

Getting Engaged? The Relationship between Traditional, New Media, and the Electorate during the 2015 UK General Election

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Foreword

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About The Author

Colin Byrne is CEO UK&EMEA for Weber Shandwick, the leading global public relations firm. He was previously Head of Press for the Labour Party and deputy to the then campaigns director Peter Mandelson. In 2015 he was named one of the top ten influentials in PR and given a Lifetime of Achievement Award in communications.

Executive Summary

The 2015 UK General Election was set to be the first real social media general election. The major platforms like Facebook and Twitter had grown their user bases significantly since 2010. A number of new platforms such as Snapchat and Instagram had also been launched since then. New media platforms such as Vice News and BuzzFeed were building up their teams of political reporters and planning different approaches to election coverage.

Underlying the media's approach to the election was awareness of widespread disillusionment with, and disengagement from, mainstream politics. But the traditional media had their own issues to contend with, including continued decline in circulation, reputational challenges arising from the phone hacking scandal, and the challenge from social and new media on news dissemination.

Could the media, as professional engaging content creators and using their own growing social media channels, help re-engage disillusioned voters and bring digital native young voters into the election process?

A number of them tried, some tried really hard, and with mixed results. Many of them focused on young voters, a low turnout group compared to their older peers, again with mixed results.

Despite the millions of tweets, retweets, posts, likes, shares, and views, there is no evidence that social media played a decisive role either in boosting engagement and turnout, or in the election result. There is evidence that traditional media, and particularly broadcast media with their set piece debates and events, remained much more influential on voters.

Media engagement strategies were driven mainly by a commercial desire to attract new viewers and subscribers, but their efforts – many good practice examples of which are detailed in this report – should be praised and valuable lessons on engagement learned for future elections.

At the end of the day it was not the media's – or social media's – fault that tightly controlled, safety-first election campaigns, and political leaders who looked and sounded the same, turned voters off.

However, if rapid growth in social media users continues, and digital natives grow into key roles in the news organisations and the political party campaign machines, 2020 could be much more of a social media election.

PART I: INTRODUCTION

The 2015 general election was potentially the UK's first real social media general election. Facebook and Twitter were already being widely used by the public in 2010, but less so in political debate.

By the approach of the 2015 election both platforms had grown significantly since 2010, with Facebook users going from 26 million¹ to 35 million² by the start of the campaign, and Twitter doubling users from 7.2 million³ to 15 million.⁴

Facebook was gearing up for a major voter registration drive similar to those run in the USA in previous elections. Meanwhile new social networks like Snapchat, Vine, and Instagram had come online since the 2010 election, and new media platforms such as Vice News and BuzzFeed were increasingly covering politics and hiring political reporters.

Labour had brought in Blue State Digital,⁵ veterans of two Obama election campaigns, and the Conservatives were spending a reported £100,000 a month⁶ on Facebook advertising. Political journalists and commentators had become significant voices on Twitter. All the major and minor parties and some of the party leaders had seen increases – in some cases significant percentage increases – in their followers on Twitter and Facebook in the months leading up to the start of the campaign. Social media had also been credited by many commentators as a major factor in political engagement during the Scottish referendum.

So the stage was set for the UK's first social media general election. But was it to be? And more importantly, given the widespread disillusion with and disengagement from politics being recorded – see below – would social media help engage the disengaged? And what part would the media and their social media channels and initiatives play in engaging voters and potential voters in the political process, as opposed to their 'day job' of reporting, investigating, commenting, and in some cases seeking to influence the outcome of the poll? Would it be a case of 'move over old media, new media are here'?

In fact the 2015 election was not the 'social media election' that many expected, although they did still play an important role. This impact came from their relation to the coverage provided by traditional media outlets. That is to say, news coverage in traditional media and broadcasters was the anchor that most social media conversations tethered to.

¹ BBC News, 'Facebook And Electoral Commission Launch Voter Push'. News.bbc.co.uk, 2015. All websites cited in the footnotes were accessed in Aug. 2015.

² The Drum, 'Facebook Prompts UK Users To Register For 2015 General Election'. 4 February 2015. <<http://www.thedrum.com/news/2015/02/04/facebook-prompts-uk-users-register-2015-general-election>>.

³ Sysomos.com, 'Exploring the Use of Twitter Around the World'. Jan. 2010. <<http://sysomos.com/inside-twitter/number-twitter-users-country>>.

⁴ 'Tech Talks: Marketing With Twitter'. 2015. Presentation.

⁵ Blue State Digital, 'How do You Transform the Way a Party Organizes Offline, Online?' <<https://www.bluestatedigital.com/our-work/case-study/labour-party>>.

⁶ BBC News, 'Tories' £100,000 A Month Facebook Bill'. 5 Feb. 2015. <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-31141547>>.

Engagement

My research has focused on engagement, rather than volume of social media activity during the campaign (which has been analysed elsewhere in studies such as *Election Unspun*⁷ by the Media Standards Trust and the Policy Institute at King's College London, July 2015).

Today engagement is used to describe communications campaigns aimed at gathering tweets, retweets, comments, Facebook page likes and shares, and generally raising awareness of a brand or issue, gaining attention in a noisy, 'always on' online world of increasing channels and messages and decreasing attention spans (human beings now have an attention span on average that is one second less than that of a goldfish⁸). In electoral politics surely that is inadequate? It is not a spectator sport – though tightly managed and 'safety-first' controlled campaigns like the recent election are increasingly making it so for those who bother to watch – for armchair tweeters. I believe engagement to mean capturing attention in this very noisy world of competing claims and narratives, not just to drive awareness but to drive action: whether that action is a change of purchase preference from one brand or service provider to another, a decision to actively support a cause or issues, or a decision to vote and who to cast your vote for.

Disengagement

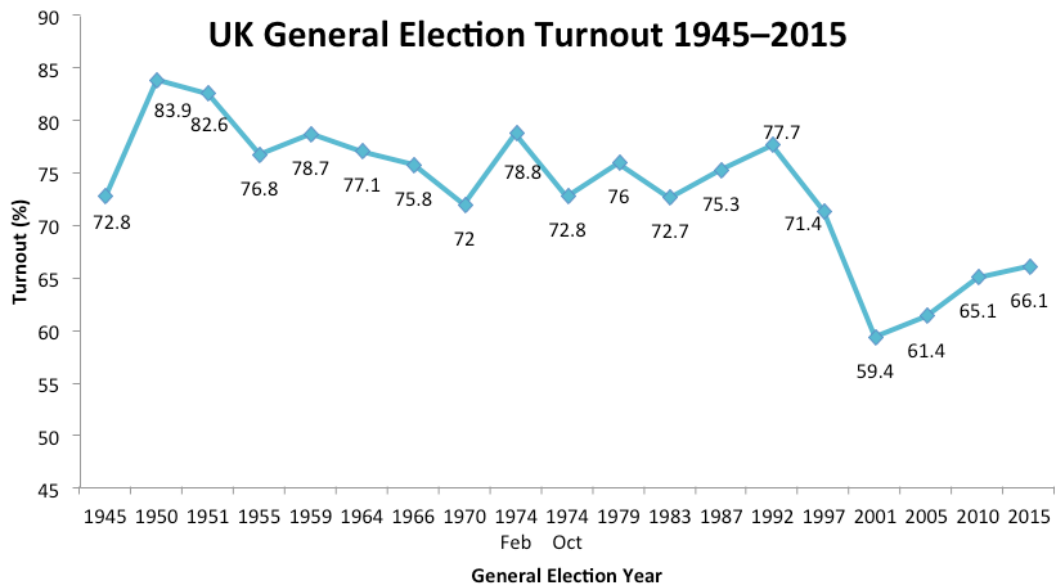
Leaving aside the coming of age of social media, the 2015 general election was set to be different in a number of ways. First of all it was coming off the back of five years of the first coalition government since the Second World War.

Secondly there was the impact of minority parties like UKIP and the SNP and the potential impact of their growing support on the three established UK parties.

A third significant factor in the election was the increased levels of public disengagement with politics, political institutions, and parties, a trend and sentiment which had been evident in decreasing turnout at post-war elections, which is yet to recover from the record low of 59.4% in 2001, and in attitudinal research for some years (see graph on next page).

⁷ Electionunspun.net, 'Campaign Buzzwords'. 3 May 2015. <<http://electionunspun.net/week-17/campaign-buzzwords-17>>.

⁸ Weber Shandwick, 'Visual Influence'. <<http://visualinfluence.webershandwick.com>>.



Source: Electoral Commission

If political parties were struggling – with declining party membership, fragmented political bases, disillusioned voters and supporters, declining reputation and public standing as a result of the MPs’ expenses affair, lack of differentiation between the main party leaders and low turnout at the ballot box – the media also had their problems.

The media sector had a reputation issue arising primarily from the Leveson Inquiry and a ‘disengagement’ issue of their own in terms of the increasing struggle for readers, viewers, and advertisers in the face of the growth of ‘free’ news online.

Would the media’s own battle for audience and revenues also help drive engagement with voters and potential voters in the election process, either as a strategy or a by-product of strategies to attract paying readers and build audience share?

‘The public are barely engaged’

Four weeks before polling day *Daily Mail* columnist Stephen Glover wrote a scathing attack on the political party campaigns. ‘Never before have politicians of ALL parties so cynically tried to dupe voters ... Despite the magnitude of the issues, the public are barely engaged.’⁹ He laid the blame firmly on the parties’ strategy which he saw as ‘keeping the media – and in particular newspapers – at arms’ length’.¹⁰ He continued:

This is a campaign dominated by carefully contrived photo-opportunities and sound bite-filled speeches delivered to audiences largely...made up of activists.

⁹ Stephen Glover, ‘The Phoney Election: Bogus Rallies, Photo Stunts, Vacuous Sound Bites, And The Press Banned – Never Before Have ALL Parties So Cynically Tried To Dupe Voters’, 9 Apr. 2015. <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3031200/The-phoney-election-Bogus-rallies-photo-stunts-vacuous-sound-bites-Press-banned-never-parties-cynically-tried-dupe-voters-writes-STEPHEN-GLOVER.html>>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

At all costs, normal voters are to be avoided, and wherever possible print journalists – who are after all supposed to be ‘the tribunes of the people’ – must be side-lined.¹¹

His only reference to social media was in an aside about politicians retreating to their comfort zone ‘protected by legions of spin doctors, whose preferred method of communication is risk-free Twitter or Facebook’.¹²

It was hardly a new media criticism of modern party election campaigning, recalling previous complaints about access, photo-ops, ‘spin doctors’, sound bites, and the attempts by political campaign managers to control the message, dating back to when Labour’s level of professional campaigning caught up with, and for a time overtook, that of the Conservatives nearly two decades ago. Indeed BBC political reporting veteran Nicholas Jones published an entire book on the issue in 1996 – the year before Tony Blair’s landslide election victory – pointedly titled *Soundbites and Spin Doctors: How Politicians Manipulate the Media – and Vice Versa*.

Glover’s article put political disengagement firmly at the door of the parties trying to dodge ‘the tribunes of the people’ in their carefully planned campaigns. He did raise valid points about the professionalisation of political campaigning and the parallel rise in disengagement. A September 2013 Survation poll found only 9%¹³ of active voters trusted politicians to tell the truth. Amongst non-voters, 27% said they didn’t vote because it wouldn’t make any difference, 25% said they saw no difference between the parties and candidates, and 19% said they were ‘not interested in politics’.¹⁴

The 2014 Hansard Society Audit of Political Engagement found just 49%¹⁵ of those questioned said they would be certain to vote in the event of an immediate election. While 67%¹⁶ agreed it was a ‘duty to vote in all types of elections’, that fell to 46%¹⁷ amongst 18–24 year olds, compared with 79%¹⁸ agreeing amongst 65+ year olds questioned. A third (33%¹⁹) declared that they were ‘not a supporter’ of any political party, just a year before the general election was to take place.

Only 34%²⁰ agreed that Parliament ‘holds Government to account’, the lowest level since the question was first asked in the Hansard Society Audit five years earlier. Only 23%²¹ agreed that Parliament ‘encourages public involvement in politics’, compared to 30%²² in previous audits. Two-thirds (67%²³) believed that politicians ‘don’t understand the daily lives of people like me’.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Survation, ‘Apathy In The UK? A Look At The Attitudes Of Non-Voters’. <<http://survation.com/apathy-in-the-uk-understanding-the-attitudes-of-non-voters>>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Hansard Society, ‘Audit Of Political Engagement 11’. 30 Apr. 2014. <<http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/audit-of-political-engagement-11>>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Hansard Society, ‘Audit Of Political Engagement 9 (Part Two)’. 25 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/audit-of-political-engagement-9-part-one>>.

²¹ Hansard Society, ‘Audit Of Political Engagement 11’. 30 Apr. 2014.

²² Hansard Society, ‘Audit Of Political Engagement 9 (Part Two)’. 2012.

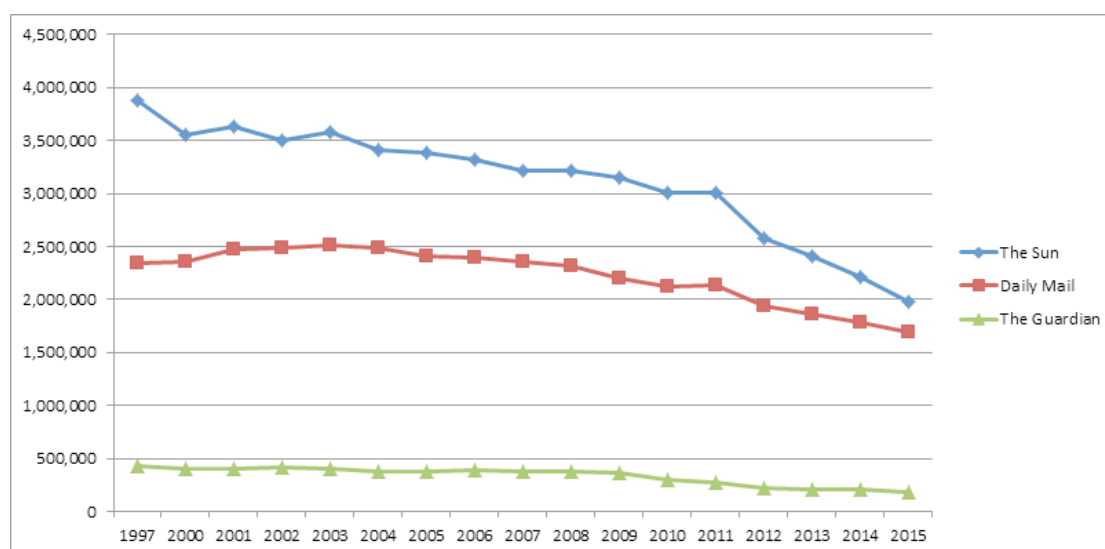
²³ Ibid.

Research by the Committee on Standards in Public Life published in 2013 revealed 40%²⁴ of respondents saying they felt ‘alienated’ from party politics.

But the media had their own ‘trust’ and ‘engagement’ issues in the run-up to the 2015 election. In the 2015 Edelman Trust Barometer, trust in the media had fallen from 47% in 2013 to just 38%. Trust in Government was marginally higher at 43%, though down from 47% in 2013.

