

How to lose power on Facebook – social media in the 2017 UK General Election

Social media in the June 2017 UK General Election was the mirror image of the November US 2016 presidential vote. Almost everything was the same – just the other way round. says Alex Connock

Donald Trump triumphed in the 2016 US presidential election through upbeat alt-Right journalism plus echo-chamber social media activism. He bypassed the mainstream press with targeted, aggressive paid social advertising, which went viral and overwhelmed stodgy and technically clunky opposition. Commentators cried foul over fake news and supposed armies of mechanised bots, but the social media fight was really won organically. The right made more compelling content, and it made it faster.

In the UK election seven months later, it was same story but the other way around. This time, the newly-minted alt-Left swept the battlefield with an insurgent playbook, and it was the Right that looked static. Technical advertising and automation on either side was overwhelmed by the sheer passion and virality of an online movement on the Left.

There was really only one key thematic difference in this social media story. Despite all appearances before and since, Labour didn't actually win the election.

Viral charisma

"Some cause happiness wherever they go," observed Oscar Wilde. "Others *whenever* they go." Before even policies and technical tactics, the charismatic chasm between the two party leaders was the Ordnance Survey map of social media in the UK June 2017 election.

Corbyn had what SAS soldiers in the desert war called a 'battle nose'.¹

Whether talking to someone's iPhone or a 10,000-person arena, he had the believable line for any given occasion to maximise social media engagement throughout the campaign. His would be the most popular election day post, with over 88,000 engagements and over 1.6m views. "This is our day. Our time. Our chance." Theresa May's characteristically miseryguts election morning message got just 12,000 engagements.²

Labour was massively outshared³ on Facebook versus the Conservatives. Liam Corcoran of Newswhip wrote:⁴ "The Labour Party and its politicians outperformed their Conservative rivals in the engagement stakes, on Facebook and elsewhere." Labour posted more: 229 stories to the Conservatives' 67, and 153 of them were videos, with higher engagement and shareability. On 25 May Corbyn's Facebook page outranked Theresa May's by ten times more views, and their growth was moving in opposite directions.^{5 6} Corbyn's Facebook had 4,360,000 engagements from May 8 to June 8. Theresa May's just 554,000.

Put simply, Labour were millennial, the Tories were so 20th century.

Registration and turnout

Labour accumulated Millennials on Facebook and created registered voters. During the campaign, a record 1.05m 18 to 24-year-olds registered, including a quarter of a million – that’s almost three per *second* – on deadline day alone. Two thirds of those voted for Corbyn.⁷ Then crafty websites like My Nearest Marginal⁸ pointed young people to their nearest marginal seat to go canvassing – for Labour.

Facebook was the consensus social media battleground. An Enders report estimated 56.4 per cent of UK population of voting age are Facebook users: all the young ones.⁹ And over a six-week period, Facebook had 16m shares to Twitter’s 2m.

Turnout in the election would hit 69 per cent, the highest since 1997. Labour would take student seats like Lincoln, Reading East and Nick Clegg’s Sheffield Hallam. Momentum claimed Tory paid digital advertising was outflanked simply by the sharing by young people with friends and family, to the point that by election day one in four UK Facebook users had seen one – not bad for a media organisation with limited budget and no access to the TV stations.

Becoming ubiquitous (on Facebook) was the Tory Britain 2030 scaremongering video, which hit 7.8m views by mid June. A brilliantly simple conceit, typical of the best virals, it was a young girl talking to her Dad about the world lost.¹⁰

“And what’s that ?”

“That’s a free school meal.”

“Why don’t I get a free school meal ?”

Good question. Asking a question to which there is no positive answer is *the* sure-fire way to win a debate on social media – even assuming Tory voters were engaged in the social conversation. There was a campaign in which the incumbent prime minister couldn’t even be bothered to embrace the 20th century trope of a live political debate.

