogeneous, rather than homogenous, groupings of people (1997: 302) where participants had equal access to the 'floor', but also:

> equal participation in setting the ground rules for discussion, and a set of ground rules designed to encourage pertinent speaking, attentive listening, appropriate simplifications, and widely apportioned speaking rights. (p307)

Could that ideal be applied to Facebook? Certainly, individuals have equal access to the 'floor', in the sense that anyone can join Facebook and create their own social group – their Friends – with whom they might discuss issues, and those Friends might participate equally in any discussion. However, as this chapter has argued, that space is an indeterminate and often unmanageable space and one in which the young people surveyed for this research do not feel encouraged to exercise their speaking rights.

Stage one of the research had suggested that young Facebook users who were predisposed to debate politics were generally uncomfortable doing so on their personal Facebook Profile. Therefore, the second research stage investigated whether users were more comfortable debating issues on public Facebook sites which were clearly political, i.e. would those Facebook users predisposed to engage in political talk seek out like-minded strangers on the site? And, when they did engage in debate, what was the quality of that interaction – were these citizens engaging in the reasoned and reasonable political talk of the public sphere?

As previously mentioned, one thing that proved to be ethically and technically impossible in this next, online ethnographic, phase of the research was to follow the students in the survey groups onto Facebook to watch their online interactions. What

also proved difficult was trying to target the same demographic on the public (candidate) political Pages. The fieldwork - looking at candidates' Facebook Pages and some of the visitors to those Pages - was dependent on who appeared in the timeline or message thread on each visit. Further, it was difficult to identify the age and background of the visitors. Information about the identity and social group of a participant in a debate was largely only available via their personal Facebook Profile and, depending on that individual's privacy settings, was frequently restricted to a profile picture, location and a few posts.

It was not possible to filter Comments and Posts by age group, and the only way to tell whether an individual was more generally interested in politics was whether their privacy settings allowed enough content through to see evidence of that interest – for example in Groups they belonged to, or other posts and comments they had made. However, it is reasonable to assume that for someone to visit a political candidate's Page and post a Comment, then they were likely to have an interest in that candidate or their Party (supporting or opposing); or in civic or political issues; or in the General Election itself - i.e. they were 'want to talk, here to talk' in a space they may expect to be more comfortable.

And, as the following section details, these were not necessarily people coming together to debate with like-minded people. The issue of people engaging in debate on a Page belonging to a candidate they were not able to vote for, or even a candidate they did not plan to vote for, was something seen often during this research. What mattered was that they felt comfortable raising issues in this space.

5.4.3 Politics over, nothing scary happened (engaged openers and supportive policers)

The fieldwork stage focused on looking for political talk. In particular, looking for political talk indicative of the open debate among citizens on which public spheres theory is focused. Thus, when the 'predisposed to talk' groups debated political or civic issues, did they do so in a way that was public, reasoned and reasonable, with the aim of forming or informing opinions? As chapter three outlined, the data gathering focused on looking for debate rather than oratory, even though the latter might also have the aim of informing others or directing opinions on an issue.

By extension, it was not relevant for talk to be coded as explicitly, implicitly, or not political - the assumption would be that the majority of talk within these political online spaces would be explicitly or implicitly political. The content therefore needed to be coded in a much more direct way in order to distinguish between political *statements* (oratory) and political *debate* (discussion). The research was focused on debate – the reasoned exchange of views – not simply the airing of them.

As example, a thread on the Stoke-on-Trent UKIP Page began as oratory from Facebook user Jason about local councils, the EU, multinational companies and perceived preferential treatment for migrants ("whilst we are in the EU we are seeing local people put at the back of a housing waiting list that is seeing hundreds of migrants pushed right to the front"). But, rather than a racist tirade, Jason ends his oratory with the conciliatory "Rant over" – a signal that he recognises others may not agree with him. That recognition acts as an invitation – to which Rich responds (see below and Fig. 18).

Jason: [continues] and we have the local Labour party to thank for the neglect towards local hardworking people. Rant over.

Rich: You're right of course in some ways Jason but you need to articulate the message properly if we're going to take it to the bleeding edge…[continues]

Addressing each other by name as a signal that they intend to be reasonable.
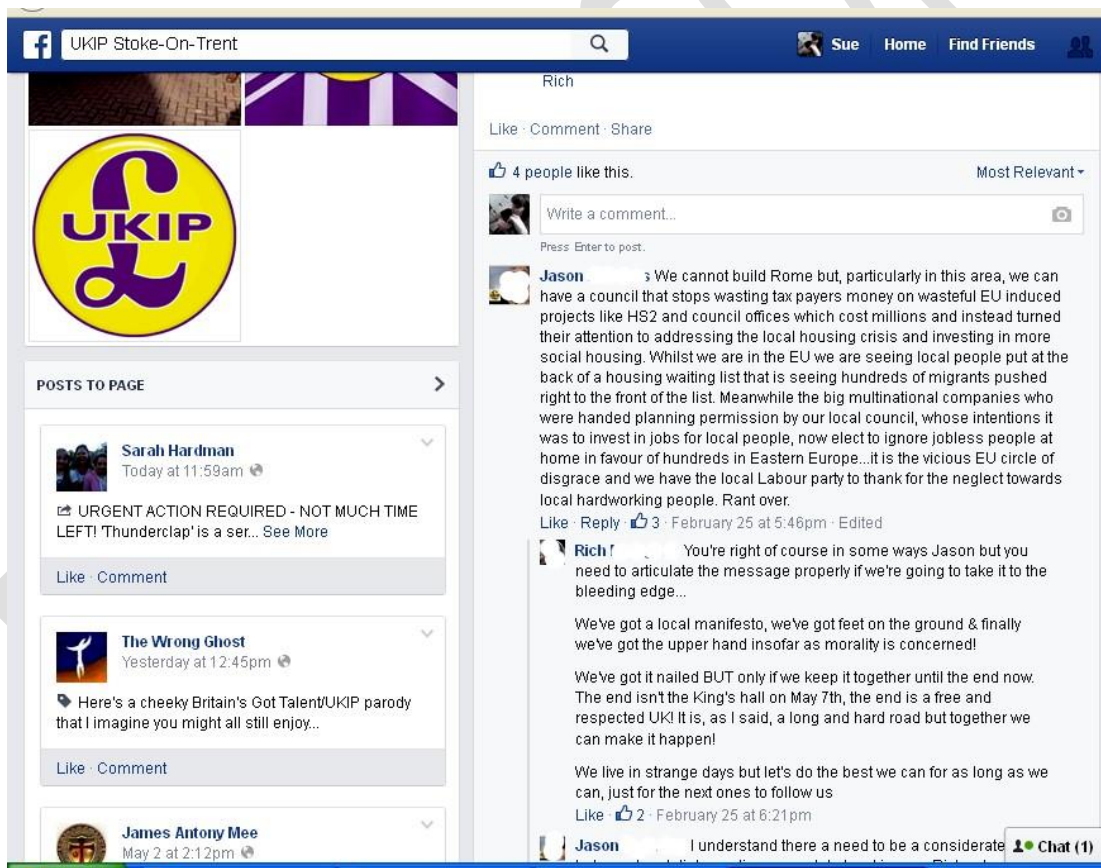
Figure 18: Screenshot of civil opening of debate

Essentially, Jason and Rich are on the same political side, but the exchange becomes a debate as Rich responds to Jason, by trying to persuade him to become more engaged in debate and a stronger advocate for UKIP policies.

Jason opens a sentence with "I understand [however]", Rich with "I agree [but]" and in doing so, both signal willingness to continue the debate. Then, whether to challenge Jason or having tired of the discussion, Rich veers from reasonable debate towards personal criticism ("essentially spouting lefty lies") and back to oratory ("We need everyone to stand up now…"). Jason does not respond and the discussion ends (Fig. 19).

Note, in Figure 18, that almost apologetic sign-off to making a political point from Jason of "Rant over". This ameliorating of the expression of strong political opinion was seen frequently during this second stage research. Another example is pictured in Figure 20, from the Facebook page of Jason P, ending his passionate exhortation to his Friends to vote with: "I'll step off my pulpit now" and a smiley emoji.

Figure 19: Screenshot of end of debate
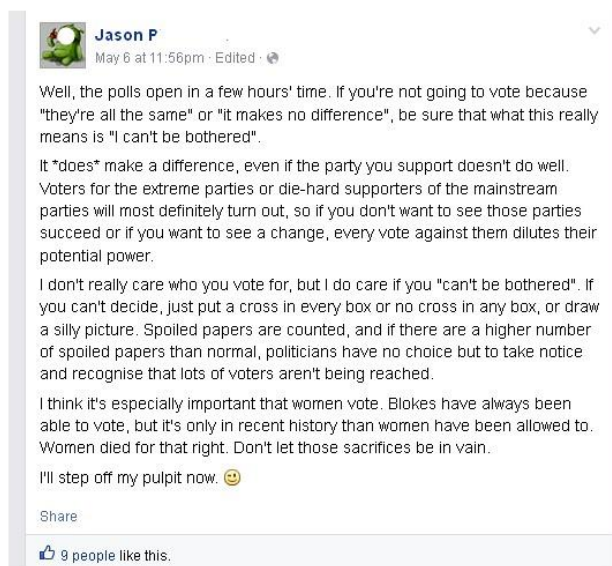
Figure 20: "I'll step off my pulpit now"

Willingness to be "reasonable" in debating on Facebook was frequently signaled

by an apology for having raised a political issue within the highly mediated political

talk typical of online forums (Jackson et al, 2013). Saying what s/he might think about a political issue - even when writing on an overtly political site – takes what Eliasoph defined as "cultural work" (1997: 607). The task of transmuting the citizen's feeling of powerlessness against the weight of powerful elites into expressions of self-interest on an issue. Producing political apathy takes work too, the culture of pervasive political avoidance Eliasoph noted needs to be maintained by hard work and peer reinforcement. Thus, when people do engage in political talk, however tentatively or briefly, how they talk to each other matters.

> If we recognize that producing apathy takes a great deal of work, then we may find an unnoticed reserve of hope; we may begin to draw out the contradictory, tangled, democratic impetus embedded in citizens' everyday interactions – and also the impetus toward self-enclosed, narrowness embedded in these same interactions. (1997: 606)

Expressions such as "rant over" or "step off my pulpit now" signal reasonableness by undermining the importance of what is being said – the suggestion that this may be political talk, but it is couched in terms of political apathy. This is only "my pulpit" and it won't change a damn thing. A signal of reasonableness and an invitation to others to step in by implying "it's ok, the politics bit is over, nothing scary happened".

So, Michelle feels it necessary to temper her strong views ("if Labour get in omg God help us") in consciously chatty language and a visible willingness to listen to opposing views (Fig. 21). Writing on her own Profile (and picked up by Burton & Uttoxeter Conservative candidate Andrew Griffiths because of the hyperlinked name check in her Post) she is happy to debate with her non-Conservative-voting "girlys" because more people "should attend debates and understand politics" and, perhaps

because she is comfortable talking with this particular group of Facebook Friends, happy to encourage them to participate in the election:

> "don't want to get in to a row over politics Hun you can vote who like. I'm all for free speech and free country just as long as people vote can't do with the moaners then they don't vote [smiley]"

The netiquette is particularly interesting – the women in this conversation called each other "Hun" (short for honey) and acknowledged the other's opposing view – reassuring themselves that the friendship (at whatever level it was on Facebook) would not be adversely affected by their debating from opposing political sides.

Michelle, like Jason earlier, is an *engaged opener*. Curious and engaged citizens, often young and/or female and/or liberal, who either initiate debate or join in, but clearly signaling how the debate should proceed through light, non-threatening language and clear netiquette. Engaged openers may move between that role and the role of the aware producer or the supportive policer in continuing to set the terms or standards for the debate.[165]

When another Friend, Rockin Ratbags, joins this debate and also disagrees with Michelle's political position (Figs. 22 and 23), he eventually signals an end to the discussion with an invite to his gig – an olive branch she happily accepts (Fig. 24).

---

[165] Graham and Wright (2014) wrote about "superparticipation" by what they termed as superposters, agenda-setters and facilitators observed on the online forum moneysavingexpert.com, and who similarly might move between the categories and influence debate. While largely focused on volume – the superposters who dominated the forum by quantity of posts (primarily, the researchers note, as replies to other posters), the agenda-setters and facilitators they suggested may have greater influence on the nature of the debate that occurs.

Michelle and Ratbags are the debate leaders and once this transaction happens they stop, ignoring the more strident points made by the newcomer Matt (Fig 24).

There is reasonable debate here but no changing of minds and fairly short-lived reasoning at that, perhaps because the participants are too quick to end discussion if it seems to be getting too serious and therefore a potential risk to the equilibrium of the Friends group. Michelle as engaged opener has initiated the debate, been visible in encouraging participants, but also visible in policing how the debate should be conducted and when it should end.
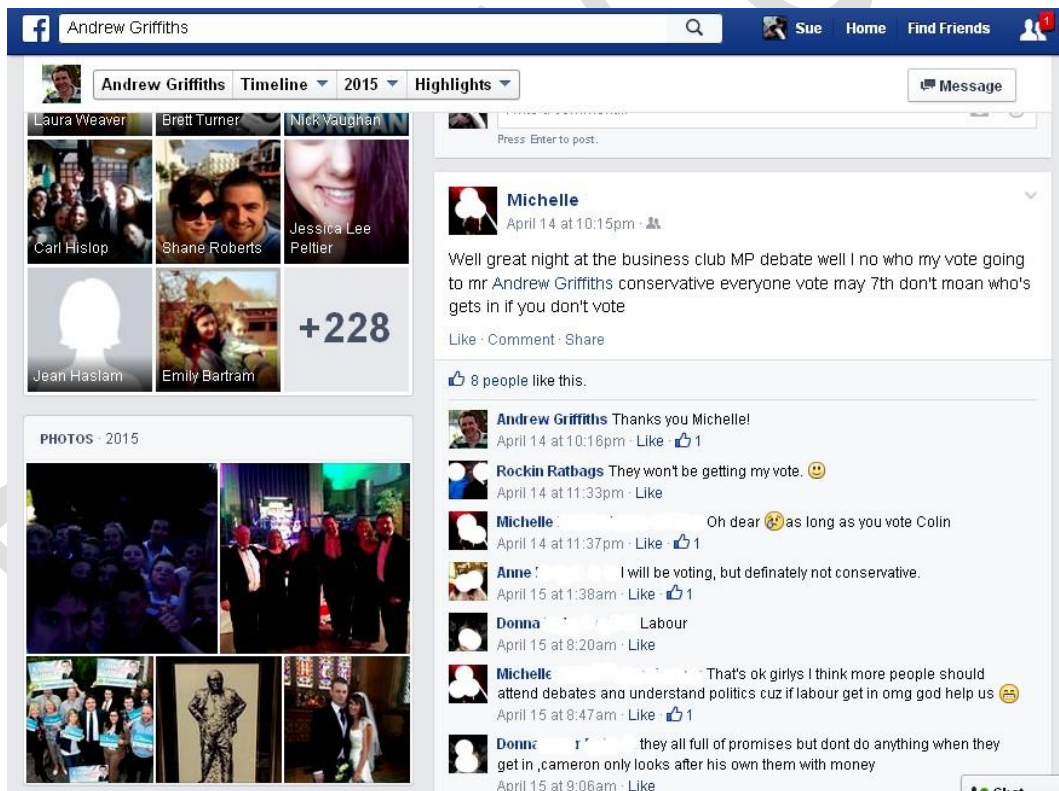
Figure 21: Michelle's use of chatty language such as "girlys"
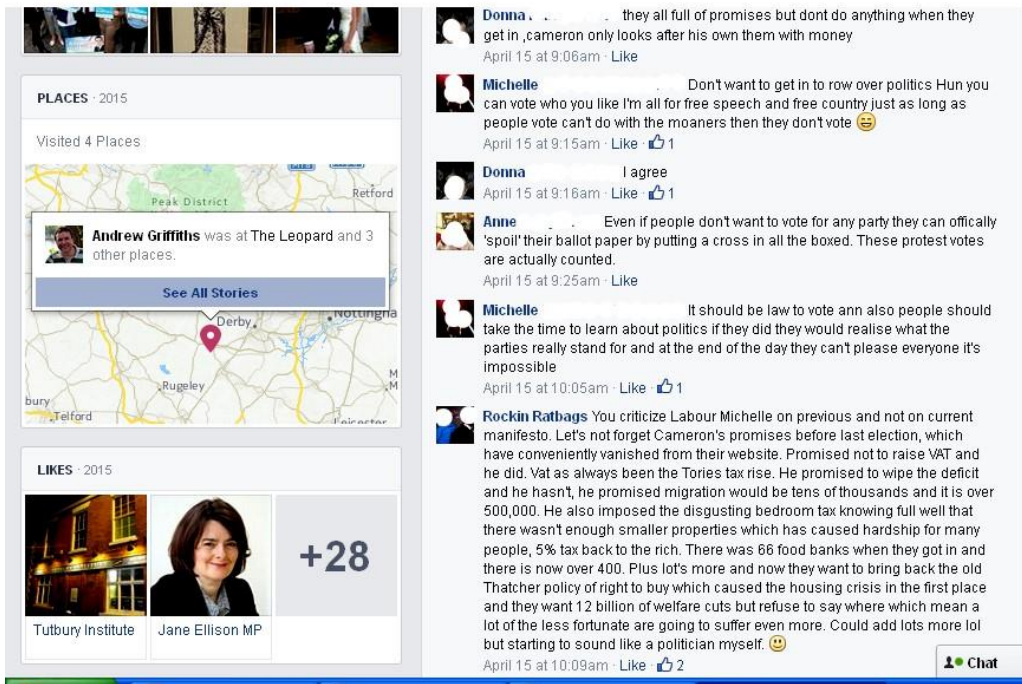
Figure 22: Progression of debate and risk to group equilibrium
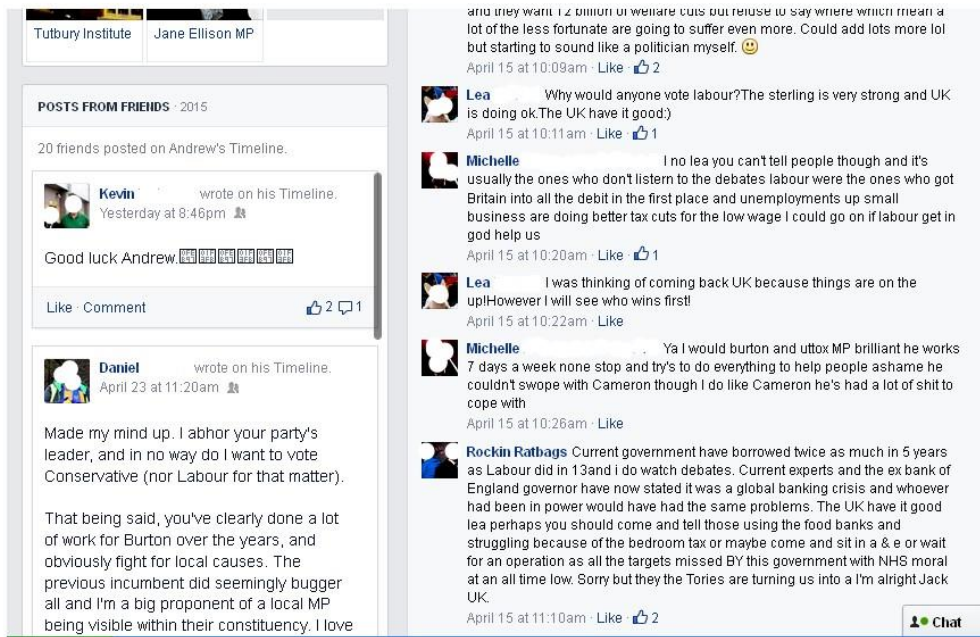
Figure 23: Further debate between Michelle and Rockin Ratbags

240
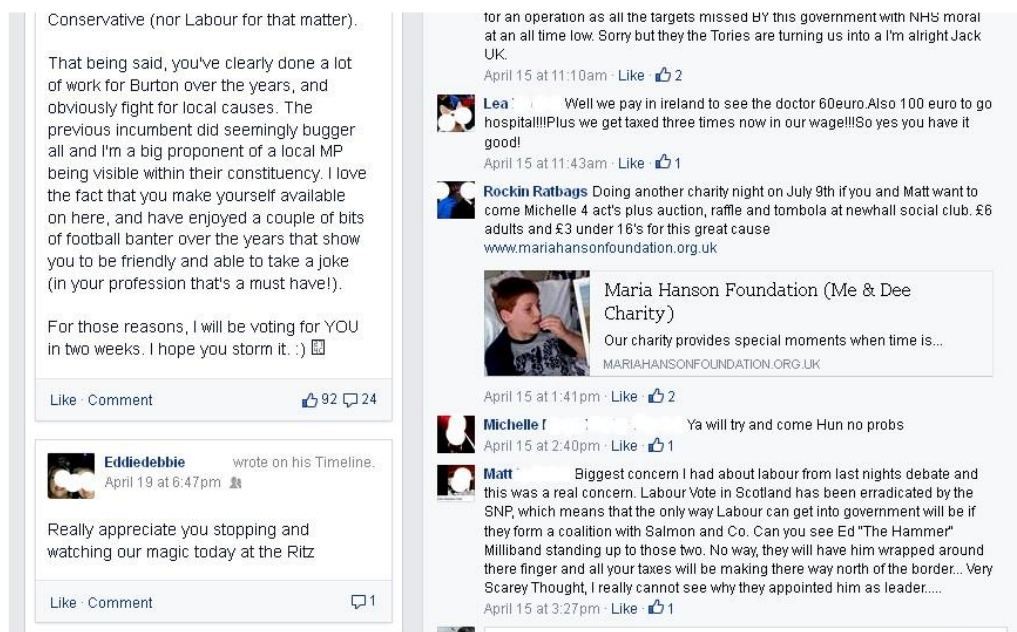
Figure 24: The "olive branch" ending of the debate

Alongside the "hun" and "girly" and addressing each other by name as signaling

respect and therefore intended reasonableness is the use of irony, jokes and emoji.

Kohn (2000) wrote of "irony, personal narrative, aesthetic interventions, theatricality

and visibility as indicative of discursive, rather than deliberative, democracy and

more reflective of real-world political talk than Habermasian bourgeoise ideals

(2000: 425). Thus, in the conversation mentioned on pages 175-8, Kevin brings to a

close a similarly limited debate (because he and Mark are too entrenched in their own

point of view) with his final and ironic use of "mate": "Well you have your view

mate and I have mine and never the twain shall meet".

There were many similar examples of people apologising ahead of making a

political point or tempering their views in order to mitigate risk to themselves or the

group. Tony, in a screenshot of a debate submitted by one of the graduate volunteers

241

opens with the apology: "I'm not one to comment on my Political Views via social media but…", before showing his hand holding a UKIP poster he'd torn down; one of "14 or so". Then, like Ratbags and Jason, he wraps up with his own version of 'politics bit over, nothing scary happened' with this reassuring invitation:

> "Now what's everybody wearing to the Polling Station? I'm going with brogues, skinny black jeans, and a white grandad collar shirt."

His Post attracted several replies in kind: "Cowboy boots, black slim boot cut jeans, blue collarless Indian Cotton shirt. Obvs" from Emily; "Daisy Dukes and a bikini on top #californiagurrrrrl" from Michelle B; and "Work uniform, sadly" from Cathy. Note the willingness of women to engage in replying, they may not have initiated the debate but they joined in as engaged openers, following and continuing the netiquette path begun for them.

The research of Miller et al (2016) suggested that most users avoided debate and serious political comment on Facebook, but might share humorous political memes as a means of entertaining friends or reinforcing group norms.

> Serious memes and comments are mainly found either among the highest income groups who favour green issues or among the lowest income groups who live in social housing and promote nationalist causes such as supporting the army or banning immigrants. (2016: 147)

Whilst the use of memes was noted in the online ethnographic research stage of this project, and appeared to be particularly prevalent on the Facebook page of the Brighton & Hove UKiP group, there was no particular pattern noted. This was in large part because of the technical and ethical limitations in being able to look at the Facebook Pages of individual citizens, which meant there was insufficient data to see

any pattern in relation to who more typically posted memes. For example, this excerpt from the May 7, 2015 log, looking at the personal Facebook page of a Green party supporter who had participated in a debate on Brighton Pavilion Green candidate Caroline Lucas's Page:

> Decided to look at sample of commenters who had replied to others in thread.
> Sue [166] (replied to Jan) – not local, but Talitha is.
> Talitha [her Facebook Page]:
> 200 friends.
> Last 20 posts, 15 political (mostly Green-party related); 5 not political (mostly memes). Lots of posts from her giving advice and info on voting tactically and vote swapping, plus plugs for campaigns for more independent press.

And a similar excerpt looking at the participants in the Michelle/Rocking Ratbag debate seen on Conservative candidate Andrew Griffith's Page and mentioned earlier:

> Looked at debate participants – six involved in debate, plus the candidate. Two of six had other political content on their personal page (mostly viral memes etc) but didn't belong to any political or campaign groups, four had no political content or I was barred from seeing posts.

The sharing of memes, GIFs and videos may be perceived as less threatening to group norms than words written in a post or comment. It is less personal, less "owned" – produced by someone else and shared as in part to entertain Friends and in

---

[166] Again, full names made in the field notes have been anonymised to first name only in the thesis.

part to share ideological "badges" as tribal identification – every Like from a Friend is signal from a like mind.

Facebook began as a medium designed to use words. The ability to share photos was not added until 20 months after the site launched (see page 31), but it is a communications medium that has become increasingly visual, not least with the company's buying of photo-sharing site Instagram and the launch of Facebook Live video. Sharing a well-crafted meme by someone else is an easy and less personal way to participate. That visual communication also makes it easier for people who may be uncomfortable with their use of written language, particularly to deliver socio-political opinions, to participate in a visual sharing of ideas. The sharing of visual memes etc. is one way to reinforce tribal identification, but political talk can also become a tool for reinforcing the socialness of the group by restating generally shared attitudes using humour. So, Sam tells his Facebook Friends (see Fig. 25):

> As an active participant in our government and democratic process for five minutes today, I would like to claim expenses for the twix I ate on the way to the polling station

> "Seems fair" replies Simon.

This willingness to engage in politics and make a serious point while couching it in terms designed not to prompt argument - an apology, a humorous sign-off - was seen to happen more often on Posts by women and by younger people.

Stacey does not "normally mix social media with politics but…" before urging her Facebook Friends (via Instagram, linked to her Facebook feed) to vote to save the NHS. She adds hashtags (Fig. 26) showing her awareness of how messages are reinforced over social media. She may have started by apologising for making a

244

political point on social media, as in many of the examples shown, but none-the-less

she uses SEO tools such as the hashtag to help her point reach a wider audience

beyond her own Facebook Friends.