According to YouGov research published in 2011, 64% of respondents said TV was their most trusted media outlet. Only 38% said newspapers. 74% said media outlets sometimes or frequently lied to their audience. 71% of tabloid readers agreed that their newspapers ‘focus on negative stories about politics and politicians’.

Circulation for print media also continued to decline, with sales of the print edition of the *Sun* down from circa 3.4 million to circa 2.5 million between 2005 and 2015, and sales of the *Daily Mail* down from circa 2.5 million to circa 1.7 million over the same period. Recent ABC circulation figures (July 2014) showed the newspaper market decline running at 8% a year.



Source: Audit Bureau of Circulations

In contrast social media interactions by leading UK newsbrands had tripled in the year leading up to the general election according to Newsworks research. But much of that social media interaction was non-revenue-generating.

The continued rise of political disengagement, the decreasing trust in politicians and political parties and institutions – and in the media – formed the backdrop to what was to become – in headline and political terms (and for bystanders and collateral damage such as the polling firms) a significant if not

²⁴ Matt Chorley, ‘Maybe Paxman And Brand Were Right: 40% Of People Feel So Alienated By ALL Politicians They Might Not Vote’. *Daily Mail*, 15 Nov. 2013. <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2507888/Jeremy-Paxman-Russell-Brand-right-40-alienated-politicians-vote.html>>.

landmark general election.

But what of the campaign itself, the underlying decline in trust and engagement with politics, and the media's own role in that engagement process?

Planning for Engagement

A few weeks prior to the election campaign beginning in earnest, veteran BBC political journalist John Pienaar, now with BBC Radio 5 Live, reflected:

Many of us inside the Westminster bubble often hugely over-estimate the degree to which people are engaged in the political process and the political campaign. Even less so in understanding, or trying to understand, the issues and arguments that fly around between the parties. I think most people aren't interested, they don't care, and they don't care that they don't care ... The chasm of understanding and engagement is huge and I think we are in denial about that as we pump out our material and the politicians pump out their messages.²⁵

Pienaar acknowledged the potential for social media to disrupt the decline of interest and engagement in politics.

There is a capacity for that. [Political coverage and comment] is much more easily accessible and it is on offer constantly, whereas before you had to make an effort to seek it out. [Social media] is now in the ether, it surrounds you and you have to almost make a positive effort to avoid it and not engage.²⁶

In terms of his own BBC outlet and general election planning he said:

It's [social media] a big part of the strategy ... a way to draw people in to listening to a programme. But we are moving beyond that into it being part of the engagement of listeners in the campaign itself.²⁷

Social media engagement was key to the election planning of many media outlets (though few were willing to divulge their plans or, given the commercial sensitivity, talk about them at all) including Sky News. Their Stand Up Be Counted collaboration with Facebook, to engage young potential voters in discussion with the main party leaders (bar Nigel Farage who declined to take part) was an example of best practice during the campaign (see Case Study 1). Questions were unfiltered, both via the studio audience and through Facebook and Twitter. David Cameron was put on the spot on the question of VAT on tampons and other questions unlikely to be asked in set piece press conferences or rallies of the party faithful.

Like many media organisations Sky has invested in its social media team, as well as social media and digital planning for the general election.

²⁵ John Pienaar, interview with author.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

Speaking ahead of the campaign, Audience Development Editor Richard Evans explained his hopes that 2015 would be a truly social media election.

It is now in everything we do. The platforms are on board; it is just a matter of trying to get the leaders on board. That's the tricky bit ... we are in the attention business. We want audience attention, them spending time with us. Ten years ago the BBC was our main rival, now I see it as anyone who is vying for [audience] attention on any platform, whether it's Twitter, a website or a TV programme. When you think about organisations like BuzzFeed who have come up through social media, that's where the competition is. In terms of how I prioritise social media platforms, Facebook is probably the most important. They have gone aggressively for video and their algorithms favour news. Whilst Twitter can break news, Facebook can help you reach more people for longer.²⁸

Social media is more democratic than traditional TV coverage, where people just watch something and say 'oh I didn't agree with that'. Now they can voice their opinion to all of their friends and followers.²⁹

His colleague, Sky News's Head of Digital, Andrew Hawken, expanded:

Digital will be hugely important to our future growth. While TV remains strong, digital is becoming more and more important and so is social media. Especially with a younger audience. As much as we would love them to be on our platforms, we have to meet them where they are.³⁰

Stand Up Be Counted was

really about looking at trying to get as many young people as possible to be involved in the process. Our coverage will be richer, deeper and better because we are bringing in other voices. We are already seeing the power of SUBC. It's not every day you have that level of engagement.³¹

It wasn't an accident we are hosting it with Facebook. While we bring great content, the politicians, knowledge and expertise, they bring the audience.³²

For him, engagement would be defined as 'time spent' on Sky News's various social media platforms. What was different for Sky News about election campaign coverage planning since the previous election was the smartphone.

If you look at where we were last time vs now, the key change is smartphone penetration and its capacity to be a really good media device. 75% of Facebook and our consumption is on mobile. Mobile and social media strategy is now mainstream for us.³³

²⁸ Richard Evans, 2015, interview with author.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Andrew Hawken, 2015, interview with author.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

In terms of the impact of that increased engagement on media business models, Hawken sounded a warning note.

*We have to figure out how to make these things profitable and drive value. On our own sites there are established business models, we can sell advertising. But social media organisations have to work out what their advertising model is for partners, otherwise there is no point for anyone.*³⁴

Evans's point on 'reach' is at the heart of the issue over the media's use of social media during the election – the difference between amplifying coverage and engaging people in the issues. Most news organisations strategised social media into modernising their election coverage. The question is how much of that new activity and focus would actually engage people beyond the already politically active and engaged, as opposed to wider broadcast reach.

Over at Facebook UK, Head of Public Policy Rishi Saha, himself an ex-Conservative Party digital strategist who worked on the 2010 election campaign, explained Facebook's approach to engaging the disillusioned.

*The election will be a huge focus for us. Elections are big public moments, and we are part of those moments. The Scottish Referendum was one of the most talked about events ever on Facebook in the UK.*³⁵

He said that in its early days the Stand Up Be Counted partnership with Sky News

*drove a huge amount of engagement and conversation, especially with those who might not be traditionally engaged with politics. It shows that platforms like ours are not just secondary, where [politicians] might do something with a traditional broadcaster and then do something as a follow up with us, but that we are fully integrated into these big media moments.*³⁶

He added that most media companies

*recognise the enormous value of having an active presence on Facebook to drive traffic to their websites. Most journalists are present on Twitter, but we will increasingly see journalists using Facebook more to amplify their columns and gain a wider following.*³⁷

As well as the growth of some social media platforms since 2010, and the arrival of others, another new feature of the 2015 election would be the style of coverage and political engagement impact of new media platforms such as Vice News and BuzzFeed.

Also speaking a few months ahead of the election campaign, Vice News' Head of News Programming, Kevin Sutcliffe, explained:

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Rishi Saha, 2015, interview with author.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

*The election fits into why Vice News came into being in the first place, as a response to what's happened to news and current affairs which have increasingly spoken to an older audience. Grey men talking to grey men, the middle aged talking to the middle aged.*³⁸

*It's a myth that young people are not interested in politics. They are increasingly engaged with the way politics impacts their life. The 16–35 [-year-old] audience is there and hungry to know what's happening to the world. Ours is an offering made by and for that generation. They are an audience that want authenticity. You can't bullshit them. And they are not sitting around waiting for the 10 o'clock news when the news is breaking on their Twitter feed. We aim to be the 'authentic reporting' to the BBC's 'trusted reporting'.*³⁹

*This election has already started and once again feels like a compact between the broadcasters and the political parties. The rules and regulations around reporting are already in force and the whole process takes on a surreal air, scheduling the photo opportunities, the set piece interviews on a train and so on. Are we surprised people aren't engaged in the whole theatre of it? Being able to step outside that, that is where the opportunity for others like Vice is, to engage people in a different way. Looking at issues that we think are important but are just not being talked about like housing and rent costs.*⁴⁰

Sutcliffe drew a line at planning to encourage viewers and readers to vote.

*We are a news and current affairs operation. We will engage with the issues, they will decide how and whether to vote.*⁴¹

Many news media and social media platforms declined to reveal or comment on their plans ahead of the election, for reasons of commercial confidentiality and competitive advantage. This was understandable, given that most digital and social media initiatives by the mainstream media and the key social media operators are focused on increasing audiences, penetrating the harder to reach ones and countering falling circulation figures.

But it was clear that the stage was set for a massive deployment of social media strategies and initiatives in the first 'social media coming of age' UK general election.

³⁸ Kevin Sutcliffe, 2015, interview with author.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

PART II: DURING THE ELECTION

The following ten case studies look at good practice and laudable attempts at engagement in a number of areas:

- youth engagement strategies;
- using big data to create engaging content;
- differing approaches by new and traditional media;
- the role of the leaders' debates and interviews in driving social media engagement.

Youth Engagement

Case Study 1: Sky News – Stand Up Be Counted

Youth engagement was at the centre of many initiatives during the 2015 general election coverage. Reaching out to younger audiences was not merely seen as a social good, but also as a business imperative for the media, in helping them attract younger audiences. Sky News's flagship digital youth engagement initiative, Stand Up Be Counted, is a great example of how traditional media utilised digital. Launched in September 2014, the initiative, aimed at 16-25 year-olds, was born out of the fact that the number of young voters participating in general elections has been in decline in recent years; according to a Sky News poll, 'almost half of the young people in Britain are not engaged in politics, feel their voices are not heard, and don't believe that politicians are addressing their problems'.⁴² The digital platform was aimed at helping make the voices of young people heard, as well as highlighting the issues that matter most to them. Sky has also stated that the aim of Stand Up Be Counted is to encourage more of the 18-25 year-old age group to register to vote, and play a greater role in setting the agenda for the future of Great Britain.⁴³

'They [young people] feel, quite rightly, disengaged from the Westminster bubble, who decide the direction in which our country heads. Likewise news organisations like Sky need to up their game, and help explain how policy decisions directly affect the lives of young people, and how they can influence those decisions.'

(John Pienaar)

The idea for the platform was born from the success of a digital project named '50 States: 50 Voices' undertaken during Sky News's US election coverage, which allowed one person from each US state to produce a video.

⁴² Sky News, 'Sky Poll: Young Not Engaged In Politics'. 1 Sept. 2014. <<http://news.sky.com/story/1327348/sky-poll-young-not-engaged-in-politics>>.

⁴³ Ibid.

At the centre of Stand Up Be Counted is a dynamic digital platform where young people can post videos, articles, and comments on issues that matter to them. The platform is engineered to make user-generated content easy to produce and publish, demonstrated by the fact that, as well as being mobile optimised, Stand Up Be Counted is also available as Apple and Android applications. The content on the platform is highly sharable, offering amplification and syndication of all of their content across all popular social media channels, from Kik and Snapchat to Facebook and Twitter. Similarly, there is also a 'register to vote' icon located prominently next to the content upload icon, further highlighting SUBC's voter registration drive.



Fig. 1: Sharing options on Stand Up Be Counted website.

The Platform is divided into four main areas:

- Hot Topic: Hottest issues and major news are discussed and debated.
- Open Mic: An area where 'Stand Ups' can discuss any topic that interests them.
- News Feed: A feed which presents the best content from Sky News.
- Stand Ups: An area which displays the profiles of all the registered 'Stand Ups'.

Register to vote button

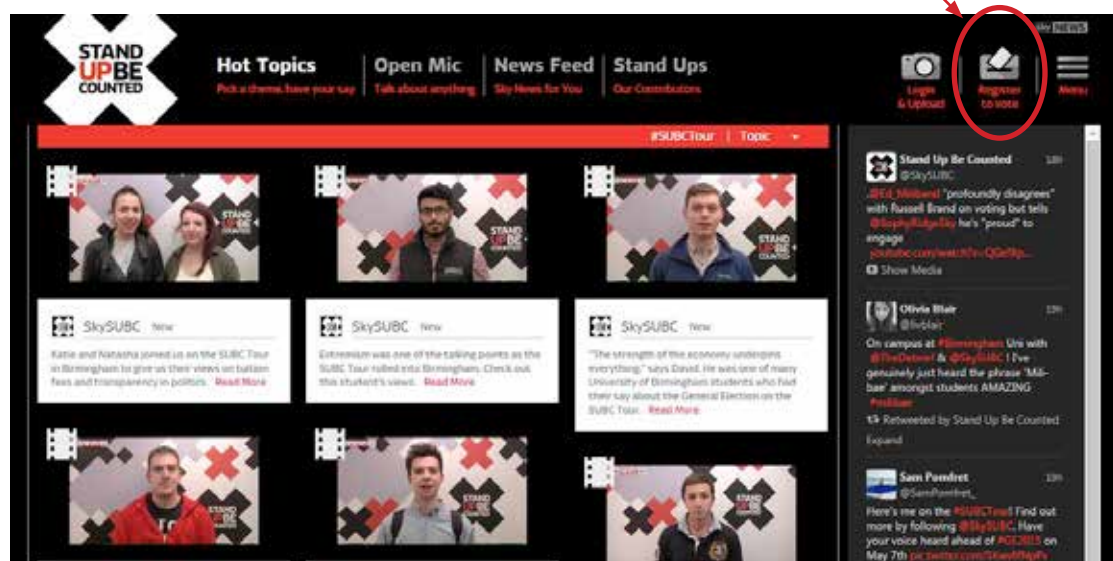


Fig. 2: Landing page of Stand Up Be Counted

There are over 390 unique users between the ages of 16 to 25, all engaging with, and creating, content – not an insignificant number, considering the BBC’s equivalent initiative hired in 200 young people.

We want to give them a platform which works for them a place where they can talk about their hopes, dreams, fears about the future and share them with their contemporaries via social media platforms.⁴⁴

‘Their voices will become an integral part of our coverage, we will highlight the issues that matter to them ensuring our content becomes more inclusive and reflective of a younger generation.’

(John Ryley, Head of Sky News)

To ensure that the content being created by users was not being limited in its reach to only those active on social media, Sky News integrated it into its live coverage of the election – at times showing clips from user videos to add as commentary or analysis, or inviting some interesting voices to join Sky News’s studio team.



Fig. 3: Stand Ups on Sky News broadcast programmes

⁴⁴ Sky, ‘Sky News To Launch Stand Up Be Counted’. 1 Sept. 2014. <https://corporate.sky.com/media-centre/news-page/2014/sky_news_to_launch_stand_up_be_counted>.



Fig 4: Stand Ups on Sky News broadcast programmes

Another aim of Sky News was to ensure that, as the Head of Sky News John Ryley said, news organisations ‘up their game, help[ing] explain how policy decisions directly affect the lives of young people ... avoid[ing] doing it in a preachy patronising way’.⁴⁵

#ASKTHELEADERS

In early February 2014 SUBC partnered with Facebook to host an Ask the Leaders debate. Four major party leaders, Prime Minister David Cameron, Labour leader Ed Miliband, Liberal Democrat Nick Clegg, and the Green Party’s Natalie Bennett, were all invited to the canteen at Facebook’s offices in London to be quizzed on a wide range of issues, from hot topics such as immigration and the NHS to Britain’s tribute to the late Saudi King and the tax on tampons, by a live audience of around 35 16–25-year-olds, with some questions coming from social media.