Tory strategy

At the start of the campaign, and fired up by the success of Brexit and Trump and the perceived weakness of the opposition, the Tory plan must have looked great in the PowerPoint. It would feature a relentless, aggressively-targeted social marketing exercise; smart media buying (mostly Facebook), some automation, and relentless demographically-focused attack ads. What could go wrong ?

What had already gone wrong were the assumptions lying behind social media targeting. Like a naïve medieval general, the Tories were advancing into enemy territory without securing their own. They didn't defend their own marginals, said Sam Jeffers, of Who Targets Me, which via user permissions was tracking more than 7,000 Facebook ads to nearly 12,000 voters. He showed that in Amber Rudd's close marginal of Hastings and Rye Labour advertised heavily, but not the Tories,¹¹ who were trying to geographically target their investment to marginal constituencies, which might explain their smaller reach and engagement levels.¹² According to the Telegraph¹³, there were also no Tory adverts in Battersea in the final 48 hours of campaigning; it voted Labour, a 7,938 majority for the Conservative Jane Ellison overturned.

Not only that, but they weren't getting the 'earned' boost on their paid, from virality. Any social marketer knows if you are paying for all your views and the thing isn't going viral, you are basically pushing a dead donkey up a glacier.

Attack ads

"Remember the golden rule of politics," Gerald Kaufman said: "Never kick a man until he's down." That underpinned the Tories' social media election strategy. Go after Corbyn everywhere, because he was weak. But the problem was that just wasn't so. To attack Corbyn on Facebook was like attacking Lionel Messi in the Camp Nou.

Tories made some questionable choices. Theresa May accused Corbyn of being opposed to using 'shoot to kill' to deal with terrorist incidents, based on a misleadingly headlined 18-month-old BBC video clip, and the party's social outlets backed it, even buying Google search term 'Jeremy Corbyn shoot to kill'. There was grey area open to social media feedback. The BBC Trust had said 'the report had not been duly accurate in how it framed the extract it used from Mr Corbyn's interview'.¹⁴ That was grist to the mill for Opposition bloggers.

The Tory campaign was also targeted sub-optimally, sending to swing voters material that appealed largely to current supporters, according to data from We Are Social.¹⁵ The material didn't pull in new and undecided voters, and 'strong and stable' didn't attract new support on social media.

Labour strategy

Meanwhile Labour was resolute in this election not to be beaten in Facebook advertising like it had been in 2015, according to an Enders report¹⁶. In the two intervening years advertising targeting on Facebook had seen interstellar evolution. Labour planned to spend £1m on targeted Facebook ads. That meant over a hundred million News Feed ad impressions.

That was the paid bit. What Labour really benefited from was a higher organic share rate. People wanted to send their friends more Labour stories than Tory ones. This worked for

Labour-favouring press sites like The Independent, Guardian and Mirror. But where it really worked in the pro-Labour online publishers like The Canary and Evolve Politics, and even blogs like Another Angry Voice.

Labour also worked with social influencers – like grime artists. The hashtag #Grime4Corbyn went viral on Twitter¹⁷ with Stormzy tweeting to his 710,000 followers: “Please please please vote. It’s mad quick. Just go and do it, I used to think nah fuck it it’s long what’s my one lil vote gonna do.”¹⁸

Emphasising the cultural divide, a comment on a Times piece about this complained: “Maybe voting should be limited to those who pay taxes?”

Another user replied: “They’d like to pay taxes but don’t earn enough to in Tories zero-hours contract economy!”

Labour attacked too

Lest the impression were created that Labour stuck to purely positive messaging – in fact out of 2,314 Labour Party messages seen by Who Targets Me?, 60 per cent criticised other parties. Labour made an ad about ‘dementia tax’, in more than 200 constituencies.

Through Momentum, Labour had an insurgent force to deal the toughest attacks out – in the same way as Trump had been helped in the US by the numerous hard-core outlets of the Alt-Right, Breitbart included.

