Parties, Candidates, and Social Media in the 2015 UK General Election

Twitter and the Public Sphere

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Thesis Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own work and that it has not been submitted in any form the award of a higher degree elsewhere. I confirm that this thesis does not exceed the prescribed limit of 80,000 words.

Helena J. Pillmoor, 20 October 2021

Abstract

This thesis was undertaken to examine the role of the social media forum, Twitter, in the 2015 UK general election. The research, conducted during the campaign, focused on the official party pages of the Conservatives, Labour, Liberal Democrats, and United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and their candidates standing in target seats. The thesis contributes to an ongoing academic debate concerning the potential for the internet and social media to transform political communication. The theoretical framework draws on the work of the philosopher Jürgen Habermas and his concepts of ‘rational-critical debate’ and the ‘public sphere’. Although Habermas’ theory pre-dates the internet, his insights provide invaluable criteria by which the practical impact of social media, as opposed to its undeniable promise as a 'transformative' promoter of political debate in a liberal democracy, can be judged.

I examine Twitter’s design architecture, which has been heavily influenced by its users and, at least in theory, constitutes an open forum for the free exchange of ideas and opinions envisaged by Habermas. Chapter Five explores the use of these features by the main UK parties in 2015. An analysis the content of the tweets in Chapter Six explores how the parties engaged with different election issues on the site, considering the extent to which they reacted to public opinion and events, or tried to retain control of this aspect of their campaigns. Chapter Seven examines the use of Twitter by individual candidates, reviewing their engagement with the site’s design features and their coverage of election issues. This chapter focuses on the potential conflict between the candidates’ roles as local campaigners and their status as representatives of the national parties. Overall, the findings arising from the empirical research suggested that the major parties regarded Twitter as a means of promoting their own favoured agendas rather than a venue for 'rational-critical debate'. Nevertheless, the site offers considerable potential for future research into the use of social media in political campaigning in the UK, while an analytical framework based on Habermas' ideas could usefully be applied to other internet platforms.

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Introduction

It is difficult to think of any significant human activity which has escaped the influence of the internet since the introduction of the World Wide Web to the public in 1993. Many familiar practices, methods of communication, and institutions have been transformed (Graham and Dutton, 2019). Amongst these developments, High Street shops are becoming endangered by the 'multichannel retailing' of their online counterparts; even out-of-town retail parks are being affected as they increasingly cater to click-and-collect shoppers (Wrigley and Lambiri, 2014: 9; Jones and Livingstone, 2018). In communication, the United Kingdom's landline telephone network is gradually being phased out to be replaced by new internet technology by the end of 2025 (Ofcom, 2020), and the humble text message is already succumbing to the attractions of internet-supported instant messaging applications such as WhatsApp. Even the lofty halls of academia have experienced important changes. On the positive side, academics could now disseminate their scholarly productions more widely and reach an international audience at the touch of a computer mouse. Yet, years before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the same technologies were already opening the possibility of a new world of online learning, with recorded lectures and 'virtual' libraries making the traditional university look like an increasingly outdated institution.

Alongside all these changes, it was always likely that the new technology would have some effect on the practice of politics. In particular, the relationship between politicians and the media in countries like Britain, which had become increasingly controversial and combative since the Second World War, had

entered a new phase by the end of the 1980s as national newspapers abandoned their old base in and around London's Fleet Street. Subsequently, the circulation of printed newspapers has plummeted (Mayhew, 2020); by 2020 the UK public's news consumption had shifted with only 35% of adults reading print newspapers while 65% turned to the internet as a source for news (Jigsaw Research, 2020).

The emergence of social media sites since the early 2000s (Facebook was founded in 2004) plays a significant role in the shifting dynamics of media consumption and media relations. People, especially young people, have increasingly turned to social media for news (Boukes, 2019). Constructed from user-generated content, social media have signalled a progression from the format of the early internet, which was characterised by a passive relationship between creator and audience (O'Reilly, 2005). The early internet was primarily composed of sites on which content was displayed for the consumer to read but without the means for direct interaction. Consequently, with social media, the role of 'creator' has also expanded to encompass (potentially) all online citizens – 'netizens' (Murthy, 2013).

Fundamentally, the introduction of social media sites has engendered a wave of new online spaces and communities through which netizens communicate and interact with one another. Significantly, this online development into social media renewed debate around the potential "provided [by the internet] for political participation in political debate, such as blogging and 'citizen journalism'…[and for] marginal political groups to make statements with global reach" (McNair, 2012: 13). The effects of social media on both civic and political participation have only grown from its early years to "become much

more dramatic" (Boulianne, 2020: 942) as the technology has continued to evolve and individuals and activist groups have become more adept at navigating the online space (Karpf, 2016; Rhodes, 2019; Wells et al., 2020). In the UK, the left-wing political grassroots organisation Momentum utilised and showcased social media platforms that could be used for political agency and activism, rejuvenating interest in politics, especially amongst young people (Pickard, 2018). Momentum was also considered a significant factor in Labour's success in the 2017 general election as it was able to help mobilise and organise support (Pickard, 2018; Rhodes, 2019).

Beyond activist groups, social media have also created new avenues for communication between politicians and the public, in part by bypassing the 'third man' that is the traditional media journalist (Muller, 2016; Fisher et al., 2018). Former US President Donald Trump's frequent use of social media, especially Twitter, during both his election campaigns (2016 and 2020) and presidency is an extreme but well-profiled example of the disrupting the 'norm' of traditional political communication mechanisms (Bennett and Pfetsch, 2018; Boczkowski and Papacharissi, 2018; Wells et al., 2020). For example, Trump sought to undermine and bypass 'conventional' media relations, including official White House channels, and more directly engage with his supporters, often with the claim that the press spread 'fake news' (Enli, 2017; Francia, 2018; Waisbord et al., 2018).

However, there remained unanswered questions about whether such changes in the media landscape had a truly radical effect on the way in which political actors in liberal democracies undertake the business of winning and retaining support – or whether they try to adapt their existing practices to the

new environment. In short, has the advent of the internet *transformed* the way in which we 'do' politics in countries like the United Kingdom? At the heart of this is the question about the potential of social media to encourage communication and deliberation between elected political representatives and the electorate.

As this thesis argues, the proliferation of social media sites raises key questions about the practices of liberal democracy, ranging from prophecies of impending doom to idealistic expectations of more meaningful engagement for voters in the democratic process. The primary aim of this thesis is to examine how political parties and candidates used the social media site Twitter during the 2015 UK general election campaign. The focus on Twitter responds to a growing body of literature on discourse architecture – understanding how the design of a site determines the deliberative potential of the platform (Freelon, 2015; Bossetta, 2018). An empirical investigation into the site by political parties and candidates during 2015 election campaign provides a unique case study, poised as it was during a period when parties and candidates had begun to engage with social media more readily as a means to communicate with the electorate. Underlying these investigations is the debate around social media's potential to support deliberative democracy. Consequently, thesis draws on Jürgen Habermas' (1989) concept of the 'public sphere' as the theoretical framework of the research.

1.1 Chapter Outline

Chapter Two begins by introducing literature on deliberative democracy, a field of study that has been revitalised by the development of social media. It identifies Habermas' (1989) work on the 'public sphere' as underpinning many of the ideas within the deliberative model, notably the expectation that rational-critical discourse could be realised through social media. Habermas' theory goes on to provide an analytical framework for my own investigations as I seek to test the application of his concept of the public sphere to the virtual environment (Chapter Three), and his expectation of the demand for rational-critical debate, examined through the use of Twitter by political parties and candidates.

The chapter then engages with the growing criticism of the generalised use of the term 'social media'. It highlights the importance of distinguishing the difference in the design architecture of different social media sites to understand the unique deliberative opportunities each platform provides. This provides the basis for the decision to focus the thesis on a single platform, Twitter. Next, the chapter outlines the rationale for choosing the 2015 UK general election as case study. I argue that it provides a unique study as a turning point in social media campaigning in Britain.

I highlight limitations in the approaches taken by existing literature on social media and the 2015 election campaign, examining the rise and dominance of quantitative methods and 'big data' in election research into Twitter. My primary argument is that a more qualitative approach has numerous advantages, such as enabling an in-depth content analysis which also allows the detection of nuances in behaviour by political parties and candidates in their

2015 general election campaigns. The final section outlines the data collection process.

Chapter Three begins by establishing the theoretical framework for the thesis, outlining Habermas' (1989) notion of the 'public sphere' and the core elements behind the sphere's formation and development. This leads to an in-depth examination of the three institutional criteria – 'access', 'disregard of status', and 'domain of common concern' – which Habermas (1989: 36) regarded as essential to the existence of the public sphere. These ideas were not without critics, and I introduce some of the key arguments against the application of his principles. I also ask whether such arguments are applicable to the online environment. In short, do the internet and social media promote a genuine public sphere, or are the same obstacles to the free exchange of 'rational-critical' arguments relevant in the virtual environment?

The second part of the chapter explores the challenges to the public sphere which Habermas (1989: 142) associated with its decline through a process he termed "refeudalization". These factors are outlined and then considered in the context of social media, questioning their transferability, and examining if they are also present in the online world and, if so, how they manifest. This offers a comparison to the first section, which considers the deliberative potential of the internet and social media from an institutional perspective, by introducing several possible external and internal threats to the 'virtual' public sphere and their implications.

Chapter Four introduces Twitter as the focal platform for the case study of this thesis. In this chapter, I explore several key design elements which define

Twitter and how the site came to be shaped into the platform it was at the time of the 2015 UK general election. I consider the implications of these design choices and processes on the site's functionality and deliberative potential. After introducing Twitter, I outline the evolution of the internet's role in political communication to understand how the use of new technology had been adapted in political campaigning before the 2015 election and the role social media (and Twitter in particular) played in this process. Through identifying significant turning points in the history of Twitter and digital campaigning, I develop an understanding of any potentially transformative effects of the new technology and begin to explore possible tensions between the deliberative potential of the site and its use in political communication.

After investigating Twitter's design architecture, Chapter Five examines how the main UK political parties engaged with the deliberative potential of the site during the 2015 election period. Using the official Twitter accounts of the Conservative Party, Labour Party, Liberal Democrats, and the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), this chapter asks whether these parties grasped the potential for online discourse, or whether they regarded them as new ways of conducting 'politics as usual' – the mode of campaigning, at national and local level, which has been described as a 'broadcast' style of communication (Margolis and Resnick, 2000). If one accepts that Twitter offered considerable potential for the encouragement of 'rational-critical' debate, does the evidence suggest that the main parties seized this opportunity?

Chapters Six and Seven begins a content analysis of the tweets which the parties and candidates posted on the platform during the election campaign. Chapter Six focuses on the coverage of election issues, exploring which topics

the parties sought to emphasise (or play down), the breadth of the coverage, and how the main UK parties engaged with the voters on such matters. It also investigates the relationship between issue coverage, public opinion, and the role of 'agenda-setting', asking how each of the parties shaped the content of their online campaigns. Were the parties reactive to public opinion and events? To what extent did the online campaigns reflect their offline campaigns?

The penultimate chapter extends the discussion beyond the political parties to the use of Twitter by candidates during the 2015 election campaign. Using a sample of candidates who stood in target seats for the four parties, I examine the balance they struck between national and local campaigning. The decision to focus on targets seats, whilst unrepresentative, follows the intention of the thesis to analyse online behaviour in a context when engagement with social media by political actors can be expected to reach a peak. Focusing on this sample of seats allows a unique perspective of the dynamics between the local and national campaigns; while Twitter could provide new opportunities for greater candidate-constituent interactions the parties also have a strong desire to ensure that candidates in these seats remain 'on message'. As such, the thesis is at least in part an attempt to gauge the state of British democracy at the time of the pivotal 2015 general election: did the main parties take any steps to foster what Habermas called 'rational-critical debate', and if so, how far did they succeed? If the parties were anxious to suppress debate, did individual candidates use social media sites like Twitter to evade their restrictions?

Chapter Seven is addressed to the latter question, exploring the use of Twitter's features by the candidates: who used the site, and if and how did they engage with the participatory features of the platform? The chapter also

examines patterns in online behaviour between those of different party affiliations and how this compared to the use of these devices by the respective party pages. Secondly, the content of the tweets by different candidates is analysed, with particular focus on the coverage of election issues to produce a comparison with the party campaigns. The emphasis of this investigation is on how the candidates engaged with the issues and whether they behaved as local actors or as mouthpieces for the national campaigns.

Chapter Eight presents the key conclusions of the thesis. I review the deliberative potential of the Twitter site, first through re-examining Habermas' public sphere in the online environment. I highlight how the architectural opportunities for a meaningful exchange of ideas and opinions and their implementation can come into conflict. The chapter conclude with my own reflections on behaviours the case study has indicated before considering the direction of future research.

Chapter Two: Mapping the Method

This thesis has been undertaken to explore the use of Twitter by political parties and candidates during the 2015 UK general election. The aim is to use the 2015 election contest as a case study in order to develop a deeper understanding of the ways in which political actors engage with Twitter, and social media more generally. Underlying the research is the debate around the potential for social media to transform political communication, particularly the expectation that it can support and enhance deliberative democracy between political actors and the electorate (Dahlberg, 2001; Papacharissi, 2009; Calderaro, 2018; Kutlu, 2018). This chapter begins by outlining the evolving body of literature on deliberative democracy in response to the development of the internet and social media, central to which is Jurgen Habermas'(1989) concept of the public sphere. It explores the relevance of Habermas' thesis in this field of study and outlines the merits of returning his original work as the theoretical framework for my research.

Arguably, Twitter provides an ideal forum for deliberative democracy as a free and 'open' public platform. Its potential is explored in the growing body of literature discussing the significance of recognising and understanding the difference in design architectures across social media platforms. I argue that this sets important parameters within which to understand and analyse to what extent the deliberative potential of a platform is realised.

The chapter then explores the significance of investigating the use of Twitter in the context of the 2015 UK general election as it offers a unique snapshot in the evolution of social media campaigning in Britain. It highlights

limitations in the existing literature, notably the growing focus on quantitative methods and ‘big’ data and argues for a more qualitative approach. The final part of the chapter expands on the methodological approach taken to data collection and analysis.