Figure 25: Use of humour to maintain group equilibrium
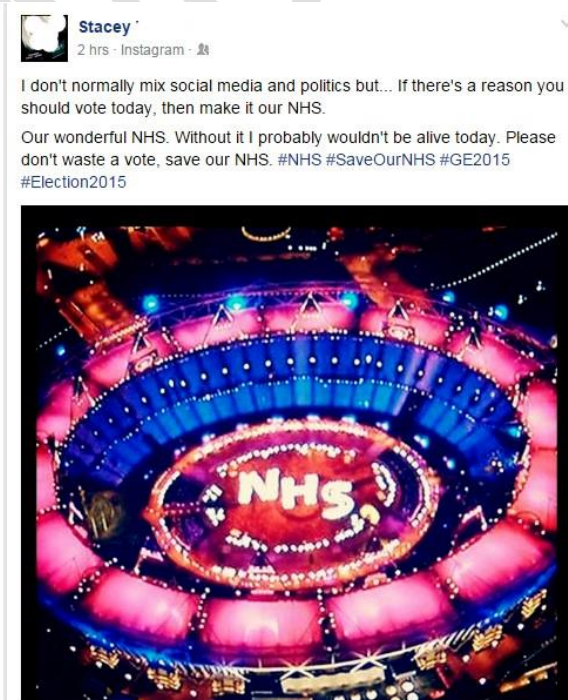
Figure 26: Apologetic opening and use of hashtags

And in the following exchange (copied below and pictured at Fig. 27) the use of emojis, "lol" and "X" are used to keep the debate reasonable and maintain group norms, while the discussion is brought to a halt by Michael's "never use Facebook on election day" sign-off:

> Ryan: If you don't vote you have no right to complain [smiley] that's how I see it lol

> Hannah: Also one other little thing that bugged me but may have changed not sure… from 16-18 you have to pay taxes yet cant vote? Think that seems a bit wrong.. X

> Ryan: I think it's where you can register to vote at 16 but can't actually vote till your 18 that's all I know

> Michael: Election Day, never use Facebook on Election Day. On that note bye!

That "never use Facebook on Election Day" exhortation appeared frequently during the field research. This comment, from (non-Staffordshire University) Journalism student Alessandro, who sent the screenshot of that exchange:

> A majority of my friends did not have anything to do with the election on their Facebook. Only a couple of dozen posted anything throughout Friday.

> What was interesting is that I was on Twitter and my friends who did not comment on Facebook, were commenting a lot more on Twitter. Using hashtags e.t.c. I was on Twitter more during wed-fri as I was live-blogging it and I saw a lot more commentary by my 'twitter' followers (Many of them also my friends on Facebook) than I did on Facebook.

>> I spoke to some people and a lot of people on the 7th turned Facebook off effectively because they were fed up with the 'I voted in GE2015' statuses that Facebook posted for you if you clicked on the button.

246

Despite this reticence to engage in debate on Facebook, when debate did happen it was seen to be almost always polite and civil. Among the 3,500 posts read during the research period, only one debate (between a small group of older male Conservative and Labour supporters) became a full-blown argument. This echoes the findings of Papacharissi (2004) who, in her study of 300 online debates found posts to be predominantly civil, and Halpern and Gibbs (2013) who found people tended to be more civil with each other on Facebook than on YouTube, even when discussing sensitive topics such as gay marriage or the Iraq War.[167]

---

[167] The study looked at 7230 posts made on the public Facebook and YouTube channels managed by the White House. It found that user-to-user posts made on Facebook (versus posts made on YouTube) tended to be longer; more polite; less frequent (that is, poster may only make one comment rather than several comments in a thread. A factor the researchers interpreted as more egalitarian in that users were ceding the floor to each other. However, this could have been a factor of the architecture of Facebook in breaking threads by time and space, as discussed in this thesis in section 5.6, and that users who engaged in discussion on sensitive topics tended to do so in a more reasoned way - presenting more arguments, citing more external sources, and providing fewer unfounded claims (2013: 1166)

Figure 27: Discussion with "never use Facebook on Election Day" sign-off

By-and-large, when an individual made an aggressive or personal remark it was either ignored, or other people – the *supportive policers* - would deliberately try to move the discussion on to a more civil level. For example, a debate on Caroline Lucas's Page (Brighton Pavilion Green Party candidate) began with participant Oliver trying to rile (trolling[168]) Green supporters by questioning whether they had

---

[168] Trolling, or to troll, is a process of online goading of (generally) individuals by other individuals. Defined by the Oxford Dictionary as making a deliberately offensive or provocative online post with the aim of upsetting someone or eliciting an angry response from them.

read the manifesto of "this looney party" (excerpt copied below and see Fig. 28). The tetchiness almost turns to argument at several points:

> Neville: Whom do you intend to vote for, Oliver? What are the top three reasons?...Oh wait, I've seen the poppies and England flag on your page. Let me guess, Sun reader? UKIPer at heart but voting Tory?

> Oliver: I haven't decided although I won't be voting for a party which welcomes a recession and thinks it's ok to be a member of a terrorist organization…Yes the poppies are very important. They represent those who gave their lives for this Country… if the likes [sic] of the Green party which hates this country.

> Emma: Oliver you sound like a Britain first member. Take your fascist views and express them to people that are interested.

> Jordan: [in two posts supporting Oliver] It's like you only have to mention the word 'immigration' to the Green party and other political parties and you get the 'race' card thrown at you!
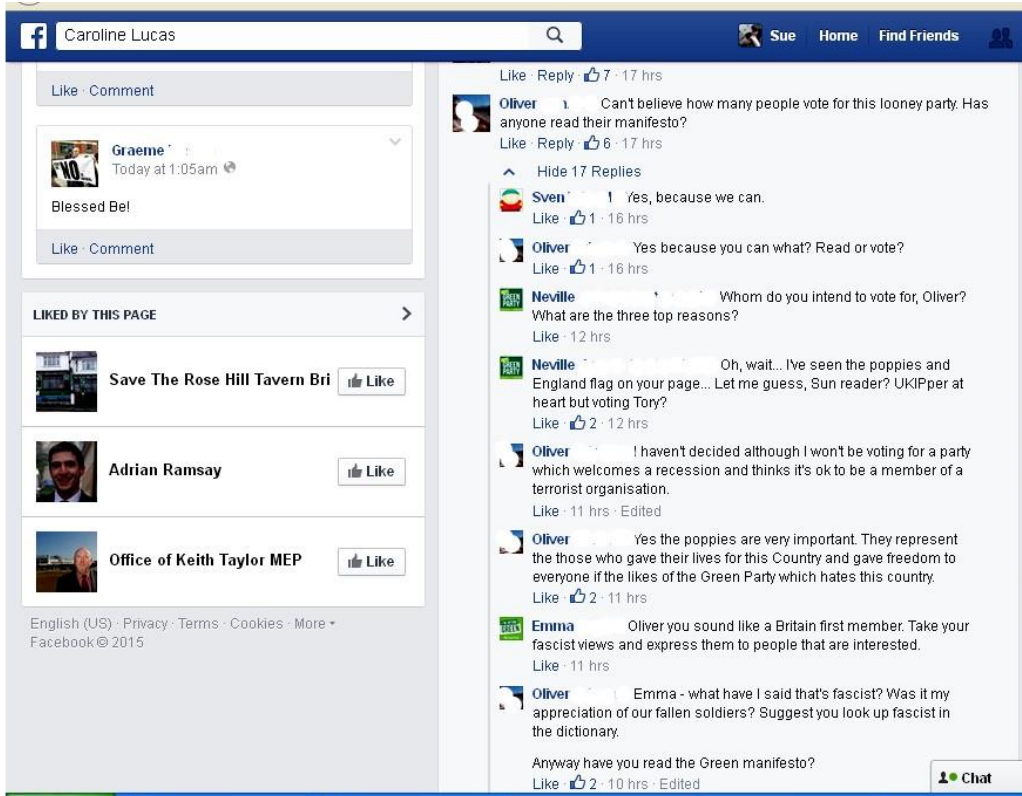
Figure 28: "Tetchy" debate seen on Caroline Lucas' Page
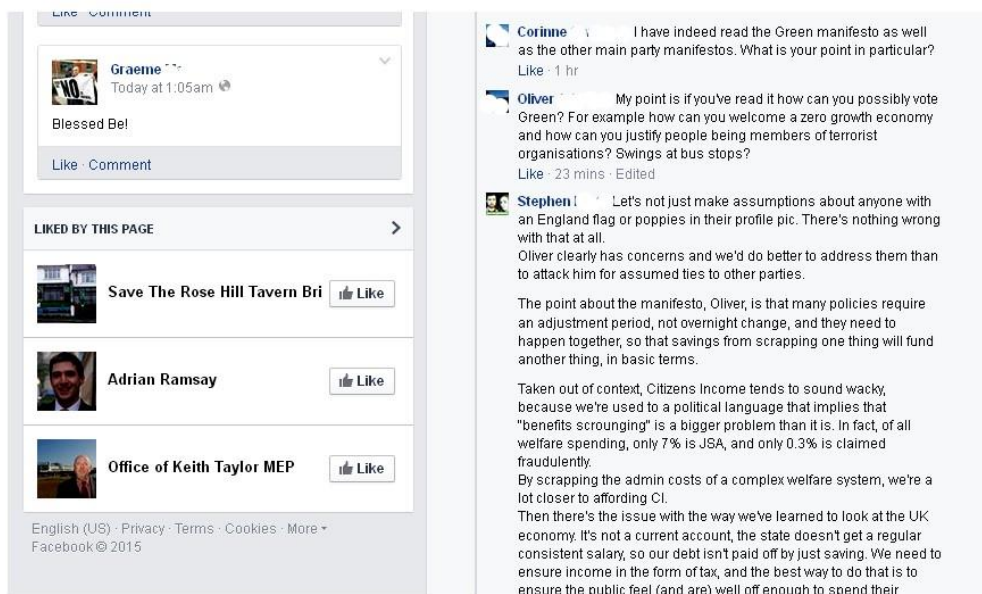
Figure 29: Example of supportive policer engagement

The 'debate' is eventually brought onto a more reasoned and reasonable footing by the intervention of Green Party supporters. Stephen exhorts debate participants not to make assumptions about people based on their profile pictures adding: "Oliver clearly has concerns and we'd do better to address them rather than attack him", before addressing Oliver (and his concerns) in a long and detailed reply (Fig. 29). Neither Oliver nor Jordan reply to Stephen, and the discussion moves on to other subjects.

It is one of many examples witnessed not only of 'netiquette' in action but also of how supporters of a candidate (some of who may be party workers or activists) will intervene to keep debate civil and maintain engagement – defined here as the *supportive policers*.

Another example from Lucas's Page is a debate sparked by a Comment from a local resident[169] that "Lucas and her party of protest have achieved very little for Brighton". Corinne and Tessa respond by pointing out that "the council & our MP are separate entities". And when Peter says a Green vote is a wasted vote "almost as bad as UKIP", Tessa jumps in again:

> It's nothing like UKIP, and all votes do count. You elect local MP's [sic] to make a difference in your local area. That is how you get things changed.

This willingness to engage in debate with strangers was particularly evident on Lucas's Page, and even more so after the election result. Unlike the Pages of other winning candidates (e.g. the Conservative candidate Andrew Griffiths in Burton &

---

[169] The commenter, Peter, had said on his own Facebook Page that he lived in Brighton

Uttoxeter) Lucas's Page showed evidence of supporters of different parties coming together to debate the election result, rather than to simply congratulate the candidate.

This is not necessarily surprising - after all Griffiths was also in the overall winning Party so one might assume the hundreds of supporters who added their congratulations to his Page and Profile on May 8th were also happy with the election result overall. However, Lucas's Page seemed to act as a magnet for left-leaning voters, whether they voted Green or not and whether they lived in Brighton or not, to come together in order to debate the election result.

The two strongest themes to emerge on the Lucas's Page post-election were a call for unification of opposition, and discussion of the perceived unfairness of the voting system. As examples:

> Doug: Worthwhile unifying the left on mainstream values – come up with viable alternatives. Don't just go banging on about anti-this or that…

> Gill:….I feel we need to have serious discussion about a system where 10 million people get to decide the fate of a total population of 64 million...

The prompt to debate seems to have been a post by Lucas, on 9th May, on her blog (and promoted and linked to on her social media) arguing for cross-party progressives to work together in opposition. But the debate on her Facebook Page, and which continued across the 124 Comments read (attracting 1,978 Likes and 474 Shares), was dominated by people who were not in Lucas's constituency, according to what could be viewed on their Profiles, yet had engaged in her Page.

As previously explained, a large number of them may not have actually been "there" at all but were responding to the thread or part of the thread seen on a

Friend's Page and thus on their own Page. Without help from Facebook (and perhaps even with the company's help) it is impossible to say what percentage of the people contributing those 124 comments, 1,978 Likes and 474 Shares were doing so on Lucas's Page and who had come across the posts or its comments on another Page.

Architectural issues aside, it can be assumed that a percentage of them had engaged directly with this Post on Caroline Lucas's Page. And for those who saw the material via a Friend, they still chose to engage with the thread even when it was prompted by a candidate they could not vote for. They had no reason to visit Lucas's Facebook Page, or to engage with what people in her constituency might have to say about the election. But by choosing to visit and/or comment it is reasonable to assume most of them were looking to engage with like-minded people (in some cases opposing views were seen but the overwhelming majority were participants agreeing with each other). Being there would validate their own thoughts on the election; offer new insights; and offer the opportunity to debate in a space more likely to be reasonable. They were seeking debate with strangers, but specifically with like-minded strangers.

5.4.4 Like-minded strangers

Between 2015 and 2017, that desire to find like-minded people led to the rapid rise of quasi-political, single issue Facebook groups such The 48% and We Are The 48 – two of the largest UK Groups set up on Facebook after the Brexit election (48% voted to remain in the UK), each with tens of thousands of members. The 48%

Group, launched the day after the vote to leave the European Union, had 5,000 members by the end of its first day and 25k members within six weeks[170]. It became a closed group[171] as its membership grew, in order to better control debate and membership.

But this enabling of like-minded groups by Facebook is double-edged. On the one hand, thousands of people were able to find each other within a comfortable space in order to debate an issue – Brexit – in greater depth and detail than they may have been comfortable doing in their family/friends personal Facebook group. It thus made such debate more likely[172]. But on the other hand, this ghettoization of debate and opinion reinforces cognitive bias and, as Dahlgren (2005a:152) highlights risks undermining the integrative societal function of the public sphere; encouraging fragmentation between groups; further polarization of opinions; and disconnect between communicative spaces and political decision-making processes.

However, that desire to find like-minded people in terms of political or issue-led affiliation is key both to feeling able to engage in political talk on Facebook and to developing the knowledge and/or opinions necessary to productive debate. Dahlgren (2005) noted that political apathy did not necessarily mean political disinterest and that for many citizens, disenchantment with established political systems had led

---

[170] Source: The Group's public-facing website at http://the.48andbeyond.co.uk/p/blog-page.html

[171] This means material is not openly public and membership applications have to be accepted by an administrator/Group controller, and there may be other restrictions. In the case of The 48%, posts are moderated and have to be approved by an administrator before being published and posters are discouraged from sharing material seen within the group unless they get permission from the originator. See: http://the.48andbeyond.co.uk/2018/01/normal-0-21-false-false-false-de-ja-x.html (accessed November 12, 2018).

[172] See also Savigny, 2016: 148-150 on the importance of resistance as a form of political communication from people to state.

them to refocus their political interest into more fluid social movements and para-political groupings.

> Politics becomes not only an instrument activity for achieving specific goals, but also an expressive activity, a way of asserting, within the public sphere, group values, ideals, and belonging. (2005:155)

This sense of belonging delivers a sense of commonality within the group, a feeling that, despite their individual differences, they belong to the same social and political entities (Dahlgren, 2005a: 158). Ancu and Cozma (2009) in their research into US citizens Friending the MySpace sites of election candidates similarly concluded that voters were drawn to candidates' pages largely in order to interact with like-minded supporters, rather than to gather information.

 The desire to seek out like-minded people was also looked for within the online ethnographic research stage by checking for membership of issue-based or political Groups on Facebook among participants in the debates witnessed. Such membership was viewed as a potential indicator of willingness to debate. For example, Daniel who initiated a debate (*engaged opener*) on Burton and Uttoxeter candidate's Andrew Griffith's Page (copied below and see Fig. 30), had belonged to 46 different Facebook Groups, including ones on running, sports, local groups, and one political issue-led group - Disenfranchised Shrewsbury Residents (with 2,888 members at the time). Daniel visited Griffith's Page in order to address him directly:

> Made my mind up. I abhor your party's leader, and in no way do I want to vote Conservative (nor Labour for that matter).
>
> That being said, you've clearly done a lot of work for Burton over the years, and obviously fight for local causes [continues in similar vein]… For those

reasons, I will be voting for YOU in two weeks. I hope you storm it [smiling emoji, ballot cross emoji]

Daniel's post sparks a flurry of supportive messages (24) and Likes (92), including replies from Griffiths, but no debate. However, the thread (Fig. 31) is interesting for two reasons: first the role of the candidate in encouraging more supportive comments by replying to and addressing commenters, and secondly as an example of why people visit a candidate's site if not to debate politics.

Daniel had previously (March 30th, 2015) posted a similar supportive message about Griffiths on his own Facebook Page. Naming Griffiths in the Post created a tag (the blue text in the image) which meant it would be seen by Griffiths. Griffiths is then able to join in the debate thread, which is running on Daniel's Page (Fig. 32) and is therefore seen by his Friends, several of whom join in the debate he has opened:

> Daniel: I wish Andrew Griffiths was running as an independent. I'm actually happy with how he's represented Burton, it's his boss I want nothing to do with. Ive still no idea who I'll go for.
>
> Andrew Griffiths: Thank you David. Well that's a challenge to me! I've worked hard for the last 5 years. But I'm going to use the next 5 weeks to convince you Im worth your vote! The challenge is on!
>
> Daniel: Well, that's not the best of starts… Regards, David [winking emoji]

Richard joins in to explain why Labour isn't for him (his assumption perhaps that Labour had been 'for' his Friend Daniel in the past) – Labour "got us [into] a mess and as for Ed millipede as a leader. No thank you." But despite his negative response, Daniel keeps the thread open by agreeing with Richard and echoing and adding to his

point about Miliband: "The wrong brother was picked and none of their policies seem, well… logical".

Note that, in those examples, Griffiths has replied to direct messages of support for his candidature but does not engage in the discussion about Labour's policies or the strength of its Leader or the local Labour candidate. Interviewing Griffiths after the 2015 election, he said that he deliberately avoided contentious issues on his page, adding:

> I think people get turned off by party politics and the 'yahboo politics'. If you look at the Labour party page they often have a conversation with themselves without realising that the general public sees that and it turns them off.
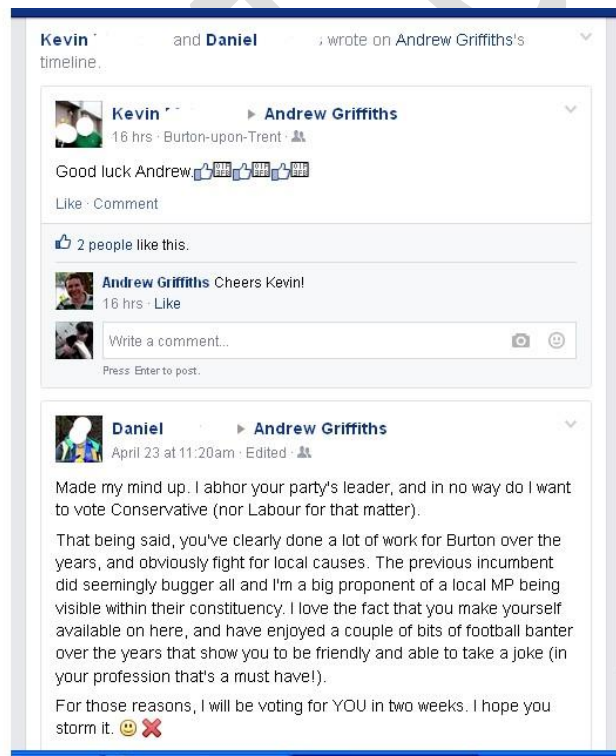
Figure 30: Post made by Daniel to Griffiths' timeline
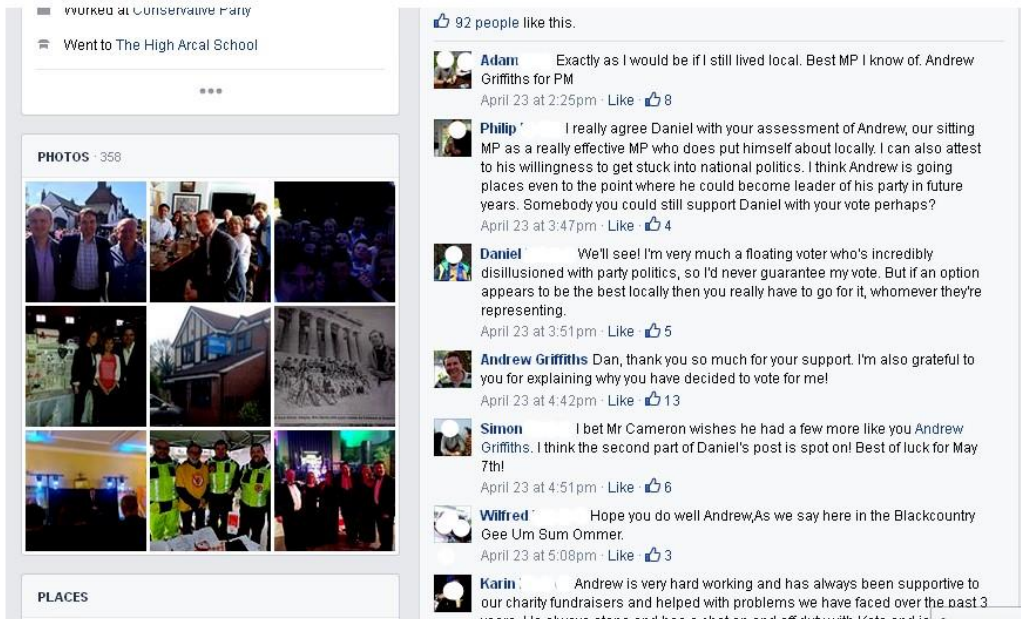
Figure 31: Responses to Daniel's Post
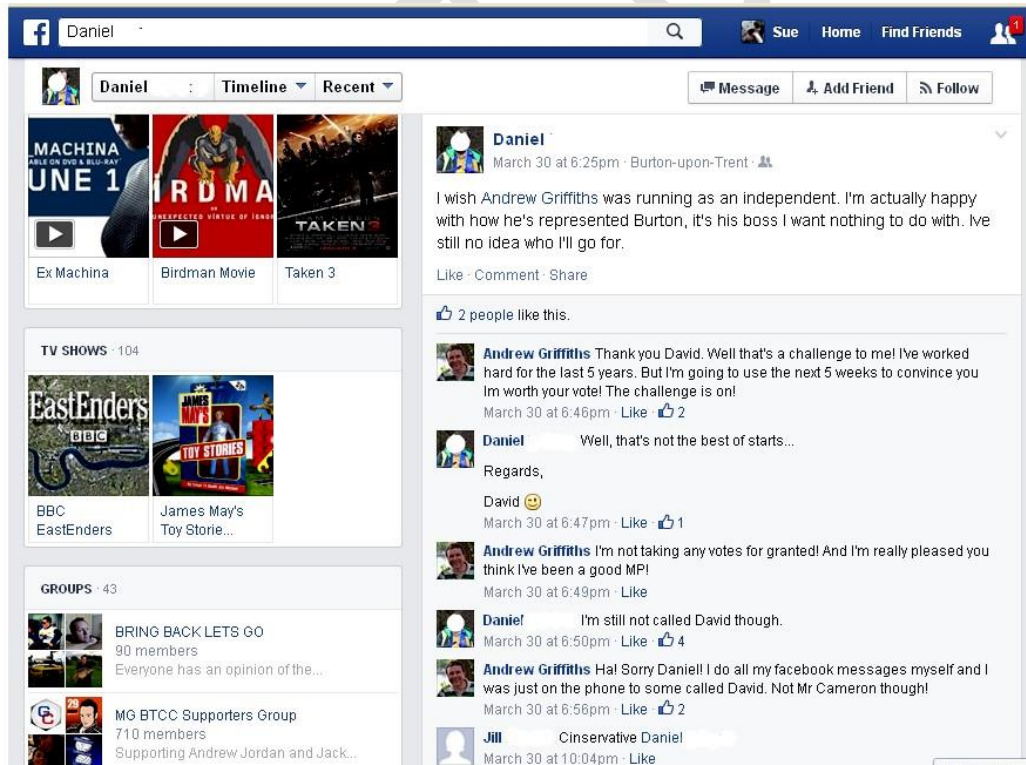
Figure 32: Daniel addresses Griffiths from his own Page
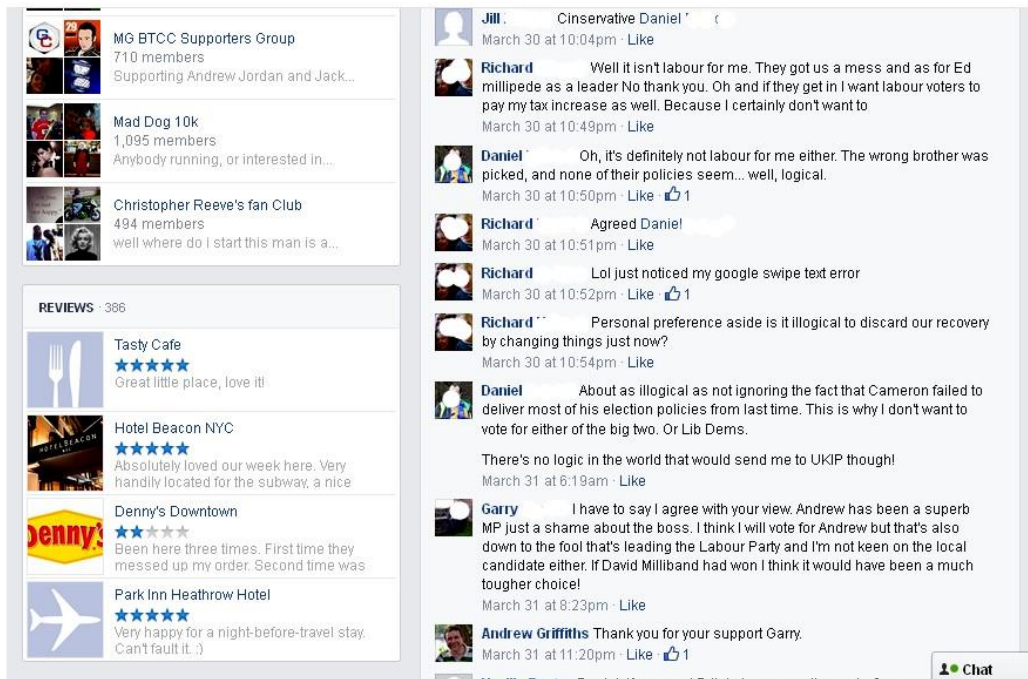
Figure 33: His support for Griffiths is responded to by his Friends

So, Daniel uses his own Facebook Page to air his dichotomy – his support for Griffiths set against his antipathy towards the political party Griffiths stands for. Then, perhaps having found his views echoed by like-minded Friends (Garry writes: "I have to say I agree with your view. Andrew has been a superb MP just a shame about the boss." (Fig. 33), he makes his voting decision and seeks out Griffiths on his campaign page to tell him so (Fig. 30). His decision is then further reinforced by supporters of Griffiths who echo his assessment of Griffiths as a particularly hard-working local MP who therefore is deserving of Daniel's support and change of allegiance.