The format of the event was more of a townhall than a debate, meaning the leaders did not interact with each other at all. They arrived at staggered intervals, did their Q&A with the audience, and left. Then the next leader would arrive.

The event was broadcast live over Sky News and Facebook, hosted by Sky News’s Faisal Islam, and a handful of Stand Ups who Sky News equipped with selfie-sticks and hard questions.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

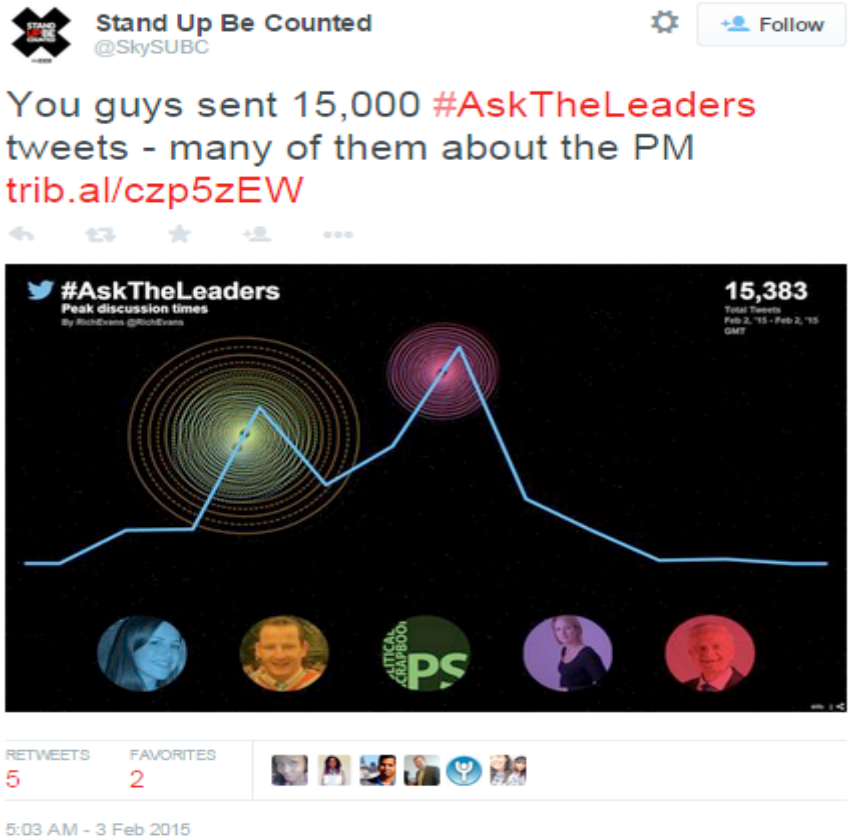


Fig. 5: SUBC Twitter graphic about number of tweets garnered by Ask The Leaders event

Source: Twitter.com

The event was largely successful for Sky News, garnering over 15,000 tweets for #AskTheLeaders in one day, which though less than the traditional broadcast debates and interviews, was still significant compared to other purely digital initiatives such as BuzzFeed Brews, which garnered less than 1,000 tweets. Importantly, all of the content lived online for people, not just young people, to interact with. The success of SUBC lies in its sophisticated use of social and digital media, in not expecting young people to come to them for news and content, but rather to go where they were and interact with them there. If engagement is a two-way dialogue, SUBC was certainly engaging.



Fig. 6: #AskTheLeader set in the Facebook canteen Source: <Twitter.com/SUBC>

Case Study 2: BBC Generation 2015

On the flipside of digital youth engagement initiatives by traditional media outlets there was the BBC's Generation 2015. Generation 2015 was the BBC's flagship youth engagement initiative for the 2015 general election, targeting young people aged 18–24. The initiative brought together a cohort of 200⁴⁶ young people and asked them to contribute to the BBC's election coverage.

The participants were selected from hundreds of applicants, from a range of diverse backgrounds and communities, with the intention of bringing together a representative group of young people, to express differing views on a range of topics.

The group would then appear across a range of BBC outputs, from *Newsbeat* and the Asian Network, to the *World at One*. This in turn allowed

⁴⁶ BBC News, 'Generation 2015 Brings Young Voices To Election Debate'. 30 Mar. 2015. <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-32111879>>.

the BBC to meet their objective of ensuring that the views and experiences of young people – and potential young voters – were brought to the foreground of BBC news programming and election coverage.

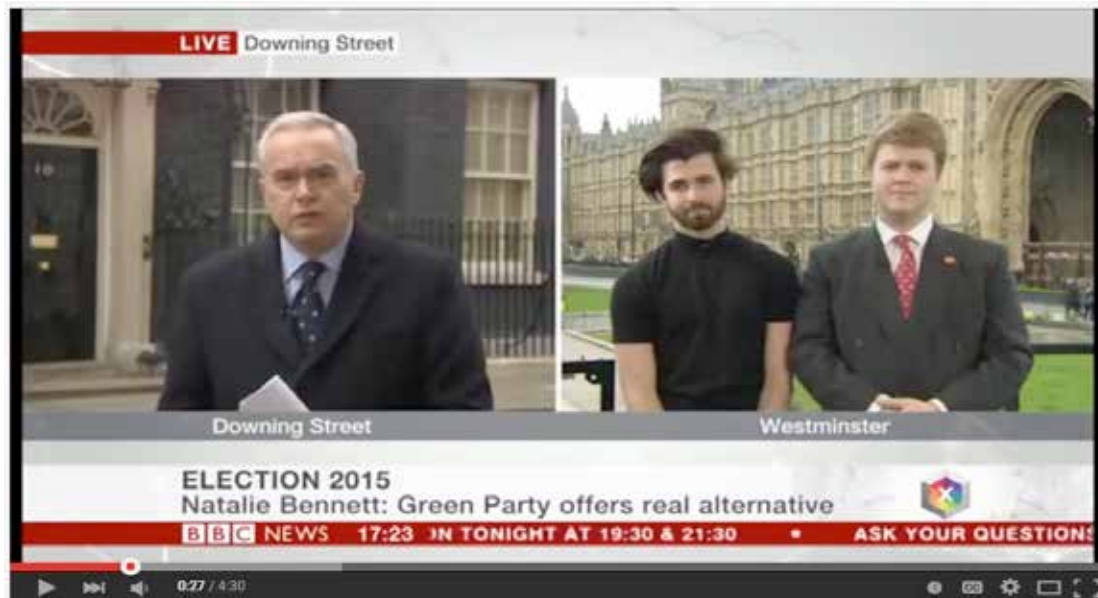


Fig. 7: BBC Generation 2015 on BBC broadcast programme.

But while the initiative generated a sizeable conversation on Twitter, it was not actively cross-pollinated across other social media outlets very well, thereby limiting its own reach and ultimately the scale of their engagement in the conversation. There was, for example, no official Tumblr, Pinterest, or even Facebook page for Generation 2015, all of which could have boosted engagement further via the initiative. While we are not sure why the BBC decided not to integrate Generation 2015 with digital and social media, it was a very detrimental decision.

#INMYSHOES

Within the Generation 2015 initiative lived a smaller project called #InMyShoes. The project was created to help enable those young people who did not make it into the 200 Generation 2015 participant group to have their say about the election.

The project was entirely video-based and was broadcast through a YouTube channel called InMyUK. The idea was for young people to add the hashtag on Skype, record a Skype video message, and then the BBC would choose whether to distribute it either online or on their programming.

The YouTube channel was launched on 7 April, and totalled 1,846 views to date, with each video averaging 300 views. These are incredibly low viewing and engagement figures. Compared to Generation 2015, the YouTube story seems to be the same, in that these initiatives did not build enough of an organic audience on YouTube, as they only appeared shortly before the election kicked off. This low engagement is compounded by the fact that, because there is not a large social media drive to these videos from other

owned social media channels, they missed out on getting the attention of audiences and contributors.



Fig. 8: BBC InMyUK YouTube page Source: <Youtube.com>

Case Study 3: BBC Free Speech

However, the BBC was very successful in its engagement of young people through its programme *BBC Free Speech*. *BBC Free Speech* was a fortnightly debate and discussion show broadcast on BBC Three that travelled throughout the UK. Produced by Mentorn Media, the makers of *Question Time*, *Free Speech* targeted a younger audience through its broadcast on BBC Three, the BBC's channel aimed at 16–34-year-olds.

Hosted by youth-appeal presenters Rich Edwards and Tina Daheley, the programme invited a panel of commentators to a roaming studio to engage in debate between themselves and the audience.

Mentorn partnered with 'social TV' production company, Telegraph Hill, to curate a 'fully interactive' show, and it was this aspect which set *Free Speech* apart from other discussion and debate shows during the campaign. *Free Speech* did not treat social media merely as a platform for sourcing questions for the panel. Social media permeated every aspect of the show.

First, the viewers were allowed to directly influence which topics were covered in each of the live shows. The show's producers posted photo memes on their Facebook and Twitter profiles, and collated the responses to devise which topics were best suited for igniting a lively conversation.



Fig. 9: BBC Free Speech promo picture.
Source: <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01s4sk3>>

While this methodology was largely successful, it was limited in that it only engaged the audiences who were active on Facebook and Twitter, while ignoring other popular platforms, such as Snapchat and Kik, which were likely to be less colonised by already politically engaged or active young people.



Fig. 10: Powerbar
Source: <<http://www.aloksharma.co.uk/content/sharma-first-ever-mp-win>>

Secondly, *Free Speech* allowed its audience to actively contribute to the show, by creating their own content. Through a partnership with The Lab at the

BBC, a small production unit that makes film content with community groups for broadcast on BBC outlets, *Free Speech* created two films in advance of its programme, one for transmission during the show, and one that lived online.

Thirdly, during the hour-long transmission *Free Speech* simultaneously launched debates through Facebook and Twitter, as they were initiated by the studio audience. Tina Daheley, the interactive presenter, then wove them into the debate, so that viewers at home could see their point raised in the live studio debate within minutes of making it online.

Finally, and probably most innovatory in the campaign coverage, *Free Speech* was the only show to incorporate the Power Bar, a live Twitter-controlled graphic, into every show. Viewers tweeted predetermined hash tags to show their approval or disapproval of what each panellist were saying. So if a panellist is called Ben, they could tweet #YesBen to agree with him, or #NoBen to disagree. The live graphic responded in real time, giving a cue for Rick Edwards, the lead presenter, to respond to a panellist's points with a response from the audience at home to gauge sentiment through the on-screen 'Power Bar'. The Power Bar aggregated all tweets mentioning the show's hashtags, and then showed whether they agreed or disagreed with the opinions being voiced by the panellists and audience.

Making Big Data Engaging

Case Study 4: The Guardian

Having hired Alberto Nardelli from Tweetminster to lead their data team, this year's election saw the *Guardian* become a leader in the data journalism world. The *Guardian* aimed to create sophisticated election coverage, which would marry both the editorial and mathematical to give its readership the clearest and most nuanced picture of the election possible.

Nardelli highlighted that the 2015 election would be significantly different from that of 2010 due to the rise of big data. Nardelli noted that, during this election, his data team would have access to more data than ever before, but that this would also present the team with new challenges. What sets Nardelli's style of data journalism apart from the rest is his focus on the audience, going to great lengths to balance accessibility with the complexity of data.

Just having lots of numbers and figures isn't in itself a good thing. There is a big distinction between information and knowledge. Often data without humanity is meaningless, it's about connecting data with stories.⁴⁷

Nardelli and the *Guardian* invested a lot of their efforts in contextualising the data they analysed, and displaying them in such a way as to be easily digested by the reader.

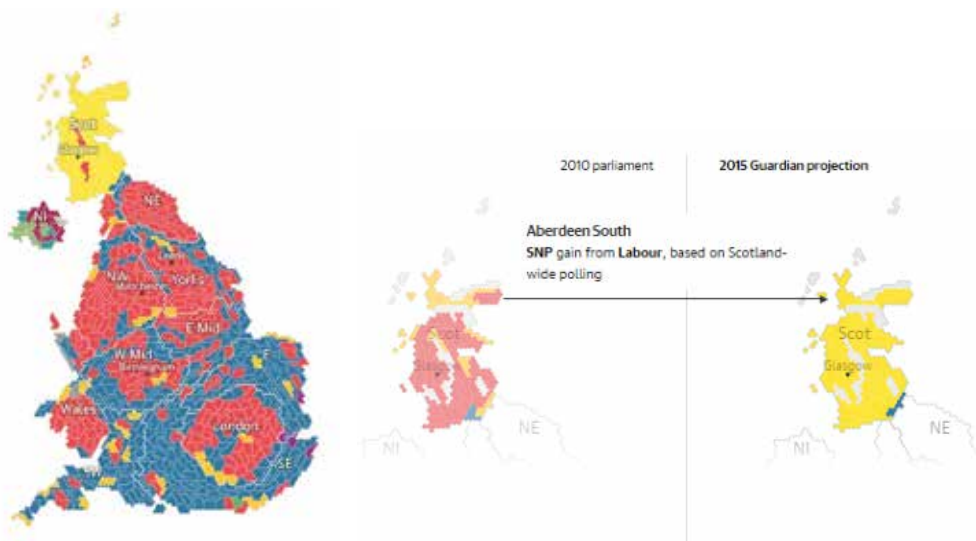
⁴⁷ Alberto Nardelli, WANIFRA, 4 Feb. 2015. <<http://blog.wan-ifra.org/2015/02/04/media-experts-discuss-preparing-for-the-uks-first-real-hashtag-election>>.

The way you present things is very important, because you are trying to communicate lots of things in the most simple and visually meaningful way so that anyone who looks at it immediately understands. (Alberto Nardelli⁴⁸)

Data visualisations played a large role in the overall general election coverage, with everyone from the *New Statesman* and the *Sun* to *The Times* and *Scotsman* using these graphic representations of data to enrich their coverage. Data visualisations were also popular, not just because they made usually very complex data sets understandable, because they are very easily sharable.