2.1 Deliberative Democracy

The introduction of the internet and social media has opened many new channels of enquiry for political scientists. Prominent amongst these subjects has been a developing interest in “the possibility of the Internet enhancing democracy” (Dahlberg, 2001: 615; Margolis and Moreno-Riaño, 2010; Van Dijk and Hacker, 2018). Nonetheless, democracy is a contested concept amongst scholars, and there has inevitably been divergence in the research. The three main models which have influenced this academic debate are the ‘communitarian’ perspective, the ‘liberal individualist’ stance, and the ‘deliberative’ model (Dahlberg, 2001; Bakardjieva, 2012; Yan et al., 2018; Valera Ordaz, 2019). The communitarian perspective focuses on how the internet is “enhancing communal spirit and values” (Dahlberg, 2001: 616) by supporting social cohesion and the formation of group identities (Freelon, 2010: 1180). In contrast, the liberal individualist model assesses the internet as a means through which individuals are able to exercise greater self-expression (Dahlberg, 2011: 857-858). Finally, the deliberative model, which is the line of enquiry this thesis follows, embraces the need for dialogue and difference, challenging the unitary stances of the other two models and opening the discussion to explore the potential of the internet as a space in which discourse can be undertaken (Dahlberg, 2001; Witschge, 2004; Friess and Eilders, 2015;

Maia, 2018). Since the early 2000s, coinciding with the emergence of social media sites, it is the deliberative model that has become pre-eminent in online democratic theory (Wright and Street, 2007: 850; Bruns and Highfield, 2016; Chambers and Gastil, 2021).

Underlying the deliberative model is the work of Jürgen Habermas (1989) – particularly his concept of the 'public sphere', in which citizens can engage in 'rational-critical' debate. For Habermas, rational-critical debate is the product of a space (the public sphere) that is openly accessible to citizens, disregards status, and allows dialogue on cultural, social, and political issues (Chapter Three). This has obvious relevance to the internet and social media (Dahlgren, 2005; Fuchs, 2014; Ess, 2018). The deliberative model relies on Habermas' belief that, within such a space, humans – as rational beings (Dahlberg, 2005) – will use the public sphere to communicate with one another through an exchange of views and ideas to bring forward "a consensus about what [is] practically necessary in the interest of all" (Habermas, 1989: 83). Despite some criticisms of Habermas' public sphere, the concept of the sphere and how a space might cater for rational-critical debate has continued to form the basis for discussions around online deliberative democracy (Petley, 2012; Amiradakis, 2019; Hammond, 2019; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). His optimism is reflected in claims that "the public sphere of rational-discourse will be extended through cyberspace" (Dahlberg, 2001: 620), and anticipations of the "virtual reincarnation of the public sphere" through the internet and social media (Papacharissi, 2009: 231).

This thesis lacks the space and scope to do full justice to Habermas' extensive work on the public sphere – or to engage comprehensively with the

views of his critics. However, the significance of his contribution to the study of deliberative democracy gives rise to speculation about his assumptions of the demand for rational-critical debate in Twenty-First Century Britain and the opportunities the digital environment provides for the realisation of a public sphere. Whether evaluating the deliberate potential of the internet or social media sites, Habermas' 'public sphere' has become a representative term for an environment in which rational-critical debate occurs. Despite this, closer engagement with his work in the context of the internet and social media age is limited, despite being at the root of deliberative democratic theory.

Instead, the application of the term 'public sphere' has become increasingly generalised and passive as inquiries have turned to the activities of netizens which can be harmful to rational-critical debate, such as the spread of fake news or trolling, rather than recognising opportunities to utilise Habermas' work as a critical framework (Kruse et al., 2018; Bimber and Gil de Zúñiga, 2020). Significantly, such approaches overlook both the basis (institutional criteria) for Habermas' concept of the public sphere and, importantly, his recognition that there are challenges to the existence of the sphere. By returning to Habermas' original work, this thesis begins by contextualising the development of the internet and social media and evaluates their potential to support a public sphere (Chapter Three). Further engagement with his work identifies and examines factors Habermas considers potential challenges to the public sphere. These factors are also adopted as a framework to analyse the behaviours of the parties and candidates on the site during the 2015 general election campaign. If Habermas was right in his views about the human capacity for 'rational-critical' debate, the development of the internet

(and particularly sites like Twitter) can be regarded as a means of putting his ideas to an empirical test. At the same time, academic literature on these issues continues to develop: firstly, in the growing importance of understanding the architecture of the online spaces and secondly, by recognising how a space is used, and within the context of its design architecture.

2.2 The Plurality of Social Media

Taking initially the importance of the architecture of a space, the development of the internet led Habermas (2006: 415) to re-evaluate his perception of the public sphere, not as a homogenous space but rather as a complex web of networks. This shift in position was sparked by the expansion into a virtual world that moved beyond the physical spaces Habermas originally envisaged the public sphere to occupy (Sennett, 2013). This response to the introduction of the internet turned out to be pre-emptive of developments also occurring in literature on digital democracy. Indeed, the growth of social media has subsequently provoked growing criticism of attempts to apply Habermas' concept of the public sphere unilaterally across the internet and social media platforms (Freelon, 2015; Alexey, 2018). Central to this has been the recognition that the social media landscape is becoming increasingly diverse and fragmented as more and more platforms are created (Wright and Street, 2007; Bossetta, 2018).

As a result, the use of 'social media' as an umbrella term has come under increased scrutiny (Bossetta, 2018; Kreiss et al., 2018). While there is nothing inherently wrong with using the blanket term in certain contexts, the developing

body of literature into social media sites and their use has led to growing recognition that not all sites are designed in the same way. Consequently, the potential and style of discourse the different sites support also varies. One such division concerns the distinction between social networking sites and social media sites (Oz et al., 2018). The former are built around community networking, the latter on information sharing. Notable examples of these are, respectively, Facebook and Twitter (Boukes, 2019). Comparisons between the designs of these two sites are explored further in Chapter Four, but fundamentally the architectures of the sites have evolved from different design ethos: one intended for connecting people and the other for disseminating information.

Bossetta's (2018) comparative look at four different social media during the 2016 US Election – Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat – highlights some of the core design differences between the sites and how they determine the ways in which netizens interact with the platforms. However, he also includes the caveat that "digital architectures alone cannot fully explain why or how political actors campaign on social media" (Bossetta, 2018: 474). This view connects to the earlier point raised regarding Habermas' concept of the public sphere – his assumption of the demand for rational-critical debate. It is not only important to understand the design of a space but also how it is utilised in practice. By recognising the design parameters of a site, it provides an architectural framework for analysis.

By pursuing a focused examination of a single site (Twitter) I can undertake an in-depth evaluation of its deliberative potential which in turn facilitates further investigations (Chapter Four). First, it provides a framework for understanding

how the parties and candidates engaged with Twitter during their 2015 election campaigns, such as which features they used. Second, it sets important parameters for evaluating to what extent the democratic potential of the site is realised to evaluate *how* the features were used (Chapter Five).

So far, I have introduced Habermas as providing an important theoretical framework for my approach and outlined two key aspects of my research (1) investigating deliberative potential of the Twitter (2) examining the use of the site by parties and candidates in 2015. The following two sections of this chapter outline the interest in using the 2015 election as a case study, academic literature on the growing use of Twitter as campaign tool, how this has informed further research questions, and the rationale for pursuing a qualitative approach in the research.

2.3 The 2015 UK General Election

While Habermas' public sphere provides the theoretical framework for this thesis, the case study is of the 2015 UK general election. By their very nature, each election has its own context and set of issues (Bossetta, 2018). We can still form a comparative outlook across elections, for example by examining patterns in voting behaviour, campaign spending, and campaign messaging. However, 2015 election was uniquely placed as the junction between pre-social media electioneering (the 2010 election was widely considered a non-social media election – Chapter Four) and established social media campaigning. At the time, the UK parties were still being forced to improvise their response to new technology, whereas in the later campaigns

(2017 and 2019) they had a much better grasp of its practical impact (Dommett and Temple, 2018; Nizzoli et al., 2021). Since, the 2015 election Twitter also has been popularised as a valuable tool for disruptors such as Donald Trump, Len McCluskey, and Dominic Cummings.

Although a body of work was already developing around social media by 2015, in more general discussion of election campaigns, 'media' was still dominated by the traditional, offline formats and 'social media' continued to be widely referred to as a unitary medium. Indeed, in Cowley and Kavanagh's 2015 iteration of the *British General Election* series, social media is given little attention and Twitter only referenced once. Social media is more widely referenced in the 2017 version, as it became an apparent mainstay in campaigning, and the recognition was further upgraded in the 2019 contribution in the chapter 'Fragmented and Polarised: Broadcasting and Social Media' (Ford et al., 2021)[1]. In respect of social media, 2015 was the year of improvisation rather than conscious adaptation by political parties who had found it hard enough to adjust to the replacement of 'Fleet Street' by the dominance of television and the tabloid newspapers. However, it is equally

[1] Twitter appeared in the index a total of 3 time in the 2017 version and was often referenced in relation to the use of digital campaigning; the social media campaigns were more widely recognised than in 2015 and integrated into discussions about the campaign methods (for example, see Chapter 12 Cowley, P. & Kavanagh, D. (2018) 'Targeted (and Untargeted) Local Campaigning'. In: Cowley, P. & Kavanagh, D. (eds.) *The British General Election of 2017.* Cham: Palgrave Macmillan,). Similarly, Chapter 13 (Cushion, S. & Beckett, C. Ibid.'Campaign Coverage and Editorial Judgements: Broadcasting'.) spoke about social media challenging the norms of the broadcast media. In comparison, the 2015 version, as side from the occasional sidenote, dedicated little more than two pages to the social media campaigns (see Cowley, P. & Kavanagh, D. (2016b) 'Roads and Car Crashes: The Election Approaches'. In: Cowley, P. & Kavanagh, D. (eds.) *The British General Election of 2015.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.150, 152-153) which were otherwise mentioned in passing.

profitable to analyse the ways in which the main UK parties improvised under the pressure of change than to assess their reaction to changes which had already taken place.

It has been argued that research during election periods is bound to furnish a distorted picture of the role of social media – an unrepresentative 'screenshot' grabbed at an unusual time (Wright, 2012: 245). However, this line of enquiry reflects the growing body of work on social media use during election campaigns. Far from being unrepresentative occasions, general elections (and referendums on highly controversial issues) are precisely the kind of occasions which cast the most vivid light on the health of liberal democracy in a state like the United Kingdom. After all, at such times there *should* be maximum engagement between parties, candidates, and the public on sites like Twitter, which present minimal barriers to communication (Bossetta, 2018; Boukes, 2019). Indeed, the 2015 general election is itself an interesting and unique period to study.

2.4 Campaigning on Twitter: The need for a more qualitative approach

Between the 2010 and 2015 UK general elections Twitter emerged as a "pervasive tool in election campaigning" and with more members of the public, politicians, and political candidates joining the site it has likewise become an increasingly popular subject for research (Jungherr, 2016: 72). From this field, three main areas of investigation into campaigning emerged: the use of the platform by political parties and candidates, use by netizens during the

campaign, and engagement with the site during mediated events (Jungherr, 2016: 74, 76). It was also during this period, as social media became more prominent, that a trend emerged towards quantitative methods and ‘big data’ as it became possible to collect and analyse data on a large scale from online platforms.

Investigations into the use of the site by political parties and candidates up to and including the 2015 election have primarily been case studies focused on categorising tweets in relation to their function. On the one hand this has been presented as an overview of the employment of the site’s features such as hashtags and @-replies (Adams and McCorkindale, 2013; Bruns and Highfield, 2013; Graham et al., 2014). On the other there have been attempts to categorise the ‘type’ of tweets based on content, such as ‘campaign tweets’, ‘broadcasting’ and ‘interacting’ (Jackson and Lilleker, 2011; Graham et al., 2013; Evans et al., 2014; Graham et al., 2014; Kruikemeier, 2014; Southern and Lee, 2019). However, across this literature there is little cohesion between these two points of investigation (features and content) or detailed engagement with the social media content. This raises questions regarding the extent to which the parties and candidates engaged with different campaign issues in the 2015 general election: how often they tweeted about different issues and what messages were conveyed to the electorate through Twitter. Instead, a commonality across the research has been the growing reliance on quantitative data to illustrate party and candidate activity on the site. However, as I will discuss, this has hindered our understanding of the use of the site as a campaign tool during the 2015 election.

The movement towards a quantitative approach has been led by scholars such as Alex Pentland (2015: 16) who argue for ‘social physics’ – the use a mathematics to understand the major driver of human habits and norms (Harari et al., 2017). Central to social physics is the reliance on large-scale, probabilistic quantitative analysis, an approach that has become more prominent is in the field of online political communication as the data-mining and analysis software has continued to develop (Mahmoodi et al., 2017). Early uses include attempts to forecast election outcomes based on Twitter traffic (Tumasjan et al., 2011; Burnap et al., 2016; Keller and Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2018; Bright et al., 2020)F. More recently, during election time, it has become common to collect tweets connected to the official election hashtags as a way of mining and analysing big data to identify popular topics during election campaigns (Cram et al., 2017; Ginnis and Miller, 2017; Segesten and Bossetta, 2017) or to monitor reaction on the site during an election debate (Vaccari et al., 2015; Gorkovenko and Taylor, 2017; Robertson et al., 2019).

However, the reliance on quantitative data limits how far investigations can go into the use of Twitter by political parties and candidates as a campaign tool. The aforementioned literature’s reliance on quantitative data forms an introductory overview of the use of the site but does not go on to engage fully with how the platform was used in the respective elections. More recent attempts to integrate quantitative data into social media use by parties and candidates during election campaigns have consequently taken a turn to focus more on network connections and information flow rather than engaging with content posted by the parties and candidates (Himelboim et al., 2017; Boulianne, 2020; Esteve Del Valle et al., 2021).