That one expressed idea (basically: 'I'm thinking of voting Griffiths, am I right to do so?') began in one place, on Daniel's own Page, was seen by Griffiths because he was tagged in the Post and was then taken onto Griffith's Page to be seen by his supporters. If some of his supporters – that is people who had already Liked one of

Griffith's two Facebook pages, or Followed him – also happened to be Friends with Daniel, that would make it more likely that Facebook's algorithms would use that connection as reason to make sure that they, Griffiths and Daniel saw the posts and comments in the thread.

Which necessitates a return to the question of why Facebook users would visit the Page of a candidate? Furthermore, why would people visit the Facebook Page of a candidate they do not intend voting for or could not vote for because they were not in that constituency (such as many of those commenting on Caroline Lucas or Tristram Hunt's Pages)? And why would they – like Daniel – visit the Page of a candidate they had already decided to vote for, just to announce that? There is cultural work (see page 249) involved in going to the Page and addressing the candidate, therefore there must also be a benefit to be gained from that effort.

Those Facebook Pages of Andrew Griffiths, Conservative candidate Burton & Uttoxeter, helped in answering these questions. He was personally very active on Facebook and both his personal Profile and campaign Page showed significant activity from users. Indeed, across the four constituencies monitored in 2015, his sites were the second most active (Lucas's Page was first). Posts normally attracted comments in the double figures, however the overwhelming majority were messages of support. In the 300+ comments read, the only debate seen was the one initiated by Michelle (as mentioned earlier) which ran on her own Profile page but was cross posted on Griffiths' Page because she had tagged him in her Post.

Tagging is the feature of Facebook structure that creates links between user accounts[173]. By correctly naming Griffiths he is tagged (linked) and this is evidenced by his name appearing as blue hyperlinked text. Facebook may send him a notification so that he can see the post and, depending on his account settings, the post (and comments attached to it) may appear in Griffith's Timeline as well as Michelle's[174]. It may then also appear in both sets of Friends' feeds, creating more links and potentially drawing more voices into the conversation. It is this ability of Facebook's architecture to use the connections between users to bring a conversation in one place to the attention of people in another place that makes it so effective as a communications media.

> "[I]t is genuinely a way for people to have a conversation with their friends. That's when it works is when people share things about you on their own Facebook page. It's a dumping of people's instant reaction to things." (Andrew Griffiths, interviewed July 2015)

However, tagging also makes it possible for strangers (i.e. people outside his/her Facebook Friends) to see what a user has posted and therefore adding to the social risk in them raising contentious issues in a public space in which they can only share control over its boundaries.

But it is the socialness of the social network that matters most to its users - it is why they use Facebook; it is why its business model is successful - and it is also why users would gather on a political Page but not necessarily to debate politics. They are there to see the candidate; to verify that they care about the same local area or issues

---

[173] More at: https://en-gb.facebook.com/about/tagging (accessed November 12, 2018)

[174] There are some limitations, depending on the privacy settings for a user's Page or a Group. See https://www.facebook.com/help/218027134882349 (accessed November 12, 2018).

as they do, and to see his/her supporters. They are there to be sociable, whether by showing support to a candidate; to gather information or to ask questions. It is about affiliating to a tribe (or occasionally picking a fight with them), but it is primarily about socialness. They want social networking to be a pleasant experience shared with like-minded people.

This may be the case even for those non-participants in debate. Jones (1997) was writing well before the advent of Facebook but in his work looking at social use of the Internet, including Usenet groups[175], he noted a parallel between online "lurking" in such online groups – reading and watching rather than participating in discussion – and offline reading in the way both activities isolate individuals, encouraging them to be "among but not *with*" other people (1997: 14).

> We are struck, as we use the Internet, by the sense that there are others out there like us. (1997: 17)

Reinforcement of that "like us" feeling comes from people making similar comments – echoing each other's points, particularly when supporting a candidate or a message, and being seen to do so by the non-participants – Jones' "lurkers". Positive responses reinforce the group's understanding of its identity. It is not coincidental that users are invited to 'Like' a post, nor that the majority of such interactions are affirmative – with smiling rather than angry face emojis.

---

[175] Usenet newsgroups are thousands of open access, virtual bulletin boards on a wide range of subjects. Anyone with internet access can post a message to a newsgroup, read a message, and post a response to a message. They form the organisational structure of Usenet, a peer-to-peer online network for exchanging information and files. Source: https://www.livinginternet.com/u/u.htm (accessed November 12, 2018).

The majority of comments and posts on Griffiths' sites were supporting the candidate. Even when a contentious issue was being discussed, comments would generally support Griffiths and each other (further supportive policing). For example, a thread begun by Griffiths in response to a newspaper article about East Staffordshire Borough Council Leader Julian Mott prompts a string of Comments from supporters (Fig. 34), mirroring Griffith's anger about the issue, of which this excerpt is typical:

> Sue: Not surprised – Frank Bather's family deserve more respect [2 Likes]
>
> Matty: It's a joke. He should be fined the cost of today's hearing [3 Likes]
>
> Jan: What a disgrace! Certainly the man has no manners…[continues] [5 Likes]
>
> Ed: No honour, no decency and no respect shown…[continues] [3 Likes]
>
> Matthew: As someone who could certainly be described as left of centre, this above story embarrasses me as its clear it's an effort to stall till post may 5th. IF this was an attempt to collude…[continues] [2 Likes]
>
> Gary: This is disgusting and dishonourable behaviour which should be taken as further evidence of his unsuitability for office

Note in the screenshot how Matthew introduces his point "as someone who could certainly be described as left of centre...". Another example, perhaps, of someone visiting a candidate's Page or joining in a debate linked to a candidate's Page even though they did not support the party s/he represented.

Figure 34: Sequence of "mirrored" supportive comments

However, it is impossible to know whether all the Comments in the conversation

thread above came from via direct visits to Griffith's Page, or indirectly by a user

picking up the debate in their own News Feed. Facebook, as explored further in

section 5.6, is built on making as many links as possible between users and the

content they post. Thus, the News Feed of posts that a user sees when they log into

their Facebook profile or page will, according to Facebook, contain material from multiple sources direct and indirectly connected to the user:

> Posts that you see first are influenced by your connections and activity on Facebook. The number of comments, likes and reactions a post receives and what kind of story it is (example: photo, video, status update) can also make it more likely to appear higher up in your News Feed.
>
> Posts that you might see first include:
>
> A friend or family member commenting on or liking another friend's photo or status update.
>
> A person reacting to a post from a publisher that a friend has shared.
>
> Multiple people replying to each other's comments on a video they watched or an article they read in News Feed.[176]

5.4.5 Visibly there

Griffiths' sites show that he is seen by his supporters as both a hard-working local MP[177] and someone who is visibly 'there'. They comment frequently on things he has

---

[176] Source: Facebook Help Center 'How News Feed works' https://www.facebook.com/help/1155510281178725/?helpref=hc_fnav accessed 17 September, 2018.

[177] In July 2018, the Mirror newspaper published a series of articles exposing Griffiths as a "sex pest" who had sent hundreds of lewd text messages to young women in his constituency, some sent from the Houses of Parliament, prompting an investigation by the Conservative Party and Parliamentary Standards Committee.

done for them, events they have seen him at, and as someone who "does put himself about locally". His presence on social media is important to reinforcing that viewpoint - you always know where you can "see" him, as in Christine's comment, after the election:

> Rob: Well done Andrew, thanks for all your hard work
>
> Christine: Well deserved win. I've never felt so compelled to vote and that is down to you and your hard work. You offered to help my friend re undeserved parking ticket at the hospital, your reply meant such a lot. Being able to follow you on twitter and friends on Facebook means anyone can see how hard you work and also contact you easily if need to. (fig 12)

For both Rob and Christine, Griffith's visibility on and off social media was important. Rob addresses Griffiths directly, knowing he will be "there" to see his supportive comment. He even addresses Griffiths by his first name, reinforcing that he believes himself to be in a social space. While Christine comments directly on how being able to connect with the candidate on Twitter and Facebook gives her the power to "see" him, to watch him work and to feel he is visibly there for her to contact and connect with.

To stress again, out of the 27 candidates across four constituencies studied, all of the winning candidates and three out of four of the second-placed candidates were also the candidates who had the most active Pages. Aside from one anomaly[178], the candidates who got most votes in the 2015 election were those who were seen to be most active on Facebook. They were visibly there and, while more research would be

---

[178] As previously mentioned, Stoke Central candidate Tristram Hunt had an active Facebook page in terms of engagement, but it was clear that he did not take an active role in the page himself.

needed to determine the strength of the link between candidate visibility and votes won, there was a link in these four constituencies.

Interviewing Griffiths after the election, he said that it had been a conscious decision to be personally more visible on Facebook this time and to manage his own Pages.

> Facebook is a great app for me to just engage people in my work, for people to see what I'm doing - the number of appointments and the engagements I do. Particularly to the individuals concerned with those issues. It might be about a pothole or something really local but it's really important to them. I use it very much as a notice board.

He said that a member of staff had previously handled his Facebook page but then, about 12 months before, he had had "an epiphany":

> Jim Messina[179], who was President Obama's campaign manager, came and spoke to some of us at Conservative Party Office and he asked: 'What's the first thing you think about in the morning and the last thing at night?' I said the answer was sex but it was my smartphone! It's the first thing I reach for in the morning and before I go to bed is to check my phone.

> Until that time, I always viewed Facebook as a free add-on to my campaign. In the course of this election campaign it became an integral part of my campaign and for the first time I spent money on it, on buying ads on Facebook.

---

[179] Gaber (2017) in alluding to massively increased spend by the Conservative Party on Facebook advertising, also quotes Messina in saying that Facebook was critical to communicating with voters because it was a message "shared by their friends or others they trusted" (p623)

Griffiths (who increased his share of the vote in a constituency with 65% turnout) added:

> This was a watershed in terms of politics and the potential of social media, but I think in five years hence it will have moved on again - five years hence it will be something else. But the core strategy of engagement with people socially, of pavement politics, is there now. It's an integral part of engagement so that we don't even think about it any more.

Stoke Central had the lowest turnout of a constituency at the 2015 election.[180] This was also the constituency in the group in which none of the candidates for the major parties chose to personally engage with voters via the electronic doorstep of Facebook. Just two of the eight candidates had their own campaign Page. Three candidates shared local party pages, and others either had no involvement in Facebook, or only had a personal Profile (which did not reference the local campaign).

Pages in which the candidate took no active part - such as Tristram Hunt's Page (Labour, Stoke Central) - showed very little involvement of local voters. As outlined in chapter four, Hunt's campaign Page (his personal Facebook Profile was closed to the public) saw the most volume of Likes and Friends and activity from visitors against his rivals' Pages, however not the most activity from local voters. This in itself is interesting as it suggests that the Likes and Friend/Follower requests were delivered as part of a centralised (rather than local) push to boost the reach of content. Given that activity on a post or comment in the form of Likes and Shares made it more likely that Facebook's algorithms would "reward" the poster by pushing the

---

[180] At 51.3% it was not only the lowest in England, but the lowest across the UK, according to Electoral Commission figures.

material out to more people, central supporter banks or coordinated work by party volunteers could be an effective way to naturally boost reach.

Posts on Hunt's campaign page very often had double-figures of Likes, sometimes in the hundreds, but comparatively few comments (less than ten on each post viewed). Sampling three random sets of Likes on Hunt posts, it was found that in each case almost all Likes were from non-local voters, including people from overseas (according to information on their Profiles). For example, a posting of photographs from a local campaign event had one of highest number of Likes (133), but only 16 could definitely be linked to people based in Stoke-on-Trent. The comments on that post (copied below and screenshot at Fig. 35) reinforced that Hunt and his team were not actively managing his Facebook Page:

> Paul: Should women not be on the right segregated from the men
>
> Jon: Bloody hell somebody finally [put] a stoke postcode into his sat nav
>
> Ian: Have you seen Liam Ascough anywhere, because we haven't seen him in Crawley
>
> David: Ukip

Jon was the only local voter in that exchange and his jibe about Hunt went unanswered - as did all of the criticism and negative comments seen. Reasonable points addressed to the candidate were also ignored, such as these from women voters:

> Donna: Hmmm. Having read it [a Sunday newspaper column written by Hunt], I agree tentatively but, given some of the things you've said in the past, I'm worried you're going to throw money away by not thinking things through…[continues]

Karen: What about children with autism?

Philippa: So where are the jobs and education? Education for the elite and jobs for people prepared to work below the minimum wage doesn't seem fair to me Tristram. Skills are essential but need to be available.

[and later in the same thread] Tristram, could you tell us how you are going to tackle education (including special needs) Don't waffle just lay your plan out. I do believe you are of good intention but can you do it on a people's level?

Other posters chipped into the thread with criticism of Hunt (Fig. 36) as a "champagne socialist" (Gary), "a joke…posh useless toff" (Will) and "posh snob" (Banaris) – again, indication that Hunt's Facebook feed was not being managed (Hunt did not reply to requests for an interview in relation to the research).

Philippa (Fig. 36) was one of a handful of local voters in this thread and her own Facebook Profile showed an interest in political and civic issues. She had been involved in Human Rights International, belonged to a Facebook Save the NHS Group, and Liked dozens of Pages related to anti-poverty and pro-NHS campaigns, as well as various media Pages (Manchester Gazette to Jerusalem Post). She would be an example of the research target group of individuals predisposed to debate. However, what was interesting is that not only did she not get a response from Hunt, but no one else engaged in debate with her. This thread (which went on for several pages) was largely a series of statements by individuals - oratory without the reward of positive response from the candidate or other participants; there was no reasoned debate[181].

---

[181] While focused on candidates' use of Twitter, rather than Facebook, research by Graham et al (2014) compared the use of Twitter by both Dutch and UK general election candidates in 2010. They

270

Figure 35: Evidence that Hunt's Page was not being actively managed

found that Dutch candidates were not only (then) more active on Twitter but more likely to use it interact with the public and that this interaction appeared to encourage the public to engage in further dialogue.
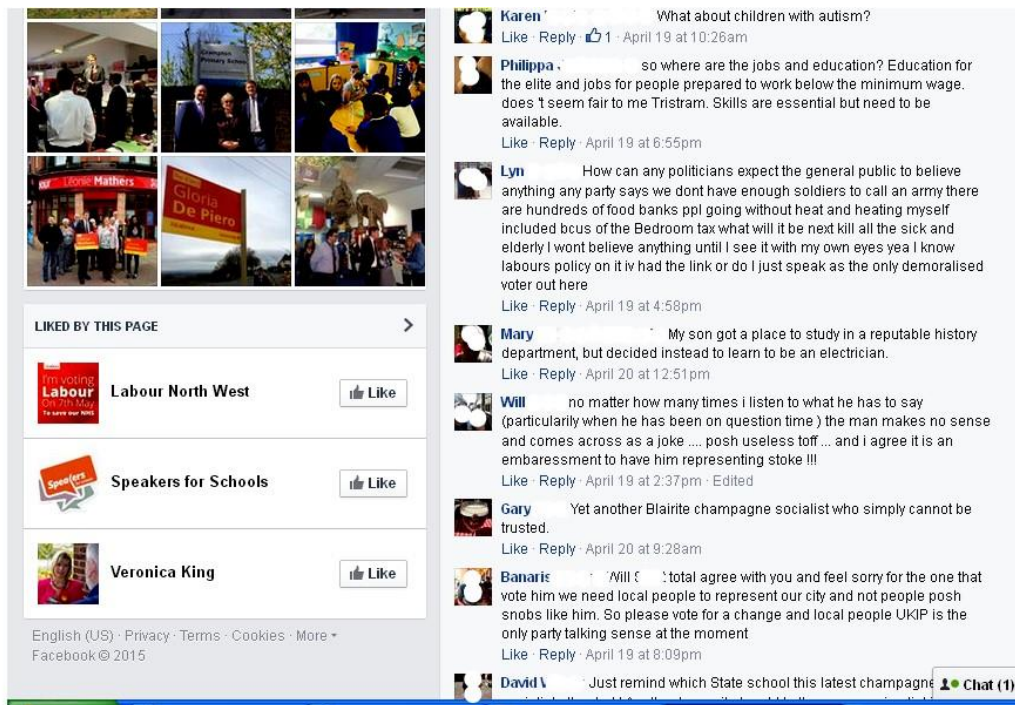
Figure 36: Criticism and questions on Hunt's page went unanswered

The thread had none of the participatory elements that the research had shown had encouraged debate on other candidate's pages. There was no *visible leader* - no candidate demonstrating openness to debate; no *supportive policers* encouraging participation and managing netiquette to create a *comfortable space*; no *aware producers* posting content with the aim of initiating engagement, and no *engaged openers* initiating debate and signaling how it should proceed.

This issue of how far the level of personal involvement of a candidate in social media affects voting patterns would be a question worth exploring further in future research, as is the effect of candidates managing their social network sites by responding to – or even censoring – comments. As noted on pages 279-80, voters saw a link between the *visibility* of the candidate on their social media and the *authenticity* of the candidate.

272

The same effect was seen in 2017, during the run-up to the "snap" General Election. In the exchange below, on Burton & Uttoxeter Labour candidate John Mckiernan's page (Fig. 37), local voter Katie comments that she had not known the candidate's name until she saw "the only sign in [T]utbury with your name on it". Her request that voters like her needed to be see and hear more about the candidate, is responded to by others (supportive policers) who point out the difficulty in getting information out in the short campaigning time allowed.

Note that the candidate responds directly to Katie, addressing her by full name which 'tags' her so the reply would appear on her own Timeline:

> John Mckiernan: Katie [name deleted for anonymity] Hi Katie. Virtually no time to organise and act. The only real channel was FB to get out there fast.

And other commenters joined in the thread and referenced the online visibility of the candidate, Mckiernan, as a plus - Leonie: "John did respond to questions (unlike Andrew [Griffiths] who ignored me)"; Dawn: "Please stay visible and take every opportunity to hold Andrew Griffiths to account"; Ian: "John, I think your achievement in the few short weeks that you were able to put together a campaign, with just about no support from the national party was incredible"; James: "Well done John, keep going. Burton and Uttoxeter need caring, sincere and honest people like you. Stay visible and continue to take the fight to them."

However, the reply from Mckiernan, like most other Comments from the candidate, did not come from him but from one of the team of three local party volunteers who were tasked with running Mckiernan's social media campaign. During the case study element of this research, the group were seen to be able to log in as the candidate to respond to Comments (as one of them did in the example

above). They took on the role of *proxy* visible leader, as well as the roles of supportive policers and aware producers, to encourage engagement. They provided the candidate visibility that Facebook users were interpreting as candidate authenticity.

The success of that team in using Facebook to raise the visibility of the candidate and to develop his campaign Page as a comfortable space for political talk meant the candidate was observed trusting them to run his Page and to effectively "be" him.
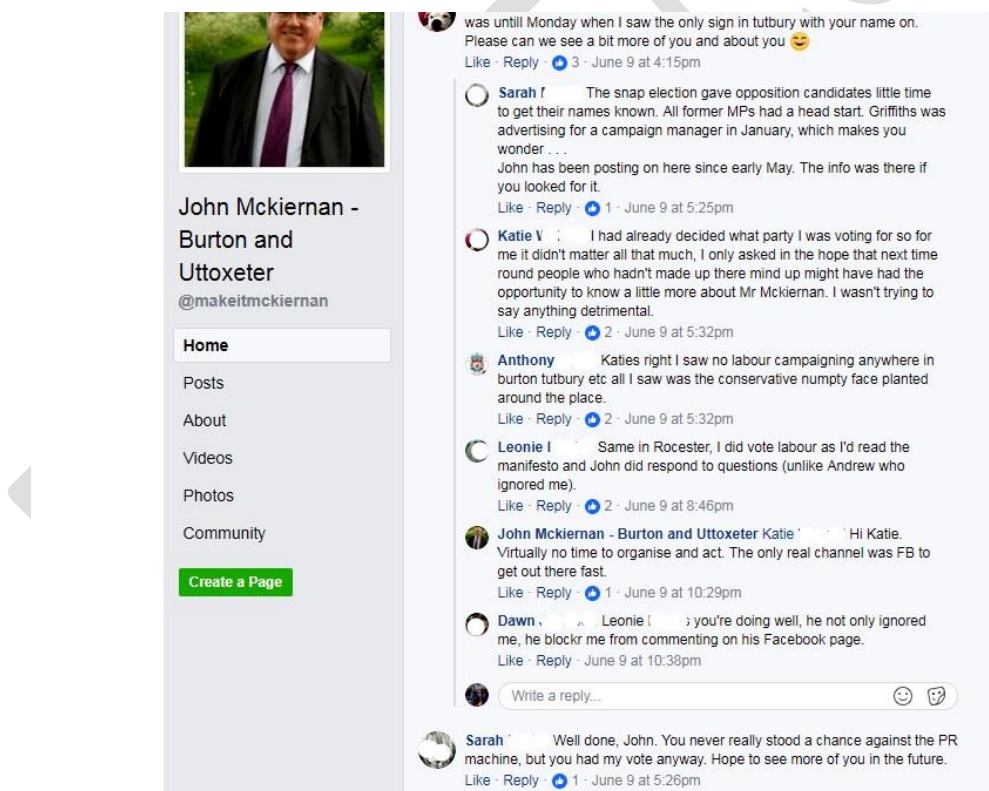
Figure 37: Exchange between voter and "the candidate"

The attributes Mckiernan's Facebook visitors came to see in the candidate, his visibility, "caring, sincere and honest", his willingness to respond directly to questions, were developed by his organised and social media-aware proxy group[182].

Thus, while it benefits engagement on Facebook to have the candidate as visible leader of their Page, it does not have to be the candidate him or herself. What matters is that "the candidate" is seen to take on the visible leader role by responding to direct questions and (some) Comments in order to deliver the authenticity that voters seek out; the visible evidence that the candidate is interested in them and their concerns and willing to put the work into responding to them.

Mike Green (UKIP candidate for Burton & Uttoxeter) or his colleague replied to most questions and comments posted on his Page (Fig. 38), even negative ones. In reply to emailed questions about his Facebook strategy, he said:

> Our local strategy was to try and engage with younger voters and a different audience. We believe social media will be a very powerful tool in the future.

> My impression is that Facebook and Twitter are big, but it is still like screaming in a vacuum. Things would be said or posted on social media, but my reaction was to look out of the window and ask myself how many of the

---

[182] And from the quality of the material produced by these aware producers and supportive policers, including the Post written about (an as if from) the candidate and his values pictured at Fig. 62 appendix five.

electorate in Burton would know about it. I think it will grow as an election

tool, but at the moment the answer to [whether it encourages debate] would be

a minute fraction.

However, a "minute fraction" in relation to Facebook's almost two billion users

could, in fact be a great deal of debate. As this thesis suggested in chapter one, it is

the scale of Facebook that warrants investigation of its potential as a new space for

political debate.

Darren Hall, Green Party candidate for Bristol West, spoke about the need to

make his Facebook Page "fun" and engaging:

We had an upbeat positive style and jumped on anyone that was trolling or
being negative. Content was designed to be engaging and provocative. We
wanted to make politics a bit more fun, open, so our strategy was to use
Facebook to invite participation via interesting events such as our Forum is
Free series of debates, plus a couple of music and art events.

This encouraging of a sociable space was important. If as Griffiths suggested,

Facebook is "on the sofa" with users, and by extension in their personal space, they

are also vulnerable through it. A user who is attacked on Facebook for something

they say knows that some of their Friends will see that attack too – they cannot easily

walk away. No wonder then that political points are wrapped with apologies,

humour[183] and ameliorating language. Facebook is not a comfortable space in which

to engage in debate, because users cannot be certain who will see what they post, or

---

[183] See also Vraga et al (2015) on the use of humour by young people to mitigate anger or aggression
and create a more supportive environment for political talk on Facebook, and Graham and Wright
(2014) on the use of humour by "superparticipants" in online forums to foster a friendly discussion
environment.

who will respond. But a candidate who is a visible leader on their page – whether in person or through a proxy – sets the tone and the normative behaviour that can make the space more (or less) comfortable as a place for political talk.
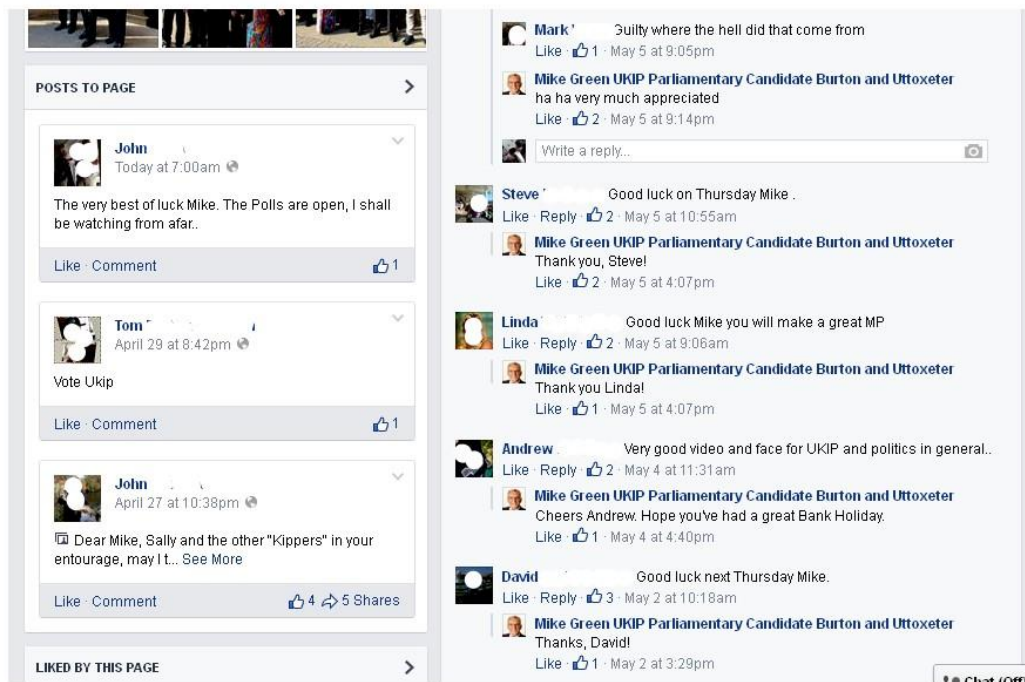
Figure 38: Example of *visible leader* engaging with voters

5.4.6 Visibly managed

One interesting side note seen in 2017 compared to 2015, was Griffiths visiting a rival's Facebook page in order to attack them, to effectively "troll"[184] Labour supporters. From the Burton and Uttoxeter Labour Party Page, screenshot (Fig 39) taken on April 27th, 2017:

> Andrew Griffiths: Shobnall is voting for Theresa May & the Conservative Party not Jeremy Corbyn and your hard left RMT sponsored candidate. The results on the doorstep show that Mr Walker will be the first Labour candidate to lose Shobnall

Griffiths' comment was in response to a photograph of Labour campaigning in the Shobnall Ward local council elections. It prompted some replies (although little anger), but what was interesting was that this exchange had not appeared on Griffiths' own Pages. From the Field Log notes of the same day, April 27th:

> I hadn't seen that last year – candidates commenting on rival's FB pages. Seemed daft – why pick a fight there? Decided to have a look at how the exchange had looked on Griffith's Page. His post/comment wasn't mentioned on his site (or didn't show for some reason???). The last post was from April 23rd and of a successful Burton Albion football match – non-political stuff that won him 84 Likes and four comments….