“Momentum were pushing out slick attack ads which allowed the Labour Party to stay above the fray,” former press adviser to David Cameron, Giles Kenningham told The Guardian. “The Tories didn’t have the equivalent third-party campaigning group in the rightwing space.”¹⁹

A prescient BuzzFeed piece by political editor Jim Waterson²⁰ a month before the election christened the ‘alt-Left’; sites like pay-as-you-feel blog Another Angry Voice²¹ run by English tutor Thomas G Clark: “The most viral political journalist in the entire country.” The site regularly gets 1.5k likes on its Facebook page, and ²² video views are in the hundreds of thousands. The featured video in June 2017, a rant about Theresa May’s argument that she should be judged on her record, hit 1.1m.²³ The anger, presentation, social media-driven approach are all exactly reminiscent of the US alt-Right. Even the fonts are similar.

Waterson dubbed them: “Corbyn’s outriders.”

Buzzfeed analysis, just as it had done with pro-Trump social media in the US the year before²⁴, picked up that alt-media power: The Canary, Evolve Politics, Skwawkbox.²⁵ A Labour MP described them as ‘the six nutters who sell the Socialist Workers Party newspaper in any town centre’.

As if the Alt-Right comparison were not clear enough, Skwawkbox described the media on its homepage in a way Trump would recognise: “We’re proud that this blog has a track record of revealing news long before the ‘MSM’ either take an interest or care.” MSM is Alt-Right for main stream media.

Did bots play a role ?

In the spring of 2017 there were claims that the Trump and Brexit campaigns had won in 2016 partly via the use of automated tools and fake users.²⁶ I make the case elsewhere in this book that whilst bots are real (social media channels know them by name, because they post comments improbably fast on new uploads) automation in Facebook advertising is not sinister but normal practice, and the case is far from proven that anything automated drove the massive organic social media enthusiasm behind Trump in 2016.

For the UK election, Oxford Internet Institute research found posts using Labour-related hashtags dwarfed those featuring content about other parties, ultimately reaching 62 per cent of all tweets mentioning a party. Labour support spiked highest during the debate programmes: the Q&A with May and Corbyn on May 28, the election debate on May 31 that the Prime Minister opted out of.²⁷

But was any of that impact from bots? ‘High-frequency tweeting’ increased in the same period, with more than 100,000 tweets sent from accounts that posted more than 50 times a day on just one hashtag. Such rapid rates of posting indicates automation, the Oxford authors say, although it may also just be a user with too much time on their hands.²⁸

Meanwhile, and unlike in the US the year before, outright fake news sites flopped in the UK. An Oxford Internet Institute study found much lower levels of linking to ‘junk news’ stories than in the US election, at 11.4 per cent of the links shared vs 33.8 per cent in the US sample.

So there is a bit of evidence of automation. There is limited evidence of fake news linking. There is no evidence at all that it made much of a difference.

The final death of the tabloid press

“A newspaper should have no friends,” said Joseph Pulitzer.

He wouldn’t have said that about social media followers – since they are fast becoming the primary source of clout for newspapers, a quarter of whose web traffic derived in the election from Facebook (according to Comscore as reported by Enders). Building ‘likes’ is of existential commercial value, and not having enough likes can put the seal on your irrelevance.

Like Trump, Labour used alternative news channels. Enders pointed out that pro-Labour online publications with no direct print equivalents (The Canary and Evolve Politics) were reaching larger Facebook audiences for their content than most national news brands. Overall

coverage weighted by distribution was much more left on social media than in print or on major news websites.²⁹

Conclusion

In his otherwise brilliantly insightful May 6 piece about the rise of the Alt-Left, BuzzFeed journalist Jim Waterson said: “If polls are correct and Labour loses heavily, there will need to be a new narrative – and the early signs are that the mainstream media and Labour right will get much of the blame.”³⁰

Labour didn't lose heavily and it wasn't the Alt-Left that ended up needing a new narrative at all. It was the Tory party, it was the Government, and it was even the MSM – the mainstream media, left scratching their heads. After what hit them in June 2017, none will ever be the same again.

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Note on contributor

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