There are some clear benefits in taking a quantitative approach; aside from the volume of data than can now be collected and analysed, it can be a useful tool for identifying patterns in online behaviour. However, the aim of this thesis is to develop a greater understanding of how the parties and candidates engaged with and utilised the site during the 2015 UK general election. In order to do this, it is important to consider the context of the election and the explore the nuances of the online campaigns. For example, how did the parties structure their online campaigns? How did they engage with the different election issues? I argue that these patterns can be extracted with quantitative data (and be useful indictors) but are not an end in themselves. Instead, they should be used to provide a useful framework for content which can then be examined more in-depth (Gerring, 2008; Fountaine, 2017; Pal and Gonawela, 2017). As such, I combine the two methods, using quantitative data to highlight patterns in behaviour supplemented by a qualitive exploration and analysis of the content.

In addition to my methodological preference to take a more qualitative approach to this thesis, there were also practical limitations to consider in terms of resources. Most importantly are those concerning the limitations to access of Twitter data. Since 2011 there have been restrictions placed on the volume of Twitter traffic that can be collected per day, with the company essentially commodify access to data (Felt, 2016: 2). This has proven to become a barrier to political scientists, especially those, like myself, with limited funding and resources. Therefore, it has also restricted my ability to pursue certain avenues of enquiry such as exploring public reaction on the site, for example, to compare with content posted from the parties' Twitter accounts. Despite these limitations however, the available data created an opportunity to pursue a gap in the

literature and move beyond what remained a predominantly quantitative approach to this field of research and expand into a more in-depth examination of content.

With the desire to move away from the quantitative approach, using Habermas' work as a theoretical framework complemented the desire for developing a more in-depth investigation. Notably, this relates to, Habermas' (1989: see Chapter 6) recognition of factors that could challenge the existence of the public sphere. For example, the influence of economic considerations (such as the use of advertising) and the behaviours of the political actors within the space, such as the use of representative and manipulated publicity – presenting ideas to the electorate as if acting on their behalf but without engaging in rational-critical debate. Unlike the quantitative approach, this invites an examination of how the parties and candidates used the features of the site and how they presented the content to the electorate, for example, agenda-setting (Chapter Six).

Some of these behaviours have already been recognised in relation to online marketing and the obtrusive and increasing 'consumer culture' across the internet, but there is scope for further discourse as these have not been fully extended into the study of political communication (Lees-Marshment, 2009; Warner, 2015). Instead, academic discussion (as well as media reporting) has remained broadly focused on the potential infringements of key liberal-democratic principles by internet companies and concerns around data protection, highlighted by the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica scandal uncovered in 2018 (Ahmed et al., 2017; Cadwalladr and Graham-Harrison, 2018). In comparison, the intention of this thesis is to examine parties' and

candidates' utilisation of Twitter and the opportunities the space provides. As I explore further in Chapter Three, these challenges outlined by Habermas provide a useful framework through which to examine the behaviours exhibited on Twitter by the parties and candidates. Further factors that influenced my decision, including practical considerations, will be outlined in the next section.

2.5 Data

Ultimately, the thesis analyses what has been presented to the electorate; what the parties and candidates chose to include in their campaigns. The purpose of the data collected for this thesis is to allow an examination of the parties' and candidates' output on Twitter rather than of the institutional processes behind the decision-making, or the personnel involved in the production of the tweets. This follows the approach taken by previous commentators on social media and the 2015 general election literature. Future research could usefully incorporate interviews with candidates to understand the motives of their social media campaigns. However, the current thesis is more concerned with social media output rather than the motives of individual participant.

The data was collected during the short campaign period (from 30 March 2015 to the end of 6 May 2015). Tweets (including @-reply) from the official party Twitter accounts of the Conservatives (@Conservatives), Labour (@UKLabour), Liberal Democrats (@LibDems), and UKIP (@UKIP) were collected and analysed through NVivo (see Chapter Six, section 6.2). The official party accounts rather than the official press office accounts, such as the Conservatives' CCHQ Press account (@CCHQ) or Labour Press

(@LabouPress) as the former were more actively utilised for campaigning and are considered the 'main' accounts with more followers. The Twitter data of 133 candidates standing across 45 marginal constituencies was also analysed (see **Appendix 1.** And Chapter Seven, section 7.3). In total 5,620 tweets from the parties' pages and 16,549 tweets from candidates' pages were analysed[2]. All data was collected through Nvivo with Nvivo Capture and were analysed manually. The decision to manually code the data was influenced by the direction of the thesis: to follow a more qualitative route. As I will outline later, this proved to be a beneficial decision, but it did limit the volume of tweets I could realistically code.

As such, the research has intentionally focused on the social media output of candidates standing in target seats (assessed by marginality). The rationale behind this was that as local resources for constituency campaigning have been in decline the national campaigns have become more involved, blurring the line between the national and local (Fisher and Denver, 2009; Pattie et al., 2017; Pattie et al., 2019). Consequently, most of these resources have been directed towards marginal seats. This encourages examination of the balance between local and national campaigning by candidates standing in target seats. If Twitter provides the opportunities for deliberative democracy, the marginals will provide an insight into how the candidates used these opportunities in their 2015 campaigns. In order to pursue this line of enquiry I wanted to explore to what extent and how the candidates' and parties' pages differed in their use of the Twitter features and their content output.

[2] Each of the relevant chapters provides a further breakdown of data analysis for each section (see 6.2 and 7.3).

Primarily, I wanted to alter the approach to content analysis and move away from typology, instead framing the content in terms of election issues. This was influenced in part by Gaber's (2016: 604) article which sought to establish "to what extent [the] Twitter issues agenda reflect[s] that of other media and of the public?". One of the points raised in this was the connection between public opinion and social media output, using opinion poll data to identify and rank the salience of issues. Gaber's research was limited as it only offered an introductory overview of issues covered on Twitter by political parties, although it did indicate some correlation across the parties' accounts on the relative tweet coverage given to the top issues. Therefore, there was an opportunity to take this even further and examine in more detail the coverage of election issues on Twitter looking at public opinion data alongside the issue agendas of the parties and candidates, all within the context of the 2015 general election.

To provide the initial framework for this part of the analysis, the content was coded against the issues listed in the YouGov (2015c) opinion survey asking respondents which issues they thought were the most important facing the country at the time. The results of the three polls taken during the short campaign period were aggregated to provide a final ranking of the issues by salience, presented as a comparative percentage **(see Appendix 2).** This provided the basis from which to compare content coverage by the different accounts.

However, in keeping with a more qualitative approach it was also to be able to react to findings in the data rather than relying only on a rigid coding system. Through manually coding the data, it was possible to identify and respond to other patterns that emerged within the different issues and explore

how the parties and candidates engaged with them. This was particularly useful when examining the candidates' activities on the site as it highlighted attempts at personalisation by taking a local perspective on issues or pursuing inherently local concerns. It allowed a more detailed investigation, beyond the statistics, of how the candidates engaged with the election issues in relation to the national parties. Similarly, it provided an insight into how far the candidates engaged with and balanced the local and national campaigns on the site.

2.6 Summary

In this chapter I have outlined a line of enquiry that I deem most appropriate to develop a greater understanding of how parties and candidates used Twitter during the 2015 UK general election. The research was informed by the study of online deliberative democracy. I argue that contextualising the online space is an important part of understanding its deliberative potential and Habermas' institutional criteria form a sound basis for this analysis. Twitter has its own design architecture which sets the parameters of its deliberative potential, and it is within this framework that the parties and candidates use of the site should be analysed.

I have presented the 2015 UK general election as a key case study in the development of social media election campaigning in Britain. The existing literature on this period, however, has been focused on quantitative data at the expense of in-depth content analysis which has led to a gap in understanding as to how the parties and candidates conducted their campaigns on the site. A

mixed method approach to data collection will enable further exploration into the characteristics of the parties' and candidates' campaigns and develop.

Chapter Three: Habermas and the Public Sphere

This thesis examines the behaviour of political parties and candidates on Twitter during the 2015 UK general election. This chapter begins the discussion by engaging with Habermas' (1989) concept of 'the public sphere', which has been central to the discourse on a space's deliberative potential (Dahlberg, 2001; Fuchs, 2014). In this chapter, I revisit Habermas' (1989) original thesis of the public sphere, including his (2006: 415) later amendments to his original view of the sphere as a homogenous environment. The institutional criteria which underpin the public sphere – *access, status,* and *common concern* – are explored in detail, highlighting key criticisms of the original thesis. During this process, I expand on these criteria to consider them in the context of the internet and social media to assess how far they can be transferred to the online environment and to what extent the virtual space can provide answers to Habermas' critics.

The second half of this chapter more closely examines the challenges Habermas identified to the existence of the public sphere and which he attributed to its decline through a process he termed 'refeudalisation'. It maps the main obstacles Habermas identified to public sphere and the provision of rational critical debate through a growing 'consumer culture', the mass media, state actors, and the 'manipulation' of public opinion. I also analyse if, and how, these factors may also affect the virtual environment.

3.1 Habermas' Public Sphere

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas (1989) outlines the development and key formative elements of the public sphere of the political realm as well as the factors which led to its decline. The public sphere came into being as a public arena in which private persons could engage in rational-critical debate. Habermas (1989: 30) identifies two pre-existing domains as preceding the emergence of this sphere in the eighteenth century: the private realm and the sphere of state authority. The former consisted of private individuals within the conjugal family's internal space (the household), commodity exchange (such as markets), and social labour. The latter comprised the state and the courts (or the courtly-noble society of the eighteenth century). The bourgeois public sphere developed from the private realm, an environment which fostered discussions of the arts, literary works, and politics, though one where such dialogues were limited to private spaces such as drawing rooms, amongst friends and acquaintances. The movement of such debates into public spaces heralded the beginnings of the public sphere and the eventual formation of the political public sphere.

The emergence of the public sphere in the world of letters marked the first stage in the creation on the political public sphere (Habermas, 1989: 29). In an apolitical sphere, the discussions focused on cultural commodities – art and literature – but were freed from the confines of private settings. This literary public sphere drew in much of the courtly-noble society as it became more distanced from the state and greater rational-critical debate developed amongst those in the sphere. The 'town', with its coffee houses and salons, provided a space in which these members of the courtly-noble society could converse with

bourgeois intellectuals, bridging a gap between different sections of society and beginning the formation of the new, bourgeois public sphere (Habermas, 1989: 30).

However, despite providing an initial point of contact, the late seventeenth- and eighteenth- century coffee houses and salons which originally acted as the great “centers (sic) of criticism” fell to the wayside with the emergence of print media (Habermas, 1989: 32). Print media offered new ways in which ideas could be shared amongst a wide group of individuals. In the mid eighteenth century, articles written by scholars were increasingly circulated in periodicals. At the same time, the content also shifted to become more political, engaging with topics which previously had been restricted to the private realm. For the first time, private persons could participate in public rational-critical debate on the activities of the state. Thus, the public sphere in the political realm emerged, acting as an arena for debate as well as both a source of and vehicle for public opinion and bridging the gap between private individuals and the state.

Habermas saw the public sphere as a homogenous entity formed from a single public (Fraser, 1990: 62; Knapp, 1997; Warner, 2002). This assumption of uniformity within the sphere was open to question, especially as technology developed and created more diverse ways in which information could be provided, exchanged, and discussed (Dahlberg, 2005: 112; Chadwick, 2013). However, Habermas (2006: 415) later amended his position to recognise the public sphere as “rooted in networks”, multiple in number and part of a complex, overlapping system (Dahlberg, 2005: 112). He acknowledged that sources had become increasingly varied throughout the twentieth century: news,

commentaries, film and television, and others created heterogenous audiences and multiple subcultures, but which were all part of the vast web constituting the public sphere (Habermas, 2006: 415; Shirky, 2011; Bruns and Highfield, 2016). Although Habermas only briefly acknowledges this change, perhaps seeing it as inconsequential to the overall concepts behind the public sphere, it has both allowed and encouraged investigation into different types of public spheres. The amendment acknowledges and accepts that the development of new technologies has contributed to the emergence of online public spheres which vary in characteristics depending on the environment in which information is exchanged, such as Twitter or Facebook (Warner, 2002; Wright and Street, 2007; Freelon, 2015; Oz et al., 2018). Despite his acceptance of such a network of publics, Habermas still maintained that three institutional criteria must be met to constitute a public sphere.

3.1.1 The Institutional Criteria of the Public Sphere

Fundamental to Habermas' conception of the public sphere was the requirement of rational-critical debate, whereby citizens use their reason to engage in discussions. Although a "state-governed public sphere" (the public sphere in the world of letters) in which the citizenry acted "in common" for "properly political tasks", such as the administration of the law and military survival, had existed previously, this sphere had shifted in the late seventeenth century to encompass "the more properly civic tasks of a society engaged in critical public debate (i.e. the protection of a commercial economy)" (Habermas, 1989: 50-1). Despite the absence of democratic institutions, the citizenry was starting to engage with a greater breadth of state activities, looking for

emancipation from the directives of public authorities, and subjecting the system of government to rational critique.

Habermas (1989: 36-37) associated three key institutional criteria with the public sphere: the “disregard of status”, acting as a “domain of common concern”, and being “inclusive”. For the first, Habermas argued that to achieve rational-critical debate, the public sphere must suspend hierarchies (social and economic) and treat all those participating as equals upon entering the sphere, allowing arguments to be judged on merit rather than an individual’s standing. Secondly, the domain of common concern referred to the shift from a passive civil society to one which challenged the regulative role of public authorities, such as in governing commodity exchange and social labour, domains which had previously existed unquestioned. Finally, the notion of inclusivity (qualified by Habermas to mean inclusive “in principle”), required that, however exclusive the public sphere appeared at any one moment, it could not become *wholly* exclusive (Habermas, 1989: 37). The opportunity for economic and social mobility safeguarded the potential to access the sphere and meant that it would never be entirely cut off as a “clique” from the rest of society (Habermas, 1989: 37, 85).