The League Table photo on that April 23rd Post had been re-posted from Griffith's official Page. On this Page there was a post relating to Shobnall, but in far less combative terms to the one he posted on the Labour group page (Fig. 40). Still attacking the Labour candidate, but in terms that would be more likely to appeal to his Conservative supporter base.

---

[184] See explanation of term in footnote 169, page 262

This ran counter to things Griffiths had himself said, in interview in 2015. Asked about why his own site was so lively, including debate among his page visitors, he said:

> I think sometimes in the naivety of some people they will share an opposing view and they think that the way to be successful on social media is to write derogatory things on your opponent's social media page.

> My Facebook isn't a platform for my opponents to post what they like on. Just as I wouldn't let them write on my leaflets, I don't allow them space on my Facebook page to attack me.

During the 2015 election itself, Griffiths had been accused by Labour supporters of removing negative comments from his Pages and blocking dissenting voices. However, this was not in evidence during the field work. Negative comments seen in both 2015 and 2017 appeared to be ignored by Griffiths or left for his supporters to respond to.
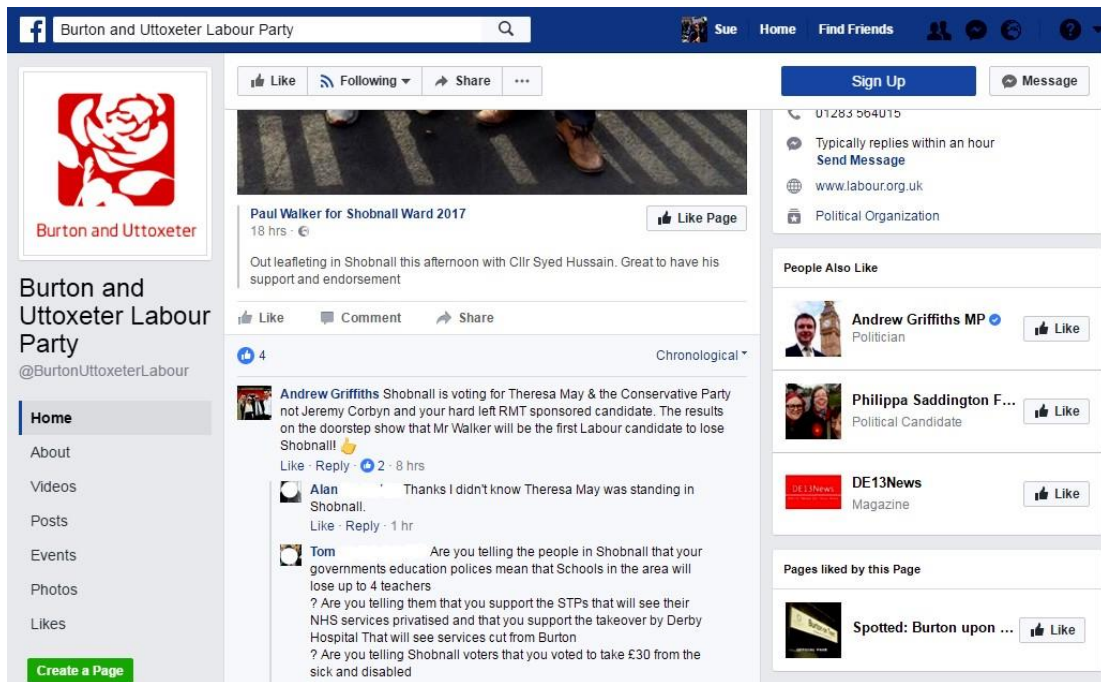
Figure 39: Candidate appearing to "troll" rival Party supporters

Figure 40: Less argumentative version of Post on candidate's Page

That policing of a candidate's Page by his or her supporters was something seen

frequently on sites that were actively used by candidates. For example, this exchange

on Griffith's official Facebook Page (excerpt – with surnames removed - from Field Log, April 27, 2017):

> Tracy: Did you ask those you spoke to how many are using food banks? How many scraping by on the reduced benefits so the rich can pay less tax? Sorry - you have actually been good at your job but with the wrong party for my vote this time around.

> Daniel: tracy this conservative government are still trying to pick up the mess left by the last labour government, they created a benefit culture where people think it is acceptable to live off the state. so yes they may be cutting benefits but for a good reason, it should only be for people who need it and not those who think they are entitled to it for simply not being bothered to go to work, so yes the cuts they make to public services and benefits may not be popular but it has to happen to end this "something for nothing" culture! i feel as a working parent of two that i am in a better place than i was 7 years ago thanks to there income tax allowance increases and help to buy schemes.

What was interesting was that, while both participants' Profile pages were largely locked down under the new, more restrictive Facebook of 2017, Daniel gave his location as living in Derby so unlike Tracy he was not a local voter for Griffiths. There was no evidence of political interest in what was visible on his Profile but his comments about benefits culture and the help-to-buy scheme suggested an interest in politics and issues – as did his willingness to engage with Tracy, but he was a supportive policer for a candidate he could not vote for.

The tone of his response – addressing Tracy by her forename, giving facts and information as counter-argument rather than seeking to directly undermine her points, and offering personal information about himself (father of two) to reinforce that this is a comfortable social space, are all examples of the supportive element of his

policing of dissent. This is not a counter comment designed to shut down debate; but to encourage further interaction, if not a changing of opinion.

As outlined on page 288, Labour candidate John Mckeirnan benefited from a particularly active group of supportive policers during his 2017 bid to win the Burton & Uttoxeter seat.

Local voter Pete responds to a comment thread prompted by a (national) Labour Party video by saying he still hadn't made his mind up who to vote for, blaming it on the lack of visibility of the candidate: "I have to say if I had received some literature, promotional information or even met someone campaigning on your behalf it would probably have helped your cause." That prompts responses from a number of Mckeirnan and Labour supporters in trying to persuade Pete to vote for Mckeirnan, including lengthy responses from Greg Finney[185] (figs. 41-43) which focus on counter facts rather than argument, stay polite, and address Pete directly – all elements common to supportive policing. And it works, Pete replies, which prompts other replies – all information-led argument - and the thread becomes a debate.

---

[185] Full disclosure: Greg Finney is my husband and, while I did not have (or ask for) direct access to Mckeirnan's site during the production of posts for the interventionist case study, Greg Finney was one of the group of three campaign volunteers who had access and through which I fed material or suggested that particular posts be Boosted.
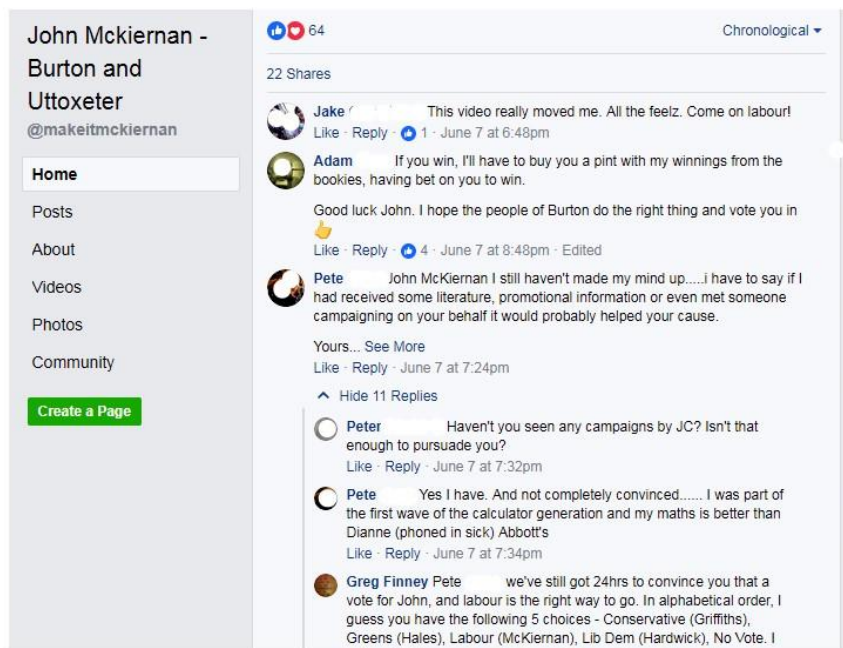
Figure 41: Criticism of the candidate is managed by *supportive policers*

Greens (Hales), Labour (McKiernan), Lib Dem (Hardwick), No Vote. I believe that Labour are offering a vision which could benefit many people in this country, and our local community. I know that Theresa May and obedient MP's like Andrew Griffiths only use the term "hard working families" in their PR -
they don't know what it means. They don't know what it's like to struggle with elderly relatives seeking care. I suspect their school choices are somewhat better than ours too. I've met John McKiernan, only recently, and only a few times, but his head and heart are in the right place. I can't tell you how to vote, but if you accept that Brexit is going to happen, you need to decide whether you want Theresa May grandstanding it or Keir Starma managing it. If you accept that the NHS has been run-down of late, you need to decide whether you want Theresa May inviting American corporates to run and own it, or you want Corbyn to invest in it for people, not for profit. Hope you do vote. Would be good if you voted for John.

Like · Reply · 4 · June 7 at 7:46pm

Pete   I agree that austerity cuts have hammered many public services but I do wonder about the long term sustainability of Labour's proposed spending especially with the Brexit looming. I know that a rise in corporation tax would be an initial cash injection... See More

Like · Reply · June 7 at 8:06pm · Edited

Pete   Even with Labours proposed rise in corporation tax, it will still be the lowest rate in the G7. The only reason business may relocate is a bad Brexit deal and that is what you will get with the Tories.

Like · Reply · 2 · June 7 at 8:31pm

Pete   How can you say that the conservatives would get a bad deal? I can't see that any deal has been offered yet. And from what I've seen neither party can supply a convincing guarantee of the outcome.....unless you can show me? Again sitting on the fence

Like · Reply · 1 · June 7 at 8:37pm

Greg Finney Pete (I hear you. But I've concluded that a Corbyn "innings" probably isn't going to be a simple re-reun of the Tony Blair "quango" years. You've got to admit that Corbyn's demeanour, dress, attitude and generally nowtiness isn't the same - I just don't see how it

Figure 42: The focus is on information-led replies
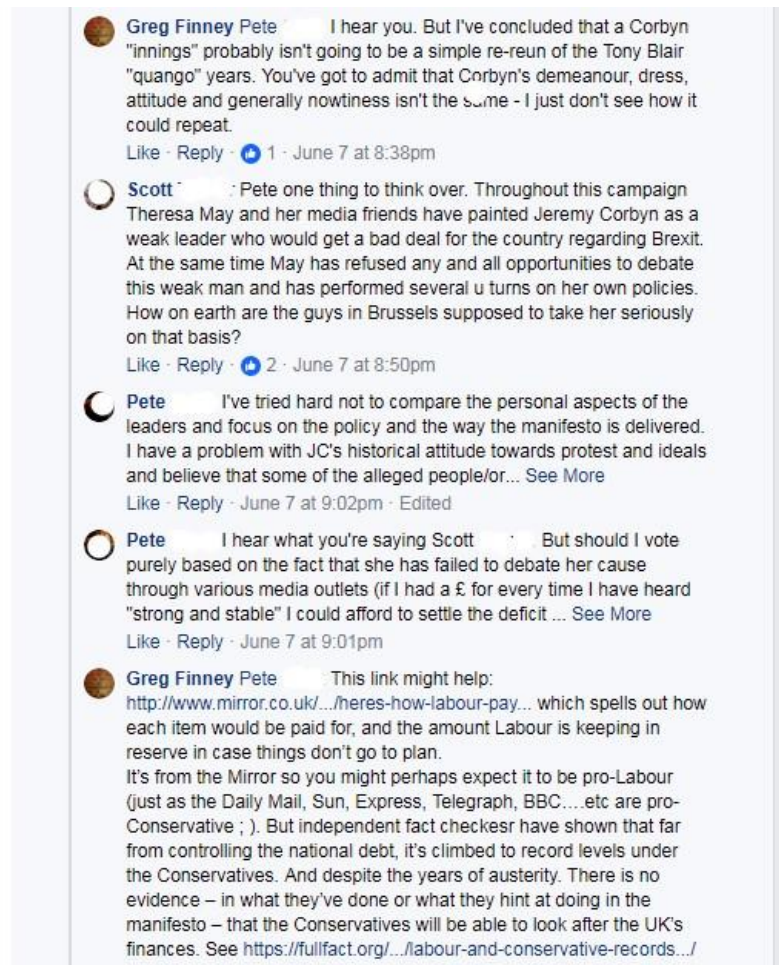
Figure 43: Reasoned and reasonable debate prompts further engagement

Note two things in the screenshots of that debate – firstly the tagging of Pete's

name by Finney would push the Comments into Pete's own timeline, and secondly

how Pete begins to mirror some of Finney's language "Finney: Pete [name deleted] I

hear you"; Pete; "I hear what you're saying Scott [name deleted]"). The netiquette for

this debate is being led by Finney acting both as supportive policer and aware

producer.

In the screenshot at fig 41, we see the discussion had begun with another voice – that of Jake. He, along with Finney and a local Party worker, Tom, were the group of three activists who ran the 2017 election Facebook campaign. Jake and Finney were particularly active as supportive policers and were observed spending hours each day and evening checking the page; responding to questions and Comments and using tags, Comments and Shares to make it more likely that Facebook's algorithms would boost content organically.

This was a coordinated strategy between the two men, who said at the time that their policy was to respond to every critical Comment made against Labour or Mckeirnan, even from trolls (as in the exchange copied below, with Matt, Fig. 44); seeing it as an opportunity to put counter facts and counter arguments that would be seen by many more people outside the thread and outside the campaign Page.

> Jake: I have to post this out an awful lot on here but there was global financial crash on 2008. The actual records on Labour vs Tory borrowing is here. It puts Labour as the less profligate party actually… See more

> Matt: And if he thinks big business and super rich will stick around to pay for it he is a bigger clown than Dianne Abbott [continues]

> Greg Finney: Matt [name deleted] Hey Matt, I suspect there was never any chance of you "bringing yourself to vote" for Labour. But welcome to the fold for your brief foray here. You're right question [sic] how the next 12 months will play out [continues]

> Jake: Corbyn is going to do everything he can to help smaller businesses thrive. As to the super rich going elsewhere I think there are two points to consider [continues]

Matt: And as far as society rebuilding, yes as soon as we rebuild our economy money will be available to help the less fortunate.

Jake: Matt [name deleted] that's a generation or two lost right there [continues]

The argument continues over 12 posted exchanges between the three men, ending finally with Matt's' signaling that he's had enough with: "Anyway we will never agree on this one." At no point does it get angry – tetchy but not angry. And the trio by and large address each other directly and respond to each point raised by the other, rather than delivering oratory. This is an attempt at debate, albeit between people who are entrenched in their own position. The visible management of the thread sets the normative standards for discussion.

Those normative standards also dictate how likely it is that debate will happen. A space which is visibly managed by people who respond to, rather than shout down, dissenting voices is a more comfortable space in which to raise an issue or ask a question.

Figure 44: Further example of managed debate in 2017 interventionist case study

Focusing on counter facts rather than "yah boo politics" sets an intellectual

standard that may reinforce that 'people like me' tribal perception. And using tagging

and similar techniques to organically push discussion out across the connective links

between Facebook users means more people may be attracted to the comfortable

space and/or encouraged to participate in the debate.

5.6 Architectural bias

If it is the considered actions of some Facebook users - people acting as visible leaders, supportive policers, aware producers and engaged openers, that creates spaces in which political debate may happen on Facebook, the counter to that is Facebook's architecture and corporate culture which works in ways that limit or prevent such debate happening.

As previously argued, Facebook's architecture works against the efforts its users might make to engage in debate in two ways. A one-to-most corporate culture that needs the architecture to link as many people to each other as possible, and in so doing encourages people to collect together through social or tribal ("think like we do"[186]) links.

And architecture which, in order to reach the most people with content that may interest them, splits posts and comment threads across space and time. A conversation may open on one day, on one particular Facebook page, but be seen hours or even days later in another user's News Feed. Content may similarly move across technologies; be posted on Twitter or Instagram and be seen on Facebook. There is no space-time continuum[187] in Facebook.

---

[186] Zuckerberg said in 2018 that it was human nature for people to gravitate towards others who think the same way: https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/zuckerberg-said-facebook-could-be-better-at-filtering-fakes?utm_term=.tqgxBJBQq#.xfo0VXVDn (accessed November 12, 2018).

[187] The Grand Theory, first posited by Minkowski, whereby the three dimensions of space plus time are linked together as a single, unified four-dimensional object and one continuous reality: https://einstein.stanford.edu/content/relativity/q411.html (accessed November 12, 2018).

This encourages disjointed conversation threads. Threads in which comments are seen or responded to out of sequence; threads which may not be seen in their entirety; comments which may appear in a News Feed without their context. All of this (as chapter five detailed) makes oratory more likely than debate and makes user more wary of investing the cultural work needed to engage in political talk on Facebook.

A user adding a comment to a thread on a candidate's campaign Page may be doing so as *primary or secondary engagement* in that conversation. That is, primary engagement by adding their comment to the thread at source; on and from within the candidate's page. Or secondary engagement via a Friend - adding their comment to a thread or partial conversation seen in their own News Feed because a Friend is linked to the thread in some way.

And just as the user has only limited control over what they get to see in their own News Feed, so they know they have limited control over who gets to see what they might post or comment on – and that has a chilling effect on political talk on Facebook.

5.6.1 Visibility of content

Other technical issues also affected what was shown in a user or a candidate's News Feed. Software that enabled candidates to simultaneously post comments made on Twitter or Instagram to Facebook, or to link from their blog posts to their Facebook feed, sometimes made it difficult to tell whether a post had originated on Facebook or was simply being shared or reposted on the social network.

And as previously outlined, because of the way posts can be shared or participants tagged, it was not always possible to be certain whether people who commented on a post had done so while visiting the candidate's page or by seeing the post on a Friend's page or in their own News Feed. According to Facebook, the News Feed ('the constantly updating list of stories' in the middle of a user's home page) is

> …influenced by your connections and activity on Facebook. This helps you to see more stories that interest you from friends you interact with the most. The number of comments and likes a post receives and what kind of story it is (ex: photo, video, status update) can also make it more likely to appear in your News Feed.'[188]

But there was little evidence that Facebook was "influenced" by the researcher's activity during the online ethnographic stage. The content presented in the News Feed with each log in appeared to be unrelated to previous activity. Posts from the same small number of people and Pages would be delivered with each log-in and it was difficult to view others.

There also seemed to be no rationale for the order posts appeared in, certainly it was not related to timeliness, as these excerpts from the 2015 Field Log show:

> 8th May, starting 9.17am

> Home page top 5 posts: Darren Hall (1hr[189], LC, 241 Likes, 19 comments); Ali Majid (1hr, LC, 3 Likes, 5 comms [comments]); Andrew Griffiths (4hrs, LC, 767 Likes, 44 Shares, 186 comms); Caroline Lucas (20mins, LC/NC, 580 Likes, 27 Shares, 29 comms); Patrone (4hrs, LC, 10 Likes, 2 comms).... This

---

[188] Source: https://en-gb.facebook.com/help/327131014036297/#!/help/327131014036297/ (accessed November 12, 2018).

[189] Time relates to how old the post or comment was, i.e. how long ago it was posted

time decided to click on links in timeline posts, rather than paste URL direct, to see if that affected what's shown on my Home page later.

Link on Griffiths post took me to his campaign page....

[Later] Back to my Homepage

Top five posts: UKIP Brighton & Hove (4hrs, NC, 63 Likes, 4 comms); Caroline Lucas (20hrs, LC, 444 Likes, 39 Shares, 15 comms); Mike Green (LC, 4hrs, 2 Likes, 3 comms); Ali Majid (LC, 23hrs, 6 Likes, 1 comm); UKIP Brighton & Hove (5hrs, NC, 85 Likes, 3 Shares, 5 comms)....

Returned to my Home Page. Galloway story now third in Trending 10. Same Suggested Groups.

Top five posts: Majid (1min, adding a Friend); Nigel Carter (yesterday!); UKIP Brighton & Hove (5hrs and 8hrs); Caroline Lucas (23hrs!).

Those examples are taken from a session lasting just under two hours in which only Pages and Profiles linked to the Burton candidates were visited. Yet that evidence of interest in those candidates was rarely reflected in the posts Facebook's algorithms chose to show during the session. Nor did this vary on other days - whichever candidates or constituencies were chosen as the focus in a given session, that interest was not reflected in the content feeds.

Facebook allowed limited options for changing how the News Feed is displayed – users could Unfollow groups or people; set the feed to display 'Most Recent' instead of 'Top' stories (but at the time of the research it would automatically revert to Top stories view), or divide Friends into Close Friends or Acquaintances, with posts from

Close Friends given priority in the feed over posts from Acquaintances.[190] Users could also select to Hide a particular story, or click to 'See less' from that Page, Group or person in future.

This is an important issue because, for Facebook to be effective within the public sphere its structure must enable debate. If the algorithms are not able to sort the 1,500 or so content items a user might see into a News Feed that more accurately reflects who and what they want to see and which material, by the posts the user reads and the links clicked, that user has told Facebook they would be most interested in seeing, then the feeling that Facebook provides an unsafe or uncontrollable social space will be stronger. If when a user logs in, they see their News Feed filled with posts from people they do not know well – Acquaintances - and Pages that only those Acquaintances are interested in, then they will understandably be more wary about engaging in debate or making serious points.

The actions taken as a Facebook user – spending more time reading particular Posts and Comments or Following or Liking particular Groups or Profiles - are measures of engagement that should, according to Facebook, be reflected in the content a user sees. Facebook promises to prioritise the people and types of content a user interacts with the most. None-the-less it was noted in the Field Log that content from some providers dominated the News Feed, regardless of the interest shown in that provider or their material:

---

[190] This particular tweak to Facebook's algorithm was made in April 2015, after complaints that users were finding it less social: http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/apr/22/facebook-news-feed-tweak-friends (accessed November 12, 2018).

28/4/15: Session 1pm – 3.34pm

Overnight I'd had a friend request from someone I know who had found me as mutual "Friend" of Burton Conservative candidate Griffiths.

Wondered if that's why, when I logged in, the top posts shown were comments left 16 hrs ago on Griffith's page

After Griffiths, next posts related to Debbonnaire, the Labour Bristol West candidate I'd looked [at] in the previous session. Followed by two more Ali Majid ones (one several days old), then a 5hrs-old Purna4Pavilion post (Labour candidate for Brighton Pavilion). Next few were mix of Purna's posts, more Majid and more UKiP Hove & Brighton, then Socialist Party of Great Britain.

Timings varied, some a couple of days old and some couple of hours old but definitely being shown posts according to an algorithm which seems only partly based on what I did last, but selection shown is getting more varied.

Suggested groups partly local to Burton, partly political.

8/5/16

2.48pm – started on Brighton candidates again (previously looking at SoT). Went to my Home Page first to see if any [Brighton candidate posts] showing in top posts. 4 UKIP Brighton & Hove posts in my top five (plus Mark Green, Burton UKIP). Still don't understand why as only UKIP page I've looked at today is UKIP SoT.

In the case of Majid (Stoke Central) and Griffiths (Burton & Uttoxeter) appearing so frequently in the News Feed, it may have been because it was necessary to Friend rather than Like their Profiles in order to gain access. However, in the case of UKIP Hove & Brighton, whose Page had only been Followed (and only visited once during

the research) there seemed to be no reason for posts from that page to normally appear in the top five posts in the News Feed at each log-in.

Facebook's algorithms[191] will prioritise different types of content, or different subject matter, at different times and as part of normal or test operations. It may be therefore that those algorithms were prioritising paid-for content, or prioritising video rather than written content, or content from organisations that were generating exceptional interest across Facebook.

The company does not give out information about the proprietary operation of its algorithms, but to see them only as bits of commercialised code also undermines their importance. Facebook's algorithms turn Facebook from social network service to sociotechnical actor, able to create collectives and steer collective action in ways which may be "problematic" (Milan, 2015). And thus, algorithms which prioritise time spent watching a video over time spent reading words; or which favour content posted by UKiP Hove & Brighton over posts from the Green Party candidate for Brighton, are neither technically nor politically neutral.

This mismatch between action and outcome was not only noted in the Field Log. One of the participants who submitted screenshots of their Facebook feed around election time also noted that after Liking the Labour Party page, she saw no difference in the content delivered in her News Feed or in Trending Topics:

---

[191] It should be borne in mind that there are, at any point in time, multiple algorithms are in operation and on multiple versions of Facebook. Facebook is not one site, but a grouping of thousands of versions of Facebook running as test sites. Source - interview with Zuckerberg: https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/294242

Sian A: Hello, this is what happened after I liked the Labour party page - still no tailored content in Trending. I have a feeling this may be a 'trend' in itself…
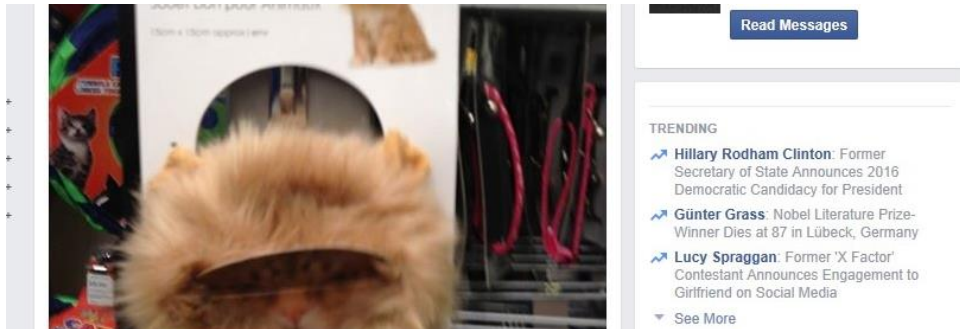
The volunteer continued to see no effect on her News Feed or in Trending Topics, however this may not be so unusual. If, as Facebook claim, the algorithm responds to levels of interaction by a user and if that user spent longer reading particular material from particular people, or watching particular videos, or Liking or commenting on content from particular people (for example closest Friends), then the action of simply liking one political party's page may not be enough to move the algorithm from a pattern of prioritisation already in place for that user.

At least not without some additional incentive perhaps, such as that political party paying to boost its content – as explored in the final data collection stage.