POLLS AND PROJECTIONS

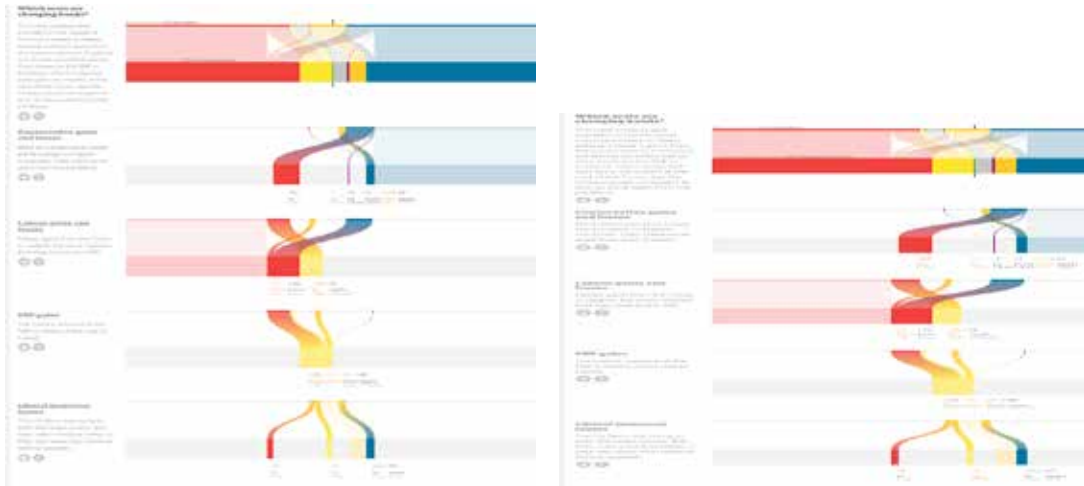
A great example of this is the *Guardian's* interactive opinion polling map. Shared over 2,400 times on social media, a significant number for any single article to be retweeted, the hexagonal map showed population sizes in each constituency, as well as the daily polling results from that seat. The zoomable map allowed you to select a constituency or region and explore the projected seat winner, as well as what that seat looked during the 2010 election side by side. Using the *Guardian's* own poll projection data model, which aggregated all of the different polls conducted across the country, their aim was to create the fullest and most accurate picture of all of the different possible outcomes.



Figs. 11/12: Projections and polls maps.

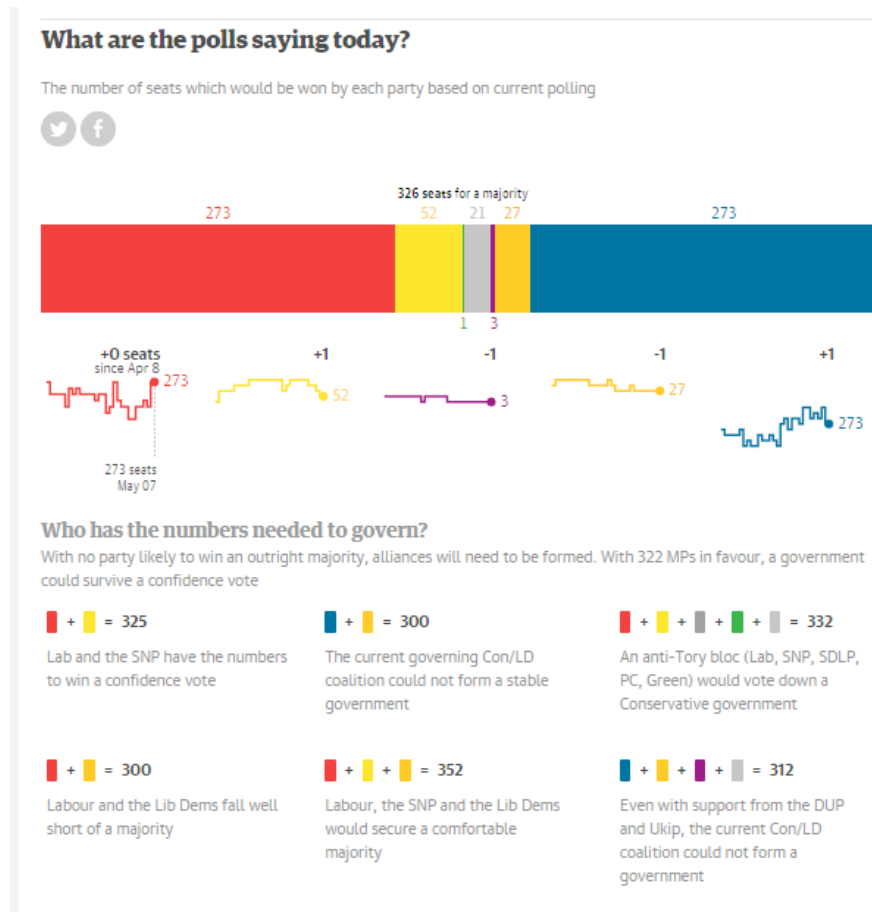
This platform also allowed its readers to explore what the latest projection would mean for seats changing hands between the parties.

⁴⁸ Ibid.



Figs 13/14: Projections and polls graphs – change of parties holding seats.

Nardelli and his team would also take the data from the poll projections, and created further visualisations of how possible coalitions could be formed. Speaking at the LSE’s Polis Journalism 2015 conference in March, Nardelli stated that the aim of the poll tools was not just to be informative and relevant, but also to make the polling interesting for those people who might not always be engaged in that level of detail.



Figs. 15/16: Coalition builder.

MANIFESTO EXPLORER

The *Guardian* also offered its readers an interactive Manifesto Explorer, where users answered five survey questions, including their demographic, family, transport choices, main policy interests, and housing statuses. Based on each of the user's answers, the platform curates relevant policies from within the different party's manifestos. The article was shared close to a thousand times on Twitter.

Election 2015: What are the parties offering you?

How will their manifesto promises affect you in your daily life? Our guide selects the policy areas which target particular groups and lets you build up a picture of how (or whether...) the parties say they will help you

Seán Clarke, Will Franklin, Troy Griggs, Nicola Slawson, Glenn Swann and Paul Torpey

Wednesday 22 April 2015 8:00 BST



0 policies

1 2 3 4 5

1. Which of these target voters do you think you are?

			
Starting out in life	Getting by	Comfortable to well-off	Retired
43 policies	40 policies	33 policies	30 policies

Figs. 17/18: Manifesto Explorer.

Your Guide

We've found 92 policies relevant to you



You said you had older children

Free schools

Conservatives More schools to become academies; more free schools	Green Return Academies and Free Schools to local council control	Labour End free schools and use the money to cap infant class sizes	Lib Dem Drop rule that all new state schools must be free schools	Plaid Cymru No free schools in Wales
Ukip Support Free Schools				

Higher education

Conservatives Lift the cap on university places	Green Reintroduce block grant to universities	Labour Introduce and prioritise technical degrees	Plaid Cymru More Welsh language higher education	Ukip Scrap target of university places for half of school leavers
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You said you were living in social housing

Bedroom tax

Green Abolish the bedroom tax	Labour Scrap the bedroom tax	Lib Dem Reform the bedroom tax	Plaid Cymru Abolish bedroom tax	SNP Scrap the bedroom tax
Ukip Scrap the bedroom tax				

Universal credit

Green Halt universal credit	Labour Preserve tax credits and pause to review Universal Credit programme	Plaid Cymru Review Universal Credit	SNP Halt universal credit and reinstate disability living allowance
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House building

Green Build 500,000 social rented homes by 2020	Labour Build 200,000 homes by 2020	Plaid Cymru Claim back Treasury money to spend on Welsh housing	SNP Back annual target of 100,000 affordable homes
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Figs. 19/20: Manifesto Explorer results.

drowned out by the other *Guardian* digital initiatives. The use of this platform during the election coverage was limited to a few assignments, and some liveblog contributions. While the idea behind this digitally enabled open journalism and crowd-sourced news content had all the makings of a stand-out digital engagement initiative, it was underutilised and therefore ineffective.

Overall, the *Guardian* was largely very engaging, due to the new and innovative ways in which it approached the idea of using big data. It was not successful simply because it used big data in these ways, but by the method of distribution that saw them being utilised across all social media channels.



Fig. 23: Guardian Witness landing page.

New Media vs Traditional Media

Case Study 5: BuzzFeed Brews

BuzzFeed Brews is BuzzFeed's flagship international interview series, where they sit down with famous and noteworthy individuals to ask tough questions, from James Franco to Barack Obama. Hosted by Tim Waterson, deputy editor of BuzzFeed UK, David Cameron sat down on 16 March for an interview which was live-streamed and syndicated through Facebook. Kinura, a UK-based web video agency specialising in live HD video production and

live streaming, installed a HD multi-camera set up for the live stream, with three camera operators and one wide shot, 'allowing for the audience to get a real feel for the atmosphere and witness the reactions of Mr Cameron'.⁴⁹ The stream was delivered via BuzzFeed's LiveStream channel, with the player also embedded on their Facebook feed.

David Cameron's interview with BuzzFeed was seen as somewhat of a steal by other media outlets, with the *Guardian* describing it as a 'coup'. This was due to the fact that BuzzFeed and David Cameron have not always had the warmest relationship – only a year ago Cameron had asked 'What is the BuzzFeed?' The coup also resides in Cameron's willingness to do an interview with BuzzFeed, while snubbing countless other offers from traditional UK broadcasters and media outlets.

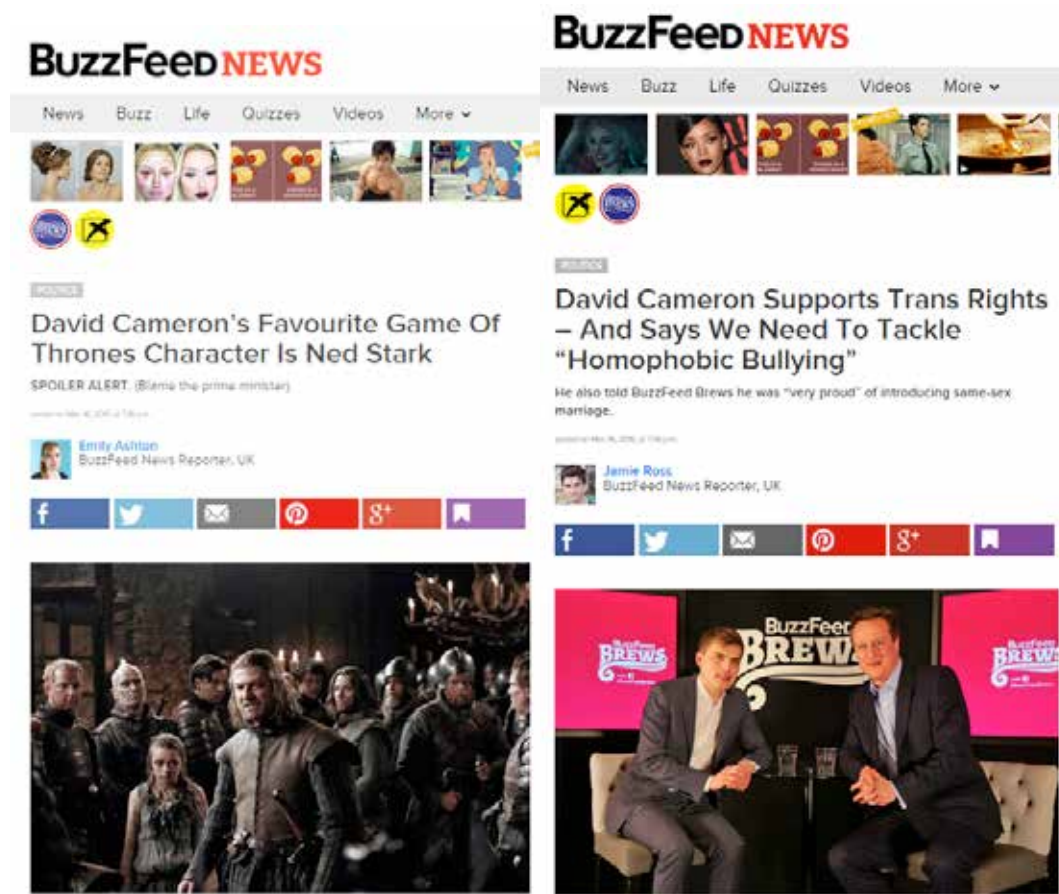
However, Cameron and his team understood the appeal of BuzzFeed in bridging the gap they faced for the youth vote against Labour. And its online audience is, notably, much younger than its print audience. Its own figures show that the average age of its desktop audience was 39, and its mobile readership younger still at 35,⁵⁰ while ComRes research suggests that 54% of BuzzFeed's audience is between 18 and 35.

Cameron was offered the opportunity to reach out to BuzzFeed's younger readership and BuzzFeed got the opportunity to play a larger role in the election, and drive greater traffic to their website. By being able to draw the Prime Minister, just five weeks after their US counterparts drew President Obama, BuzzFeed is starting to set itself apart, not just as an online digital outlet, but as a major political player. While first known as a purveyor of pet-themed listicles and similar content, BuzzFeed has invested heavily in its news division, expanding editorial staffs and hiring big-name journalists for their global news desks. BuzzFeed UK's editorial staff has grown from 12 people to more than 40 in the last 18 months, Waterson said.

On the night, the live stream generated around 10,000 unique views from an international audience. An on-demand version of the event was immediately available to watch – and the video now has had more than 14,000 views, with comments from people all around the world. While 10,000–14,000 views is not much compared to traditionally broadcast interviews such as *Newsnight's* Leaders' interview with Nigel Farage (2.5 million TV viewers), the YouTube upload of that same interview garnered merely 20,000 online views, meaning relatively speaking BuzzFeed Brews was not a failure.

⁴⁹ James Welham, 'Election Time! #Buzzfeedbrews With Prime Minister David Cameron'. Kinura. 17 Apr. 2015. <<http://www.kinura.com/buzzfeedbrews>>.

⁵⁰ Digiday, '13 Interesting Facts Brands Should Know About Buzzfeed'. 29 Apr. 2013. <<http://digiday.com/publishers/13-interesting-facts-brands-should-know-about-buzzfeed>>.



Figs 26/27: BuzzFeed article on BuzzFeed Brews Facebook

Source: <[Facebook.com/BuzzFeed Brews](https://www.facebook.com/BuzzFeedBrews)>

The decision to syndicate the interview over Facebook paid off considerably well for both parties, garnering 215,961 views and 183 shares on the four sharable minute-long snippets that were published on the BuzzFeed Brews Facebook page.

The response to the interview was generally positive, if a little quiet. On Twitter, the conversation garnered only 648 tweets or mentions, compared to the Nigel Farage’s interview with *Newsnight*’s Evan Davis which garnered close to 2,000 tweets. While BuzzFeed could argue that Facebook was the platform they were attempting to engage, with only 232 shares and 239 comments, it doesn’t seem incredibly successful. This shows that while the digital platforms may be able to take on the traditional media in some realms, when it comes to entirely digital election campaign interviews, the UK just isn’t ready.



Figs 26/27: BuzzFeed article on BuzzFeed Brews Facebook

Source: <[Facebook.com/BuzzFeed Brews](https://www.facebook.com/BuzzFeedBrews)>

Case Study 6: #BBCAskThis

#BBCAskThis was a BBC News initiative to create greater interactivity in its news programming. The initiative asked the audience to send in questions to leaders and commentators on BBC News programmes via any social media site, and they would feature some on screen. The questions had to be submitted in a video format, and include the hashtag #BBCAskThis.



Fig. 28: #BBCAskThis segment on BBC programme

Source: <www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer>

The initiative was more interactive than BBC Generation 2015, as it allowed submissions from all social media platforms, or alternatively by sending the video as a message via WhatsApp. This meant that #BBCAskThis could tap into a younger audience that could otherwise have been bypassed.