3.1.2 Challenges to the Public Sphere

Habermas also observed growing challenges to the public sphere during the mid-nineteenth century, for which he laid the blame at the door of the state and the emerging mass media. This process of decline was termed ‘refeudalisation’, which produced a “pseudo-public sphere” and “manipulated public opinion”,

both of which maintained an appearance of public deliberation but were without the rational-critical debate which characterised Habermas' public sphere and the public opinion gave rise to (Habermas, 1989: 162, 239). For Habermas (1989: 122-123), refeudalisation marked a return to the approximate conditions of the feudal state through the blurring of the divisions between state and society, public and private. He observed a return of 'representative publicity', insofar as the state (previously embodied in the monarch and nobility) merely displayed its power before the people without engaging in political discourse. This was juxtaposed with the use of 'public representation': the state referring to the addressees as "the public" for the first time, to create the illusion of representing public opinion (Habermas, 1989: 189). From the beginning of the twentieth century, public relations also became an increasingly common feature of the public sphere, disrupting the process of public opinion through manipulation and promotion. Along with public representation, public relations were another method for generating the illusion of collaboration with the citizens that was, in reality, virtually non-existent.

Habermas' key criticism of mass media focused on its role in transforming the public from citizens engaged in rational-critical debate to unthinking consumers (Warner, 2015: 285). Mass media had given rise to advertising, advertising specialists, and professional political journalists. Habermas saw these attributes as severely damaging to the key principles of the public sphere, such as rational-critical debate and the disregard of status. Because … Ironically, whilst Habermas had claimed early capitalism had overturned the feudal system by the late 1600s through the "traffic in commodities and news" with the production of journals and periodicals, as well

as a growing trade in mailing pamphlets alongside private letters, he also later attributed these developments to contributing to the refeudalisation of the public sphere (Habermas, 1989: 15). As increasing value was placed on news as a commodity, mass media emerged, and the capitalist system expanded and flourished, contributing to further commodification. All these aspects contributed to the emergence of a ‘pseudo-public sphere’ and ‘manipulated public opinion’, threats to the public sphere which this chapter investigates in detail in the context of social media. I first explore the institutional criteria presented by Habermas, highlighting key criticisms of his work, and considering how the development of the internet and social media fit within this framework. Rephrase is more critical later.

3.2 Access

Habermas (1989: 85) stipulated that “the public sphere of civil society stood or fell with the principle of universal access”. This qualification did not require the inclusion of *all* individuals as members of the public sphere at any given time but rather that the sphere “could never close itself off entirely” from the rest of society as there existed an assurance of the *potential* for citizens to gain access (Habermas, 1989: 36). To support this view, Habermas distinguished between the limitations placed on access which arose from the institution of the public sphere versus those driven by the external structures of civil society which undermined the principle of universal access. He used this distinction to explain his otherwise exclusive public which was formed from the “propertied and educated bourgeoisie” (Habermas, 1989: 85; Fraser, 1990; Garnham, 1992). Habermas (1989: 86) further argued that whilst an individual’s

economic situation determined their levels of education, this represented “the mere legal ratification[s] of status obtained economically in the private sphere” and so did not make the public sphere institutionally exclusive. For instance, Habermas (1989: 37-38) saw the restrictions on access to resources such as education, literature, and higher educational institutions on the basis of financial limitations as the product of the class structures of the time (namely the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries) rather than an inherent issue with the institution of the public sphere. However, he argued that despite these unavoidable external impediments and however exclusive the public sphere may be at any one moment, the safeguarding of the principle of universal access, or the *potential* for access, was ultimately assured by fluid economic and social conditions which “gave everyone an equal chance to meet the criteria for admission” (Habermas, 1989: 86).

Despite Habermas’ careful use of terminology and insistence upon the lack of institutional exclusivity in the public sphere, his argument was heavily criticised. For example, Habermas’ nostalgia for the eighteenth century bourgeois public sphere was chastised for its selective membership, which consisted of white bourgeois men (Fraser, 1990; Garnham, 1992: 360). Critics also challenged that his assertion of the existence of fluid economic and social status as opportunities for entrance to the public sphere was severely limited for many citizens. Nancy Fraser (1990: 63), a longstanding critic of the exclusivity of Habermas’ public sphere, observed the existence of “formal exclusions” on the grounds of gender, finance, and race which transcended Habermas’ mentions of education and property. For Fraser (1990: 63), gender status excluded women regardless of class and ethnicity, property requirements

eliminated “white plebeian men”, and exclusion on racial grounds superseded both gender and class. Indeed, in the eighteenth century, many of these formal impediments existed and even continued into later centuries. However, Fraser (1990: 63) acknowledged that by the end of the twentieth century, such formal exclusions had been all but broken down, and she recognised this as a product of the fluid economic and social conditions for which Habermas had accounted.

Despite these changes, social mobility did not remove prejudices arising from protocols and decorum-created hierarchies, which acted as “informal impediments” within the sphere which bracketed groups rather than excluding them in the formal sense (Fraser, 1990: 63). This highlights the importance of distinguishing between two different points of exclusion: access to the public sphere versus hierarchies within it. Fraser challenged the idea that status could be disregarded, even in a formally non-exclusionary sphere. Informal exclusion is discussed in the next section on status, but the existence of formal exclusions in a social media context must be analysed first.

Even setting aside changes in societal structures and attitudes, digital public spheres face their own structural challenges in ensuring their accessibility to the public. As we will see, the fluid nature of technology has helped open these spheres towards achieving nearer universal access. Though the society has changed and the technologies have developed much faster than Habermas could have conceived, their progression followed similar patterns to those he envisaged (Warner, 2015: 288). For example, young, white, male professionals with a high income and education levels dominated the demographics of those with initial internet access (Margolis and Resnick, 2000; Norris, 2001: 77-86). For the most part, this access stayed solely within professional environments

until the creation of the World Wide Web in 1989 began the move towards a more accessible, multimedia online environment which accommodated the needs and abilities of those outside university and business settings (Margolis and Resnick, 2000: 4).

Even so, by the end of the 1990s, the demographics of internet access had changed little (Margolis and Resnick, 2000: 4), and only a minority of UK households (just 25% in 2000) possessed their own internet connection (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2017a). This figure increased drastically in the early twenty-first century, doubling by 2005, reaching 57% in 2006 when Twitter was launched, and growing to 86% of British households by 2015 (ONS, 2017a). These figures not only illustrate the prevalence of internet access in British homes but also the speed at which it became a common household fixture. In addition to household internet, the later ability to access the internet 'on the go' through mobile devices, mobile internet data, and free Wi-Fi hotspots in public places (such as town squares, coffee shops, and on public transport) has created a society in which individuals are heavily connected to the internet but do not necessarily need broadband in their own homes. The ease of internet use is reflected by its continued incorporation into many aspects of life such as communication, consumer habits, banking, and media. Despite this upsurge in use, some barriers to universally equal access still exist, including socio-economic status and age (linked to computer literacy); others have argued that personal preference and a lack of interest can also explain why some choose not to make use of the internet (ONS, 2017a; Thuermer et al., 2018: 288).

Two opposing schools of thought have emerged on the expected impact of the internet on the relationship amongst socio-economic status, access, and

engagement (DiMaggio et al., 2001). On the one hand, the internet represented a way to close the gap between the information- (and socio-economic) rich and poor (Rheingold, 1993; Anderson et al., 1997), whilst on the other hand, some believed the internet would merely exacerbate existing divisions (Margolis and Resnick, 2000; Norris, 2001). The demographics of early access demonstrated the prevalence of division, reflected by not only the socio-economic and information rich-poor gaps but also differences on the grounds of gender and race (ONS, 2017a). Research conducted in the early 2000s supported the notion that the internet exacerbated pre-existing divisions, finding that the majority of those with home internet access were of high socio-economic status (Gibson et al., 2005: 563).

However, supporting patterns in Habermas's argument of an 'open' public sphere, access became much more inclusive over time. In part this was due to the cost of accessing the internet declining, and both the software and hardware becoming more user-friendly (Norris, 2001: 28, 30). A pattern then emerged: the more users who paid to access the internet, the more costs could fall, which in turn would entice more new users, and only when demand reached a point of saturation would the percentage of households online begin to plateau (Norris, 2001: 30). The implications of this process were reflected in the steady reduction of those who listed the cost of equipment or access (telephone, broadband subscription) as the reason for not having internet connection in their home (ONS, 2017a). Even well into the twenty-first century, these numbers continued to fall, declining from an already relatively low 18% and 15%, respectively, in 2010 to 8% six years later (ONS, 2017).

Moreover, 2010 also saw a shift in dialogue about the impact of socioeconomic status in determining internet access; the focus instead moved to the relationship between socio-economic status and the level of political participation once online (Gibson et al., 2010; Thuermer et al., 2018). However, this change should not be interpreted as reflecting the attainment of real-time universal access; rather, the share of households with internet access has plateaued around 90%, which has been explained by factors other than socio-economic status.

Household demographics, specifically the number and ages of people residing in the home, highlight other factors which influenced uptake. Nearly all those with children (97%) were connected, but access of single-occupancy households (where only one adult resided at the address) fluctuated greatly depending on age (ONS, 2017). For such households containing an adult aged 65 or over, the figure fell to 49%, compared to 80% of those in single-adult households in the 16–64-year bracket (ONS, 2017). This age gap is primarily linked to computer literacy, with lack of skill representing the second-most common reason citizens did not use the internet – 21% in 2015 (ONS, 2017). As the internet has become a more integrated part of life, schools have encouraged its use for the completion of homework, educating pupils in internet safety and providing them with the foundational knowledge necessary to function in an increasingly online world. The COVID-19 pandemic had also thrown the reliance on internet access in for teaching into sharper relief as school pupils and university students spent much of the 2020-21 academic year taking online classes. The reliance on internet access in education not only at least partially explains the greater likelihood that households with children have

internet access but also why the generation gap became so pronounced. Despite this gap, as observed by the overall household access statistics, there has been a continued trend for the age-related gaps to close, albeit more slowly than with overall household access. Efforts to encourage uptake amongst older generations have been undertaken, in part due to the necessity of internet literacy when living in a technology-driven world. However, computer literacy does not represent the only reason citizens choose not to use the internet. As the following paragraphs explore, personal preference and disability are two other factors that determine whether an individual is 'online'.

The most common reason given in the survey for being offline (53% of the respondents without household internet in 2015), was occupants' views that they did not need it, either because they did not see it as useful, or they lacked interest (ONS, 2017). Even as overall internet access has increased, this reason has remained the most common explanation for citizens being unconnected, accounting for more than 50% of non-users since 2011 and increasing to over 60% of offline households in 2017 (ONS, 2017). Although some citizens are still unable to access the internet due to other factors such as a physical or sensorial disability (Dobransky and Hargittai, 2016), the statistics indicate that the potential for access is more or less universal (ONS, 2017a). However, access cannot be assumed to automatically translate into participation in online debates.

This latter point illustrates the important secondary distinction between Habermas' interpretation of the *opportunity* to engage in rational-critical debate and the *choice* to access the public sphere. For example, a 2015 survey found that that 86% of households had access to the internet, but only 57% utilised it

for social networking (ONS, 2017a). Despite the ability to access social media sites, not everyone wishes to do so, and even under the umbrella of social media, a range of platforms exist, including Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. These variations in choice led Habermas (2006: 415) to acknowledge that the public sphere is formed of a network of networks, of which social media comprise just one branch. The range of platforms also allows individuals access to a variety of specific networks to which they can choose to connect or not. Indeed, Habermas' qualification of the public sphere supporting the *potential* for universal access might be better (and less controversially) applied to the online context.

3.3 Status

Once the public sphere had been accessed, Habermas (1989: 36) stipulated that "far from presupposing the equality of status, [it] disregarded status altogether". This indifference would ensure that debates would be conducted and decided on merit alone rather the economic and social positions of the participants. Those who convened as the public would do so as "private gentlemen" and discuss amongst themselves on a level of "common humanity" (Habermas, 1989: 36). Their positions as private persons would represent their only badge of identification; positions of public office had no place in the sphere and would not command an automatic assumption of authority. Similarly, economic status based on income or occupation would not play a role as only the quality of debate mattered in the sphere. In short, the public sphere would naturally function as a meritocracy whereby, regardless of status, there would be both the "opportunity and mobility for 'talent' to combine with 'effort' in order

to ‘rise to the top’” (Littler, 2017: 1). However, Habermas (1989: 36) was aware that this ideal of the public sphere had not been fully “realized in the coffee houses, the *salons*, and the societies” of the eighteenth century, the centres of criticism which had originally informed his ideas. Rather, he argued that the *idea* of equality within the public sphere had become institutionalised which was “at least consequential” to opportunities provided for citizens engaging in discourse (Habermas, 1989: 36).

The concept of a disregard for status has since re-emerged as a focal point of debate amongst scholars who regard social media as providing opportunities for political discourse to take place on a level playing field for users. Individuals such as Howard Rheingold (1993), Clay Shirky (2011), and former Member of Parliament (MP) Douglas Carswell (2012) saw the internet and social media as offering a significant challenge to the monopoly of the elite (though they could, of course, be replaced by new elites) by giving a platform to otherwise marginalised voices. In contrast, Margolis and Resnick (2000) doubted that the use of the internet would bring any meaningful change to political communication, whilst Fraser’s (1990) concerns about the informal barriers foreshadowed the emergence of new hierarchies from within the sphere. In this section I briefly examine Habermas’s notion of the disregard of status in the context of social media sites. This is followed by an analysis of how status has influenced online participation in relation to different demographic groups. The focus then shifts to the status of celebrity and how it has both permeated the social media sphere and emerged from within it.