However, the principle that Facebook responds only or mostly to the actions of its users in prioritising the content they will see is undermined by the Field log for this research, which time and again in the Stage Two data collection – and in both the 2015 and 2017 election logs - noted no link between the researcher's actions and the content that was shown at the next log in. Rather particular groups (UKIP) and

individual candidates (Majid and Griffiths) appeared to "swamp" the News Feed for no obvious reason:

> 24/4/15 [c7.30pm]
>
> When I went back to my own FB page, top posts were from candidate Caroline Lucas and Green Party candidate Darren Hall in Bristol West. Top post from Lucas 2 hrs ago, followed by one from her posted yesterday, then one from Green Party Bristol West candidate posted three hours ago…. Then more Ali Majid and UKIP Brighton and Hove!
>
> When I refreshed the page again – just got Majid and the UKIP stuff
>
> 28/4/15. Session 5.10pm to 7pm
>
> Logged into FB. Top post on my feed is one from Bristol West Green candidate Darren Hall (2 hrs old), then usual Brighton & Hove UKIP (3hrs old), then an 11mins old Griffiths post, followed by two 3hrs old posts from Burton UKIP candidate. Really starting to wonder why UKIP is dominating my news feed when I haven't yet looked at those candidate's feeds.
>
> 8/5/15 [day after election]. 11.20am
>
> Returned to my Home page. No other Bristol West candidates in my feed (usual Majid, UKIP, Hall, Griffiths and Lucas). Tried selecting News Feed (same). Then tried pages feed. Some posts from Jan Zablocki (15hrs) at top but otherwise same people mix as other feeds. Tried scrolling down Pages Feed for c30 posts but all I saw was posts shown to me on previous days. Can't find a way to go from FB page to people or pages I actually want to look at.
>
> 2.48pm – started on Brighton candidates again (previously looking at SoT)
>
> Went to my Home Page first to see if any showing in top posts.

4 UKIP Brighton & Hove posts in my top five (plus Mark Green, Burton UKIP). Still don't understand why as only UKIP page I've looked at today is UKIP SoT.

There are many more similar references in the 2015 Field Logs. No matter which constituency was being looked at and no matter how much time was spent looking at particular candidates' Facebook pages, Posts from Brighton and Hove UKIP dominated the News Feed, even before that Page had even been looked at.

The only explanation could be that the algorithm was prioritising posts from UKIP. Perhaps the algorithm determined that interest in UKIP candidates in the four constituencies suggested a preference for news from UKIP, and yet not for the other parties followed?

The more likely explanation would be that UKIP, as Brighton and Hove or as the national party, had been able to exert more influence on Facebook during the 2015 election, and the likeliest reason for that would appear to be that the local or national party was paying significant amounts to have its material "boosted".

5.6.2 Pay to play

Andrew Griffiths, Conservative candidate for Burton and Uttoxeter, was very active on Facebook both in the 2015 and 2017 election (and won the seat both times). Interviewed for this thesis, he said it had been a conscious decision to make Facebook an integral part of his 2015 campaign, including spending "hundreds and hundreds" of pounds on Facebook advertising as part of a multiplier of his social media reach.

I was able to use Facebook as a way to bolster and add to the conventional campaign. That way I was able to engage with other Facebook Pages in Burton - SpottedBurton and JasonGreenwoodSpottedBurton. They were engaging in the campaign and had thousands of followers. I'd never met them before, but they had an engagement in the campaign even though their readers weren't necessarily Conservative supporters. It's interesting - it all had a multiplier effect - my paid-for ads, my posts, being on SpottedBurton.

If Facebook users have political content delivered to their News Feeds based on algorithms which only in part – despite what Facebook itself says - respond to their own activity, and if the overwhelming majority of content which could be relevant to a user does not make it into their News Feed, then the content that is delivered has "won" the opportunity to attract that user's attention. Thus, companies and organisations – including news publishers – reliant on attracting attention to their content through social media have developed tools and processes as part of the 'attention economy' (Lanham, 1997) - aimed at increasing the likelihood of their content "winning" a place in a target user's News Feed.

As Chris Moran (then Audience Editor for the Guardian) said in interview in 2016:

The simple scale you can get on Facebook is totally different to anywhere else. Facebook…have the most dynamically-changing algorithm in the world, much more so than Google, which is often criticised for the same thing at great length. [Facebook's] recent changes to their news feed algorithm fascinates me because what it broadly says, and the notations are unmistakable, it says the emphasis is on you to create your own content.

Five years ago, I was being asked in a conference why should we be relying just on one major technical giant, and isn't it dicey that we're tagging along on Google? Now interestingly people are saying the same thing about Facebook.

Of course, all of those concerns are correct, but at the very least, we now have … somebody who is actually challenging Google.

Is it enough for Facebook to allow users (some) options to control their feeds in order to prioritise people they want to hear more from? Or should the architecture reflect, as Dahlgren suggests, an ecology which proactively enables interaction; that encourages deliberative democracy (2006: 268)? And how about paying to control News Feeds? How does the ability of individuals and organisations to Boost or Promote their posts, or to pay for adverts, impact on that democratic ecology?

Facebook is a business. Like the traditional press, any role it might be able to play in mediating between people and state in the public sphere will always be tempered by the need to earn revenue. The tweaks that made it easier for users to control their News Feed had to be sold to the companies and organisations that were paying to be pushed into users' feeds ("Pages still matter - a lot"[192]).

The final data collection stage of this research project included, as previously outlined, directly intervening in a candidate's relationship with their page visitors by both producing content and asking the site administrators to consider paying to 'boost' some of the content in order to note the effect on visibility of and engagement with that boosted content. An example being the Post below and this excerpt from the Field Log for June 6th, 2017:

> Logged in but straight onto John Mckeirnan's page, rather than my own.
> Mckeirnan is the candidate I've been working with on his campaign –
> including writing posts for his FB page, setting posts strategy and boosting

---

[192] In an open post to its Pages customers, in November 2014, set out Facebook's argument for why they were reducing their access to News feeds in order to create a better experience for users.

posts. The post was written by me last night, set for timed release this morning (7.30am) and boosted for each for the key towns in the constituency. It's interesting in terms of its reach (because of the boost but also because of the effectiveness of the SM strategy) and interesting because of the discussion going on.

In the screenshots taken of the response to that Post (an attack post against the rival Conservative candidate that focused on his voting record in relation to benefits and social care issues) over 75 users engaged with the Post by Liking or selecting an emoticon, while 47 users shared the posts in the first few hours and it had gathered 14 comments; all within hours of the Post being published.

However, not all the Comments were positive and a fairly lively debate begins with multiple participants both defending Andrew Griffith's record as the sitting MP and responding to his voting record.

Note also how, in the posts from Sarah (Fig. 45) she addresses each contributor by name, as does Gareth who name tags Andrew Griffiths which means his supportive posts would appear in Griffith's own Timeline.

Figure 45: Section of Comments on the attack Post

The debate continues across multiple threads and with more participants joining in as the (Boosted) Post expands it reach organically through being seen by more people.

A post written the day before the election (the rallying call mentioned on page 198) picked up 33 Likes, 15 Shares and 15 Comments pre-Boost. While a similar rallying post published the following day (Appendix 5, Fig 62) this time both personalised to the candidate and boosted attracted 534 emoticon responses, 124 Shares and 106 Comments.

The Field Log for June 8th, 2017 (election day) noted that the two most active site administrators, Jake and Greg Finney had worked through much of the previous night

and during election day answering every negative or question Comment and engaging in discussion and that "seemed to encourage more" interaction. This particular Post was one of the liveliest seen in terms of engagement – both positive and negative - and the Field Log for that day also notes: "Is it the boost that's drawing them in, or knowing that someone is reading what they say (by responding to it)?"

One final example of how paying to Boost or promote particular posts can positively affect political engagement is contained in the excerpt and screenshot below (Fig. 46), from an exchange that followed the creation and Boosting of a Post encouraging young people to vote.

Jodie tells people she doesn't normally vote but will from now on because she is "sick of people deciding my future!"

Figure 46: Further example of result from Boosting a Post

Her personal Facebook profile showed that she was a young mother, a local voter

and working in a low-paid job, with no evidence of political affiliations or interests

other than a couple of fundraising groups. She would have no reason to directly visit

Mckiernan's campaign page and therefore would most likely have seen the youth

vote Post and/or Comments on the Post either through organic links between her and

other commenters (for instance if one of the discussion participants was her Facebook

friend), or as a result of the paid Boost pushing the post into her News Feed because

she fitted the location and age range demographics chosen for the Boost.

It is unlikely that the Post itself had made her decide to vote this time around, but it is likely that seeing the Post, and perhaps other people's engagement with it, encouraged her to feel able to comment publicly – to engage in the cultural work of making a political statement.

For all the complexity of Facebook's algorithms in determining whether or not a user may be interested in a particular Post from a particular Friend, the evidence from this final research stage suggests that by-and-large Facebook will prioritise content that is linked - directly or indirectly - to paid campaigns.

5.6.3 The in-between years

The influence of Facebook's algorithms on political content was not the only issue that had become more relevant to this thesis in the years between the 2015 and 2017 elections. In monitoring responses on candidate's pages to the 2015 election result, the desire of people on the 'losing' side to seek out comfortable spaces in which to discuss the result had been noted. In particular, voters discussing the election result and the need for a unification of parties of opposition on Caroline Lucas's Facebook page (as outlined on page 265).

Subsequently, the "shock" Brexit vote saw a similar effect with the rapid growth of anti-Brexit group the 48% Group on Facebook (see page 267), and a shift in left-leaning and young voters' willingness to make their political position public through Facebook and to engage with political content. Chris Moran (then Audience Editor for the Guardian) interviewed in July 2016, explained how this desire to be part of like-minded conversations had manifested itself as a spike in traffic to The

Guardian's website, with both average daily uniques[193] and page views rocketing to record levels. He added:

> I think the single biggest thing in the last four weeks is the sheer scale of Brexit….Pre-Brexit, Paris attacks day two was our biggest. We didn't just beat that record; we almost doubled that.

> You are friends with your friends. That is the defining characteristic of Facebook. That's not something that can ever possibly change. When I hear about people being disappointed that they haven't seen more pro-Brexit or anti-Brexit stuff, what we've seen over the last six weeks is people sharing at vast scale pieces which help them clarify or state their own position.

However, this was despite what Moran saw as Facebook's inability to reflect that interest, with fluctuating algorithms that made it more difficult for publishers to reach an audience who may be interested in particular issues or stories:

> I think the thing that's worried me most is watching the pre-Brexit [traffic], the decline of Facebook as a referrer, but also really a lot of the way in which it fluctuates so much. It concerns me.

> I understand why. They have to have a live response, but you can really see those numbers come back. Then when they came back with: "We're also going to change our algorithm later," that's quite bothering.

That bias built into Facebook's algorithms – whether a bias paid for by advertisers or would-be influencers[194], or a bias against some types of news or news

---

[193] The number of unduplicated (counted only once) visitors to a website in one 24-hour day – that is, the visit to the site is counted as one visit, regardless of how many different pages are looked at during the visit.

[194] The American Civil Liberties Union submitted a complaint to the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission alleging gender discrimination after job adverts on Facebook, paid for by 10

publishers[195], or a bias in favour of gathering information Facebook as a company is interested in[196] became an increasing concern during these in-between election years.

In 2016, Mark Zuckerberg told his audience that Facebook is both a technology company and a media company – just not a traditional media company. He said:

> Facebook is a new kind of platform. It's not a traditional technology company. It's not a traditional media company… We don't write the news that people read on the platform. But at the same time, we know we also know that we do a lot more than just distribute news, and we're an important part of the public discourse.[197]

Over 2017 and 2018, investigative journalism, particularly by the New York Times, The Guardian and Buzzfeed, revealed just what "doing a lot more than just distributing news" might mean to Facebook. Fake news farms run by secretive

---

advertisers, targeted male users and did not appear to women. Source: https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/sep/18/facebook-sued-gender-bias-male-targeted-job-ads (accessed November 12, 2018).

[195] In January 2018, Facebook announced it would begin prioritising articles in its news feed based on how its users ranked the trustworthiness of individual publishers. Source: https://www.forbes.com/sites/kathleenchaykowski/2018/01/19/facebook-to-prioritize-trustworthy-publishers-in-news-feed/#2e977d7328de (accessed November 12, 2018).

[196] The company has been criticised for gathering data not only about Facebook's users but also about people who do not use Facebook and have never signed up to the network – even sometimes targeting them with ads. Source: http://uk.businessinsider.com/mark-zuckerberg-facebook-collects-data-non-users-for-security-2018-4 (accessed November 12, 2018).

[197] In a one-to-one video conference filmed with Facebook CEO Sheryl Sandberg and published to Zuckerberg's Facebook page on December 21, 2016

agencies[198]; mass harvesting of data by third parties for political ends[199]; political disintermediation in a series of "unexpected" election results – Brexit, the election of Donald Trump[200].

The investigations are ongoing (at the time of writing) and information continues to emerge on links between Russia and alt-right individuals and groups in the US and UK and, often, through third-party data provider Cambridge Analytica. It is too early to be able to say how much data has been mined; how many fake news stories have been published, who is involved and why, or what the political effect might have been of sending fake and partisan information to people who might be more likely to be influenced by it. Nor how much of that is still happening or will happen in the future.

None-the-less, the arguments given in this thesis for studying Facebook as a political actor in its own right – its tremendous scale; the reach of its network; its

---

[198] Buzzfeed journalist Craig Silverman had written in 2015 about Macedonian teenagers pumping out fake, pro-Trump news stories ahead of the 2016 US election. Subsequently, Silverman with a team of journalists discovered that those news farms had links to American political players and possibly Russia: https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/american-conservatives-fake-news-macedonia-paris-wade-libert (accessed November 12, 2018).

[199] Cambridge Analytica - the UK-based data analytics firm that worked with Donald Trump's election team and the winning Brexit campaign – was found to have harvested millions of Facebook profiles of voters to build a powerful software program to predict and influence choices at the ballot box. Source: https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/mar/17/cambridge-analytica-facebook-influence-us-election (accessed November 12, 2018).

[200] In February 2018, the US Justice Department charged 13 Russians and three companies for executing a scheme to subvert the 2016 election and support Donald J. Trump's presidential campaign. In the indictment, officials detailed how the Russians used Facebook and its sub-company Instagram to sow discord among the electorate by creating Facebook groups, distributing divisive ads and posting inflammatory images. Source: https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/17/technology/indictment-russian-tech-facebook.html

corporate ecology of building ever more links between users (and, it seems, non-users) in order to make money from those links, are the same reasons to be concerned by evidence of individuals and groups being able to 'game' Facebook to their own political ends.

That so much of what has emerged thus far is linked to those two unexpected election results – Donald Trump becoming President of the US, and the UK voting to leave the European Union – is of particular concern if, as this thesis argues, Facebook is replacing the traditional public sphere with a global space in which political news and information is less likely to be debated.

That lack of debate and political talk among users, coupled with users being served content which is largely controlled not by their preferences but by easily-influenced algorithms, encourages political responses based on low information, partisanship, and/or cognitive bias. In an interview with The Guardian in 2018, Anthony Scaramucci, the former White House communications director for Donald Trump explained why each news story "crisis" that had hit the White House since the President's inauguration had seemed to have no effect on Trump's core supporters[201].

---

[201] Also of note, is the decision by Trump in 2018 to hire Brad Pascale as his 2020 re-election campaign manager. Pascale was Trump's digital media director for his 2016 campaign and (writes Julia Carrie Wong in The Guardian, 2018), claims his Facebook campaign won the election for Trump. Pascale focuses on micro-targeting – sending out tens of thousands of iterations of messages every day, targeted at tiny groups of voter types. That ability to send very specific, unregulated messages to individuals (unlike traditional advertising with its broader, public and more regulated messages), to target their particular bias or "inner demons", may make it easier for voters to believe Trump is "for them".

> They love this guy, they think this guy's for them. These are low information emotional voters and they like what they see in the president. They think he's working for them.

Those "low information emotional voters" may be low information by choice – a deliberate avoidance of the cultural work of engaging with traditional media and potentially uncomfortable information; but they are also low information by design. A Facebook which prioritises paid-for content/information which is more likely to be partisan, more likely to engage by emotion, and more likely to be targeted at those particular voters is, by default, low information.

Interviewed in 2016, Aron Pilhofer then Executive Editor of Digital for the Guardian[202], saw the relationship between news publishers and Facebook as on balance positive at that stage. With Instant Articles[203] in particular opening new revenue streams for publishers and providing a better experience for Facebook's users. However, Facebook's lack of interest in what content actually appeared on its site was a concern:

> I think you have to look at why Facebook [works with publishers], what are their motives? What do they want? They want attention. They want people to

---

[202] Interviewed by the author for the book 'Future Journalism: Where we are and where we're going'. Pilhofer was then both Interim Chief Digital Officer and Executive Editor of Digital at Guardian News and Media but about to leave and take up a professorship at Temple University School of Media and Communication, Philadelphia.

[203] A Facebook propriety application which enables publishers to repurpose news articles, complete with pictures, videos and/or links, through a templated system designed to load that article many times faster than standard posts. Facebook launched Instant Articles in 2015 and encouraged publishers to use it for articles they want to publish to Facebook, rather than publish their original version. It had had mixed responses from news publishers some of who were uncomfortable with the additional control it gave Facebook, while Facebook's subsequent prioritising of video over text-led articles further reduced interest. Sources: https://digiday.com/media/how-google-amp-won-over-facebook/ and https://instantarticles.fb.com/. Accessed Oct 1st, 2018.

stay in Facebook. They don't really care what the content is, as long as it's keeping them in, so if you're making content that keeps people in Facebook, they will have every reason in the world, they are completely incentivised to keep this relationship as friendly for publishers as possible.

That focus on keeping people "in" Facebook, where they can be tracked and that data sold or otherwise used, means delivering content that attracts that user's attention. So, content that user agrees with or content that user is attracted to (a funny viral video, for example) will always be more useful to Facebook. Zuckerberg may say that he knows that his company does more than just distribute news, but he should also know that Facebook controls what news is sent to who.

Facebook – whether directly or by omission – is doing a great deal more than just distributing news. Facebook is not a traditional media company in that it doesn't write the political narrative but, to yet unknown degrees, it may control it.

5.7. Back to the public sphere future

In 2012, Backstrom et al led Facebook's Data Science team in a test of the entire network of Facebook users at that point (721 million) against Travers and Milgram's (1969) "six degrees of separation" experiment. In that experiment, individuals routed a postcard by sending it person-to-person only via people they knew. The Travers/Milgram experiment concluded that a maximum of six people (4.4 to 5.7) intermediaries (degrees of separation) were needed. The 2012 experiment used algorithms to determine that – at least for Facebook users – it was closer to four degrees of separation (3.74 intermediaries).

It was an interesting test to determine the linked-ness of people on Facebook - the pathways between those individual walled gardens. A 2016 Facebook-led update on the experiment found that linked-ness had increased as Facebook had grown. There were now 1.59 billion active users and the researchers concluded each user was now linked to every other person on Facebook by an average of three-and-a half other people (3.57 intermediaries; 3.46 for US users), and concluded that collective "degrees of separation" had shrunk in the intervening five years:

> Now, with twice as many people using the site, we've grown more interconnected, thus shortening the distance between any two people in the world. (Facebook, 2016)

While Facebook's network effects are able to bring lots of people together quickly to march, fundraise, or lobby for change, it is not able to sustain that because people's experience of Facebook is very local and personal – limited by their own connections to family, friends, jobs and domicile – and limited by the dominance of weak-tie connections in their network.

The issue becomes whether that very local and personal experience can become a national or global citizenship one. Facebook's transformational potential may in the end not be about its capacity to change the world, but it's ability to provide a variety of small social spaces – analogous to those Habermasian coffeeshops perhaps – in which it is OK to talk politics.

From Facebook's point of view, the social network is global. It is unprecedentedly large in scale and reach. In that sense, it has the capacity for transformational change. However, lots of things are global in the sense that they are marketed and delivered to a vast global audience – from Apple's iPhone to Johnny

Walker whisky. Facebook's mission to connect the world may simply be a marketeer's desire to extend the reach of their product.

The individual user does not access Facebook as a global entity, rather as a personal service delivering hyper-local heterogeneity. Users communicate on a regular basis with only a handful of people, frequently the same people they communicate with offline. To step out of their immediate Facebook space, their News Feed, and the normative restrictions imposed by engaging in political talk with friends, workmates or family, they need to consciously do so by joining a group or Liking a political Page, such as the candidate campaign pages that this research focused on.

These two areas of their Facebook "life" may be kept separate by the user, Although, as this research has shown, how separate they remain is determined by Facebook and its algorithms. That lack of control over who will see a political Comment or Post a user might make means the user, even in the 'safe' space of the candidate's page, has to judge the level of personal risk to them and their existing relationships on Facebook, in posting material. The cultural work of engaging in politics (Eliasoph, 1997) becomes that bit harder; they may want to talk, but dare they talk?

As an avenue for future research, that link between favoured Facebook Friends and sharing of political views would be worth exploring further. If Facebook offered valid mechanisms to more effectively sort and prioritise friendship groups, such as the people they feel most comfortable discussing political and civic issues with (in

the way, for instance, that it's new business WhatsApp does[204]) then users may be more willing to engage in political talk. Miller referred to something similar as "scalable sociability" (2016) in which an individual will choose from different social media in order to communicate with different sized groups appropriate to the message they want to send (Facebooks' one-to-many communication versus WhatsApp's one to particular groups, for example).

There is another issue, arising from Facebook's scale and its connective architecture, which is whether it is contributing to the reduction in separation between individuals. While it may be experienced as a hyper-local network of individuals users mostly already know, the data studied in this research shows how, through membership of groups and the seeking out of discussion spaces, that may be changing with users becoming connected to more people they do not know but with who they share a common interest. Thus, users were seen to engage in political talk on or linked to Pages of candidates they could not vote for for reasons of geography but with whom they shared attitudes or interests

At noted in the previous section, growing concerns have emerged around the influence of extreme right and left-wing political groups via viral sharing of content on Facebook. These concerns have resulted in a number of recent and current studies, investigations (governmental and journalistic) and increasingly the attention of law-makers and legal institutions. While these ongoing investigations are outside the scope of this thesis, the 2017 Stage 4 case study does have relevance to looking at

---

[204] See footnote 24, page 44.

how political content material can be forcibly spread on Facebook to particular demographic groups.

To return to the argument that, rather than be part of the public sphere Facebook has disintermediated it, one further argument for disintermediation is the representative role of the traditional public sphere. As discussed in section 2.7, a public sphere 'test' of Facebook should also consider its representational role as conduit of public opinion to political elites, analogous to traditional mass media.

But some of the elections that have taken place during the period of this study – 2015 to 2017 – suggest the converse; that Facebook is not a conduit of public opinion and that it has undermined that representational link from citizens to their government. What is said in Facebook largely stays on Facebook. No wonder Trump's election and the Brexit decision were a "surprise" to political and media elites – they could not have known what information voters were exposed to in their Facebook News Feed, nor what discussions they may have engaged in. Facebook's may not be a public media but its scale creates its own public. If governments want to know what the majority of citizens think about them, ahead of finding out at the ballot box, they need to find a way to listen to them on Facebook.

Chapter 6: Conclusions

Facebook is, as Zuckerberg has said, "a new kind of platform" (see page 323) and this thesis has focused on what that new kind of platform might mean for the public sphere. Something that had not existed before, something very new and something very much a platform in the non-technological sense of that word – that of a space and opportunity to voice views.

The research made a unique contribution to theory around the public sphere by focusing on whether the social network site provides a new platform for political debate. The thesis posed two inter-related questions – is Facebook, as a phenomenally successful new communications medium, a new public space or new public sphere? And, as a commercial communications medium, is Facebook capable of delivering the civic interaction necessary to an effective public sphere? As discussed in chapter two, while other studies have considered Facebook's contribution to political debate by studying the role of the internet or of social media generally, this project uniquely focused on Facebook arguing that its scale, reach and corporate ecology necessitated studying it as a political actor in its own right.

Overall, the research delivered four concluding findings:

1. Facebook's architecture has multiple chilling effects on political talk, and on political debate in particular.

2. Facebook's corporate concerns drive content algorithms which tend towards the creation both of filter bubbles and of bias that can be bought by third party influencers.

3. The likelihood of debate comes down to the positive actions of the "right people" (defined as *visible leaders, supportive policers, aware producers,* and *engaged openers*) vs the negative influence of Facebook's architecture.

4. Facebook is not a new public sphere, rather it has undermined or disintermediated the public sphere as it is largely understood. In particular, by bypassing the traditional media in the public sphere as opinion conduit.

Facebook is a platform that is actively used by over two billion people each month to chat, share content, organise events, flag locations, post pictures, thoughts and opinions, and to interact with people they largely already know. It is, again in Zuckerberg's words, not just a communications medium but a "transformational" communications medium, able to change the way society is organised and to "give everyone a voice."[205] But a voice to do what, and to be heard by who?

Research conducted during the 2015 and 2017 UK General Elections underpins this thesis. The mixed methods research included surveys alongside online ethnographic study, and direct intervention via a case study. The methodology was influenced by a number of earlier studies; in particular the work of Dan Jackson and colleagues in their 2013 study of political talk in online forums, and danah boyd's "deep watching" of teens' talk on MySpace (2008).

By focusing on online spaces (political candidates' public Facebook pages) and a time period (the month preceding a general election) when political debate might be *expected* to happen, the study assessed whether Facebook's architecture encouraged or discouraged such debate. It sought to explore whether these online spaces – candidate's Facebook pages - offered a 21st century version of Habermas's 18th

---

[205] Zuckerberg's letter to shareholders, reposted to (and accessed via) readwrite.com February 1, 2012

century coffee house and salons as a place where debate is expected, sought out, and encouraged.

The data gathered delivered a number of findings. Firstly, the 2015 surveys found respondents locked in a "want to talk, daren't talk" relationship with expressing political views to their Facebook friends. Two-thirds of the young people surveyed said they were interested in socio-political issues and wanted to debate them, and yet would routinely avoid commenting on issues on Facebook, even when moved by a campaign or news story.

The online ethnographic study, conducted in the run-up to and just after the General Election saw this reticence underpinned by strict rules of "netiquette", with debate quality limited both by normative group behaviour and Facebook's own architectural culture which creates a less safe space for debate.

Thus, across the thousands of Posts and comments seen, and despite those posts being on political pages in the days before an election, and despite those posts largely coming from people who had shown interest in the election by choosing to visit a political page, there was actually very little political debate. Only 170 threads (five percent) of the material read showed evidence of reasoned debate.

It should be understood that in order to explore the role of Facebook in the traditional Habermasian interpretation of the public sphere, the aim was not simply to look for political talk, but for political *debate*. Debate that, as Schudson argued (1997), was among people "acquainted by virtue of their citizenship… under norms of public reasonableness", rather than simply social interaction. Habermas had seen the formation of public opinion as a cornerstone of the public sphere. Evolving from

the "world of letters" of coffeeshop clubs, *salons* and the press, public opinion would put the state in touch with the needs of society (1989). This research was about identifying Facebook's relationship to the public sphere in its Habermasian sense, and therefore sought to identify political talk that was public, participatory and reasoned debate rather than oratory; that circulated ideas or information with the aim of helping form opinions.