While the idea behind the initiative was undoubtedly good, the promotion and marketing of it was fragmented and disjointed. This meant that a large group of viewers was completely ignorant of the fact that they could pose their own questions to all the party leaders through videos on social media. Similarly, #BBCAskThis was not featured on the BBC News's evening broadcasts, failing to inform their audience of the possibility for a two-way conversation. The result was not a success, despite the good intentions and potential.

Case Study 7: Sun Nation

Announced in a print edition of its daily tabloid in April 2015, the *Sun* launched a new free-to-access microsite offering a 'lighthearted take on politics' named Sun Nation. Sun Nation described itself as being a place to engage in 'politics without the boring bits'. Edited by Tim Gatt, the *Sun*'s website editor, the microsite offered political commentary, guest opinion pieces, games, videos, and social media activity.

At the time of the launch Tim Gatt said Sun Nation 'wanted to create a platform that would allow the *Sun* to be as loud and disruptive and influential in the digital sphere as we are in the paper during the election campaign'.



Fig. 29: Sun Nation graphic 1

The site was contributed to by some notable *Sun* contributors, as well as new ones such as Katie Hopkins. The site had a number of editors, including Gatt, political editor Tom Newton Dunn, head of social James Manning, and deputy head of publishing Dan Silver.



March 16, 2015

TAKE THE GREEN POLICY OR RHUBARB QUIZ!

Alternative title: Natalie Bennett or Gordon Bennett?

Fig. 30: Sun Nation graphic 2

Source: <sunnation.co.uk>

ELECTION 2015
#SunNATION

GENERAL ELECTION COUNTDOWN:
 47 DAYS 13 HRS 00 MINS 40 SECS

Facts Wot?! Play List Quiz

HOME GAMES VIDEO OPINION SOCIAL

LATEST SUN POLL

35%	33%	13%	8%	6%
-----	-----	-----	----	----

On launch the website SunNation.co.uk offered videos and articles such as ‘A day in the life of Dave’, a backstage look at the average day of David Cameron, and ‘How to cook like a prime minister’ and ‘Katie Hopkins’ “snog, marry, avoid” leaders special’. The look and feel of the microsite, along with its use of engaging visuals, gifs and listicles, suggested that it borrowed more than a little from the success of the BuzzFeed model. The articles were sharable through Facebook and Twitter, two platforms on which the Sun is itself very popular. Among their most popular content were quizzes such as ‘Balls or Bollocks?’, where you could guess if a quote is that of Labour’s Ed Balls or made up by the *Sun*, and games such as Harriet Harman’s “Barbie Bus” where readers would try to parallel park Labour’s much derided pink bus.



Fig. 31: Sun Nation graphic 3
Source: <sunnation.co.uk>



Fig. 32: Sun Nation graphic 4
Source: <sunnation.co.uk>

Also on offer was 'Macho Mili? No chance!' a BuzzFeed-style string of 20 pictures and videos of then Labour leader Ed Miliband looking silly. Unsurprisingly five of them feature a bacon sandwich.

According to Stig Abel, Managing Editor of the *Sun*:

The idea behind Sun Nation was that we recognised that it was going to be a long and probably not very interesting campaign. Parties were obsessed with message control and voters were likely to be disengaged. We wanted to break through the boredom and disengagement with politics. We wanted to ground our coverage overall in reality and Sun Nation was created as a microsite to allow us to be disruptive, nimble and fun, a location outside the paywall where we could try new things. Interactive quizzes worked well, but so did breaking news. Some of the other stuff like funny photoshopping played less well but still got lots of retweets.

Case Study 8: Milibrand Interview

While not strictly speaking an initiative by traditional or new media outlets, Ed Miliband's interview with Russell Brand was an important flashpoint of engagement in the election campaign, and so certainly warrants inclusion.

On 29 April Russell Brand, Hollywood actor and comedian, published his much anticipated interview with Labour leader Ed Miliband on his YouTube channel. Up to that point Russell Brand had been an important political commentator on the condition of both British and global issues, often bypassing the media entirely by self-publishing his content online. His YouTube channel has over 1 million subscribers, while his Facebook and Twitter pages have over 3 million likes and 10 million followers respectively. Speaking on everything from gentrification in London to climate change, Russell Brand had cultivated a reputation as someone who spoke their mind, and addressed important issues in a language that was seen as more approachable than traditional media.

The third 'episode' in his 'The Trews: Politics Week' series, proved Russell Brand's to be an influential voice online during the election campaign. News of the interview leaked after a neighbour recognised Ed Miliband leaving Brand's house, and tweeted a picture, which gained hundreds of retweets and favourites.



Fig. 41: Milibrand interview

Source: <Youtube.com>

Before the interview Brand had been very cynical about the UK political system as a whole, going so far as to declare that he refuses to vote as he

does not see any real difference between the various candidates, a position that he advocated for others. This was seen as a very controversial view, promoting total disengagement from the political system as a whole, and feeding the already worrying trend of youth apathy towards politics. Even before the video was published, there had been wild speculation that Brand was to change his mind on the matter of not voting, and pledge his support for Miliband. And that is exactly what happened, despite a few instances of disagreement, the two largely agreed with each other on important issues from welfare to monopolies in the media. In the video, it has been noted, most prominently by BuzzFeed, that Brand spoke more than the Labour leader, for example with Brand opening with a 1 minute 6 seconds question on the elites.



Fig. 41: Milibrand interview

Source: <Youtube.com>

In the traditional media the interview was received along the expected party lines: while the *Guardian* was complimentary, the *Daily Mail*, the *Sun*, and the *Spectator* all viewed it as an example of the weakness of Miliband and the attention-seeking behaviour of Brand. The *Daily Mail* published an article titled 'Do you really want this clown ruling us?' with a picture of the two men but pointing out the headline was pointed at Miliband not Brand, and the *Daily Star* used an unflattering photo of Miliband mid-sentence with the headline 'Red Ed & Brand talk total ballots' on their front page. Most famously the *Sun* ran with the amusing 'Monster Raving Labour Party: "Mockney" Miliband cozies up with Brand' headline. The general sentiment of most of the traditional media seemed to be one of disapproval, believing that Miliband was pandering to Brand and his 1.09 million YouTube subscribers. David Cameron, as expected, was quick to mock Miliband for his

decision to take part in the interview, stating that he was too busy, solving important problems such as the British economy, to 'hang out' with the 'joke' Russell Brand.⁵¹

Online, while there was some very vocal disagreement with the interview, what was said in it, and the fact that such an interview was even taking place, the video seemed to be relatively well received. Within days, the interview and its trailer had garnered over 1.7 million YouTube views,⁵² and over 500,000 views on Facebook:⁵³ the surrounding hype and controversy made it the most watched video of the election campaign. Comparatively, Miliband's interview with YouTube vlogger Louise Pentland has had only 360,000 views to date, despite her larger 2 million subscription base.⁵⁴ An important moment in the election, the Miliband interview garnered over 436,000 views making it the fourth largest spike of engagement during the election campaign (see Graph 4 in the section on 'Engagement: What did the Numbers Say?').

Overall, the interview was interesting because it highlighted an ever-growing trend of individuals being able to bypass the media, both traditional and new, entirely and instead exploit popular existing online platforms and audiences. However, the impact of the interview was limited by the fact that, while Brand's endorsement of Miliband was positive for Labour, it came after the closing of voter registration, meaning those whom Brand had previously convinced not to register to vote were now unable to vote on polling day, even if the interview changed their view.

Broadcast Debates

Case Study 9: ITV Leaders Debate

On Thursday 2 April, all the leaders of the major political parties in the UK participated in a live two-hour debate on ITV, hosted by ITV News anchor Julie Etchingham. The live debate was watched by some 7.7 million people on their televisions, and a fair percentage of that audience went online to comment. Twitter stated that there were around 1.5 million tweets sent out during the debate, at a rate of 8,657 per minute.⁵⁵ This means that 3% of all election-related tweets were sent out during the *ITV Leaders Debate*, making it the largest spike in engagement (see Graph 2).

The debate was particularly successful online for Nicola Sturgeon who managed to convert her debate performance into an increase in her Twitter followers by 15,000, and according to the *New Statesman's* May 2015 blog an impressive 35% of all tweets mentioning her were positive, and her party garnered 21% of all political chatter online. The winner of the battle on

⁵¹ Nicholas Watt and Patrick Wintour, 'David Cameron Mocks Ed Miliband Over Russell Brand Interview', *Guardian*, 28 Apr. 2015. <<http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/apr/28/david-cameron-mocks-ed-miliband-russell-brand-interview-labour>>.

⁵² Rowena Mason, 'Russell Brand Changes Mind About Voting And Urges Support For Labour', *Guardian*, 4 May 2015. <<http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/may/04/russell-brand-changes-mind-about-voting-and-urges-support-for-labour>>.

⁵³ Facebook, 'Russell Brand'. <<https://www.facebook.com/RussellBrand/videos>>.

⁵⁴ Sprinkle of Glitter, 'A Louise and a Politician'. 4 May 2015. <<https://youtube.com/watch?v=gw4FwDoVtew>>.

⁵⁵ May 2015, 'How Social Media Reacted To The Leaders' Debate'. 14 Apr. 2015. <<http://www.may2015.com/sponsored-content/how-social-media-reacted-to-the-leaders-debate>>.

social media was, unsurprisingly, Nigel Farage, who was mentioned more than 262,000 times on Twitter, closely followed by David Cameron with over 162,000 mentions.

Nicola Sturgeon managed to out-perform many of the other political leaders during the debate, being mentioned 9,000 times more than Ed Miliband, and 20,000 times more than Nick Clegg. Natalie Bennett and the Green party both benefited online from the debate, seeing a sudden increase in her mentions online from 10 tweets to a dramatic 14,000, while Plaid Cymru's leader Leanne Woods saw her party trend on Twitter after she challenged Nigel Farage over his comments on immigrants and HIV.

While the women on the podium were very popular online, Nigel Farage and UKIP were the most talked about after the debate, although some 32% of comments about him were unfavourable. Ed Miliband was not left out; his post-debate response to Nigel Farage's HIV comment was the most retweeted tweet during the election. In terms of the battle to become Prime Minister on Twitter, it was deadlocked, with David Cameron getting 17%, barely distinguishable from Ed Miliband's 18%, of the online conversation.

In reality Twitter was best for its humorous reactions and responses to the happenings of the leaders' debate. Twitter users managed to turn what was expected to be a wholly uneventful debate, with the leaders and their sound bites carefully managed by their respective teams, into an amusing and entertaining experience. Below is a collection of some of the more popular musings of debate viewers.



Fig. 33: Twitter Reaction 1

Source: <Twitter.com>

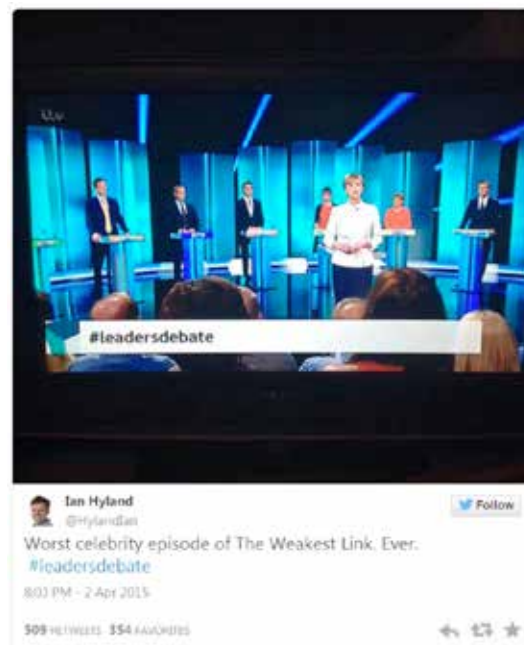


Fig. 34: Twitter Reaction 2

Source: <Twitter.com>



Unnamed Insider
@Unnamedinsider

I am not sure the woman signing for the deaf was totally impartial #leadersdebate

9:55 PM - 2 Apr 2015

7,554 RETWEETS 5,086 FAVORITES

Follow

Figs. 35/36: Twitter Reaction 3 & 4 Source: <Twitter.com>



Prince Charles
@Charles_HRH

Worst episode of Take Me Out. EVER. #leadersdebate

8:46 PM - 2 Apr 2015

7,058 RETWEETS 5,186 FAVORITES

Follow

However, it was once again Miliband who claimed gold in the viral stakes, after a Twitter user pointed out that he had apparently quoted the grime music artist Skepta during the debate. This prompted a six-second Vine with over 1.4 million loops (or views), 660,000 of which were from within 24 hours of the leaders debate, and this is the most popular vine of the election campaign.

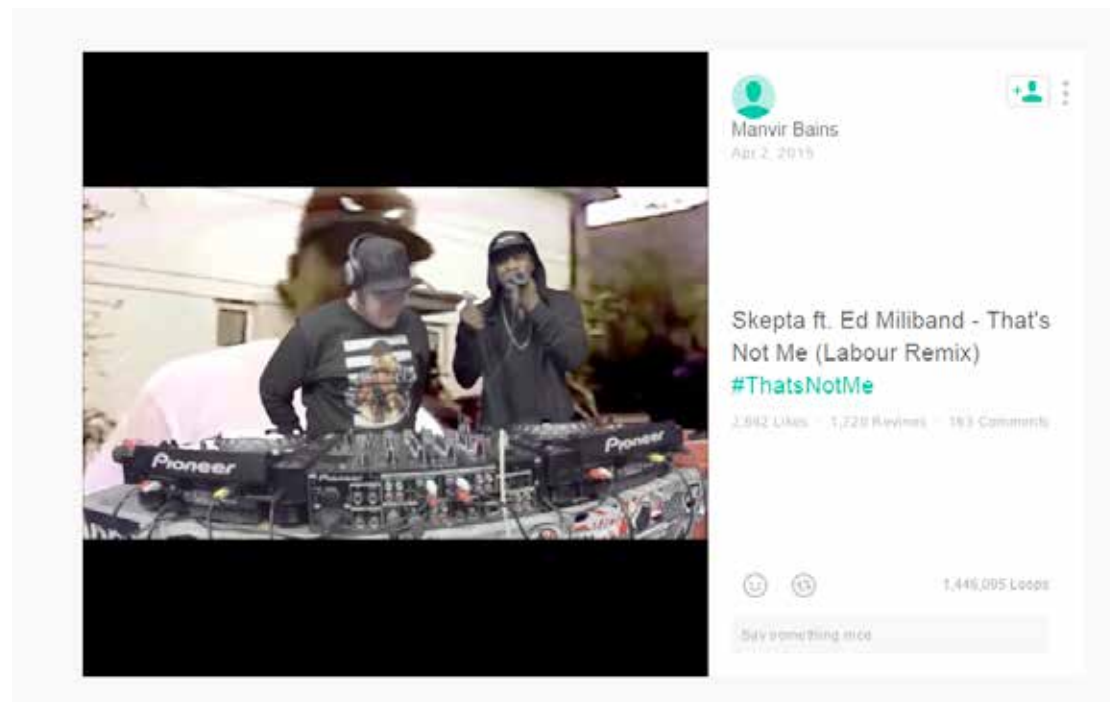


Fig. 37: Vine Reaction 1 Source: <Vine.com>

Case Study 10: Battle for Number 10

On Thursday 26 March, exactly six weeks from the general election, Sky News and Channel 4 partnered together to bring *Battle for Number 10*. Though not a direct head-to-head, the television showcase was billed as a 'debate' between the leaders of the two main British parties, Tory David Cameron and Labour's Ed Miliband. Hosted by Sky's Kay Burley and Jeremy Paxman, in his first appearance on a news programme since leaving the BBC, the programme was formatted as a one-to-one interview between the leader and Paxman, and then an audience discussion hosted by Burley.