Social media sites are created and designed around the publication of user-generated content. The sites provide platforms through which users can

create and share content, engage with other users, or both, all within a virtual environment. Twitter, for example, was designed around the sharing of news content, providing a way to connect individuals and create dialogues. As users engage through a virtual environment, the removal of the restrictions of time and space have made these platforms far less exclusive than in the offline world (Freelon, 2010). Without the need for physical encounters, and the time and resources this can entail, social media sites can connect people across countries and continents. This also lends itself to the idea of the disregard of status as it apparently removes the economic and practical barriers faced when individuals may wish, for example, to attend public meetings. As individuals are not disadvantaged by their geographical location, the sphere is more open and level. Twitter's design also seems more egalitarian as all users are given the same generic layout and character limit. In addition, use of the site had remained free, so it did not impose any financial restrictions by providing premium accounts that would cost money to use. The design architecture of Twitter, the site's key functions, and their implications on deliberation are examined in more detail in Chapter Four.

Initial concerns about socio-economic restrictions being accentuated online were tempered as the virtual environment developed. Rather than increasing barriers to participants, social media use was found to slightly lower the inhibitions to participate of those with lower levels of education or lower socio-economic status (Gibson et al 2005). This trend was not entirely uniform across the different groups as there was a less significant change in the percentage of women who engaged in more active forms of online participation (Gibson et al., 2005: 575-577). However, the research also demonstrated that

there was no clear decline in female participation online compared to offline, and the pattern of behaviour was strongly linked to personal preference rather than recognised formal impediments on the part of the social media sites.

For proponents of social media who argue the sites provide platforms for citizens' voices, youth represented one of the key groups whose political participation on these sites markedly increased compared to their offline levels of engagement, in part due to their greater familiarity with the online world (Gibson et al., 2005; Steinberg, 2015). Though young people are regularly accused of apathy and lack of civic engagement, the internet has been shown to encourage higher levels of political participation, even if only online (Freelon, 2010). Overall, the evidence suggest social media has encouraged participation and removed some of the formal barriers which prevent some groups from greater involvement in offline discussions and actions. However, to develop the analysis, I explore informal barriers which have emerged across social media platforms. The realities of inequality and hierarchies within the social media sphere are examined through three key lenses: external hierarchies pervading the sphere (social inequality), the use of professionals and advertising (economic inequality), and the hierarchies which have emerged from within the public sphere.

Just a cursory glance at the list of accounts with most followers on Twitter, friends or likes on Facebook, or subscribers on YouTube most likely highlights familiar names from the worlds of entertainment and sport. These public figures' numbers of followers easily reach the tens of millions; in June 2017, for example, American singer Katy Perry became the first to exceed 100 million followers on Twitter (Bruner, 2017). Importantly, many of these accounts

belong to individuals known to have a strong offline presence or following, which can positively impact the size of their online audience. For example, when Prime Minister David Cameron joined Twitter in 2012, he accumulated over 100,000 followers in the first week whilst only posting a few tweets.[3] A Twitter account with a large number of followers, or indeed of any numbers, cannot be assumed to be indicative of the individuals' abilities to engage in rational-critical debate. Nor does it necessarily indicate popularity, some Twitter accounts might be followed on the grounds of notoriety. However, if an individual is already well-known offline it provides them with an existing audience with whom they can look to create a digital relationship with through social media. Chapters Five and Seven will examine patterns in follower data and status between celebrities, political commentators, political parties, and candidates.

Status is not only influenced by 'celebrity' but also offline economic status, which has become increasingly significant in social media. For example, the motivations behind the use of the social media site Instagram have moved towards the desire to create the 'perfect picture', which can often involve travelling to various (expensive) destinations. In one instance, an Australian woman admitted to accumulating over £5,000 worth of credit card debt to travel to Disneyland for "the perfect shot" for her Instagram followers (Newsbeat, 2019). Whilst there may have been multiple factors that influenced this individual's decision, such as the desire for social capital or the fulfilment of a

[3] This data was collected during the research for my undergraduate dissertation submitted in 2013, when I recorded weekly the number of followers and tweets posted by MPs who held Twitter accounts between 11 June 2012 and 23 December 2012. See Pillmoor (2013).

dream trip to Disneyland, it highlights how the aspiration to collect such images from various spots all over the world can become increasingly commodified.

More pertinent, however, is the growing presence of digital professionals and advertising into the social media sphere. Whilst Habermas did not foresee the infiltration of professionals, a business or individual can, with funding, use specialists to assist in creating their brand (a product or themselves) to attract online attention (Warner, 2015: 286). This moves the social media sphere into the business of online consumerism rather than rational-critical debate. It allows large companies or individuals with the necessary resources to advertise through personalised ads and 'pinned' search terms or topic areas to attract users' attention, undermining the concept of a level playing field. A comparison of the use of resources by the UK political parties in their online activities on Twitter is performed in Chapter Four.

However, financial advantages and hierarchies can also be created internally. This will be discussed in the context of the rise of social media 'influencers'. In Habermas' outline of the public sphere, he overlooks the emergence of internal hierarchies, despite acknowledging the lack of realisation of a universal disregard of status. He did not develop his ideas to consider the tensions that could arise between his concept of a disregard of status upon entry to the public sphere and the impact of the hierarchies that form *within* the sphere, akin to the informal barriers outlined by Fraser (1990). These hierarchies are clearly illustrated in the virtual environment though the rise of social media 'influencers', a term which has become increasingly prominent over the last decade.

Influencers are individuals who use social media sites to engage with and shape the attitudes of an audience, building up credibility through the platforms, often by relying on ‘authenticity’ in their presentation and reach (Taylor and Harris, 2008; Lou and Yuan, 2019). In this instance, influencers not only create a higher status for themselves within the sphere but also turn themselves (as a brand) into a commodity, feeding into the profession of advertising in the sphere and agenda- (or trend-) setting. However, as I discuss, the rise of influencers can itself be an indication of a level playing field.

A key attraction of social media platforms has been the new opportunities they provide for users to reach a wider audience (Lipsman et al., 2012; Fuller and Roy-Chowdhuri, 2018). For some netizens, social media sites are platforms on which they can display their talents in the hope of attracting sufficient attention across the original site, and even beyond the virtual environment, to gain the attention of others in relevant industries. Canadian singer-songwriters Justin Bieber and The Weeknd are examples of individuals who used YouTube to display their musical abilities and, based on these, attracted an online following and wider exposure. Through the site, they were also noticed by and gained the support of music industry heavyweights, including Usher and Drake, respectively, and subsequently went on to sign record deals (Lentz, 2019). These examples demonstrate how social media has the potential to help individuals ‘rise to the top’ and achieve ‘celebrity’ status based on their abilities. However, not everyone who is able to gain traction on social media does so to develop a career away from these platforms.

In the world of social media influencers, there are those who continue to base their careers on social media platforms. UK-based Zoe ‘Zoella’ Sugg

represents one of the earliest and better-known examples and someone who became a millionaire in her twenties. Sugg started her social media career with her online ‘blog’ in 2009, primarily based around fashion and beauty products (often picked up at car boot sales for minimal cost), before expanding to a YouTube channel the same year (Ford, 2014). Through YouTube, Sugg started posting ‘vlog’ reviews of her favourite products and was able to connect with other users in a way which caught and maintained the attention of viewers and subscribers. In this respect, her ‘talent’ for identifying relatable content and personable engagement with an audience meant she could distinguish herself from her peers. Over time, her online following also attracted advertisers and companies which paid her to review their products. This latter stage of the progression of her career, the advertising relationship she built with other brands, highlights the double-edged nature of the idea of disregard of status in the social media sphere. The creation of these internal hierarchies and the financial influences they draw in appear to challenge the principles of the public sphere. However, it also proves how the platform of social media, at its core, provides opportunities for otherwise peripheral voices to be heard and recognised for their abilities

Despite this, where talent and perseverance enable individuals to ‘rise to the top’, the rise in consumerism and the implications, which Habermas warned to be wary of, still need to be acknowledged. For example, the impact can be seen in the shift in terminology and categorisation; as individuals have become brands in themselves, ‘influencers’ have been categorised under the label of social media ‘marketing’ (Vrontis et al., 2021). Also, with ‘social media influencer’ becoming a recognised occupation, competition in this crowded

market has grown, at some detriment to the concept of the level playing field. For aspiring influencers specifically, there is a growing emphasis on the need for quality equipment such as video recorders and web cameras, as well as increasingly professional editing software; a smartphone may be an accessible gateway to producing content publishing online, but after a time, influencers are expected to create more polished productions (Henderson, 2020). This does not mean there is no opportunity for individuals to rise to the top through talent alone, but with more economically driven competition in the industry, it indicates a growing challenge to Habermas' vision of the public sphere and has made the potential harder to realise. The tension between equal entry and the encroachment of economic factors into the sphere is expanded in Chapter Four to consider the impact of the different resources available to the UK pollical parties on their online activities.

3.4 Domain of Common Concern: Agenda-Setting

The third and final criterion pertains to the role of the public sphere as the domain for common concern (Habermas, 1989: 36). It represents a space where discourse "presupposed the problematization of areas that until then had not been questioned"; it meant citizens using the public sphere as a space to question any issues that concerned them (Habermas, 1989: 36). The domain of common concern had, until the rise of the public sphere, resided with the First and Second Estates (i.e., the Church and the state authorities). These institutions held the "monopoly of interpretation not just from the pulpit but in philosophy, literature, and art" (Habermas, 1989: 36). Their interpretations were passed down to the rest of the populace (the Third Estate), who lacked the

information or ability to challenge these established thoughts. The transition into a public sphere began with the commodification of cultural products (art and literature); works were produced for distribution, and for the first time, private persons could engage in rational communication with one another to discuss, debate, and decide on subjects previously reserved for the upper classes.

Fundamentally, this criterion relied on breaking institutional monopolies which excluded the public from discussions by enabling citizens to become informed and capable of engaging in rational-critical debate. However, the term ‘common concern’ has itself caused some debate amongst academics. Habermas did not go into precise detail when describing what constituted common concern beyond the inclusion of biblical readings as well as works of philosophy, art, and literature. He determined that decisions made on these works dictated societal attitudes and behaviours and so should be determined by the collective.

Fraser (1990: 70) argued that Habermas’ vague reference to “public matters” (common concerns) discussed in the public sphere failed to acknowledge how the interpretation of the parameters of ‘public’ could alter over time. The multiplicity of publics and their fluidity had not entered into Habermas’ original designs outlining a homogenous public sphere (Warner, 2015: 288). One such example which has continued to the present day involves the discussion of domestic violence. Until the late twentieth century, only a minority of the public, consisting of feminist voices, considered the issue of domestic violence against women and children a subject of common concern, whilst the vast majority viewed it as a private matter (Fraser, 1990). Recent decades have ushered in an about-turn in attitudes in the United Kingdom on domestic

violence, with far more legal protections introduced as it has become a topic of common concern. Fraser (1990: 71) used this example to note that the domains which constitute common concern lack natural or static boundaries but instead can shift through “discursive contestation”.

It can certainly be argued that Habermas possessed an overly simplistic view of which topics constituted common concern. However, despite its shortcomings in providing rigorous definition of common concerns, the broad outline of his criterion – the extension of the right of interpretation of what comprises a common concern from the Church and state to the greater public – stands up to scrutiny. The discussion of domestic violence, albeit one which took place over a protracted period before becoming a matter of wider public interest, indicates that such topics have been determined to be ‘common concerns’ amongst the citizenry and beyond the First and Second Estates. In this respect, Habermas’ argument for a transition in who can determine a common concern is supported by evidence, despite the challenges to his view of a homogenous public sphere.

Before I examine the role of social media in the discussion of the transition of the domain of common concern towards the citizens, it is necessary to first outline the role of the Fourth Estate – the press and other mass media – in steering the discourse and challenging the authority of the First and Second Estates. Framed under the term “agenda setting”, this field of research grew significantly in the latter half of the twentieth century alongside the expanding mass media of newspapers, television, and radio (Shaw and Martin, 1992: 902-903). In this field, there remains ongoing debate around how far the agenda-setting of the mass media influences the public’s engagement with different

issues. Bernard Cohen (1963: 13) is often quoted for his argument that although the media might not tell its audience what to think, it does succeed in telling it what to think about (Shaw and Martin, 1992; McCombs, 2013).

Many studies continue to investigate and attempt to measure the level of media influence (Wanta et al., 2004; McCombs, 2013), but for this thesis, the evolution of this debate was significant in signalling a shift away from the traditional agenda setters of the First and Second Estates. However, even through the mass media, citizens are still receiving a “second-hand reality”, structured by journalists and presented to the audience (McCombs, 2013: 1). Subsequently, the creation of the internet and introduction of social media sites have offered a new method for information dissemination with the potential to challenge the view that the mass media have an agenda-setting role (McCombs, 2005; Williams and Delli Carpini, 2011; Feezell, 2017). First, I outline the development of online media, examining how they have challenged the landscape of ‘news’, followed by an exploration of how social media emerged as a potential new agenda-setting platform.

The relaxation of government censorship of the press in the late-seventeenth century had begun the first significant movement away from the agenda-setting by the First and Second Estates. The end of the twentieth century signalled another shift, this time towards the introduction of the online commodification of cultural products in the form of the internet and the World Wide Web. This created a new, digital environment through which information could be made publicly available. This new mode of information dissemination came in two key stages: Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2005). Web 1.0 consisted of news sites, company websites, and search engines which primarily

aimed to share information by presenting it to a passive audience. In this respect, it closely mirrored the broadcasting role attributed to the mass media (Graham et al., 2013; Graham et al., 2014; McLoughlin et al., 2020). However, it brought about not only a new way of receiving information but a greater diversity of sources and topics which were more easily accessible to the public. It was from Web 1.0 that the beginnings of potential for online public spheres emerged through the introduction and use of comment sections on websites which enabled internet users to participate by responding to content and interacting with each other on a web page (Jackson and Lilleker, 2009). This provided an early opportunity for online citizen participation.