The five percent of reasoned debate that was seen, swamped as it was by oratory and simple messages of support for a candidate or idea, was a particularly low figure against comparison points such as the seven percent of explicitly or implicitly political online conversation seen by Jackson et al in their 2013 study, or the eight percent of everyday conversation noted by Almond and Verba in their seminal 1963 work on civic culture, or the 15 percent of British voters and 13 percent of American voters claiming to discuss politics most days in Bennett et al's multi-election research (1995, 2000), and the research gathered information from the surveys and, particularly, the online ethnographic stage, to explore reasons for this reduction.

What was particularly interesting in the 2015 online ethnographic research, was how debate was conducted – the "public reasonableness" element, with group members using signaling language to encourage – or curtail – debate, to effectively say: "It's ok - politics bit over now and nothing scary happened". Thus, the debate that was observed tended to be reasonable, wrapped in ameliorating language and etiquette (or "netiquette"), but it was also short-lived and conversational threads tended towards the discursive rather than the deliberative. Facebook's own architecture carries much of the blame for this by tending to split content across time and space. A Post, or sections of responses to a Post, can be carried from one

319

person's Facebook Page to a Friend's News Feed, to a Group Page, and the discussion picked up again by new people several days later. The ability to continue conversations is thus impeded further by virtual geography and temporal dissonance.

There is a multiplier effect at play in which normative behaviour offline in which people will normally avoid political talk[206] is increased on Facebook because of the perceived risk to group equilibrium or individual reputations. And political debate that does happen is further truncated by Facebook's architecture which favours expansion-to-most over creating a "safe" space for trusted person-to-person communication.

What was also in evidence was people using Facebook to seek out spaces in which to see and join in political discussion with strangers. This willingness to engage in debate with strangers was particularly evident on Green Party MP Caroline Lucas's Page, and even more so after the election result when Lucas's Page seemed to act as a magnet for left-leaning voters, whether they voted Green or not and whether they lived in Brighton or not. Being there would validate their own thoughts on the election; offer new insights; and the opportunity to debate in a space more likely to be reasonable and *comfortable*. They were seeking debate with strangers, but with *like-minded* strangers.

The 2017 data collection was focused around one candidate rather than watching what was going on in the four constituencies, with an interventionist case study designed to test the effect of particular content on the likelihood of debate. Among

---

[206] See (Bennett et al, 1995; Eliasoph, 1996, 1997; Bohman, 2004; Kahneman, 2011; Jackson et al, 2013; Graham et al, 2015) and also section 5.4.1, starting from page 236.

the issues that had emerged during the two years between the elections studied was greater awareness about how Facebook's algorithms influenced what content, including political content, a user might see.

Returning to Facebook for the first time in 2017, the platform appeared to know a great deal more about its users that it had in 2015, including being able to mine data from other websites and the social media networks Facebook had bought - WhatsApp and Instagram. While that is touched on in this thesis, along with the investigations into the "gaming" of Facebook's algorithms by partisan political groups[207], the 2017 data collection focused on whether debate is affected by the content posted and by how far the candidate and their agents engaged in debate on their Page.

The 2015 data had shown that, of the 27 candidates across the four constituencies studied, all of the winning candidates and three out of four of the second-placed candidates were also the ones who – personally or through their agents - were most active on Facebook. The issue of how far the level of personal involvement of a candidate in social media may affect voting patterns would be worth exploring further in future research, given that voters expressed a link between the *visibility* of the candidate on their social media and the perceived *authenticity* of that candidate[208].

The 2017 research sought to look at whether the nature of the involvement of the candidate (or their agent acting as the candidate) and their supporters on their

---

[207] See footnote 196, page 323. Note that much of this investigative work is ongoing and, at the time of writing, it is not clear the extent to which partisan political groups and underground governmental actors (particularly from Russia) may have – or may still be – influencing what content Facebook shows targeted users.

[208] See section 5.4.5

321

Facebook Page affected debate. Further, to test whether paying to Boost Posts – the core of Facebook's business model – would affect the visibility and reach of a Post and, in turn, engagement with it. However, while the case study showed that paying to Boost Posts had a positive effect on reach, it was not known how far increased reach alone had a positive effect on the likelihood of debate. Nor was it possible to determine how far paying to Boost *some* Posts caused Facebook's algorithms to boost other, unpaid, Posts too. This could also be an area for future investigation.

What was noted during the 2015 online ethnographic study and the 2017 interventionist case study is that debate can be encouraged by the actions of the candidate and his/her agents and supporters. The five key enabling factors were:

1) The visibility of the candidate or influencer on the Page (*visible leaders*);
2) The visible management of debate (*supportive policers*);
3) Type or quality of material (posts, videos, comments) produced to encourage debate (*aware producers*);
4) More young, female visitors and/or liberal thinking participants on the Page or thread (*engaged openers*);
5) The safety of conversing with like-minds (*comfortable space*).

The conclusion is that the likelihood of debate comes down to the positive actions of particular types of individuals vs the chilling effect of Facebook's architecture.

Whether debate happens depends on the right people being involved - Friends, candidates, Page managers, and like-minded strangers who are visible and exhibit the behaviour visitors want to see. The factors outlined above do not have to all be present for debate to happen, but any one of the factors being present made debate more likely.

322

6.1. Publications and further research

This discussion around who enables political debate and the ways in which they do so is a key finding in this project and part of the plan for publication from this PhD research. The role of women in particular in enabling and encouraging political talk on Facebook is of interest and it is intended that the first paper produced will focus on this area of the research findings – the roles played by the identified types of individuals and the ways in which women tended to play a part in civilising political talk and encouraging discussion on Facebook, even among people with opposing views.

This area of the active civilising of debate will also be picked up in the next stage of this research project. Having looked at how people engaged in (or avoided) political discussion on candidate pages in both the 2015 and 2017 election, the intention is to continue that work with the next UK general election. As in 2015 and 2017, the intention will be to focus on the five sample constituencies and to identify a particular area to investigate further. In 2017, the project focused on how the type of content and the actions of visible leaders and aware producers might affect the likelihood of debate, as a more focused exploration of the findings from the 2015 online ethnography. At the next election, the intention is to focus on the roles of supportive policers and engaged openers to look at whether that tendency to civilised discussion seen in 2017 has survived the more polarised and personal politics of post-Brexit-vote Britain expressed through Facebook.

Finally, the intention is to also produce and publish papers from this research looking at the overall findings and the relationship of Facebook to the public sphere. A preliminary paper based on initial findings has already been presented to the

Political Studies Association Annual Conference (2018) and the final results of the research are likely to be of interest to other academics working in the area of political talk and the public sphere; or researchers focusing on Facebook's role in civic society; or on social media and politics; or looking at how people engage in pre-political talk or deliberation.

The conclusion of this thesis that Facebook has undermined the Habermasian public sphere, or disintermediated it, by bypassing the role of the traditional media as public opinion conduit, is an important contribution to academic debate around the public sphere in the online era.

6.2 Facebook in the public sphere

To return to the starting point for the research – is Facebook part of the Habermasian public sphere, or simply an additional public space in which political discussion may happen? Is reasonable and reasoned debate happening and does Facebook's ecology and architecture make that debate more or less likely to happen? And, having happened, is that debate public and able to be seen by – or represented to – the State? The project considered key literature to define a public sphere "test" for Facebook (see pages 72-79) which would primarily assess the type and quality of political talk among Facebook users, but also that the SNS itself would have to pass structural tests in relation to its institutional, architectural and political ecology.

This research found that Facebook met some of the parameters of the public sphere but not others. It is only sort-of public – its structure is a walled garden of software and architecture the company controls and yet makes available to an

unknown number of third parties. It links users with people they already know, their "trusted friends," and yet encourages them to expand that network to a point where users no longer feel in control of who sees what they say, and therefore become less comfortable; less willing to debate.

Facebook says its focus is on showing users material they seem to be interested in, from people or organisations they care most about, and yet the evidence is that its algorithms are easily subverted through paid-for campaigns and viral techniques to show users material they have not shown interest in or would not otherwise have come across.

This thesis argues that the question is not therefore whether Facebook does or does not meet the public sphere test but posits that Facebook as political actor is so large, so influential, and so globally connected that it has subverted it. Further that Facebook has undermined the representational role of the public sphere by creating a space in which public opinion is contained within in its walled garden and within its own publics. The scale of those contained publics may make the conduit of their opinion to their governments irrelevant and only revealed at the ballot box.

Thus, both the traditional media[209] and governments are excluded from the discourse and "surprise" election results (see page 332) more likely. Further, at a period in history where trust in the media has been eroded by "fake news" accusations and weak or partisan reporting, and while Facebook continues to filter

---

[209] Back in 2003 – several years before the arrival of Facebook - Dahlgren had urged that, as the public sphere moved onto the growing Internet, it was important for civic culture that mainstream journalism was able to keep open the communicative spaces between traditional and the new politics (2003: 168).

and manage the news users see through its platform, the link between a healthy democracy and a healthy press is further undermined (see pages 96-98).

The Habermasian public sphere assumes a flattened perspective: people – media – state. Facebook is a massively global networked business experienced as a local-to-you space. Billions of bubble communities which influence each other, outside of state and media. Facebook's sphere of influence is who each user knows – the personal to the personal. This is a new public sphere of political influence, but one that redefines the word "public".

Facebook is bypassing traditional media's filtering role between public and state. This is a sphere which is not necessarily public but in which publics may be influenced. Able to be manipulated by unknown third parties and controlled by algorithms prioritising paid content. Whilst those things may be true of other media and social media, they are not Facebook; they are not a primary information source for two billion people and rising.

Facebook's corporate concerns drive content algorithms which tend towards the creation of filter bubbles, and bias that can be bought by third party influencers, while its architecture has multiple chilling effects on political talk, and on debate in particular. Facebook is not part of the Habermasian public sphere, rather it has undermined or disintermediated the public sphere as it has been largely understood.

Set against that is a public sphere which has shifted and may be better understood as multiple spheres (Habermas, 1992; Dahlgren, 1995; McNair, 2000; Temple, 2006; Khan et al, 2012), or a constellation of spaces (Eliasoph, 1990; Dahlgren, 2005a) in which public political talk may happen and effects may follow. The public sphere has

326

become simultaneously global and personal; a fluid, protean state that has moved

beyond the public – media – state triad to deliver hyper-personal viewpoints across

globalised communications. The political consumerism of product boycotts; the

global activism movements of Occupy or The Women's March; the social media

activism of #MeToo, these go beyond the nation-state political communications

theory of the early Habermasians and the deliberationists.

Politics today is about the personal and the social; it is about what the individual

thinks, or more often *feels*, about an issue – influenced by the people they know and

trust. It is inevitable that this more personal, more emotion-led and socially-driven

political response would find its home on social media, and on Facebook in particular

as the most effective social media actor. What is less clear is how far Facebook is

influencing what the individual thinks and feels about the political.

References

1. Papers, journals and books

Abbate. J. (1999) 'Inventing the Internet', MIT press, Cambridge, MA.

Abramson, J.B., Arterton, F. and Orren, G. (1988) 'The Electronic Commonwealth: The impact of new media technologies on democratic politics'. Basic Books, New York.

Albrectslund, A. (2008) 'Online social networking as participatory surveillance'. First Monday, S1, March 2008

Almond, G. and Verba, S. (1963) 'The Civic Culture', Sage Publications

Ancu, M. and Cozma, R. (2009) 'MySpace politics: uses and gratifications of befriending candidates', Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media 53 (4), 2009, p 567-583

Aslama, M. (2006) 'Intellectual scaffolding: On Peter Dahlgren's theorization of televisions and the public sphere', working paper, Donald McGannon Communications Research Center, Helsinki, Finland.

Auel, K. and Umit, R. (2018) 'Explaining MPs' communication to their constituents: evidence from the UK House of Commons', British Journal of Politics and International Relations, 20 (3), 731-752, Sage

Bakir, V. and McStay, A. (2017) 'Was it 'AI wot won it'? Hyper-targeting and profiling emotions online', in UK election analysis 2017: Media, Voters and the campaign, Thorsen E., Jackson, D. & Lilleker, D (eds), Centre for the Study of Journalism, Culture & Community

Bakshy, E., Rosenn, I, Marlow, C., Adamic, L. (2012) 'The role of social networks in information diffusion'. Proceedings of the 21st International conference on World Wide Web Pages (2012)

Bakshy, E. 'Rethinking information diversity in networks' (2012) Science (post published via Facebook Research blog, January 12, 2012)

Bakshy, E., Messing, S., Adamic, L. (2015) 'Exposure to ideologically diverse news and opinion', Science, June 2015, Vol 348, Issue 6239, pp 1130-1132

Benkler, Y. (2006) 'The wealth of networks: How social production transforms markets and freedom'. Yale University Press, New Haven, CT.

Bennett, S.E., Fisher, B., Resnick, D. (1995) 'Political conversations in the United States: Who talks to whom, why, and why not', The American Review of Politics, Vol. 16, Fall, 1995: 277-298

Bennett, S.E., Flickinger, R.S, Rhine, S. L (2000) 'Political talk over here, over there, over time', British Journal of Political Studies Vol. 30: 99-119

Bennett, W.L. (2003) 'Identity, communication and political action in late modern society', in Corner, J. and Pels, D. (eds.) 'Media and the restyling of politics', Sage

Bennett, W.L. and Segerberg, A. (2012) 'The logic of connective action: Digital media and the personalization of contentious politics', Information, Communication & Society 15:5, June 2012, pp 739-768, Routledge

Bernt, P. (2010) 'Should the whole world be watching? The tension between social networks and national privavcy policies', Paper to 38th Research Conference on Communication, Information and Internet Policy, Arlington, USA, October 2010

Bimber, B., Stohl, C., and Flanagin, A. J. (2009) 'Technological change and the shifting nature of political organization', in Chadwick, A. and Howard, P. N. (eds) Routledge Handbook of Internet Politics, Abingdon, Oxon.

Bohman, J. (1996) 'Public deliberation: Pluralism, complexity, and democracy', MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.

Bohman, J. (2004) 'Expanding dialogue: The Internet, the public sphere and prospects for transnational democracy', in Crossly, N and Roberts, J. M. (eds) 'After Habermas: New perspectives on the public sphere, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford.

Borgerson, J. & Miller, D. (2016) 'Scalable sociability and "How the world changed social media": conversation with Daniel Miller', Consumption Markets & Culture, DOI: 10.1080/10253866.2015.1120980

Bond, R. M., etc al. (2012), A 61-million-person experiment in social influence and political mobilization. Nature, Vol 489, Sept 2012, p295-298

Bowker, G.C., Turner, W., Star, S.L., and Gasser, L. (1997) 'Social science, technical systems, and cooperative work: Beyond the great divide'. Erlbaum, New Jersey.

boyd, d. (2006) 'Friends, Friendsters and MySpace Top 8: writing community into being on social network sites', First Monday 11 (12)

boyd, d. (2007) 'Why Youth (Heart) Social Network Sites: The Role of Networked Publics in Teenage Social Life', MIT Press, Cambridge MA.

boyd, d. (2008) 'Taken out of context: American teen sociality in networked publics', PhD dissertation, University of California, Berkeley

boyd, d and Ellison, N. (2007) 'Social network sites: Definition, history and scholarship', Journal of Computer-mediated Communication 13(1)

Brady, H. E. (1999) 'Political participation' in Robinson, J. P. et al (eds.) 'Measures of political attitudes', Academic Press, New York

Breslow, H. (1997) 'Civil Society, political economy, and the Internet', in S. Jones (ed) Virtual Cuture: Identity and Communication in Cybersociety, pp. 236-57, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Bruns. A. (2008) 'Blogs, Wikipedia, Aecond Life, and beyond: From production to produsage', Peter Lang, New York

Calhoun, C. (1992) 'Further reflections on the public sphere', in Calhoun, C (ed) 'Habermas and the Public Sphere (Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought)', MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.

Calhoun, C. (1998) 'Community without propinquity revisited: Communications technology and the transformation of the urban public sphere', Sociological Inquiry 68 (3): 373-379

Cannarella, J. and Spechler, J. A. (2014) 'Epidemiological modeling of online social network dynamics', paper, Department of Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ

Caers, R., De Feyter, T., De Couck, M., Stough, T, Vigna, C. and Du Bois, C. 'Facebook: A literature review' (2013), New Media & Society 15 (6) 982-1002

Castells, M. (2010) 'The rise of the network society' (2nd edition), Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester.

Carey, J. W. (2001) 'Lawyers, voyeurs, and vigilantes', in R. Giles and R.W. Snyder (eds) 'What's next: Problems and prospects for news', Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick

Chadwick, A. (2017) 'Corbyn, Labour, digital media, and the 2017 UK election', in UK election analysis 2017: Media, Voters and the campaign, Thorsen E., Jackson, D. & Lilleker, D (eds), Centre for the Study of Journalism, Culture & Community

Chambers, S. (2003) 'Deliberative democratic theory', Annual Review of Political Science 6: 307-326

Chambers, S. (2012) 'Deliberation and mass democracy' in Deliberative Systems, ed. Parkinson J. and Mansbridge, J. Cambridge University Press, UK.

Charles, A. (2010) 'The politics of Facebook friendship: the influence of the social structuration of the SNS upon the notion of the political' in CEU Political Science Journal 5:4, 575-596.

Cheung, CMK and Lee, MKO (2010), 'A theoretical model of intentional social action in online social networks', Decisions Support Systems, 49 (1): 24-30

Couldry, N. (2005) 'Culture and citizenship: The missing link?' European Journal of Cultural Studies, 9 (3): 321-40

Cumming, J.N., Lee, J.B., & Kraut, R. (2006) 'Communication technology and friendship during the transition from school to college', in Kraut, R., Nrynin, M., &

Cusumano, M. (2011), Platform wars come to social media, Communications of the ACM, Vol. 54, April, 4: 31-33.

Dahlgren, P. (2003) 'Reconfiguring civic culture in the new media milieu', in Corner, J. and Pels, D. (eds.), 'Media and the restyling of politics', Sage, London.

Dahlgren, P. (2005a) 'Television, public spheres and civic cultures.' In Wasko, J. (ed) 'A companion to television', p411-432. Blackwell Publishing, Oxford.

Dahlgren, P. (2005b) 'The Internet, Public Spheres, and Political Communication: Dispersion and Deliberation', Political Communication, 22: 147-162, Taylor & Francis Inc.

Dahlgren, P. (2006) 'Doing citizenship: The cultural origins of civic agency in the public sphere', European Journal of Cultural Studies, 9 (3), 267-286, Sage

Dahlgren, P. (2013) 'The political web: Media, participation and alternative democracy', Palgrave Macmillan, Hampshire.

Davis, A. (2009) 'New media and fat democracy: The paradox of online participation', New Media & Society, 12 (5), 745-761, Sage

Davies, D. W. (1966) 'A computer network for NPL', Memorandum, National Physical Laboratory, 28 July. In National Archive for the History of Computing.

Dewey, J. (1927) 'The public and its problems', Swallow Press, Ohio

Dimitrova, D, Shehata, A., Stromback, J., & Nord, L. W. (2011), 'The effects of digital media on political knowledge and participation in election campaigns: Evidence from panel data', Communication Research, 2014, 41: 95

Donath, J. and boyd, d. (2004) 'Public displays of connection', BT Technology Journal 22(4): 71-82

Dosi, G. (1982) 'Technological paradigms and technological trajectories', Research Policy 11, 147-162, North-Holland Publishing Company

Dosi, G. (1988) 'The nature of the innovative process', in Dosi, G. et al (eds), 'Technical change and economic theory', Pinter, London

Dosi, G., Malerba, F., Orsenigo, L. (1993) 'Evolutionary regimes and industrial dynamics', in Magnusson, L. (ed) 'Evolutionary and neo-Schumpeterian approaches to economics', Kluwer, Boston.

Downey, J. & Fenton, N. (2003) 'New media, counter publicity and the public sphere', New Media Society 2003 5: 185-202

Eco, U. (1977) 'Does the audience have bad effects on television?'

Eliasoph, N. (1990) 'Political culture and the presentation of self: A study of the public sphere in the spirit of Erving Goffman', Theory and Society, 19: 4 (Aug 1990), pp 465-494

Eliasoph, N. (1996) 'Making a fragile public: A talk-centered study of citizenship and power', Sociological Theory 14:3 (Nov 1996), pp 262-289, Saga

Eliasoph, N. (1997) '"Close to home": The work of avoiding politics' Theory and Society, (1997) 26 (5), 605-647, Springer

Ellison, N.B., Steinfield, C., & Lampe, C. (2007) 'The benefits of Facebook "Friends": Social capital and college students' use of online social network sites', Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication 12 (2007) 1143-1168

Ellison, N.B., Vitak, J., Gray, R. & Lampe, C. (2014) 'Cultivating social resources on social network sites: Facebook relationship maintenance behaviors and their role in social capital processes', Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication 19 (2014), 855-870

Ellul, J. The Technological Society (New York, 1964)

Ferrary, M & Granovetter, M (2009) 'The role of venture capital firms in Silicon Valley's complex innovations network. Economy and Society Volume 38 Number 2, May 2009: 326-359

Fernback, J. (1997) 'The individual within the collective: Virtual ideology and the realization of collective principles', in S.G. Jones (ed) Virtual culture: Identity and communication in cybersociety, pp. 36-54, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Feenberg, A. (1995) 'Subversive rationalization: technology, power, and democracy' in Feenberg, a. and Hannay, A. (eds) 'Technology and the politics of knowledge', 3-22. Indiana University Press, Bloomington.

Fisher S.D. & Hillman N. (2014) 'Do students swing elections? Registration, turnout and voting behavior among fulltime students', for the Higher Education Policy Institute

Flanagin, A.J., Flanagin, C., & Flanagin, J. (2009) 'Technical code and the social construction of the internet', New Media & Society (2010); 12 (2), 179-196, Sage

Fraser, N. (1992), 'Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy', in Calhoun, C. (ed) 'Habermas and the public sphere', 109-142, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.

Friedman, B. (ed), (1997) 'Human values and the design of computer technology', Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Fuchs, C. (2017) 'Social media: A critical introduction', Sage

Gaber, I. (2016) 'Is there still a 'crisis in public communication' (if there ever was one? The UK experience', Journalism 17(5): 636-651, Sage

Gaber, I. (2017) 'Twitter: A useful tool for studying elections?', Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Rechnologies, 23(6): 603-626

Gehl, R. (2012), Real (software) abstractions: On the rise of Facebook and the fall of MySpace, Social Text III, Vol. 30, No. 2, Summer, 99-119, Duke University Press.

Gerhards, J. and Schafer, M.S. (2010) 'Is the internet a better public sphere? Comparing old and new media in the USA and Germany', New Media Society, 12 (1): 143-160, Sage

Gibson, R. (2014) 'The Internet, Electoral Politics and Citizen Participation in Global Perspective'

Gjoka, M., Kurant, M., Butts, C.T., Markopoulou, A. (2010) 'Walking in Facebook: A case study of unbiased sampling of ONS' 2010 Proceedings IEEE

Gladwell, M. (2000) 'The tipping point'. Abacus, London.

Graham, R. and Wright, S. (2014a) 'Discursive equality and everyday talk online: the impact of 'super-participants'', Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication 19(3): 625-642

Graham, T., Jackson, D. and Broersma, M. (2014b) 'New platform, old habits? Candidates' use of Twitter during the 2010 British and Dutch general election campaigsn', New Media & Society 1(19), Sage

Graham, R., Jackson, D. and Wright, S. (2015) 'From everyday conversation to political action: Talking austerity in online 'third spaces'', European Journal of Communication

Granovetter, M. (1973) 'The strength of weak ties'. American Journal of Sociology 78 (6): 1360-80

Greenwood, S. (2017) 'Future Journalism: Where we are and where we're going', Routledge

Gustafsson, N. (2012) 'The subtle nature of Facebook politics: Swedish social network site users and political participation'. New Media & Society, 14 (7): 1111-1127, Sage

Gutmann, A. & Thompson, D. (1996) 'Democracy and disagreement', Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA.

Habermas, J (1989) 'The structural transformation of the public sphere', MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass.

Habermas, J. (1991) 'The public sphere', in C. Mukerji and M. Schudson (eds) Rethinking popular culture: Contemporary perspectives in cultural studies, 398-404, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA.

Habermas, J. (1992) 'Further reflections on the public sphere', in C. Calhoun (ed) Habermas and the public sphere, 421-461, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass.

Habermas, J. (1996) 'Between facts and norms: Contributions to a discourse theory of law and democracy', MIT Press, Cambridge MA

Halpern, D. & Gibbs, J. (2013) 'Social media as a catalyst for online deliberation? Exploring the affordances of Facebook and YouTube for political expression', Computers in Human Behavior, 29: 1159-1168, Elsevier

Hensby, A. (2017) 'Open networks and secret Facebook groups: exploring cycle effects on activists' social media use in the 2010/11 UK student protests', Social Movement Studies, 16:4, 466-478

Hutchby, I (2001) 'Technologies, texts and affordances'. Sociology 35: 441-456

Hyungin S, Houston, J. B., Taylor Knight, L. A., Kennedy, E. J., & Inglish, A. B. (2013), 'Teens' social media use and collective action', New Media & Society, 2014, 16: 833

Jackson, D., Scullion, R., Molesworth, M. (2013) 'Ooh, politics. You're brave'. Politics in everyday talk: An analysis of three 'non-political' online spaces', in. The Media, Political Participation and Empowerment', 205-220, Routledge, London.

Jacobs, L.R., Lomax Cook, F., Delli Carpini, M. X. (2009) 'Talking together: Public deliberation and political participation', University of Chicago Press

Jenkins, H., Ford, S. & Green, J. (2013) 'Spreadable media: Creating value and meaning in a networked culture', NYU Press, New York

Johnson, T. J. & Kaye, B. (2014) 'Credibility of social networks sites for political information among politically interested internet users', Journal of Computer-Mediate Communication 19 (2014) 957-974

Johnson, T. J. & Perlmutter, D. (2010) 'The Facebook election', Mass Communication & Society, 13: 554-559

Jones, S. G. (1997) 'The Internet and its social landscape', in S. G. Jones (ed) Virtual Culture: Identity and Communication in Cybersociety, 7-35, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Katz, E. (1957) 'The two-step flow of communication: An up-to-date report on an hypothesis', Public Opinion Quarterly 21 (1): 61-78, American Association for Public Opinion Research

Katz, E. and Lazarfield, P. F, (2006 updated) 'Personal influence: the part played by people in the flow of mass communications', Transaction Publishing, Brunswick, New Jersey. Originally published in 1955 by The Free Press

Katz, E., Levin, M. L. & Hamilton, H. (1963) 'Traditions of research on the diffusion of innovation', American Sociological Review, 28:2 (April), 237-252

Keen, A. (2007) 'The cult of the amateur', Nicholas Brearley Publishing, London.