On traditional broadcast, the debate was incredibly successful for Channel 4, netting over 3 million viewers for the hour-long programme, signalling an unusual rating win over ITV at 9pm.⁵⁶ 2.6 million viewers watched the programme on Channel 4, while 322,000 viewers watched on Sky News, and another 255,000 viewers on the BBC News channel's simulcast.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Digital Spy. 3 Apr. 2015. <<http://www.digitalspy.co.uk/tv/news/a639815/itvs-leaders-debate-tops-thursday-ratings-with-67m.html>>.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

The initial reactions to the *Battle for Number 10* were very critical, due mostly to the format of the ‘debate’, where the leaders never faced off against each other as they did in 2010.

However, by the time the programme went live, the main point of criticism centred on the question of presenter bias and alleged lack of impartiality. While Paxman was seen as harsh on both leaders, Burley became the central focus of most of the online discussion during the programme, with allegations flying implying that Burley was unfairly interrogative towards Miliband, while gentle in her questioning of Cameron. Critics pointed out that while Miliband was asked uncomfortable questions around his relationship with his brother after the Labour leadership contest, Cameron was asked whether he was a fan of Shredded Wheat cereal.

Burley received over 30,000 tweets out of the 220,000 tweets sent out on 26 March about the show. Four of the five most popular tweets about the programme were directed towards Kay Burley, from public figures like Lord Sugar, comedians like David Mitchell, political commentators such as Owen Jones and fellow journalists such as Amol Rajan and Krishnan Guru-Murthy. Garnering almost 1,500 retweets, Krishnan tweeted ‘Am confused whether Kay Burley is supposed to ask supplementaries? She didn’t with Cameron but does with Miliband #BattleForNumber10’. This is a significant amount of engagement compared to other interviews conducted online, such as BuzzFeed Brews, but still the smallest amount of engagement of all of the televised TV debates.



Fig. 38: Krishnan Guru-Murthy/Kay Burley interaction *Source: <Twitter.com>*

It was the criticisms from other journalists that Burley was most offended by, maintaining that she was unbiased, but that there weren’t strictly any rules for the presenters, and that the show was different to the debates of 2010 and made for ‘less clinical watch’. The programme received 254 Ofcom complaints from viewers, 110 of which were regarding the treatment of the party leaders by both interviewers.⁵⁸ However, as a leading ‘engager’ on Twitter, Burley gained over 3,300 followers in following two days.

⁵⁸ The Drum, ‘Channel 4 And Sky News’ “Battle For No 10” Sparks 254 Ofcom Complaints As Social Media Turns On Kay Burley For Ed Miliband Questioning’. 27 Mar. 2015. <<http://www.thedrum.com/news/2015/03/27/channel-4-and-sky-news-battle-no-10-sparks-254-ofcom-complaints-social-media-turns>>.



Figs. 39/40: Kay Burley reaction

Source: <Twitter.com>

Key Take-Aways from the Case Studies

- Strong engagement is built on strong media brands – from the *Sun* and the *Guardian* to Sky and the BBC. Less strong traditional media brands tended to engage less.
- Engagement with young voters worked best where media brands met them on their own ‘turf’ – online, on social media, and particularly on Facebook.
- Positive engagement facilitated dialogue with and between media consumers, and media like Sky News avoided the ghettoisation of its social media engagement by integrating content created by users into its mainstream coverage.
- Engagement on social media was strongest when it pivoted around high-visibility ‘real world’ events such as the leaders debates, which were led by the (traditional) broadcast media.
- Some events that seemed engaging – for example, the ‘MiliBrand’ interview – may have caused a lot of noise in the social media ‘echo chamber’, and some angry headlines, but less action at the ballot box.
- Some media organisations such as the BBC and the *Guardian* tried a multiplicity of social media engagement initiatives. Some worked better than others, providing some key learnings for 2020.

PART III: POST-ELECTION

Undoubtedly there was a huge volume of online comment and interaction on and via social media during the election campaign – 9,138,386 tweets alone using the top 100 key hashtags. Interaction between voters and the political parties, their leaders and candidates, interactions between readers and viewers, media organisations and journalists, interactions between activists and engaged social media users, plus a fair amount of ribald humour, blatant propaganda and good old-fashioned abuse.

There was engagement, engaging programmes and content and journalists. Real engagement efforts by media players from Sky News and the BBC to the *Guardian* and the *Sun*, plus the entrance of new media platforms like Vice News and BuzzFeed into the electoral arena. But in terms of engagement in the actual process of electing MPs and a government, and the media using social media to help engage people, what did it all add up to?

Of course it is possible to read too much into opinion research into exactly what people think influenced how they voted, as opposed to what blend of channels and messages actually influenced them. Attitudes to the parties and their leaders were built up over five years from a vast array of sources and personal impressions, despite 20%⁵⁹ telling pollsters on the eve of the election that they were still undecided.

Polling conducted by Research Now for the public affairs branch of Weber Shandwick⁶⁰ attempted to probe media influence and social media engagement with the campaign issues.

Asked 'Thinking about the recent General Election, to what extent did you use social media to engage with the issues raised during the election campaign?', 35% of respondents said at least once or more a day vs 39% who said not at all. That one-third of people across the voter demographics did engage with the election on social media is an impressive development in itself.

Asked 'To what extent did your engagement with the election via social media make you more or less likely to cast your vote?', 35% said it made them somewhat or much more likely (22% and 13% respectively) with 59% saying in their view it had no impact.

Asked about how they actually voted ('To what extent did your engagement with the election via social media influence how you cast your vote?') 45% said it was not at all influential and 23% said they did not use social media. Only 7% said social media engagement was influential or very influential on who they voted for.

TV news and programmes, including party leader interviews and debates, were rated as influential or very influential by 32% of respondents, vs 39% saying not influential and 29% neutral on the question. Print media were rated as influential by 20% vs 52% saying not influential, while radio was ranked by 14% as influential vs 62% saying not influential.

Discussion of the election on social media was seen as influential on

⁵⁹ ComRes, 'Daily Mail/ITV News Final Political Poll 6th May 2015'. 6 May 2015. <<http://comres.co.uk/polls/daily-mail-itv-news-final-political-poll-6th-may-2015>>.

⁶⁰ A representative and weighted sample of 1178 a few days after the election.

how they voted by 13% vs 70% saying it was not influential on their decision how to vote. Friends and family ranked second most influential after TV, with 26% saying they were an influence vs 44% saying not.

Which one of the following most influenced the way you actually voted on polling day?		%
TV programmes or debates between party leaders		30
Newspaper or magazine articles about the Election		10
Radio programmes or phone-ins		6
Discussion of the Election on social media e.g. Facebook or Twitter		6
Emails from political parties and candidates		2
Doorstep canvassing by political parties or candidates		3
Emails or request to sign petitions from campaigning organisations e.g. 38 Degrees or change.org		2
Leaflets or letters from political parties or candidates		7
Telephone campaigning by political party or candidate		1
Outdoor advertising e.g. giant billboards		2
Window posters or garden stakes in my neighbourhood		1
Conversation with family or friends		22
Conversation with work colleagues		5
Conversation with taxi driver or local publican/bartender		1
None of these		38

Social Media and Young Voter Engagement

One of the biggest areas of focus for media organisations' engagement strategies was the youth audience and young voter participation. Young voter (18–24-year-olds') turnout in general elections had fallen to 44% vs an overall voter turnout of 65% in 2010.

From Sky's partnership with Facebook on Stand Up Be Counted to the BBC's *Free Speech* and *Generation 2015*, from the arrival of Vice News and BuzzFeed on the election reporting scene, to Facebook's own voter registration drive, many sections of the media and the new media platforms focused on this reputedly politically disengaged – at least in electoral terms – group of potential voters via a medium which was their own as digital natives – social media.

Near the beginning of the campaign Twitter released a survey of 3,000 UK tweeters between the ages of 18 and 34 which had found that 34% were planning to change the way they would vote due to something they had seen on Twitter.⁶¹

Meanwhile on 30 April the Huffington Post reported that – according

⁶¹ Twitter, 'Political Discovery on Twitter'. 19 Mar. 2015. <<https://blog.twitter.com/en-gb/2015/political-discovery-on-twitter>>.

to research from youth charity vInspired based on data from the Cabinet Office, Electoral Commission and the ONS – 70% of 18–24-year-olds had registered to vote ahead of polling day, 14% more than in 2010. (Interestingly, given the age group and their higher usage levels of social media, the top reason for registering cited by young voters in the research was exposure to the leaders’ interviews and debates on the broadcast media.)

One of the most engaging media events – and one of the few controversial, discussion-generating ones – was Russell Brand’s interview with Ed Miliband on his YouTube channel The Trews. It was relatively unscripted and risky from Labour’s point of view, in a campaign which was (on the surface) more tightly managed than ever. It created a storm of protest in sections of the ‘traditional media’, but received 1.35 million views and almost 20,000 likes.

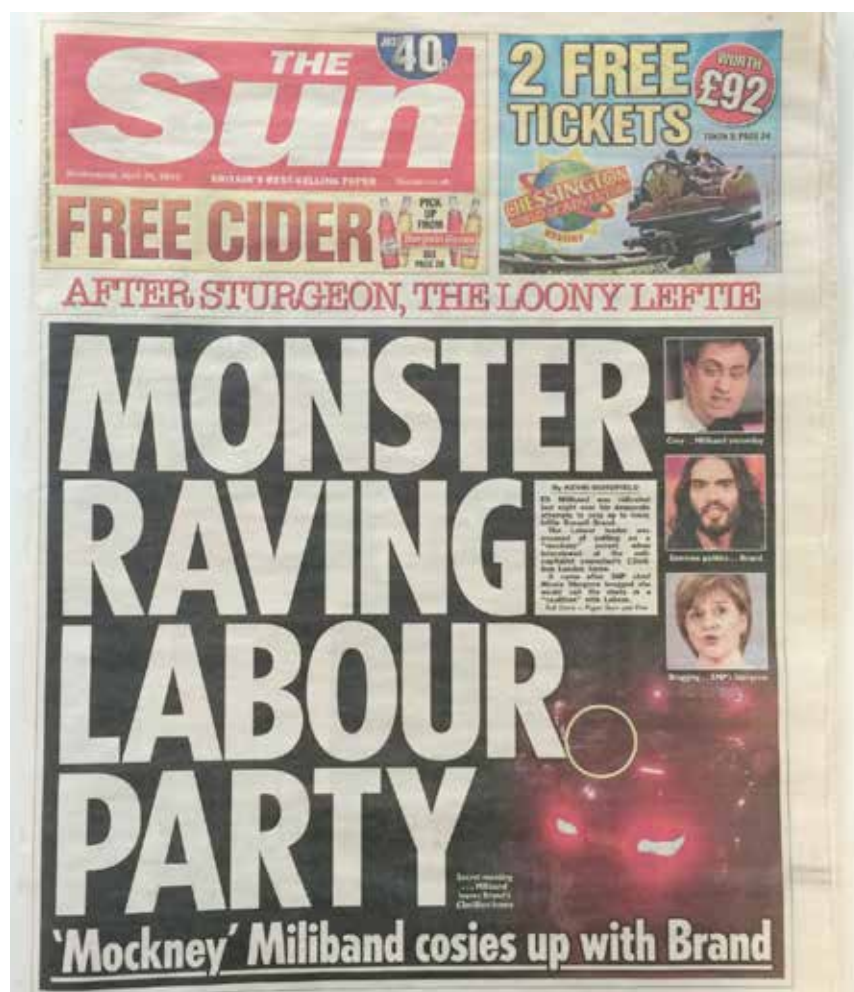


Fig. 41: Miliband interview: the Sun reaction.

His decision to be interviewed by Russell Brand, who had previously urged his army of YouTube viewers and Twitter followers not to bother voting because it changed nothing and politicians were all the same, was undoubtedly one of the sparks of interest and controversy in an otherwise ‘safety-first’ campaign. It was a social media event almost unrivalled in the campaign, matched by a chorus of derision and outrage from sections of the media. Brand’s 9 million Twitter followers and the million plus people who

watched the YouTube interview were undoubtedly engaged.

But given that the interview came after the electoral rolls were closed to new voter registrations, it was clearly ineffective in practically engaging those previously attracted by Brand's 'don't vote – they're all the same' rhetoric to do just that – to vote, and in this case, vote Labour. (Though given the rise in the Labour youth vote compared to 2010 amongst those who had registered, one can speculate that Brand's programme might have had a small impact, but one massively outweighed by media and social media influence against Labour and for the Conservatives.)

Whilst there is strong evidence that Facebook's voter registration drive could well have added new voters to the electoral roll, and the efforts of the BBC, Sky, etc. did engage people on social media, the end result was disappointing in terms of real evidence of increased youth voter engagement and participation.

IPSOS-MORI's 'How Britain voted in 2015' research suggests that turnout amongst 18–24-year-olds was flat on 2010: 43% in the recent election vs 44% five years ago. (This contrasts with BES's more optimistic research suggesting that the 18–24 youth vote rose from 52% in 2010 to 58%, but IPSOS-MORI's figures are more generally used by the Electoral Commission.)

Perhaps the likes and retweets and shares were largely from and by those who were already politically engaged or activists, not the disengaged youth that the initiatives had in mind. Once again there was certainly sound and an element of fury but signifying little in terms of real engagement or dialogue to drive an action or behaviour at the ballot box.

The Sun and Guardian – Unlikely Engagement Bedfellows

Amongst the print media, two examples of engagement came from the opposite end of the political and stylistic spectrum – the *Sun* and the *Guardian*. Though given the election outcome, one would argue that one was more engaging in terms of encouraging action and outcome via the engagement than the other.

The *Sun* may have used its social media feeds and channels, and its Sun Nation initiative to further broadcast its anti-Labour and anti-Miliband rhetoric, but it did so in an engaging way by tackling what Managing Editor Stig Abel identified as the 'boredom and disengagement' readers felt about politics. He points to polling amongst *Sun* readers suggesting a swing of around 10% to the Conservatives between January 2015 and election day as evidence of engagement leading to action.

It may not have been a case of 'The Sun Wot Won It' but we were often what was being talked about on social media and the broadcast media. There is still a belief amongst the liberal-left media and the Labour Party that the self-reassuring world of their Twitter chums IS the country. Labour convinced themselves that the world of liberal print and online media would win it for them.

People are too quick to write off print media and overstate the importance of social and online media. Print still set the broadcast agenda in this election

and remains hugely influential with readers and voters.

This sentiment was echoed by BuzzFeed's Jim Waterson: 'I was surprised the papers still held such sway. They really did still set the agenda.'