From Web 1.0, Web 2.0 emerged, which was built on the concept of user-generated content, which was to go on to include social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other online blogs (O'Reilly, 2005). This shift meant online platforms were, for the first time, designed around information exchange and debate amongst citizens. Now referred to as the ‘Fifth Estate’ (Dutton, 2009) – encompassing bloggers, non-mainstream journalists, and social media, which represented outlier viewpoints – social media distinguished themselves from the Fourth Estate of the mass media and acted in part as a challenge to the latter’s agenda-setting. As previous forms of media did with the topic of domestic violence, which was not originally considered a public matter, social media have provided opportunities to draw attention to views and issues not widely accepted as matters of public concern due to lack of knowledge and general interest or political oppression. In the case of the latter, Twitter is well remembered for its role in the anti-government movements which occurred across the Middle East as part of the 2010-11 Arab Spring. The role of Twitter

in initiating these movements is often found to be exaggerated, but the social media site was used by activists and other individuals to bring greater attention to the situation (Murthy, 2013: 111-112). By acting as ‘citizen journalists’, members of the public could update each other – and the world events as they unfolded despite the political oppression they faced (Murthy, 2013: 59, 93). Similarly, the ‘Occupy’ movements which started in 2011 in New York and adopted the Twitter hashtag #OccupyWallStreet, which aimed to highlight financial inequalities in the United States, used Twitter as one of its methods to attract attention to the cause and spark public dialogue.

Whilst not all the issues raised on social media become public matters, for many different reasons, social media offer new opportunities for peripheral voices to introduce previously undiscussed issues in a public forum. It is important to remember that the underlying significance of the domain of common concern in the public sphere was the removal of the monopoly of decision-making from the First and Second Estates. Habermas’ work raised questions about what constitutes common concern and the fluid nature of this notion, and social media have at least provided new platforms through which these monopolies can be challenged and the parameters of ‘public matters’ tested. This raises questions concerning how reactive and receptive political parties and candidates could be to online discussion and ‘trends’ during an election campaign. Chapters Six and Seven will examine this, considering how far parties and candidates used Twitter during the 2015 general election as a source for campaign topics and discourse, or a medium through which they could set the agenda.

3.5 Refeudalisation

With the three criteria outlined above, Habermas presented a blueprint for the key institutional principles needed to form the public sphere. The sphere itself was supposed to be an environment in which rational-critical debate took place amongst citizens and acted as a vehicle for public opinion. However, Habermas (1989: 142, 158) noted that his concept of a public sphere, which drew on the bourgeois public sphere of the salons and coffee houses, could come under threat through a process of ‘refeudalisation’. This process was likened to a condition which reflected the feudal state insofar as state and society or public and private merged once again. Although the earlier monopolies of the First and Second Estates would not have been reinstated, the mass media and state actors could impose themselves in the public sphere and manipulate it for their own interests.

Habermas (1989: 200, 215) identified the role of a growing consumer culture and a return to what he called ‘representative publicity’, both of which he attributed in part to the mass media and paid specialists, in triggering this process. The combined effects of consumerism and representative publicity came at the expense of rational-critical debate, which was central to Habermas’ public sphere and thus created a “pseudo-public sphere” where only the impression of deliberation was proffered (Habermas, 1989: 162). This in turn produced manipulated, or “non-public” opinion (Habermas, 1989: 239). On this basis, Habermas (1989: 239) identified two distinct forms of public opinion: “critical” public opinion which emerged from the public sphere and “manipulated” (non-)public opinion which was a product of the pseudo-public sphere.

The first presupposed a reasoning public which engaged in rational-critical debate, underpinned by the three institutional criteria outlined above (Habermas et al., 1974: 50). It acted as a "critical authority" to which the state's political and social power would be subject (Habermas, 1989: 236). This public opinion, therefore, was "critical in intent and institutionally guaranteed" (Habermas et al., 1974: 50). The second form of public opinion still required the fulfilment of the institutional criteria. However, the process of refeudalisation undermined the attainment of rational-critical debate. Instead of a debating public, citizens were viewed as unthinking consumers, and representative publicity (merely displaying a position of power of authority) was used to manipulate the public and suppress discussion. Rather than a critical authority, the public opinion which emerged from the pseudo-public sphere was seen as "an object to be moulded" and had become "an arena of competing interests" (Habermas, 1989: 236, 132).

I first outline in more detail the two elements – consumer culture and a return to representative publicity – which transformed Habermas' visionary public sphere into a pseudo-public sphere, exploring how the mass media contributed to this process and how these behaviours are translating into the new media context. Finally, I examine Habermas' perspective on the implications of manipulated public opinion and how the media and researchers have turned to using and exploring social media as a source of public opinion.

3.5.1 Consumer Culture

"…from a culture-debating to a culture-consuming public" (Habermas, 1989: 159).

The central idea of the public sphere as an arena for rational-critical debate relied on an informed public, which required a flow of information which citizens could review and debate. Habermas (1989: 182) argued that the emergence of print media proved a key turning point in information dissemination and accessibility. He looked favourably upon the template of the small businesses of the late seventeenth century which produced many of the first periodicals, viewing these establishments as working from "the principle of a modest maximization of profit that did not overstep the traditional bounds of early capitalism" (Habermas, 1989: 181). By Habermas' own acknowledgement, many of the scholarly journals and political weeklies of the time were financially insecure, but this lack of financial stability only recommended to Habermas their role in supporting rational-critical debate, undistracted as they were by many of the commercial considerations of the later newspapers.

However, the growing print media began to adopt increasingly profit-orientated business models, challenging Habermas' hopes of encouraging a rational debating public. Habermas (1989: 184) dated the transition (across Great Britain, France, and the United States) from a press built around fostering rational-critical debate to one primarily built around business considerations, from the 1830s. This shift into commercial considerations continued to have an impact across different forms of literature and by the 1920s publishers were increasingly catering for the growing popularity of post-war book clubs, publishing books *en masse,* which were cheaper and less financially risky business ventures (Habermas, 1989: 167). Although increasing public accessibility to the literature, it also "diminished consumer selection opportunities" in the interest of larger profit margins (Habermas, 1989: 167).

This trend continued throughout the twentieth century with the growing production of ‘mass market paperbacks’ that were cheaper to produce than ‘regular’ paperbacks on account of using less expensive materials. The content of mass market paperbacks was often selected on the basis of its mass appeal and saleability rather than primarily determined by the quality of the content. Thus, Habermas argued, the emphasis was on producing works orientated towards reading for leisure rather than furthering one’s critical awareness or encouraging political discourse.

For the press, the advertising business had opened a new source of revenue at a time when the price per copy was low and the number of buyers had multiplied. With increasing demand, publishers could rely on selling “a correspondingly growing portion of space” for advertising (Habermas, 1989: 185). However, the encroachment of advertising and commercialism which shifted focus onto profit margins did not necessarily come at the expense of rational-critical debate as Habermas argued. Although not matching Habermas’ ideals, the acceptance of the need for financial resources could ultimately enable the dissemination of content that could instigate rational-critical debate. The same also applied for other publishers; although the mass market paperbacks primarily catered for leisure, the revenue would also contribute to publication of other works such as literary journals or other critical pieces.

Other changes also assisted in the rising consumer culture, such as the aestheticisation of commodities that had crept into the mass media (Iqani, 2012). Habermas (1989: 168) was aware of a shifting emphasis towards imagery as cartoon and news images began to infiltrate the print media, with “yellow journalism”, named after the yellow paper used at the time to print

comics, emerging at the end of the nineteenth century. By the 1930s, the use of illustrations in books had developed into the popularisation of the comic book across the United States and United Kingdom. The use of images increased the accessibility of the product to the masses, but Habermas (1989: 168) noted that it “was as optically effective as it was undermining on the literary level”. This tendency was exacerbated by the new media of the twentieth century (particularly film and television), which came to overshadow the press that comprised Habermas’ original subject. The problems noted by Habermas with these new forms of media were twofold, but both resulted in a decline in rational-critical debate. Firstly, they created output that was “more palatable for consumption”, encouraging “impersonal indulgence in stimulating relaxation” at the expense of the use of public reason (Habermas, 1989: 170). Secondly, the form of communication was strictly one-way; the media *broadcast* to an audience, drawing in “the eyes and ears of the public under their spell” to “deprive it of the opportunity to say something and to disagree” (Habermas, 1989: 171). This process fed into a consumerist society in which production was primarily “targeted at consumption, leisure and services” (Featherstone, 2007: 21). Citizens were turning into consumers: unthinking, busy, distracted, and easily directed by branding and advertising (Warner, 2015: 288).

Further changes to the film and television industries only fed into the consumer culture. Not only did the new media bring about more varied formats but also growing fragmentation and competition within the different mediums (Chadwick, 2013). Television, for example, has expanded beyond its original terrestrial channels to multiple channels available on Freeview (free-to-air television) and the growing industry of subscription television services such as

those provided by Sky, Virgin Media, and BT. However, these products have not just remained within traditional media; online subscription services have also become increasingly common with Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Apple TV. Although the growing variety has allowed greater consumer choice and enabled the production and provision of more output, and of greater quality (Feezell, 2017), the primary criticism is that it has come at an increasing cost, both monetary and in terms of 'universal' access (Lee et al., 2018).

The growing choice of digital and social media have also been argued to contribute to the trend of turning citizens into consumers: passive, easily distracted, and expecting instant gratification rather than thirsting for rational-critical debate (Warner, 2015: 288). The demand of service from consumers has grown cyclically as websites, adverts, and content have been continually developed around these expectations. A particular feature of social media sites, particularly Twitter and Instagram, is the ability to scroll through numerous tweets and images within a few seconds. This encourages content creators to design their posts with the aim of attracting enough attention from a user to make them pause for a more detailed look. Such actions are part of the growing clickbait culture permeating the internet, whereby snippets of text or images are used to entice netizens to click on a link to another website, article, or social media profile. Similarly, more recent social media sites such as the short-form video service 'TikTok', released in 2016, have continued to develop and reinforce consumer demand for content that only requires a short span of attention as the site only supports videos of less than three minutes. The video service YouTube has also responded to consumer habits by introducing a 2021

add-on called ‘YouTube Shorts’ to create a different viewing experience where users post clips of no more than 15 seconds.

Social media likewise support users’ ability to respond instantly to online content with various features such as ‘favouriting’ and ‘sharing’. As discussed in Chapter Four, these modes of participation are spontaneous and instantaneous, and they reflect different levels of digital attachment. A tweet, for example, may be ‘favourited’, or a Facebook post ‘liked’, as a sign of acknowledgement without any further engagement with either the content or the creator. The encroaching consumer culture has increased competition online, supported by the speed at which the internet has now made information, products, and services available, along with the breadth of options. This competition is not only amongst the different platforms and traditional sellers, such as clothing companies, but also the users themselves. The imagery-driven environment, the need to attract attention, and the increased economic competition challenge the potential for rational-critical debate upon which Habermas built his concept of a public sphere. Rather than focusing on encouraging discussion within user-generated content, the internet has also moved towards the promotion of products, services, and leisure. This challenges the extent to which social media platforms are utilised as deliberative spaces and begins to highlight how some of the threats Habermas identified to the public sphere are applicable to the virtual environment.

3.5.2 Representative Publicity

The second factor Habermas (1989: 200) identified as part of the refeudalisation process was the return of representative publicity, whereby those in positions of political office or authority would represent their political power before the people merely as a display and absent from public political discussion. Having already stated his distaste for the rise of consumer culture in conjunction with the expansion of an increasingly business-centred mass media, Habermas (1989: 193) became more concerned about the effect of public relations (PR) techniques. He clearly distinguished between the effects of advertising and mass media in creating a pseudo-public sphere (consisting of consumers) versus the responsibility of PR for initiating 'non-public opinion' (the manipulation of the public's perception through what Habermas referred to as manipulated publicity) in the pseudo-public sphere (Habermas, 1989: 193-194).

On the one hand, advertising consciously addresses its audience as consumers and consists of a simple sales pitch (Lees-Marshment, 2009; Warner, 2015: 292). In comparison, the domain of public relations ostensibly addresses the audience as citizens, creating the perception of meaningful engagement and autonomous choice based on informed thinking (Habermas, 1989: 193). Although a product (for example, a policy) is still being sold under PR, marketing begins much earlier in its creation (Lees-Marshment, 2009: 292-293). This process tailors the aims of a party, business, or other actor in a way that increases their appeal to an audience. Presenting a perceived choice creates a false sense of inclusion in the decision-making process without actually engaging in rational-critical debate and thus contributes to a pseudo-public sphere.

Newman and Perloff (2004) had already identified this behaviour amongst political parties in the 1980s as a reaction to the continued decline of partisanship amongst the UK electorate with “party ideology…being driven by marketing, not by party affiliation” (Newman, 2012: 3). It was also around this period that ‘valence’ voting had become more widely recognised with David Butler and Donald Stokes (1974) first making the distinction between valence issues and ‘position’ issues. The latter pertains to matters on which voters take a clear position, such as for or against nationalisation, whereas valence issues relate to those areas in which there is broad consensus amongst the electorate (for example, most people would want to see a reduction in crime or advocate strong economic growth). Consequently, valence voting is based on the party perceived to be the most competent to deliver on the policies the electorate want, and so the disagreement comes from perceptions of the parties’ abilities to achieve these goals rather than the issues themselves (Denver, 2007: 96). Chapter Six examines the relationship between public opinion and the electoral issues with which the parties were most engaged on Twitter during the 2015 UK general election campaign.

Habermas’ concerns about the return of representative publicity and the manipulation of public opinion did not anticipate many of the new challenges that emerged towards the end of the twentieth century, most notably the use of PR specialists and technological advancements which led to the introduction of data analytics (Warner, 2015). Although Habermas had viewed refeudalisation as an ongoing process, he expected the changes to be slow. However, the advancement of new technologies and the “colonisation of politics by professional political consultants” accelerated this transition (Warner, 2015:

288). For instance, the effects of online algorithms are well-documented. On one hand, the ability to target advertisements to the interests of individuals based on their online activities has created a more personalised experience for the user and allowed a more effective advertising structure for businesses (Bodle, 2014; Kotras, 2020). However, discussions are also continuing into the negative effects of online advertising, ranging from issues such as data protection, privacy, and the need for regulation, to over-commercialisation (Toch et al., 2012; Bodle, 2014; Evans et al., 2014; Simons and Ghosh, 2020).