Kiesler, S. (eds) 'Computers, phones, and the internet', pp 265-78, Oxford University Press

Khan, M. Z., Gilani, I. S. and Nawaz, A. (2012) 'From Habermas model to new public sphere: A paradigm shift', Global Journal of Human Social Science, vol. 12 issue 5, Global Journals Inc, USA

Kirkpatrick, D. (2010) 'The Facebook Effect: The inside story of the company that is connecting the world', Simon & Schuster, New York

Kohn, M. (2000), Language, Power, and Persuasion: Toward a Critique of Deliberative Democracy. Constellations, 7: 408–429. doi:10.1111/1467-8675.00197

Kramer, A.D.I, Guillory, J.E, Hancock, J. T. (2014) 'Experimental evidence of massive-scale emotional contagion through social networks' Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences USA, 111:24, June 17, 2014

Kranzberg, M. (1986) 'Technology and History: "Kranzberg's Laws"', Technology and Culture, Vol. 27, No. 3 (Jul., 1986): 544-560

Kwon, O. and Wen, Y (2010), 'An empirical study of the factors affecting social network service use', Computers in Human Behaviour 26 (2): 254 -263

Lanham, R. A. (1997), 'The economics of attention', Michigan Quarterly Review, April 1997

Lewis, J. & West, A. (2009) ''Friending': London-based undergraduates' experience of Facebook', New Media & Society, 11(7): 1209-1229. Sage

Leung, L. & Lee, P.s.N. (2005) 'Multiple determinants of life quality: the roles of internet activities, use of new media, social support and leisure activities', Telematics and Infomatics 22 (3): 161-180

Lilleker, D. (2017) 'Like me, share me: the people's social media campaign' in 'UK Election Analysis 2017: Media, Voters and the Campaign', The Centre for the Study of Journalism, Culture and Community, Bournemouth University. June 2017

MacKenzie, D. & Wajcman, J. (1985) 'The social shaping of technology: How the refrigerator got its hum.' Open University Press, Philadelphia

Madianou, M. and Miller, D. (2012) 'Polymedia: Towards a new theory of digital media in interpersonal communication'. International Journal of Cultural Studies 16(2): 169-187

Mai, Y. (2010) 'Uniform sampling of Facebook social network using the Metropolis Hasting Random Walk'. ACM Transactions on Applied Perception, 2:3, Article 1

Markham, A. & Buchanan, E. (2012) 'Ethical decision-making and internet research: Recommendations from the AoIR Ethics Working Committee (version 2.0), Association of Internet Researchers

Malerba, F. & Orsenigo, L (1997) 'Technological regimes and sectoral patterns of innovative activities', Industrial and Corporate Change 6 (1): 83-117

Markham, T. (2014), 'Social media, protest cultures and political subjectivities of the Arab Spring', Media, Culture & Society 2014 36 (1): 89 -104

McLuhan, M (1964) 'Understanding media: The extensions of man'. McGraw-Hill, New York

McNair, B. (2000) 'Journalism and democracy: An evaluation of the political public sphere', Routledge, London.

McQuail, D. (1969) 'Towards a sociology of mass communication', Collier-Macmillan, London

McQuail, D. (2000) 'McQuail's mass communication theory' (Fourth edition), Sage

Milan, S. (2015) 'When Algorithms Shape Collective Action: Social Media and the Dynamics of Cloud Protesting', Social Media & Society, Vol 1. 2. Sage

Miller, D. (2011) 'Tales from Facebook', Polity Press, Cambridge

Miller, D. et al (2016) 'How the world changed social media', UCL Press, London

Molino, A.H. (1999) 'Understanding the role of the technical in the build-up of sociotechnical constituencies', Technovation 19: 1-29

Mouffe, c. (2000), 'The democratic paradox', Verso, London.

Negroponte, N. (1995) 'Being Digital', Hodder & Staunton, London

Oldenburg, R. (1989) 'The great good place: Cafes, coffee shops, community centers, beauty parlours, general stores, bars, hangouts, and how they get you through the day', Paragon House, New York

Oz, M., Zheng, P., Chen, G. M (2018) 'Twitter versus Facebook: Comparing incivility, impoliteness, and deliberative attributes', New Media & Society 20 (9) 3400-3419, Sage

Papacharissi, Z. (2002) 'The virtual sphere: The internet as a public sphere', New Media & Society, 4 (1): 9-27

Papacharissi, Z. (2004) 'Democracy online: Civility, politeness, and the democratic potential of online political discussion groups', New Media and Society 6(2): 259-283

Papacharissi, Z. (2008) 'The Virtual Sphere 2.0: The internet, the public sphere and beyond', The Routledge Handbook of Internet Politics, 2008, Routledge, London.

Papacharissi, Z. (2009) 'The virtual geographies of social networks: A comparative analysis of Facebook, LinkedIn and ASmallWorld', New Media & Society (2009) 11 (1-2): 199-220

Pariser, E. (2011) 'The Filter Bubble: What the Internet is Hiding From You', Penguin Press

Perez, C. (2004) 'Technological revolutions, paradigm shifts and socio-institutional change', in Reinert, E. (ed) 'Globalization, economic development and inequality: An alternative perspective': 217-242. Edward Elgar, Cheltenham.

Perloff, R. M. (2018) 'The dynamics of political communication' (Second edition), Routledge, New York

Perrin, A. J. (1971) 'Citizen speak: The democratic imagination in American life', University of Chicago Press

Postman, N. (1985) 'Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business', Methuen

Postman, N. (1992) 'Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology', Knopf, New York

Rallings, C. and Thrasher, M. (2015), 'The 2015 General Election: aspects of participation and administration', Elections Centre report, Plymouth University

Rash, W. (1997) 'Politics on the Net', WH Freeman & Co., New York

Ritzer, G. and Jurgenson, N. (2010), 'Production, consumption, presumption – the nature of capitalism in the age of the digital 'prosumer' ', Journal of consumer Culture, 10 (1): 13-36

Rohlfs, J. (1974) 'A theory of interdependent demand for a telecommunications service', Bell Journal of Economics and Management Science, 5 (1): 16-37, Rand Corporation.

Rosenberg, N. (1994), Exploring the Black Box: Technology, Economics, and History, Cambridge University Press.

Rosenberg, N. and Mowery, D. (1979) 'The influence of market demand upon innovation: A critical review of some recent empirical studies', Research policy, 8

Ross, C., Orr, E.S., Sisic, M., Arseneault, J. M., Simmering, M.G., & Orr, R.R. (2009) 'Personality and motivations associated with Facebook use', Computers in Human Behavior 25 (2009) 578-586

Rowe, I. (2015) 'Civility 2.0: A comparative analysis of incivility in online political discussion', Information, Communication & Society, 18:2, 121-138

Savigny, H. (2017) 'Political Communication: A Critical Introduction', Palgrave

Schmalensee, R. (2011), Jeffrey Rohlfs' 1974 model of Facebook: An introduction, Competition Policy International, Vol. 7, No. 301, Spring.

Shepherd, M. (2017) 'Social media and the Corbyn breakthrough', in 'UK Election Analysis 2017: Media, Voters and the Campaign', The Centre for the Study of Journalism, Culture and Community, Bournemouth University. June 2017

Shirky, C. (2009) 'Here comes everybody: How change happens when people come together', Penguin, London

Shirky, C. (2011) 'The political power of social media', Foreign Affairs, vol. 90, issue 1: 28-41

Schudson, M. (1997) 'Why conversation is not the soul of democracy', Critical Studies in Mass Communication, 14: 1-13, NCA

Schumpeter, J. A. (1976/1943) 'Capitalism, socialism & democracy', George Allen & Unwin, London

Silverman, C. (2015) 'Lies, damn lies, and viral content: How news websites spread (and debunk) online rumors, unverified claims, and misinformation', report for Tow Center for Digital Journalism, Columbia Journalism School.

Silverstone, R (2005) 'Mediation and communication'. In Calhoun, C., Rojek, C. and Turner, B. (eds): 188-207, 'Handbook of Sociology'. Sage, London.

Sloam, J. (2017) 'Younger voters politically energised, but the generational divide deepens' in 'UK Election Analysis 2017: Media, Voters and the Campaign', Thorson, E., Jackson, D., and Lilleker, D. (eds), The Centre for the Study of Journalism, Culture and Community, Bournemouth University. June 2017

Sproull, L. and Kiesler, S. (1986) 'Reducing social context cues: Electronic mail in organizational communication', Management Science 32:11, 1492-1512

Temple, M. (2006) 'Dumbing down is good for you', British Politics 1: 257-273

Temple, M. (2014) 'A forum for fruitcakes and fascists: The saviour of mainstream journalism', 191-208, The End of Journalism version 2.0. ed. Alec Charles, Peter Lang, Oxford

Thorson, E., Jackson, D., and Lilleker, D. (eds) (2017) 'UK Election Analysis 2017: Media, Voters and the Campaign', The Centre for the Study of Journalism, Culture and Community, Bournemouth University. June 2017

Twain, M. (1876) 'The Adventures of Tom Sawyer', American Publishing Company

van Dijk, J. (2006) 'The network society' (second edition), Sage, London

van den Ende, J & Dolfsma, W (2005) ' Technology-push, demand-pull and the shaping of technological paradigms – Patterns in the development of computing technology.' Journal of Evolutionary Economics 15: 83-99

van Zoonan, L. (2003) "After Dallas and Dynasty we have… democracy': Articulating soap, politics and gender', in Corner, J. & Pels, D. 'Media and the restyling of politics', Sage, London

Vatnoy, E. (2016) 'Rejuvenating the public sphere – the rhetorical arenas of social media', in Kramp, L. et al (eds.) 'Politics, civil society and participation: Media and Communications in a transforming environment', edition Lumiere, Bremen

Vraga. E.K., Thorson, K., Kliger-Vilenchik, N., and Gee, E. (2015) 'How individual sensitivities to disagreement shape youth political expression on Facebook', Computers in Human Behavior 45: 281-289

Verba S. (1972), 'Small Groups and Political Behavior: A Study of Leadership'. Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ

Verba S, and Nie N. (1972), 'Participation in America: Political Democracy and Social Equality', Harper & Row, New York

Weeks, B. E. and Holbert, R. L. (2013) 'Predicting dissemination of news content in social media: A focus on reception, friending and partisanship', Journalism & mass Communication Quarterly 2013 90 (2), 212-232

Wellman, B. (1988) 'Structural analysis: From method and metaphor to theory and substance', in 'Social Structures a Network Approach', Wellman, B & S.D. Berkowitz, S.D. (eds): 19-61, Cambridge University Press

Wellman, B. (1997) 'An electronic group is virtually a social network' in S. Kiesler (ed.) 'Culture of the Internet', 179-205, Lawrence Erlbaum, N.J.

Wellman, B., Quan Haase, A., Witte, J. & Hampton, K. (2001) 'Does the internet increase, decrease, or supplement social capital?' American Behavioural Scientist 45 (3): 436-455

Whitehead, T.L. (2005) 'Basic Classical Ethnographic Research Methods Secondary Data Analysis, Fieldwork, Observation/Participant Observation, and Informal and Semi-structured Interviewing', EICCARS working paper, Cultural Ecology of Health and Change

Williams, C. B. & Gulati, G. J. (2007) 'Social networks in political campaigns: Facebook and the 2006 Midterm Elections', conference paper for 2007 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, Illinois, August 30-September 2, 2007

Winner, L. (1977), Autonomous Technology: Technics Out-of-Control as a Theme in Political History, Cambridge, Mass.

Zhang, W., Johnson, T.J., Seltzer, T., et al (2010) 'The revolution will be networked: the influence of social networking sites on political attitudes and behaviour', Social Science Computer Review 28 (1): 75-92, Sage

2. Media and reports

Albright, J. (2016) 'Welcome to News[Fake]', series of articles on Medium, November 27, 2016:

BBC radio/Cellan-Jones, R (2011) 'The secret history of social networking' - episodes two and three of podcasts

BBC news online/Vanessa Barford 'Election 2017: If more young people actually voted, would it change everything?', 19 May, 2017

The Economist (2012) Briefing: Floating Facebook, The Economist, February 4, 2012, pp20-22 and Leader: A Fistful of Dollars, p9.

The Economist (2015) 'Britain's election surprise', The Economist, May 8, 2015

Facebook (2008), 'Happy Anniversary (and Facebook Open Platform)', June 2, 2008, Facebook Developers blog, facebook.com

Facebook (2012) 'Four degrees of separation' https://arxiv.org/abs/1111.4570

Facebook (2013), 'Public conversations on Facebook', June 12, 2013, facebook.com

Facebook (2013) 'Facebook reports second quarter 2013 results', July 4, 2013, facebook.com

Facebook (2013), 'Is connectivity a human right?', Mark Zuckerberg, August 20, 2013, facebook.com

Facebook (2014), 'Facebook Reports First Quarter 2014 Results', March 31, 2014, facebook.com

Facebook (2016) 'Three-and-a-half degrees of separation' https://research.fb.com/three-and-a-half-degrees-of-separation/

Facebook (2018), Quarterly report pursuant to section 13 or 15(d) of the Securities Exchange Act of 1934 (SEC Form 10-Q) for Facebook, April 23, 2018. See also SEC Filing April 26, 2018, at https://investor.fb.com/financials/sec-filings-details/default.aspx?FilingId=12705651

Forbes (2012), 'Betting on Farmville – Facebook IPO reveals how the social media giant makes money', January 2, 2012, Forbes

Forbes (2018), Parmy Olson (2018). 'Exclusive: WhatsApp Cofounder Brian Acton Gives The Inside Story On #DeleteFacebook And Why He Left $850 Million Behind', Forbes September 26, 2018.

Fraser, M. & Dutta, S. (2008) 'Barack Obama and the Facebook election', www.usnews.com, op-ed November 19, 2008

Gladwell, M. (2010) 'Small Change: Why the revolution will not be tweeted', in the New Yorker, 10 April, 2010

The Guardian (2012), 'Facebook hits 1 billion users a month', Jemima Kiss, October 4, 2012, The Guardian

The Guardian (2014), 'Facebook: 10 years of social networking, in numbers', February 4, 2014, The Guardian

The Guardian (2014), 'WhatsApp: Facebook acquires messaging service in $19bn deal', February 20, 2014. The Guardian

The Guardian (2016), 'Facebook's satellite went up in smoke but its developing world land grab goes on', Emily Reynolds, the Guardian, September 5, 2016

The Guardian (2018), 'It might work too well': the dark art of political advertising online', Julia Carrie Wong for The Guardian, March 19, 2018

The Guardian (2018), 'A journalist on the frontline protecting an open society', O'Toole, F., The Guardian opinion, July 1, 2018

The Guardian (2018), 'Do Republicans disapprove of Trump's meeting with Putin? 'They couldn't care less'', David Smith interview with Anthony Scaramucci, published in The Guardian July 20th, 2018

Miller, D. (2013) 'What will we learn from the fall of Facebook?'. UCL blogs, reporting on Global Media Impact Study, plus follow-up post: 'Scholarship, integrity and going viral'.

The Observer (2016), 'The world according to Google', cover story, Cadwalladr, C., The Observer, December 4, 2016

Pew Research Center (2012) 'The demographics of social media users – 2012', February 14, 2013, Pew Internet

Pew Research Center (2014): '6 new facts about Facebook', 2-3-2014

Political Insight (2015), Williamson, A. 'The digital campaign: Are we there yet?

Reuters Institute Digital News Report, 2016

Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2018

Techcrunch (2007), 'Liveblogging Facebook advertising announcement', November 6, 2007. techcrunch.com

Techcrunch (2013), 'Zuckerberg says teens still steadily engaged with Facebook', July 24, 2013, techcrunch.com

Techcrunch (2013), 'Facebook's Mobile Tipping Point: 48% Of Daily Users Are Now Mobile-Only (But No Mention Of BlackBerry)', Lundgren, I., October 30, 2013. Techcrunch.com

Wall Street Journal (2012), 'Insta-rich: $1 Billion for Instagram', April 10, 2012, Wall Street Journal

Wired (1995), 'The Internet as a public sphere?', Poster, M., Wired 3(1): 209, published 11-01-1995, archive edition 04-09-2013

World Wide Web Foundation 'History of the web', webfoundation.org

Zuckerberg, M. (2012) Letter to shareholders reposted on readwrite.com, February 1, 2012 (Accessed July 17, 2017)

Zuckerberg Transcripts (2005) Francisco, B and Zuckerberg, M. 'Bambi Francisco interviews Mark Zuckerberg in 2005' (transcript) Zuckerberg Transcripts. Paper 186.

Zuckerberg Transcripts (2015), 'Mark Zuckerberg and Oculus's Michael Abrash on why virtual reality is the next big thing' Zuckerberg Transcripts. Paper 165

Zuckerberg Transcripts (2016a), Zuckerberg, M., 'Zuckerberg Facebook post about social feeds – 2016-09-06'. Zuckerberg Transcripts. Paper 217

Zuckerberg Transcripts (2016b), Zuckerberg, M., 'Mark Zuckerberg: How to build the future' – interview. Zuckerberg Transcripts. Paper 171.

3. Author interviews

Andrew Griffiths: Conservative Member of Parliament for Burton and Uttoxeter (currently and at time of interview). Interviewed July 2015.

Chris Moran: Editor, strategic projects at Guardian News & Media (was Audience Editor at time of interview). Interviewed July 2016

Aron Pilhofer: James B. Steele Chair in Journalism Innovation, Associate Professor at Temple University, Philadelphia (was Executive Editor of Digital for the Guardian at time of interview). Interviewed July 2016

Appendices

Appendix 1: Rejected surveys

Among numerous drafts and rejected versions of surveys, the one below, aimed at politicians and worked on in the summer of 2014, came closest to being put into the field. It was rejected in the end because it was felt that the likelihood of being able to collect enough relevant data was low – not least because politicians would be unlikely to respond to such a complex question and in sufficient numbers to make the data viable.

The survey did however form the starting point for the questions and structure of the final survey, in particular in seeking to ascertain users' own perceptions of the likelihood of political debate happening on Facebook.

1. Politician questionnaire (Draft)

Section One (questions related to an MP's current use of FB)

A) Do you currently have a Facebook account?   Yes   No

B) If no, why not?

- Do not have regular computer access
- Do not have time
- Used to have one but stopped using it
- Not interested

C) If you used to use Facebook but have stopped using it, was it because

- Took up too much time
- Just got bored with it
- Concerns about what people could read/see about me
- Problems with one or more other users
- Other (please say)

D) If you have a Facebook account, is it a personal account or a work account?

          Personal   Work   I have both

E) Do you mostly run your Facebook account yourself or is it handled by someone else?

I do it

A member of my staff team does it

A member of my family does it

It's outsourced to a third party

(Answered "Yes" to question A, jump to D and E, then continue to Section Two. Answered "No" to question A jump to B and C, then jump to section Three)

Section Two (questions related to Facebook use for MPs that do use it)

1. On average, approximately how many minutes per day do you personally spend on Facebook?

10 or less   10-30   31-60   1 to 2 hours   More than two hours

2. Who can see your Facebook profile?

Only my Friends   All networks and Friends   Some networks/all friends   Don't know

3. Do you provide your email address on your Facebook profile? Yes   No

4. Do you provide a phone number on your Facebook profile?   Yes   No

5. How many of the following things would you frequently do on Facebook? (Tick all that apply)

Post pictures of myself working

Post pictures of myself with my family

Post pictures of myself at public events

Post pictures of myself at private events

Tag myself in other people's photos

Add a comment on other people's photos

Add a comment on other people's status updates

Post on other people's Timeline/Wall

Post a link about a news story

Say something on Facebook about a news story

350

Send private Facebook messages

6. How many of the following have you done on Facebook within the last year? (Tick all that apply)

Created a Facebook Group

Joined a Facebook Group

Attended events coordinated on Facebook

Created a Facebook event

Changed my privacy settings to limit who can see some of my Facebook content

Asked someone not to tag me in a photo or video

Used the Block facility to prevent some people accessing my content

7. Do you tend to use the following:

Instagram?	Yes – often	Yes - occasionally	No - never
WhatsApp	Yes – often	Yes - occasionally	No – never

Please say how much you agree or disagree with the following statements

Facebook is part of my everyday activity

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree

I am proud to tell people I'm on Facebook

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree

I dedicate a part of my daily schedule to Facebook

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree

I feel out of touch when I haven't logged into Facebook for a while

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree

Facebook helps me keep in touch with friends and family

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly agree

Facebook helps me keep in touch with colleagues and party workers

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly agree

Facebook helps me keep in touch with people in my constituency

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly agree

Facebook helps me find out what people think about how I'm doing as an MP

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly agree

Facebook helps me find out what people think about issues in the news

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly agree

Facebook helps me to project who I am and what I have to say about issues

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly agree

If people ask questions on Facebook about political or serious issues, I will usually reply

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly agree

When I'm angry or upset about something in the news, I'll usually say something about it on Facebook

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly agree

I am usually more careful in commenting on a news issue in an interview with a journalist than I would be on Facebook

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly agree

If people comment on Facebook about politics or issues, I will usually comment back

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly agree

I find that Facebook is a useful communication tool

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly agree

I use Facebook less now than I did a year ago

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly agree

I expect to use Facebook less over the next year or so

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly agree

I would be sad if Facebook shut down

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly agree

Section Three (questions related to an MP's attitude towards mass media)

As the circulations of newspapers fall, so does their power to influence politicians

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly agree

I think most of my constituents find out what's going on in the world from TV news

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly agree

Most under-30s get their news from websites and social media nowadays

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly agree

Under-30-year-olds are most likely to find out what's going on in the world from their friends and work colleagues

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly agree

I think the traditional mass media puts too much emphasis on telling people what to think
Strongly disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly agree

I read opinion (op-ed) columns in newspapers frequently

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly agree

There are certain columnists or commentators whose opinion I sit up and take notice of

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly agree

I'm less bothered by what the mainstream media has to say than I was when I first became an MP

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly agree

I think the mainstream media has "dumbed down" its coverage of serious issues in the time since I became an MP

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly agree

I think most politicians worry too much about what the mainstream media has to say about the job they're doing

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly agree

I think how an MP comes across on TV matters more to voters than what they have to say

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly agree

Section Four (questions related to MPs' attitudes to Facebook - users and non-users)

I think we underestimate the importance of Facebook in its users sharing information about what's happening in the world

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly agree

I think Facebook helps its users to be more informed about what's happening in the world

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly agree

People don't talk enough on Facebook about serious issues happening in our world

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly agree

I think it's important to encourage Facebook users who make good points about serious issues by replying to or "like"-ing their comment

354

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly agree

It frustrates me that so much of the content on social media is banal chatter

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly agree

I'm more likely to comment about a serious issue on Twitter than on Facebook

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly agree

I'm not really interested in what people are saying on Facebook

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly agree

I pay more attention to what people are saying on social media about me as an MP than I did a year ago

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly agree

I think Facebook has enormous potential as a tool for starting mass protests

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly agree

I think protests on Facebook usually grow quickly and fade just as fast

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly agree

I'm usually aware of what people are saying on Facebook about issues in the news

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly agree

What people are saying on Facebook about political and civic issues matters to me

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly agree

What people are saying on Facebook about political and civic issues influences me

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly agree

I think Facebook encourages users to give an instant response to issues rather than think about the arguments

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly agree

There's too much chatter on Facebook to be able to filter out what people are actually saying about political and civic issues

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly agree

I think people are more likely to discuss serious issues on Facebook because they are talking to people they know

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly agree

I think people are more likely to discuss politics on Facebook because they are talking with people they know

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly agree

I think Facebook weakens democracy by encouraging polarised responses to issues

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly agree

I think Facebook has changed the way people engage with politics and serious issues

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Neutral   Agree   Strongly agree

Personal details

How many years have you been an MP (total years served if elected more than once)?

Less than five years   5-10years   10-15years   15-20years   More than 20 years

Which political party do you currently represent?

The next stage of the research would involve follow-up interviews with some of the MPs. If you would be willing to answer some further questions (by telephone or face-to-face) that would be enormously helpful to my research.

I would be interested in taking part further in the research: Yes   No

The best way to contact me is:

END

Appendix 2: Final Facebook users' survey

Q1 Hello

Facebook

This survey is about if - and how - you use Facebook and will be used as part of my PhD research. It should take you 5 to 10 minutes to complete.

Your answers will be anonymised and your data will only be used as part of my research project.

If you have any questions about the survey, please email me at s.greenwood@staffs.ac.uk

Thank you for taking part - I really appreciate it.

Sue

Q2 Do you have a Facebook account?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q3 Have you ever had a Facebook account?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q4 On average, approximately how many minutes per day do you spend on Facebook?

- 10 minutes or less (1)
- 10 to 30 (2)
- 31 to 60 (3)
- 1 to 2 hours (4)
- 2 to three hours (5)
- 3+ hours (6)

Q5 In this question, please select your answer according to how much you agree or disagree with each statement.

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Don't know (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
Facebook is part of my everyday activity (1)	-	-	-	-	-
I am proud to tell people I'm on Facebook (2)	-	-	-	-	-
I dedicate a part of my daily schedule to Facebook (3)	-	-	-	-	-
I feel out of touch when I haven't logged on to Facebook for a while (4)	-	-	-	-	-
I feel I am part of the Facebook community (5)	-	-	-	-	-
I would be sad if Facebook shut down (6)	-	-	-	-	-

Q6 In this question, please select your answer according to how much you agree or disagree with each statement.

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Don't know (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
I think it's important to stay on top of your Facebook privacy settings (1)	-	-	-	-	-
Facebook is too useful to me to worry about what it does with my data (2)	-	-	-	-	-
I read pretty much everything that appears in my timeline (3)	-	-	-	-	-
I don't always read everything in my timeline but I always look at pictures (4)	-	-	-	-	-
There are certain people I look out for - when they post something I always read it (5)	-	-	-	-	-

| I don't post anything on Facebook without thinking about who might see it (6) | - | - | - | - | - |
| It worries me that Facebook doesn't control who uses it - terrorists, paedophiles, etc. (7) | - | - | - | - | - |

Q7 Do you think you use Facebook

- Less often than you did a year ago (1)
- About the same as a year ago (2)
- More often than you did a year ago (3)

Q8 If you use Facebook less often, or have stopped using it altogether, please choose your main reasons

- Intrusive advertising (1)
- Concerns about privacy (2)
- Too busy (3)
- Friends using it less often (4)
- Don't like the new layout (5)
- Bored with it (8)
- Prefer to use Twitter (6)
- Other reason (please say) (7) _____

Q9 What prompted you to join Facebook in the first place?

- My best friend at the time was using it (1)
- Most of the people I knew were using it (2)
- To stay in touch with family who were using it (3)
- I'd heard or read about it (4)
- It was recommended it to me (5)

Q10 What do you <u>mainly</u> use Facebook for? (Or if you've stopped using it, what did you mostly use it for?) You can choose more than one reason.

- Keeping up with what people I know are doing (1)
- Chatting with people I know (2)
- Looking at photographs (3)
- Finding out what's going on around me (4)
- Searching for people I know (5)
- Keeping up with groups or campaigns (6)
- Other (please say) (7)

Q11 In this question, please select your answer according to how much you agree or disagree with each statement.