For the *Guardian*, the key driver of its engagement strategy was data. Leading the engagement effort, as opposed to the political coverage of the campaign, was Data Editor Alberto Nardelli, previously with Tweetminster. For Nardelli the key difference between the 2010 election and 2015 was less the growth of social media channels and more the rise of 'big data'. In the run-up to the campaign he noted that he and his team would have access to more data than ever before, but that this presented problems as well as possibilities.

Just having lots of numbers and figures isn't in itself always a good thing. There is a big distinction between information and knowledge. Often data without humanity is meaningless. It's about connecting data with stories.

Nardelli and the *Guardian* invested a lot of time and effort in contextualising the data they analysed and displaying them in an accessible and engaging way.

The way you present things is very important, because you are trying to communicate lots of things in the most simple and visually meaningful way so that anyone who looks at it immediately understands.

Data visualisation and data storytelling played a significant role in many news organisations' overall election coverage, with media from the *Guardian* to the *Sun*, *The Times* to the *New Statesman* using infographic representations of data to enrich their coverage. The *Guardian's* in particular were very sharable on social media.

The *Guardian's* veteran political editor Patrick Wintour commented:

Ironically in the run up to the 2010 election we had big meetings to discuss reader engagement and reader reporting, and it ended up being the most centralised election based around the three TV debates. So we were more sceptical this time. But The Guardian has a pretty ingrained culture of journalist-reader engagement including using Twitter, reader surveys, meetings with groups of readers etc.

Social media was mainly used by lobby journalists to break stories and discuss politics with each other, as well as consume content from unofficial party websites, think tanks, or get the latest polls, but rarely to engage with politicians or the general public. Our live blog was very interactive and we knew instantly what was working online in terms of clicks. So in the month ahead of the election campaign we knew our readers were very engaged with UKIP and the Greens rather than the mainstream parties.

[The key lessons were] a realisation in the parties that Twitter doesn't change most voters' minds and can be a misleading echo chamber. Facebook is a better way to engage the non-activist casually engaging in politics.

BuzzFeed

Whilst BuzzFeed started in the UK – launched in March 2013 – true to the ‘listicle’ format established by its US parent, in the run-up to the 2015 election the online platform invested in its political reporting staff. Former City AM political editor Jim Waterson was joined by Emily Ashton from the *Sun* and Jamie Ross from the BBC.

Although aiming to create engaging political news content for their young readership, Waterson rejects the idea that his job is to engage them in the political process.

I feel if you just put stuff up there and people respond, then you are engaging them. I don't see it as the job of journalists to bring people into politics as opposed to getting them to read your stuff.

Commenting on BuzzFeed's style of political reporting, he says:

There is no better way [of engaging readers] than being funny and interesting. Long pieces did well, short funny pieces did well, mediocre reports from the campaign front line did less well.

We were all waiting for a Gillian Duffy moment and it just didn't happen. We did get Milifandom though.

Normal people spend a lot of time on the Internet, as opposed to it being a very different place where people hang out.

We judge ourselves on the number of people tweeting and sharing our stuff, not on traditional readership figures. We had journalists mentioning our Cameron live interview but the real engagement was around the short clips from it we put up on Facebook. We think all the time – ‘will people share this?’

Our coverage of the debate nights got thousands of views and retweets – the Internet is a great place for getting people together around a story or an event.

The only people interested in party grids and issues of the day are the daily newspapers and The Today Programme.

Twitter is increasingly irrelevant to anything but driving the narrative further. I get stories and put them out but compared to Facebook MPs should tweet less and spend more time engaging on Facebook. The Tories spotted this and were right to focus on it. Half of the UK, millions of voters, are on Facebook.

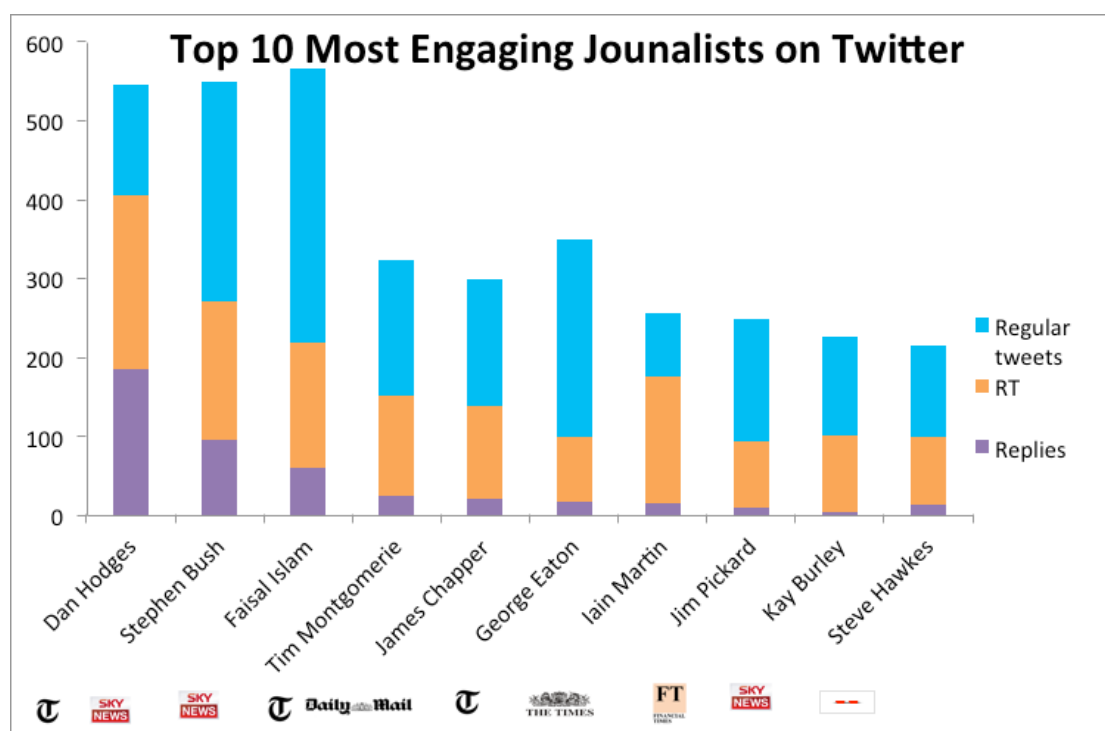
I think things like Sky's Stand Up Be Counted and some of the more worthy things [broadcasters did] did not really reach the potential audience at all. People shared the Register to Vote thing but if the broadcasters think putting out a broadcast on the Internet and getting some tweets around it was really engaging young people, they are deluding themselves.

Lessons?

You can't beat new information, you can't beat funny and don't underestimate your audience. Never look like the embarrassing uncle at the wedding.

Top 10 Most Engaging Journalists

Having trawled through the Twitter feeds of 100 journalists, this list of the top 10 journalists is compiled by analysing how often they tweeted about the general election, and what the make-up of those tweets was. Engagement in the context of this report is a dialogue between the journalists and the Twitter public. As such, although Faisal Islam, of Sky News, is the most prolific Tweeter among the group, it is actually Dan Hodges, of the *Telegraph*, who is the most engaged, because he is the most likely to reply.



Many journalists used social media ad hoc from the campaign trail, which further drove online engagement. Michael Crick of Channel 4 stated:

I just tweeted whenever I felt like it and when we'd filmed something interesting or done a good interview. If we got good material on the road then we'd try and feed it to the online people [at ITN] as soon as possible, though it wasn't always easy to get decent facilities and signal, and sometimes this diverted us from our schedule.

We also did a live blog on C4 News where I'd ring in, or more often text or email, with snippets of news, thoughts, jokes, quirks, quotes etc.

The trouble with [social media engagement] is that when you've got a great

story it's hard to find time, and when you've got the time it's because you're not doing much.

Crick monitors his rate of growth of Twitter followers and saw that it doubled during April and early May compared to the previous 12 months, up to 85,000 immediately post the election (up from 80,000 immediately pre-election).

While Sky News's Kay Burley, one of the top 10 engaging journalists during the election, was a prominent social media user and innovator, she stated that

social media is a hugely important and influential tool for any media outlet and Sky News is no different. Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat are all important to us. Periscope too has become a really useful tool. It launched the day of our Battle for Number 10 debate. We used it to offer a behind the scenes view of the set, the preparations and the audience make-up. During the campaign our correspondents often used periscope either to offer insight and analysis or to cover news conferences being held by the parties that weren't always being carried on TV or online.

I enjoy Twitter. I have found it incredibly useful in interacting with the audience. I have even used it for basic polling with RT or FAV option depending on the view of the tweeter. Being known as a Breaking News journo means that punters often tip me off to stories. We have to be careful and check the facts thoroughly but on several occasions a Twitter tip off has resulted in us being on location miles ahead of the opposition.

'There was a happy coincidence in news organisations trying to promote engagement in the election and in their own readership or viewership.'

(Charlie Beckett)

Red Box

Another aspirant engager, *The Times*, used a variety of engagement tools with readers and potential readers (given the paywall) built around the Red Box initiative. During the six months leading up to the election they staged a series of debates at News UK HQ to which readers were invited. All were reported sold out events. Debates covered the states of all the main parties, major and minor, and one dealt specifically with youth engagement with politics. Key points from the debates were live tweeted to further stimulate engagement and reader interest.

During the campaign the Red Box daily bulletin featured big name *Times* commentators, themselves with large social media followings. Commentators would tweet and post their pieces and the Red Box team

would amplify that on their own social media feeds. According to Red Box editor Philip Webster, 'That tended to set off Twitter debates most days and get us talked about.'

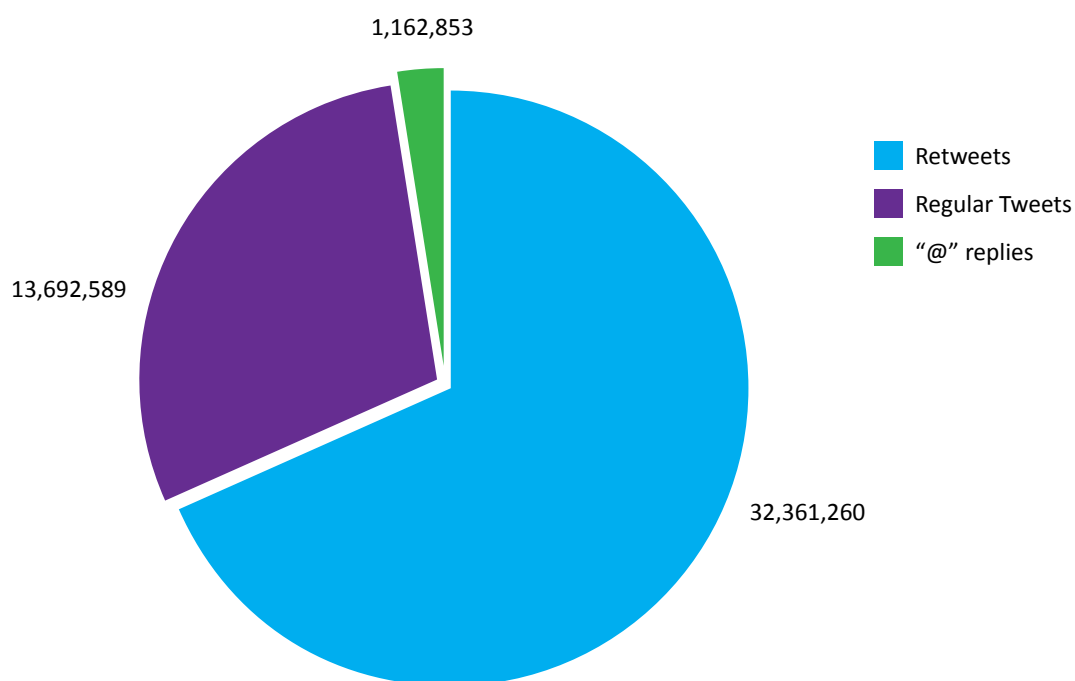
Debates were also staged on the Red Box website itself, which were linked to and from the Red Box bulletin. Readers could post comments. During the final stages of the campaign the Red Box bulletin increased to twice daily, a model *The Times* will now use for further political set piece events. According to Webster:

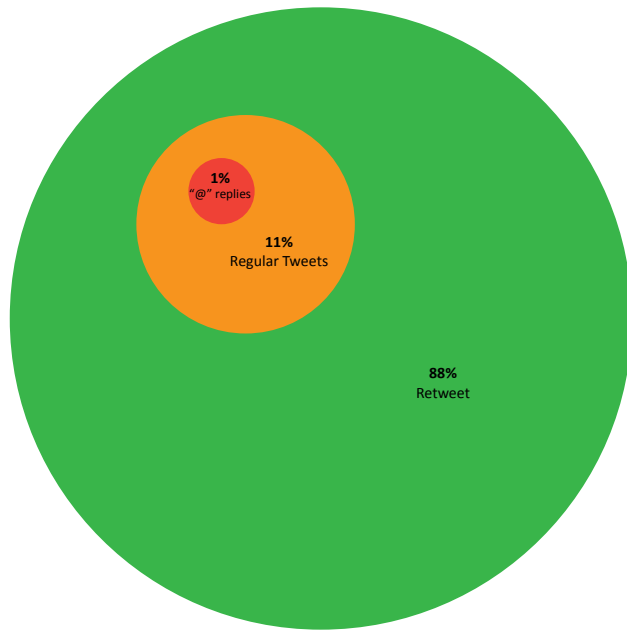
The Red Box was and remains a considerable driver of reader engagement. When we started the aim was to pull in the Westminster village and surrounds, but it grew massively and we are now at over 40,000 sign-ups each morning, way beyond what we thought was possible.

Engagement: What did the Numbers Say?

The UK general election, according to my research, garnered a total of over 47 million tweets in the six weeks between Thursday 26 March and Election Day, 7 May. Of those 47 million tweets (Graph 1), the largest portion of tweets were retweets, of which there were 41 million, followed by 5.4 million original tweets, and lastly 254,000 @ replies. This shows that engagement (Graph 2), as defined in this report as conversations (e.g. @ replies), was significantly smaller than was initially expected.