The criticism most pertinent to Habermas' arguments are concerns over the creation of 'echo chambers' through the application of these algorithms (Friedland and Hove, 2016). In this situation, the adverts, tailored to online behaviours and interest, are adapted to reflect an individual's online activities and this to reinforce existing beliefs rather than offering diversity within or beyond the given areas. The concern over echo chambers in social media has been well discussed, though the idea behind the term was conceived before the arrival of the internet. Habermas (1989: 213) observed that "those who engage in discussion more frequently…have a tendency to do no more than mutually confirm their ideas and at best to influence only the hesitant and less involved parties". Similarly, he also noted that "an opinion once assumed often becomes fixed as a rigid habit" (Habermas, 1989: 213). These concerns were reflected in the 'reinforcement theory' of the (mass) media which argued that instead of moulding the opinions of the electorate through agenda-setting, the media sought to align themselves with existing views and provide additional reasons for consumers to select them (Potter, 2011; Denver et al., 2012; McCombs, 2014). In social media, this was identified early in the congregating of like-

minded individuals in chat rooms, where fans of the same television show or book series could meet online to discuss theories or even publish their own works such as fan-fiction stories or artwork (Jenkins, 2006).

However, the degree to which the creation of echo chambers has become normalised and the ease with which the process has occurred is beyond anything Habermas imagined and would only have exacerbated his concerns. These observations challenge the oft-stated argument that the access and breadth of information the internet has provides should ensure a more informed public (Papacharissi, 2002; Dubois and Blank, 2018: 12-13). Instead, the reinforcement of ideas at the expense of rational-critical thought has only heightened the issue of ‘non-public opinion’.

3.5.3 Public Opinion

A consequence of consumer culture and representative publicity in particular has been the generation of non-public opinion. In a functioning public sphere, public opinion would emerge as a vehicle which “put the state in touch with the needs of society” (Habermas, 1989: 31). However, the absence of rational-critical debate in the pseudo-public sphere instead produces ‘manipulated public opinion’. For Habermas (1989: 236), rather than being concerned with the *outcome* of public opinion, such as ensuring a public consensus is reached, he was instead interested in public opinion as a *process* – its formation (how “the public [was] expected to behave”) and its “functional consequences” (Dahlberg, 2005). With this approach he outlined the relationship between public opinion and non-public opinion.

Habermas (1989: 236) clearly stated that critical public opinion and non-public opinion exist independently of one another. He acknowledged that, in theory, “there could be a link between public opinion as an ideal entity and its actual manifestations”, but in practice this does not occur (Habermas, 1989: 236). The existence of one does not result from the failure of the other. Instead, refeudalisation means that critical public opinion has been “supplanted by manipulated publicity”, putting the two entities into conflict (Habermas, 1989: 178) . As well as the mode of their formation, the concept of accountability also varies between the two forms of public opinion. The provision of critical public opinion puts the state in touch with the needs of society. The formation of opinion from rational-critical debate ensures society’s role as a critical authority in holding the state to account.

In comparison, non-public opinion does not hold the same authority. However, by generating manipulated public opinion, parties are still held accountable for their pledges to the electorate (Habermas, 1989). Therefore, some measure of accountability still exists but for upholding parties’ own words rather than representing the rational-critical voice of the public. Moreover, questions around the capabilities of sites such as Twitter to uphold and reflect public opinion have also opened up new areas of investigation.

Research into using social media data, collected from sites such as Twitter, as a method to record public opinion is still relatively new. The technology is still being developed, and the primary focus remains measuring public opinion as an outcome instead of a process (Murphy et al., 2014; Jungherr, 2016). However, it indicates the interest in using social media as another source for gauging public opinion. The ability of algorithms to detect the

tone of content has also improved greatly, though the detection of irony, sarcasm, and the objectivity of humour still offer significant hurdles (O'Connor et al., 2010; Hawkins and Castanho Silva, 2018; Shayaa et al., 2018). The difficulty of mapping the demographics of Twitter users also remains a challenge, as does finding a representative sample (Klašnja et al., 2018). However, the site has been increasingly used as a way to record live feedback, such as during the 2015 UK general election leaders' debates, when other media platforms used a "Twitter worm" to track online sentiment throughout the debate segments (Emes and Keith, 2017). This tool was used by broadcasters to show immediate audience feedback to their viewers as well as later to review moments when public reaction reached a high or low. The online feedback was limited to showing a net positive or negative reaction by the reacting Twitter audience rather providing insight into why or to what they were responding (Emes and Keith, 2017). This reaffirms the growing demand for instant feedback, and the reification and quantification of factors, which can then be quickly responded to by journalists or political actors. There is further examination into the relationship between journalists and Twitter as both a source for news content and public opinion in Chapter Five. However, the important consideration is that the social media users on Facebook, Twitter, or other sites are not 'the public'. Ultimately, social media users are self-selecting, both in terms of the sites they frequent and how they engage with them, despite the attempts of some journalists and other news outlets to interchange the two (Warner and Neville-Shepard, 2011).

The following chapters of this thesis continue the examination into the formation of manipulated opinion by exploring how the political parties

presented themselves and their policies on Twitter during the 2015 UK general election. It focuses on the use of representative publicity in the presentation of their online messages and how the parties use the site's features to communicate, using Habermas' work as a critical framework.

3.6 Conclusion

The internet and social media have provided a new context through which to view Habermas's blueprint for the public sphere. His recognition of a sphere formed of multiple networks lends itself to analysing these new modes of communication. The key institutional criteria that provide the basis for Habermas' public sphere were also found to be transferrable to online environments, though they have also been presented with new challenges. Through the investigations, it was demonstrated that some of the original limitations and criticisms that his criteria faced also receded in light of the new technology and changed social and economic contexts; for instance, the principle of universal access can now be more realistically approached, and the opportunities to transition topics from private to common concerns have increased. The potential for the internet and social media to be part of the network of spheres which form 'the public sphere' is therefore assured. However, although social media largely reflect Habermas' core principles of a public sphere – access, disregard of status, and common concern – there are indications that the digital sphere is also facing similar threats to those Habermas' observed across other forms of media.

Concerns about the challenges to the public sphere being mirrored online – through the encroachment of the state and the same consumer culture that came to dominate the mass media – are also present across social media though not necessarily in the same ways Habermas envisaged. The use of Twitter by political actors such as parties and candidates offer opportunities to study the plausibility of Habermas' concerns by examining the extent to which political parties and their candidates use the site to engage with citizens, encouraging and fostering rational-critical debate and participation.

Having established in this chapter the credentials of the internet and social media to support a public sphere, Chapter Four explores the specific opportunities offered by the social media site Twitter for rational-critical debate and the evolution of the role of social media in political communication. An examination of the potential and limitations of the site to function as a deliberative space enables a clearer context for evaluating how the political parties and candidates utilised the site in the 2015 election campaigns. This is followed by an investigation in Chapter Five into the extent the political actors adapted to Twitter's features and how they engaged with the devices during the campaign.

Chapters Six and Seven examine the concept of manipulated public opinion in depth. This investigation expands the discussion beyond the application of Twitter's design features to analyse the content posted on the site by British political parties and their candidates to understand how they interacted with different issues during the 2015 election campaign. It raises questions about the selectivity of parties in terms of the content they produced and engaged with on the site. This thesis uses Habermas' work in the public

sphere to provide a framework for exploring and understanding the potential of Twitter provide a space for rational-critical debate. It also informs the investigation into the extent the parties' and candidates' use of the site is 2015 indicated a transformation in how we 'do' politics or business as usual.

Chapter Four: The History of Engagement on Twitter

By the time of the 2015 UK general election, Twitter had become synonymous with the term ‘social media’ alongside sites such as Facebook and, more recently, Instagram. Launched to the public in July 2006, Twitter boasted 302 million users worldwide in 2015, with 13 million in the UK alone. However, the development of and engagement with the site by UK political parties and candidates was initially sluggish, and Twitter’s role in political communication came about gradually. Key events such as Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign brought social media further into public consciousness and into the field of political communication, though it was not until after the 2010 UK general election that engagement with Twitter by British politicians took a marked upturn.

This chapter begins by exploring the premise behind Twitter, specifically how the early design concepts of the company’s co-founders and grassroot input in the site’s early phases became key to Twitter’s identity. It considers how these design features set the parameters for the communication styles available on the site and its deliberative potential. Next, it examines the impact of the 2008 Obama campaign on the wider adoption of Twitter by politicians in the United Kingdom, the so-called Obama Effect (Cheney and Olsen, 2010; Charles, 2014). Then, it explores the significance of the 2010 UK general election, which had been hyped as ‘the social media election’ but failed to live up to expectations. This section considers how the parties and politicians tried, in varying degrees, to come to terms with the new technology – who used it,

how they used it, and how effectively they did so – providing an early comparison to the much more social media-savvy 2015 UK general election. In the final sections, the chapter explores the significant changes that occurred on Twitter and in the general digital media landscape between 2010 and 2015 as Twitter's user base grew by over 200 million and 'big data' became part of everyday vocabulary (Bimber, 2014). Barack Obama's 2012 re-election campaign illuminates how much the use of social media had changed political communication and campaigning in the interim between the two British general elections. By 2015, both major parties had fully integrated social media, including Twitter, into their campaign toolkits.

4.1 The Origins of Twitter: The Features

Central to Twitter's design was the concept of a microblogging site which would provide users with the ability to stay updated on the activities of others through status updates posted as short snippets of text known as tweets (MacArthur, 2018). The ability to post these tweets both from computers and mobile phones, allowing on-the-go updates (or live action), also proved significant (Murthy, 2013; MacArthur, 2018). Although this concept sounds simple enough today, when the site was launched in 2006, it filled a hitherto unidentified niche in the Web 2.0 market. However, its lack of a direct predecessor meant Twitter had no template on which to build, so the site still had a work-in-progress feel to it when it was first released to the public. Co-founder Evan Williams acknowledged the challenges of developing Twitter as "it was hard to define, because it didn't replace anything" (Lapowski, 2013). Initially, it had been described by the founders as a platform for "status updates and social utility",

and although this remained true in part, “the insight [they] eventually came to was [that] Twitter…[was] really more of an information network…than a social network” (Lapowski, 2013). In other words, the sharing of news proved more important than the creation of an online community – the key difference between Twitter and the social networking site Facebook. Twitter’s vague and fluid identity in its early years was what made the platform much more amenable to change. Whilst constant updates of technology are expected over a product’s lifetime, the co-founders of the site undertook numerous developments from the initial basic form of Twitter over the first few years of its life, demonstrating a willingness to accommodate the demands and habits of the users, several of which are now synonymous with the Twitter brand.

4.1.1 Putting the ‘Micro’ in Microblogging

Unique to Twitter’s design was the decision to impose a 140-character limit on content posted to the site. This limit was partly necessitated by the decision to allow users to post ‘on the go’ with mobile devices. As such, the site’s designers needed to consider the strict 160-character limit of all text messages sent through Short Messaging Service (SMS), which mobile phones relied upon at the time. Ultimately, it was decided that the character limit would be imposed across the platform rather than only as a limitation on mobile users, and so Twitter became a microblogging site. Incidentally, the gap of twenty characters was reserved for the unique Twitter handle (also known as a username, such as @number10gov for the official UK Prime Minister’s page) used to identify each account. Although originally a technological restriction, the 140-character cap remained even after the adaption of modern mobile phones and networks

that allowed numerous SMS to be linked together to form a single message. Only in late 2017 did Twitter announce a move to phase in 280-character tweets after an initial trial, claiming a desire to retain both the “speed and brevity” of 140-character tweets but also account for languages that require more characters, such as English, as opposed to languages like Japanese (Rosen, 2017). However, later data showed that only approximately 9% of tweets ever reached the original character limit, and during the test phase of the roll-out, only 5% of users went on to exceed 140 characters (Rosen, 2017). Although the lack of uptake reflected little demand or need by the public for the change, it highlighted the willingness of the Twitter corporation to continue making adaptations to the communication features to assist in maintaining dialogue between users of the site. It must also be noted that Twitter accommodated the use of hyperlinks in tweets which allowed users to expand on the written content of their posts, and which supported the further exchange and provision of information as part of a deliberative environment.

4.1.2 Following

Twitter was set up as an open platform on which the content would be visible, by default, to the public. However, to gain full access to the site’s features, a person would need to register for a (free) Twitter account using an email address[4]. This thesis hereafter refers to these registered account holders as users. Once registered, users can post their own tweets (which are then

[4] Although an email address is required, it is not necessary for users to identify their real names anywhere on Twitter.

displayed on their profile page), follow other users' accounts, and engage with others' content by 'retweeting', 'replying', or 'favouriting'. A personalised 'home timeline' is also constructed for each user which provides real-time updates to show the tweets from all the accounts a user follows in reverse chronological order (newest to oldest). This tailored timeline allows users to view content from accounts they follow without the need to visit the individual profile pages, ensuring Twitter's design objective of fast news delivered on the go. The act of following an account creates the first basic measurable form of digital attachment between users.

The terminology 'follower' is itself significant as it reiterates the idea of following news (or sources of news), rather than 'friending' one another, as users do on Facebook. More significantly, following an account on Twitter does not create a reciprocal relationship. Unlike Facebook, where two users must mutually consent to becoming 'friends' to fully access each other's content, Twitter allows users to follow accounts without requiring permission from the other accountholder. The former site cultivates a connection between "intended recipients" to form a social network, whereas the latter "facilitates interactions between unknown individuals", placing the emphasis on the sharing of content and opening the potential for a much wider audience (Murthy, 2013: 19; Oz et al., 2018). Although this creates more passive connections between accounts, it is mitigated by the openness of the site where follower status does not dictate access to content, which is open to online public viewing.