	Strongly Disagree (11)	Disagree (12)	Don't know (13)	Agree (14)	Strongly Agree (15)
I get upset about some of things that are happening in the world. (1)	-	-	-	-	-
The main way I find out about what's in the news is through friends and people I know (2)	-	-	-	-	-
If the news comes on TV, I usually find myself watching it (3)	-	-	-	-	-
I'm more interested in global issues than in national or local politics (4)	-	-	-	-	-
I don't feel that what the politicians say has anything to do with me (5)	-	-	-	-	-

I usually join in when I hear people debating politics (6)	-	-	-	-	-
I really enjoy taking part in a good debate about serious issues (7)	-	-	-	-	-

---

Q12 At present, are you intending to vote in the May 2015 General Election?

- Yes (1)
- Not sure (2)
- No (3)

Q13 Do you already know who you will be voting for in the General Election?

- Yes (1)
- Not sure (2)
- No (3)

Q14 I intend to vote

- Labour (1)
- Conservative (2)
- Liberal Democrat (3)
- SNP (4)
- Green Party (5)
- UKIP (6)
- Other (please say) (7)

Q16 In this question, please select your answer according to how much you agree or disagree with each statement.

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Don't know (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
When I'm angry or upset about something in the news, I'll usually say something about it on Facebook (1)	-	-	-	-	-
If a friend makes a good point on Facebook about a serious issue, I usually Like it or reply (2)	-	-	-	-	-
I think it's important to respond when someone asks a question on Facebook about something in the news (3)	-	-	-	-	-
We don't talk enough on Facebook about serious things that are happening in the world (4)	-	-	-	-	-

I tend to be more wary about commenting on serious issues on Facebook (5)	-	-	-	-	-
I often feel I need to "dumb down" when I write stuff or comment on Facebook (6)	-	-	-	-	-
I find out about what's going on in the world mostly through friends on Facebook (7)	-	-	-	-	-

---

Q17 How many Facebook Groups do you belong to?

- None (1)
- 5 or less (2)
- 6 to 10 (3)
- 11 to 20 (4)
- 20 to 30 (5)
- 30+ (6)

Q18 How many Facebook Groups or Pages have you created

- None (1)
- 5 or less (2)
- 6 to 10 (3)
- 11 to 20 (4)
- 20+ (5)

Q19 What is your gender?

- Male (1)
- Female (2)

Q20 How old are you?

- 15-24 (1)
- 25-34 (2)
- 35-44 (3)
- 45-54 (4)
- 55-64 (5)
- 65+ (6)

Q21 Are you

- A student (1)
- Unemployed (2)
- In paid work (3)

Q22 Would you be willing to take part in follow-up research related to Facebook?

- Yes (1)
- Maybe (2)
- No (3)

Q25 Thank you for saying you might be interested in helping with follow-up research. Please let me have your email address so I can contact you

_____

Q26 Thank you for being interested in maybe helping out further. If you'd like me to get in touch again at a later date to ask you whether you'd take part in a follow-up survey, please let me have your email address.

_____

Appendix 3: Additional comparative survey results

Q5 In this question, please select your answer according to how much you agree or disagree with each statement

AWA.FIELD	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Don't know	Agree	Strongly Agree
Facebook is part of my everyday activity	4.15% 8	9.33% 18	2.59% 5	52.33% 101	31.61% 61
I am proud to tell people I'm on Facebook	6.74% 13	23.83% 46	36.27% 70	25.39% 49	7.77% 15
I dedicate a part of my daily schedule to Facebook	20.21% 39	48.70% 94	8.29% 16	18.13% 35	4.66% 9
I feel out of touch when I haven't logged on to Facebook for a while	12.95% 25	33.16% 64	4.66% 9	39.38% 76	9.84% 19
I feel I am part of the Facebook community	25.39% 49	36.79% 71	13.47% 26	19.69% 38	4.66% 9
I would be sad if Facebook shut down	22.40% 43	21.88% 42	15.10% 29	30.21% 58	10.42% 20

Figure 47: Journalism & Humanities (JH) group answers

AWA.FIELD	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Don't know	Agree	Strongly Agree
Facebook is part of my everyday activity	0.00% 0	6.90% 2	0.00% 0	41.38% 12	51.72% 15
I am proud to tell people I'm on Facebook	3.45% 1	17.24% 5	41.38% 12	27.59% 8	10.34% 3
I dedicate a part of my daily schedule to Facebook	20.69% 6	48.28% 14	13.79% 4	13.79% 4	3.45% 1
I feel out of touch when I haven't logged on to Facebook for a while	20.69% 6	31.03% 9	0.00% 0	41.38% 12	6.90% 2
I find out everything I need to know about what's in the news through Facebook	37.93% 11	37.93% 11	3.45% 1	17.24% 5	3.45% 1
I would be sad if Facebook shut down	17.24% 5	20.69% 6	17.24% 5	34.48% 10	10.34% 3

Figure 48: Control Group (CG) answers

Q6 In this question, please select your answer according to how much you agree or disagree with each statement.

AWA.FIELD	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Don't know	Agree	Strongly Agree
I think it's important to stay on top of your Facebook privacy settings	0.52% 1	3.61% 7	5.15% 10	30.93% 60	59.79% 116
Facebook is too useful to me to worry about what it does with my data	21.13% 41	55.67% 108	8.76% 17	12.89% 25	1.55% 3
I read pretty much everything that appears in my timeline	25.91% 50	46.63% 90	4.66% 9	18.65% 36	4.15% 8
I don't always read everything in my timeline but I always look at pictures	3.09% 6	34.54% 67	9.79% 19	42.27% 82	10.31% 20
There are certain people I look out for - when they post something I always read it	5.15% 10	11.86% 23	7.73% 15	46.39% 90	28.87% 56
I don't post anything on Facebook without thinking about who might see it	4.12% 8	9.28% 18	7.73% 15	42.78% 83	36.08% 70
It worries me that Facebook doesn't control who uses it - terrorists, paedophiles, etc.	24.74% 48	29.90% 58	10.82% 21	18.56% 36	15.98% 31

Figure 49: JH group answers

372

AWA.FIELD	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Don't know		Agree		Strongly Agree	
Facebook is part of my everyday activity	0.00%	0	6.90%	2	0.00%	0	41.38%	12	51.72%	15
I am proud to tell people I'm on Facebook	3.45%	1	17.24%	5	41.38%	12	27.59%	8	10.34%	3
I dedicate a part of my daily schedule to Facebook	20.69%	6	48.28%	14	13.79%	4	13.79%	4	3.45%	1
I feel out of touch when I haven't logged on to Facebook for a while	20.69%	6	31.03%	9	0.00%	0	41.38%	12	6.90%	2
I find out everything I need to know about what's in the news through Facebook	37.93%	11	37.93%	11	3.45%	1	17.24%	5	3.45%	1
I would be sad if Facebook shut down	17.24%	5	20.69%	6	17.24%	5	34.48%	10	10.34%	3

Figure 50: CG answers

Q7 Do you think you use Facebook

Figure 51: JH group answers

373

Figure 52: CG answers

Q9 What prompted you to join Facebook in the first place?

Figure 53: JH group answers
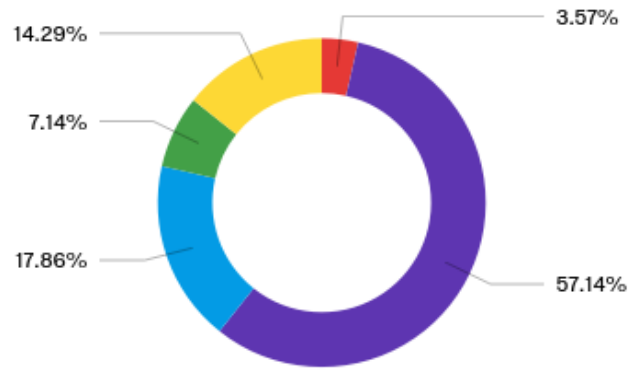
Figure 54: CG answers

Q10 What do you <u>mainly</u> use Facebook for? (Or if you've stopped using it, what did you mostly use it for?) You can choose more than one reason.

Keeping up with what people I know are doing	20.64%	110
Chatting with people I know	21.20%	113
Looking at photographs	9.38%	50
Finding out what's going on around me	12.57%	67
Searching for people I know	9.76%	52
Keeping up with groups or campaigns	8.63%	46
Other (please say)	17.82%	95
		533

Figure 55: JH group answers

Keeping up with what people I know are doing				21.62%	16
Chatting with people I know				25.68%	19
Looking at photographs				9.46%	7
Finding out what's going on in the world				10.81%	8
Searching for people I know				8.11%	6
Keeping up with groups or campaigns				14.86%	11
Other (please say)				9.46%	7
					74

Figure 56: CG answers

Q11 In this question, please select your answer according to how much you agree or disagree with each statement.

AWA.FIELD	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Don't know		Agree		Strongly Agree	
I get upset about some of things that are happening in the world.	20.44%	28	12.88%	47	11.92%	18	13.92%	60	20.43%	47
The main way I find out about what's in the news is through friends and people I know	18.98%	26	21.64%	79	7.28%	11	13.69%	59	10.87%	25
If the news comes on TV, I usually find myself watching it	4.38%	6	9.04%	33	17.22%	26	19.03%	82	23.04%	53
I'm more interested in global issues than in national or local politics	13.87%	19	20.00%	73	20.53%	31	13.23%	57	8.70%	20
I don't feel that what the politicians say has anything to do with me	28.47%	39	19.45%	71	16.56%	25	11.14%	48	6.96%	16
I usually join in when I hear people debating politics	11.68%	16	12.60%	46	13.25%	20	18.33%	79	16.52%	38
I really enjoy taking part in a good debate about serious issues	2.19%	3	4.38%	16	13.25%	20	10.67%	46	13.48%	31
		137		365		151		431		230

Figure 57: JH group answers

376

AWA.FIELD	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Don't know		Agree		Strongly Agree	
I get upset about some of things that are happening in the world.	7.14%	2	17.86%	5	10.71%	3	35.71%	10	28.57%	8
The main way I find out what's in the news is through friends and people I know	7.14%	2	50.00%	14	7.14%	2	25.00%	7	10.71%	3
If the news comes on TV, I usually find myself watching it	14.29%	4	14.29%	4	14.29%	4	42.86%	12	14.29%	4
I'm more interested in global issues than in UK politics	7.14%	2	25.00%	7	28.57%	8	32.14%	9	7.14%	2
I don't feel that what the politicians say has anything to do with me	21.43%	6	46.43%	13	14.29%	4	14.29%	4	3.57%	1
I usually join in when I hear people debating politics	25.00%	7	21.43%	6	10.71%	3	35.71%	10	7.14%	2
I really enjoy taking part in a good debate about serious issues	10.71%	3	10.71%	3	17.86%	5	53.57%	15	7.14%	2

Figure 58: CG answers

Q14 I intend to vote
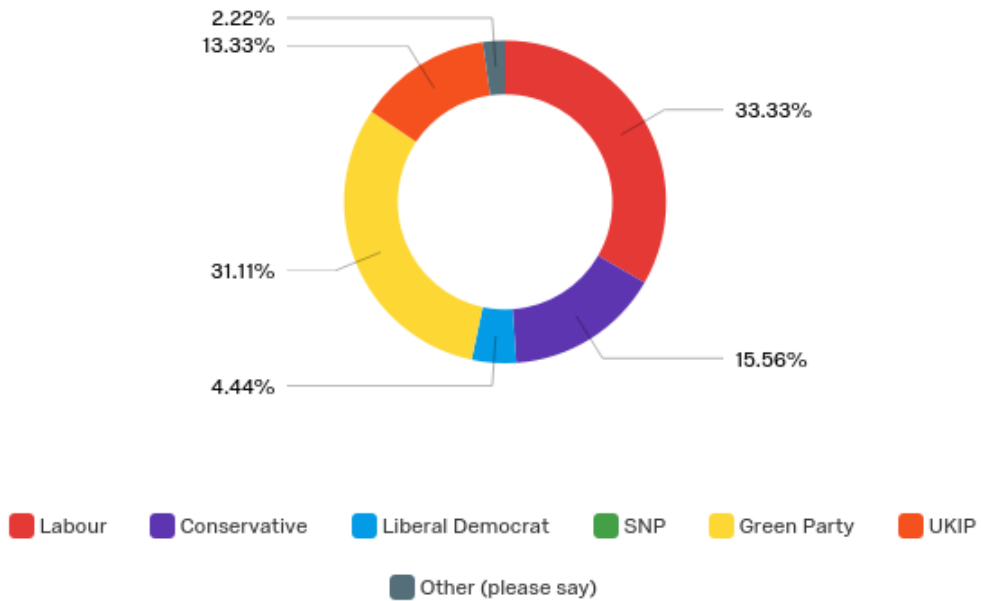
Figure 59: JH group answers
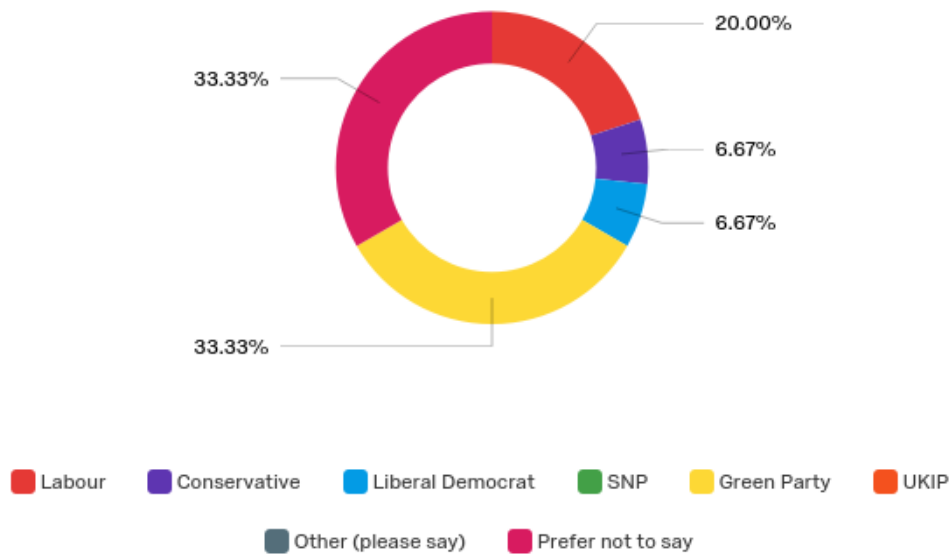
Figure 60: CG answers

Appendix 4: 2015 candidate lists and information file

Burton (control/conservative)

Profile: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/politics/constituencies/E14000610

Mike Green: UK Independence Party (UKIP)

Email: mikegreenukip@hotmail.co.uk

https://www.facebook.com/mikegreenUKIP2 (followed)

Andrew Griffiths: Conservative Party (2010 winner)

Email: andrew@voteandrew.co.uk

https://www.facebook.com/andrew.griffiths.3139?fref=ts (personal profile) (friended)

https://www.facebook.com/voteandrewgriffiths?fref=ts (campaign page) (followed)

David MacDonald: Liberal Democrats

Email: DavidforBurton@gmail.com

Facebook: (sent email 27/4) https://www.facebook.com/pages/Burton-and-Uttoxeter-East-Staffordshire-Liberal-Democrats/111953162170257 (campaign) (Liked, Following)

@DJMac1986

Agent: Hugh Warner: https://www.facebook.com/hugh.warner.79 (personal)

https://www.facebook.com/Dave.J.MacDonald?fref=tl_fr_box&pnref=lhc.friends (persona)

Samantha Patrone: Green Party

Email: sam.patrone@greenparty.org.uk

Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/greenpartysampatrone (Liked)

@sampatrone

Jon Wheale: Labour Party

Email: jon.burtonlabour@gmail.com

Facebook: https://facebook.com/Jon4Burton2015 (personal profile) (Liked, Followed)

(Griffiths emailed re interview and MacDonald/Warner, Patrone, Green, Wheale emailed re follow-up questions)

Stoke-on-Trent Central (control/university constituency/Labour)

Profile: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/politics/constituencies/E14000972

Dr Zulfiqar Ali: Liberal Democrats

Email: drzulfiali@yahoo.co.uk

Facebook: (emailed 27/4)

Liam Ascough: Conservative Party

Email: Liam@stokeconservatives.com

Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/stokeconservatives (party page) (Liked, followed)

https://www.facebook.com/liam.marshallascough (personal page) (Friend request)

Mark Breeze: Independent

Email: unitedstrength@hotmail.co.uk

Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/groups/215480605235472/ (Group he put on his candidate literature) (Joined)

Mick Harold: UK Independence Party (UKIP)

Email: mick.harold@ukiplocal.org

Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/mick.harold?fref=ts (Friend request)

https://www.facebook.com/ukipstokeontrent?fref=ts (local campaign) (Liked, Followed)

Dr Tristram Hunt: Labour Party (2010 winner)

Email: t.hunt@qmul.ac.uk

Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/LabourTristram (party) (following)

https://www.facebook.com/tristram.hunt.5?fref=ts (personal) (friend request sent)

@TristramHuntMP

Ali Majid: Cannabis is Safer than Alcohol

Email: i.a.majid@hotmail.co.uk

Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/ali.j.majid (personal profile) (Friended)

https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100009380130802&fref=ts (campaign page)

Paul Toussaint: Ubuntu Party

Email:

Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/paul.toussaint.54 (Friended)

Jan Zablocki: Green Party

Email: jan.northmidscwu@btconnect.com

Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100004211385869&fref=ts (following)

https://www.facebook.com/NorthStaffordshireGreenParty (campaign)

@ZablockiJan

(Hunt, Ascough and Harold emailed re follow-up questions)

Bristol West (Student vote – HEPI research/Lib Dem)

Profile: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/politics/constituencies/E14000602

Thangam Debbonaire: Labour Party

Email: thangam.debbonaire@gmail.com

Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/pages/Thangam-Debbonaire-for-Bristol-West/443769478976015 (personal profile) (following)

Darren Hall: Green Party

Email: darren.hall@bristolgreenparty.org.uk

Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/DarrenHall2015 (personal profile) (liked)

https://www.facebook.com/groups/667285320024360/ (campaign page/group) (sent request to join)

Claire Hiscott: Conservative Party

Email: claire4bristolwest@gmail.com

Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/bristolwestconservatives (campaign page) (liked)

Dawn Parry: Independents for Bristol

Email: dawn@dawnparry.com

Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/dawnyparry (message sent 6 May)

@DawnParry

Paul Turner: UK Independence Party (UKIP)

Email: paul.turner@ukiplocal.org

Facebook: (emailed 27/4)

https://twitter.com/paulturner2012 (unverified) @BristolUkip

Stewart Weston: Left Unity

Email: bathnesom@leftunity.org

Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/stewart.weston.35?fref=ts (Friended, Following)

@BristolLU

Stephen Williams: Liberal Democrats (2010 winner)

Email: stephen.williams.mp@parliament.uk

Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/stephen.williams.mp (personal profile) (Friend request sent)

https://www.facebook.com/BristolLibDems (campaign page)

Brighton Pavilion (younger/Green)

Profile: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/politics/constituencies/E14000598

Chris Bowers: Liberal Democrats

Email: chris.bowers@liberalbrighton.org (personal email cbowers@gn.apc.org)

Facebook: (emailed 27/4) (replied)

@chris1bowers

https://www.facebook.com/events/797684846974695/ (facebook event)

Nigel Carter: UK Independence Party (UKIP)

Email: nigelcarter2@virginmedia.com

Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/nigel.carter.9?fref=ts (personal profile) (Followed)

https://www.facebook.com/pages/UKIP-Brighton-Hove/519062224812831?fref=ts
(campaign page) (Followed)

Dr Caroline Lucas: Green Party (2010 winner)

Email: caroline.lucas@brightonandhovegreenparty.org.uk

Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/carolinelucas.page (personal profile)

Clarence Mitchell: Conservative Party

Email: clarence@clarence4pavilion.com

Facebook: (emailed 27/4)

@mitch_1uk

https://www.facebook.com/pages/Clarence-Mitchell-is-not-for-Brighton-Pavilion/1518222511727442?fref=ts&ref=br_tf

Howard Pilott: The Socialist Party of Great Britain

Email: brightonpavilion@worldsocialism.org

Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/socialistpartyofgreatbritain (party) (Following)

https://www.facebook.com/howard.pilott (unverified)

http://www.worldsocialism.org/spgb/author-speaker/howard-pilott

Purna Sen: Labour Party

Email: PurnaSenBrightonLabour@gmail.com

Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/Purna4Pavilion (Following)

Nick Yeomans Independent

Email: nicholasyeomans7@hotmail.com

Facebook: (emailed 27/4) (replied)

@NickPavilion15

http://nickpavilion15.co.uk/

Appendix 5: 2017 case study: selected posts

1: Griffiths "attack" Post, from page 196-7

The Post in full:

> Andrew Griffiths is a hard-working MP – on behalf of a few people in Burton and Uttoxeter. Here's what he really thinks of the many.
>
> His voting record shows that he backed the Tories' unfair bedroom tax 15 times. He voted against increasing benefits in line with inflation 5 times, and 15 times voted against benefit rises for disabled people. Nine times he voted against spending public money on jobs for young people who had been out of work for a long time, and 4 times voted to reduce the amount spent on advice services for people struggling to pay their council tax. He voted to reduce government spending on welfare and benefits a shocking 52 times.
>
> The United Nations published a critical report into the Tory government's austerity strategy, denouncing it as a "systematic violation" of disabled people's rights. Andrew Griffith isn't a nice bloke who happened to be a Conservative MP, he was an MP who backed that "violation". An MP who, at

every opportunity, voted to reduce support for those in Burton and Uttoxeter who needed it most.

#votelabour for the many, not the few

#makeitmckeirnan

2. Final, Henry V-style Post published the day before voting opened (page 202)

Figure 61: Screenshot of final intervention Post

The Post was written to encourage interaction. Note the unfinished sentence about the Torys and Corbyn to encourage readers to click through to read the whole Post, and the call to share the video in the full version of the Post:

When Theresa May called this snap election 7 weeks ago she wasn't just expecting to walk over the Labour Party, she wanted to destroy us. To turn the UK into a one-party state with her as its president. Unchallenged, unquestioned, and with a majority that would let her and her Tory friends do whatever they like.

She hadn't reckoned on the Labour Party fighting back hard. She hadn't reckoned on Corbyn's amazing campaign of hope. She hadn't reckoned on our manifesto for real change; for a better Britain.

Nor had her Tory media pals - and they've hit Corbyn with everything they could dream up (13 pages in the Daily Mail today!). For all of us who've been out door knocking voters, or talking to the people around us, we know how much the drip, drip of Tory lies has stuck. This has been a tough fight and it isn't over.

I'm calling on every one of you to do EVERYTHING you can in these last few hours to get the message out that only Labour is a vote for a better, caring Britain.

We saw what that looks like in the hours after the Manchester and London terrorist attacks – when doctors and nurses ran towards danger to help the injured; taxi drivers worked through the night to get people to safety; a homeless man cradles a women as she dies[210]. The Tories are the nasty party, but Britain is a country of compassion and fairness.

So, I'm asking you, my colleagues and friends in Burton and Uttoxeter Labour Party to do anything and everything you can in these last few hours to get out the Labour vote. Post leaflets, chip in on the phone bank, drive a

---

[210] The Post was written long before the homeless man referred to, Chris Parker, was discovered to have stolen from victims: https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/awful-truth-what-homeless-hero-14222569 (accessed November 12, 2018).

neighbour to a polling station, Facebook friends, workmates, children, parents and ask them to vote tomorrow for the Britain we need.

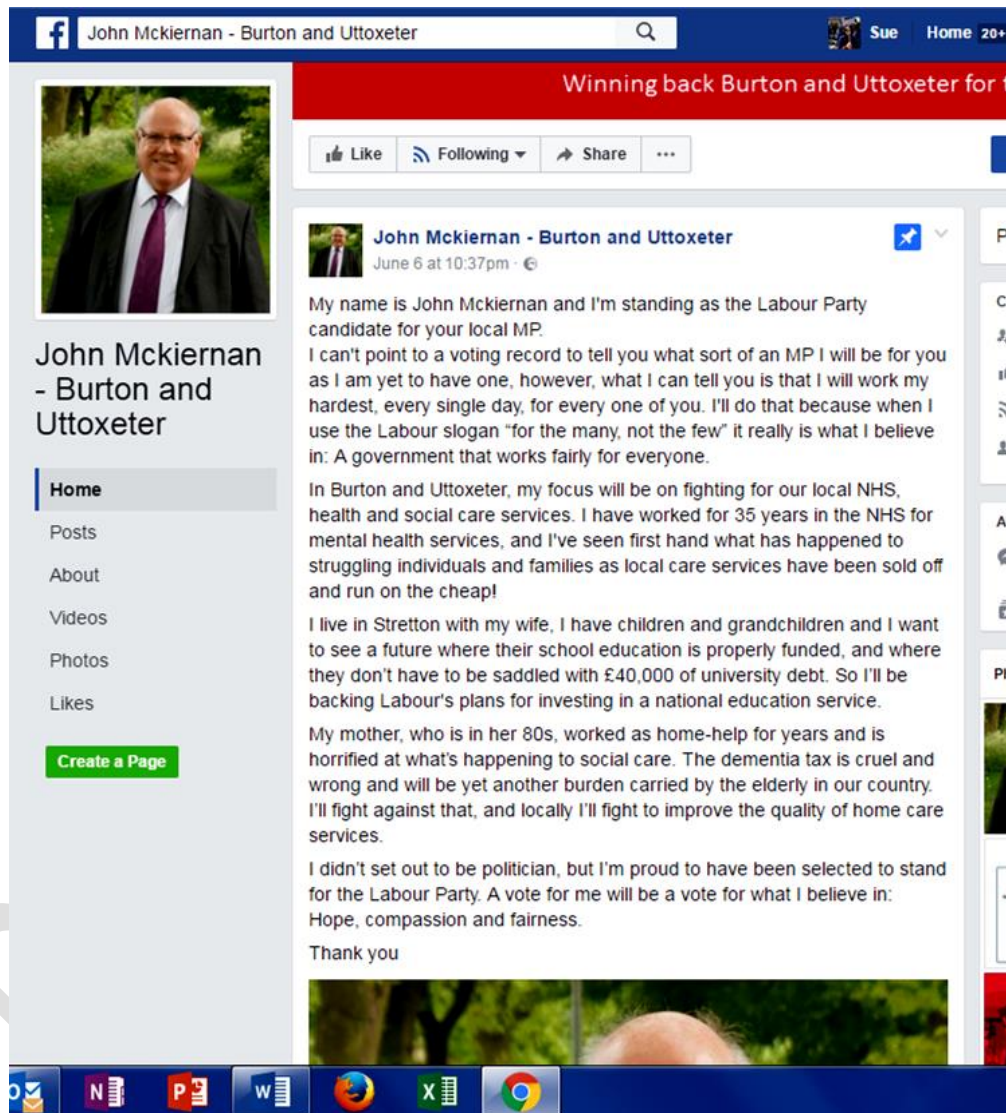And please, please watch and SHARE the video below.

Figure 62: Post written about (and as if from) the candidate to build authenticity (see footnote 181, page 291)