Graph 1: Number of types of tweets. *Source: Appendix I*





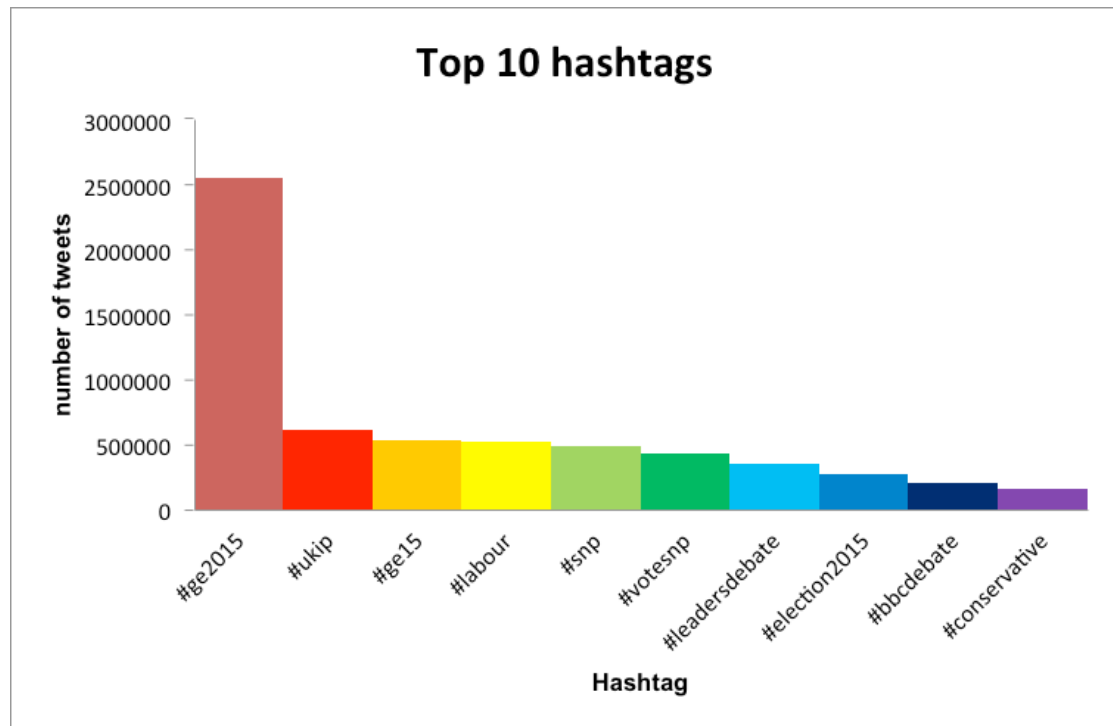
Graph 2: Percentage of different types of tweets.

Source: Appendix I

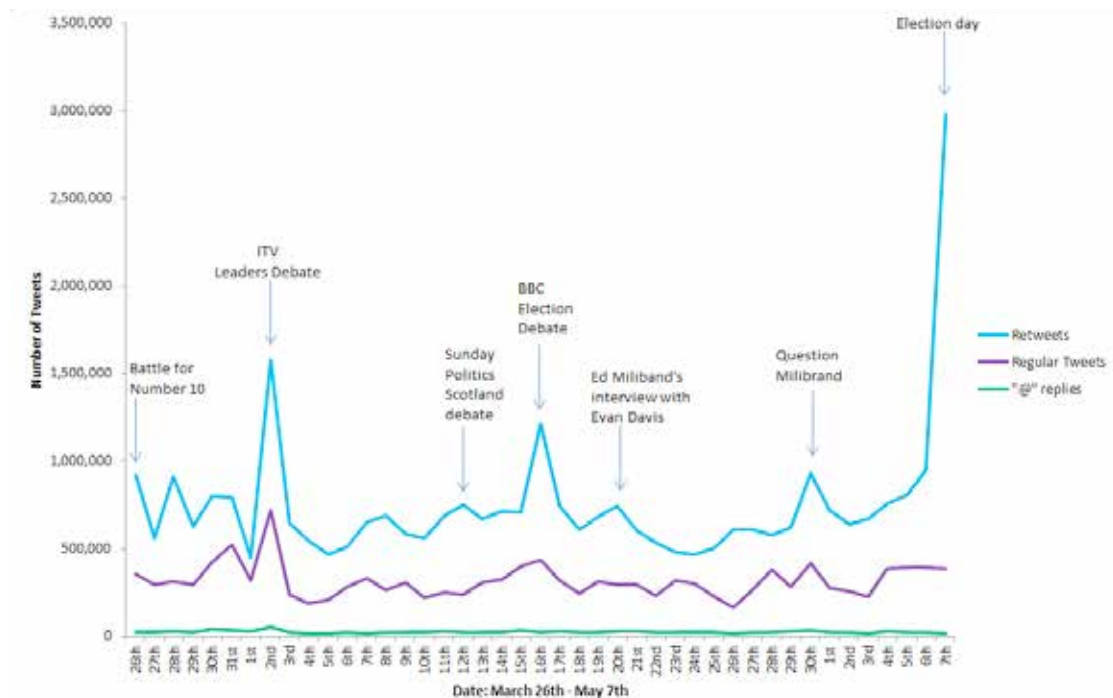
As shown in Graph 2 this means that there were 27 times more retweets than @ replies, and therefore there was 27 times more amplification of content than there was engagement and conversations.

During the same period of time, there were over 9 million mentions of the top 100 hashtags on Twitter. Topping that list, unsurprisingly, was the official Twitter hashtag #GE2015 with 2,548,151 mentions. UKIP, Labour, and SNP also performed well, with their hashtags putting them in second, fourth, fifth place respectively. Conservatives managed to land at number 10, with 155,729 mentions. However, this does not show the sentiment of the tweets that includes the hashtag, meaning that, for example, the high ranking of UKIP is not necessarily a sign of popularity or positive affinity. The most popular of all of the debates was the ITV Leader Debate, with 345,686 mentions on the hashtag, ranking at number 7. Interestingly, the amusing Milifandom hashtag pulled in at number 21 with 80431 mentions.

Graph 3: Top 10 hashtags during election campaign. Source: Appendix I



Graph 4: Levels in Engagement over Election Period. Source: Appendix 1



Graph 4 shows the spikes in engagement and conversation that took place around events that took place during the election. Interestingly, the debates

seem to be the main focus of all conversation, pulling in large spikes of activity whenever there was a televised, and broadcasted, debate. This proves that social media, while important during the election to help educate and inform the public, required the anchoring effect of the traditional media to drive and focus the conversations that were taking place.

PART IV: CONCLUSIONS

It would be fair to say that the 2015 general election could be described as a ‘social media election’, in that social media had a much more pervasive presence and a higher degree of influence than in 2010. Given the growth of the platforms, and the increase in the number of new platforms, that was to be expected. Social media played a pivotal and crucial role in how the election was conducted, whether you were a journalist, a politician or party election strategist, or a member of the public.

With over 47 million tweets sent out in the six weeks leading up to the election alone, it would not be a stretch to look at the numbers and posit that social media must have also played a prime role in voter engagement and ultimately their decision-making. This relationship is hard to prove however. As Nic Newman said in his Reuters Institute report *#UKelection2010, Mainstream Media and the Role of the Internet: How Social and Digital Media Affected the Business of Politics and Journalism* (2010), while ‘the adoption of digital and social media is clear, a more difficult question to answer is whether outcomes have changed as a result’.

One way to assess this question would be to consider the ways in which a specific group of voters, the young voters, responded to the election through the prism of social and digital media. That is to say that, considering there was a concerted effort made by many traditional and new media outlets to encourage greater youth participation and voter registration through the medium of digital initiatives, did they have any effect on the voter turnout in all actuality?

Year	Ages: 18–24	Ages: 25–34
2010	44%	55%
2015	43%	54%
Change	-1	-1

How Britain Voted 2010–2015: *Source: IPSOS-MORI.*

According to polling conducted by IPSOS-MORI, this year’s election saw a slight decrease in voter turnout; it was down 1% in both the 18–24 and 25–34 ages, compared to a 7% increase between the 2005 and 2010 voter turnouts. It would be easy to interpret these data as proof of the fact that the digital and social media initiatives were not enough to break through the cynicism of youth voters, but this would also be too simplistic. Similarly, we have no means of testing whether the turnout would have been significantly lower had these initiatives not taken place. It is worth considering, however, that while these figures must be taken in context and with a critical eye, they do raise an important question. If youth voter turnout does seem to be on the decline, what could be causing this?

The fault for continuing low voter participation can more reasonably be laid with the business of politics and political campaigning – more tightly controlled than ever. Engaging initiatives such as the 2010

leaders' debates were squeezed as a result of that control instinct. There was a lack of differentiation between the three main (white, male, middle-class, career politician) party leaders in the 2015 election. There was the Ed Miliband character issue (fanned but not completely created by the media). There is a clear feeling that politics still does not address the issues people are concerned about in a meaningful way. Broadcasters were left focusing on election process in the absence of much real engaging news or content from the campaigns.

On the whole the media made real efforts to engage voters, and in particular young voters – albeit out of enlightened self-interest – where they gathered; on social media as well as around the TV screen for set piece events. New media brands like BuzzFeed and Vice News tried to change the style of reporting of election campaigns to make it more relevant and engaging to their target audience, and platforms like Facebook made a real contribution to getting young voters to at least register to vote.

Meanwhile Sky's Stand Up Be Counted initiative with Facebook was a successful engagement initiative in that over 50,000 young people interacted with it through social media and a dedicated website, speaking out on a range of issues from tuition fees to unemployment and the NHS. Hundreds more were physically involved through the SUBC 1,400 miles⁶² road trip across 11 key marginal constituencies.

So while social media played a central role in the election, and election coverage, it was not 'the social media election', in that social media still played a tangential role in overall influence and impact on the result. And to all intents and purposes the electorate remains disengaged and disenchanted with politics and politicians. (Recent events such as the Labour leadership race and the Lord Sewel scandal are hardly likely to improve the public view of politics or politicians.)

However, importantly, the story of the election and the media was not one of a bitter zero-sum game of traditional vs new, but rather one of symbiosis. The greatest amount of engagement took place when the traditional and new media were able to weave their strengths together. This can be seen from the fact that the moments in the election campaign where the largest amount of online engagement was created were ones that centred on traditional media, such as the 'debates' and set piece party leader interviews. Just like traditional media, the new media were exceptionally good at engaging the audience that they already had, but their big challenge was how to capture those who still rely on traditional media for their election coverage. The best examples of this are the Miliband and BuzzFeed Brews online interviews, which while they made for engaging content and were much hyped, in real terms neither managed to engage similar numbers to comparable televised interviews; for example, only about 10,000 people watched the livestream of the BuzzFeed interview with Cameron, and there are currently 1.3 million views of the Miliband interview, while UKIP leader Nigel Farage's interview with *Newsnight* pulled in 2.5 million viewers.

If we consider the nebulous nature of conversations online, with 347,222 tweets and 284,722 Snapchats created every minute of the day, often

⁶² Sky News, 'Stand Up Be Counted Ends 1,400-Mile Road Trip'. 5 May 2015. <<http://news.sky.com/story/1477513/stand-up-be-counted-ends-1400-mile-road-trip>>.

there needs to be an event that acts as the centre of gravity, drawing users together into a conversation. This can sometimes take the form of online events such as hashtags, and offline events such as news, but importantly they act as a gravitational force to direct users to a single, large conversation. This symbiosis explains why the best integrated initiatives were also the most successful, while those that bucked the trend largely failed to break through.

2020 is likely to be a very different social media election – a majority government, further fragmentation of traditional media audiences, further growth of digital outreach by that media in search of audience share, further growth and development of social media including platforms that might only be in beta testing right now, and the potential for a new generation of digital native party campaign managers and senior media editors.

Only time will tell if it will be a more engaging election.

APPENDIX 1

All data are from Sysomos.

Hashtag graph:

- Boolean search: 'GE2015' OR 'conservative' OR 'tory' OR 'labour' OR 'libdem' OR 'ukip' OR 'greens' OR 'SNP' OR 'plaid15' OR 'Plaid Cymru' OR 'DUP' OR 'SDLP' OR 'respect party' OR 'election2015' OR 'GE15' OR 'whymvotingukip' OR 'ed balls' OR 'ed miliband' OR 'milifandom' OR 'david cameron' OR 'nick clegg' OR 'nigel Farage' OR 'george osborne' OR 'natalie bennett' OR 'nicola sturgeon' OR 'leanne wood' OR 'manifesto'
- Timeline: 26 March 2015 and 7 May 2015

#	Hashtag	Number of Tweets
1	#ge2015	2,548,151
2	#ukip	616,074
3	#ge15	530,508
4	#labour	523,663
5	#snp	486,014
6	#votesnp	426,118
7	#leadersdebate	345,686
8	#election2015	273,810
9	#bbcdebate	201,935
10	#conservative	155,729

Engagement line graph data:

- Boolean search: 'GE2015' OR 'conservative' OR 'tory' OR 'labour' OR 'libdem' OR 'ukip' OR 'greens' OR 'SNP' OR 'plaid15' OR 'Plaid Cymru' OR 'DUP' OR 'SDLP' OR 'respect party' OR 'election2015' OR 'GE15' OR 'whymvotingukip' OR 'ed balls' OR 'ed miliband' OR 'milifandom' OR 'david cameron' OR 'nick clegg' OR 'nigel Farage' OR 'george osborne' OR 'natalie bennett' OR 'nicola sturgeon' OR 'leanne wood' OR 'manifesto'
- Timeline: 26 March 2015 and 7 May 2015

	Retweets	Regular Tweets	'@' replies
26/03	925,645	357,623	27,498
27/03	561,101	298,921	26,554
28/03	911,502	315,646	27,801
29/03	630,011	294,006	24,331
30/03	804,973	428,630	43,242
31/03	793,218	525,275	37,076
01/04	449,269	319,193	27,844
02/04	1,578,695	721,173	55,185
03/04	648,007	241,334	26,625
04/04	547,449	190,704	16,621
05/04	466,566	209,181	20,628
06/04	509,734	282,725	24,413
07/04	652,224	333,013	21,370
08/04	691,633	266,921	21,966
09/04	587,343	309,677	25,511
10/04	561,672	222,932	25,150
11/04	689,781	251,066	29,472
12/04	752,935	240,766	25,762
13/04	672,051	310,155	27,681
14/04	718,369	324,595	27,562
15/04	707,988	403,412	35,280
16/04	1,217,817	436,706	27,380
17/04	746,344	318,434	29,785
18/04	613,054	245,407	25,991
19/04	686,754	316,481	25,514
20/04	745,979	297,922	29,936
21/04	606,433	295,302	30,889
22/04	535,202	232,615	22,654
23/04	480,273	320,011	25,345
24/04	469,730	299,785	25,344
25/04	505,456	228,558	22,665
26/04	612,975	168,827	16,094
27/04	612,381	265,819	25,976
28/04	578,358	379,940	23,666
29/04	622,160	286,195	28,224
30/04	932,776	417,573	34,758
01/05	722,346	279,738	23,283
02/05	639,857	260,405	23,709
03/05	673,063	225,661	20,608
04/05	759,244	388,581	31,189
05/05	808,605	393,698	26,415
06/05	951,757	396,865	27,580
07/05	2,980,530	391,118	18,276

Total tweets graph:

- Boolean search: 'GE2015' OR 'conservative' OR 'tory' OR 'labour' OR 'libdem' OR 'ukip' OR 'greens' OR 'SNP' OR 'plaid15' OR 'Plaid Cymru' OR 'DUP' OR 'SDLP' OR 'respect party' OR 'election2015' OR 'GE15' OR 'whyimvotingukip' OR 'ed balls' OR 'ed miliband' OR 'milifandom' OR 'david cameron' OR 'nick clegg' OR 'nigel Farage' OR 'george osborne' OR 'natalie bennett' OR 'nicola sturgeon' OR 'leanne wood' OR 'manifesto'
- Timeline: 26 March 2015 and 7 May 2015

	Retweets	Regular Tweets	'@' replies
Total	32,361,260	13,692,589	1,162,853
Percentage	69%	29%	2%

SELECTED RISJ PUBLICATIONS

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