4.1.3 Evolving With the Users: #, @, and RT

Many features now synonymous with Twitter were initially introduced to the site by the users. Chief amongst these were the use of ‘hashtags’, the implementation of the @-symbol to identify another user in a tweet, and ‘retweets’, all of which contribute to connecting content and spreading information. The first two features migrated to Twitter from their beginnings in internet chatrooms and message boards (Seward, 2013). Grassroot introductions and the use of all three tools caught the attention of the company, which then developed the platform around these habits and thus built the product around the consumer. These developments highlight how Twitter’s fluid and evolving identity allowed it to be adapted to the preferences of the users without the constraints of an initially rigid design (Shadbolt et al., 2019). In this respect, the company had shown itself to be receptive to demand-driven changes. However, practices that imply a democratic process behind the evolution of the site, can alternatively be interpreted as a means to increase traffic to the site and user registration. This raises questions about the balance between adapting to the consumers *for* the consumers and making changes with business and financial considerations at their core. It can be difficult to differentiate the two, as the cyclical relationship between attracting and maintaining users can demand concessions from a company with an overall business picture in mind. Regardless of the reasons for adopting these changes, the result was a more interactive platform than the creators had first envisaged. This has shaped Twitter’s potential to function as a deliberative space with focus on supporting opportunities for open engagement.

4.2.3.1 Hashtags

The purpose of hashtags – any word(s) immediately preceded by a hashtag, such as #GE2015 (General Election 2015) and #LeadersDebate – is to affiliate a tweet with a certain topic, event, or other association (Murthy, 2013). American blogger Chris Messina was credited as the first to bring the hashtag to the Twitter platform in August 2007 as a democratic method to organise and connect tweets discussing the same topic. Although the site's creators originally called this idea "too nerdy", the use of hashtags gradually became a defining feature of Twitter over the next few years (Seward, 2013). This growth was aided by the traction hashtags gained for the role they played in reporting some high-profile events. An early example was the use of #SanDiegoFire in October 2007 when wildfires swept through San Diego County in California (Seward, 2013). The hashtag was quickly adopted by users to identify tweets relating to this unfolding event, such as those sharing information on road closures or providing other updates on the ongoing situation (Wukich and Steinberg, 2016).

In July 2009, Twitter's developers showed their recognition of the hashtag as an accepted communication device by updating the site to hyperlink all hashtags automatically. This enabled users to view tweets that adopted any given hashtag collectively on a separate page, more easily connecting content and strangers through shared narratives, whether those be around sporting events, train cancellations, or politics. Hashtags are also a commonly used method in online campaigning, from advertising products and film releases to being part of a charity drive or a social movement. Often the ultimate goal is to use the function to help a message or brand 'go viral' – widely circulated at a rapid pace – though few command lasting attention (Murthy, 2013: 3, 92). One

benefit is that hashtags are accessible to all users to either incorporate into their own tweets or view as a thread, and so a hashtag topic can take on an unofficial following of its own.

One of the most successful viral hashtags was the 2014 ALS (Amyotrophic later sclerosis) Ice Bucket Challenge (#ALSIceBucketChallenge) wherein participants filmed themselves pouring buckets of ice water over their heads, posted the video on social media, and nominated friends to do the same, ideally with a monetary pledge to the non-profit ALS Association or a local equivalent. Within two weeks of the launch of the social media campaign, the organisation had more than 146,000 new donors, and by the end of the year, it had received more than $115 million in donations (O'Connor, 2014; Pressgrove et al., 2018). The campaign was also instrumental in raising awareness for the disease; in 2014, the question “What is ALS?” became the second most searched “What is…” question on Google for the year as people’s new awareness of the neurological disease led them to seek out more information (Singhal, 2014).

The difficulty in producing viral content and keeping the narrative ‘on topic’ is due in part to the competition on the site between the many different topics being mentioned, as well as the need to spark the interest of users to a degree that the campaign is actively engaged with and shared on the site beyond a core group. In case of the Ice Bucket Challenge, it was also able to stir support amongst high profile individuals such Bill Gates, Oprah, and LeBron James which in turn provided the potential for further reach. There are various factors that influence the chances of content going viral, including social currency, emotional resonance, and public (highly visible and more likely to

encourage herd mentality) (Berger, 2013; Pressgrove et al., 2018). The ALS Ice Bucket Challenge was able to combine these three traits to create a memorable event that extended to offline participation. As a non-profit organisation, this method of campaigning was inexpensive, though it came with no guarantees.

Hashtag campaigns have also been at the centre of a number of social and political movements, most notably the MeToo movement. Although the phrase ‘Me Too’ originated in 2006, it was revitalised and restyled as the #MeToo movement in 2017 after accusations of sexual assault by American film producer Harvey Weinstein became public. The #MeToo campaign utilised the hashtag function to raise awareness of the movement but, more significantly, create an open dialogue around sexual harassment and sexual abuse. Online, individuals were coming forward and sharing their own experiences, supporting one another, and discussing the need for change (Bogen et al., 2019). The use of the hashtag was also seen as a turning point in existing dialogue around sexual harassment, focusing more on outing the actions of the perpetrators and challenging legal precedents (Jaffe, 2018), though arguably avoiding due process (Wexler et al., 2019).

The ALS Challenge and the #MeToo movement were shaped around concentrated social media campaigns and an identifiable hashtag, relying on Twitter as a space that could raise awareness and initiate a wider public dialogue. Another high profile political and social movement, Black Lives Matter, also incorporated social media into its campaign (#BlackLivesMatter) to start conversations about police brutality and racially motivated violence, but its roots were in street demonstrations which attracted the attention of the news media. In all three instances, however, social media dialogue was not limited to online

space but received significant offline cover as well. This also raised questions about the dynamics of news coverage and social media platforms, namely whether they are a source of news or another way for journalists to disseminate information (Murthy, 2013: 54-56; McGregor, 2019).

Hashtags in particular help collate topics being discussed on Twitter, helping to streamline content on a site where news is constant and ever changing (Murthy, 2013: 51). For journalists, this can provide a useful source for a quick story based on popular topics (Paulussen and Harder, 2014). A result on monitoring hashtags is that journalists can use them as a way of 'crowdsourcing' stories or opinions (if inaccurately) on various topics and presenting them as such (Murthy, 2013: 55). As Twitter users are self-selecting the viability of using online activity for measuring public opinion is still under discussion, as we will see in Chapter Five. As a form of 'lazy journalism', hashtags can also be used to present the opinions of a few connected to a particular topic as popular opinion and help generate more 'clickbait' articles to attract similarly minded individuals. However, underlying the feature is the opportunity to raise awareness and, more significantly, initiate a dialogue.

4.2.3.2 @-reply

Another chatroom habit that emerged on Twitter was the use of the @-symbol to indicate the direction of a tweet toward a specific user, for example, a tweet directed to the Labour Party account would begin @UKLabour (Seward, 2013). This was a significant development in facilitating interaction on the site because it enabled a more direct method of communication between users and tweets

compared to the hashtag narratives. Several updates were introduced to adapt the feature to Twitter, and one of the most significant was the decision to facilitate ‘conversations’ that were formed through @-replies, presenting them as a string of dialogue. This included the introduction of a ‘reply’ option to all posts to speed up the process of composing a response. Layout changes followed that continued to make conversations more clearly identifiable and easier to navigate.

At this point, it is necessary to distinguish between @-replies and @-mentions. The latter are normally used through the inclusion of the username(s) at the end of a tweet to ensure specific users are notified about the tweet upon it being posted; however, this may also be achieved by starting a tweet with a username preceded by a full stop to indicate the tweet is not a reply. A user is not required to follow an account to be able to ‘tag’ them (the use of @-reply or @-mention). As such, this technique provides a method through which users can communicate more directly with one another, be they existing friends or strangers, celebrities, or politicians. Much like the follower system, the lack of reciprocity and strong digital attachment required for users to interact reinforces Twitter’s focus on ensuring content remains open to public viewing rather than creating a closed community network.

The introduction of the @-reply feature to Twitter was significant in its facilitation of a more direct form of open communication. This feature allows the development of a dialogue as opposed to the looser connection offered by the hashtag narratives. It also added opportunities for more personalised engagement. As discussed in Chapter Three, there is a difference between being provided the opportunity to do something (in this case, engage in more

direct rational-critical discussion) and individuals opting to do so (i.e., successfully getting the users to utilise the platform as intended). Architecturally, conversations allow another method of communication with the potential for rational-critical debate. The engagement of political parties and candidates with the conversation feature is examined in the following chapters.

4.2.3.3 Retweets

'Retweets' comprised another user-initiated addition to Twitter. A retweet is a method through which tweets can be shared across the platform by other users. For example, an MP might want to 'share' a post by their party leader, thereby spreading the tweet to a wider audience, or associating themselves more closely with either the leader or their words. However, some MPs are careful to include a disclaimer in the 140-character biography section of their Twitter page that a retweet does not mean endorsement; sharing a tweet can be to indicate its popularity, notoriety, or both (Shadbolt et al., 2019).

The Twitter founders were once again initially unimpressed by this grassroot development on the site but, as it became increasingly popular, they relented and, in 2009, implemented the retweet button, which allowed users to more easily share tweets from other accounts (Stone, 2009; Seward, 2013). However, the retweet button does not represent the only method used to denote a retweet; some users prefer to type 'RT' at the start of a post before copying in the username of the original author followed by the text of the tweet they wish to share. The difference is partly cosmetic; when the retweet button is used, the post is presented on the site in its original form, so the page from which the tweet originated is identified as the author's, with only a note above the tweet indicating that it has been retweeted. In contrast, if a post is manually retweeted

to create a separate message, it is instead acknowledged as a post from the page retweeting it and only the original text is quoted. This form of retweet starts with ‘RT’ followed by the Twitter handle of the page the original post came from, and then the text of that post is presented in quotation marks. In this instance, further text can also be added by the retweeting account, often to provide commentary on what has been said.

Ultimately, the retweet function provides the potential for a tweet to be seen by a larger audience than just the followers of the original account that tweeted and has become another key mechanism in content ‘going viral’ (Murthy, 2013: 6). For example, in 2014, an image tweeted by American TV host Ellen DeGeneres – a ‘selfie’ taken by Hollywood actor Bradley Cooper surrounded by a number of the star-studded audience at that year’s Academy Awards – became the most shared post at the time with over 3 million retweets, 2 million of which came before the ceremony had even finished broadcasting[5] (Brooks, 2014; Shadbolt et al., 2019).

Overall, the introduction and adoption of these three communication devices to Twitter indicated a user preference to actively engage with content on the site. This influenced the development of the platform away from its more broadcast-focused origins. Although Twitter remains content rather than community-orientated, these developments have opened it up as an architecturally deliberative space through which users can be connected by

[5] It later transpired this was actually a well-crafted stunt, planned between DeGeneres and Samsung, a sponsor at the event.

topics. Chapter Five examines how UK political parties have utilised the different design features of the site.

4.2 The Obama Effect

"…I'm told that I was responsible for the first-ever political tweet." (Johnson, 2016: 298)

In 2007, Alan Johnson (Labour MP for Hull West and Hessel) became the first UK Member of Parliament to tweet (Baxter and Marcella, 2012). At the time, this event passed unnoticed: no record of the content of the tweet has been found, and neither Johnson, his campaign manager Gerry Sutcliffe, nor the "guy called Stuart" who uploaded the tweet, can recall its content (Johnson, 2016: 298; Singleton, 2017). This tweet was not posted in a sudden and enthusiastic embrace of new technologies but was rather a tentative dipping of the toe into the realm of social media campaigning. It was posted as part of Johnson's campaign to become Labour deputy leader, which was significant in that the decision to engage with the site was triggered by an upcoming election. However, at the time, Twitter was still in its infancy with limited users and reach, and tweeting did not gain more widespread adoption amongst either the British public or MPs until a few years later (Baxter and Marcella, 2012).

Unlike Johnson, Barack Obama made a considerable impact in America through his digital campaign for the 2008 US Presidency. This was an election that signalled a turning point in the relationship between political campaigning and social media (Tapscott, 2009; Parmelee and Bichard, 2013; Charles, 2014). The practice of mobilising the electorate through the internet was in itself not

new; in 2000, the Republican candidate John McCain plugged his website (which accepted payments from major card companies without a minimum spending limit) at every opportunity after his success in the New Hampshire primary and saw a sudden surge in donations, with more than 40% from first-time political donors (van Natta Jr., 2004). In 2004, Democrat candidate Howard Dean similarly attracted attention with the successful use of online donations for his campaign. However, unlike McCain's website campaign, Dean's use of Meetup.com was not limited to fundraising; his campaign also used the site to mobilise volunteers to visit voters door-to-door, host meetings, and distribute campaign leaflets but without engaging in rational-critical dialogue on the site (Waite, 2010). By 2008, social media and networking technologies had added new opportunities for an interactive relationship between candidates and the public more akin to grassroot campaigning than the centralised distribution of information to a passive audience.

Obama's campaign staff recognised the potential of the Internet and social media to both connect with and mobilise the public. Thus, they created a new organisational model which was embraced to the extent that it became "an equal part of the campaign rather than subservient" (Baumgartner and Morris, 2010: 56; Smith, 2010). The Obama Model, and the subsequent 'Obama Effect' wherein political actors imitated the Obama campaign's online strategy, signified a more digitised approach to campaigning. This approach involved online fundraising, the sharing and organising of both online and offline campaign activities, and most significantly, the creation of opportunities for the public to participate in policy debates (Solop, 2010; Charles, 2014). The recognition of social media as a new environment that allowed the rapid and

widespread distribution of information and networking with the public proved central to the Obama Model's success. Obama's website, myBO.com, became an active social networking site, contrasting with the traditional structure of party and candidate webpages. Over 35,000 separate volunteer groups were created through the site, connecting and mobilising supporters, all at very little cost to the campaign (Baumgartner and Morris, 2010; Chadwick, 2013). This stood in sharp contrast to the digital campaign of Obama's rival for the Democratic presidential nomination, Hillary Clinton, whose team employed sites such as Twitter as just another top-down broadcast medium and lacked coordination with digital grassroot campaigns (Tapscott, 2009). These decisions demonstrated differences in each campaign's understanding of social media and how it varied from other forms of political communication.

Twitter was particularly useful in constructing personalised politics by creating the impression that individuals enjoyed a direct line of communication to political candidates. The Obama campaign actively encouraged supporters to send messages to Obama via his official Twitter page (Mackay, 2010). Similarly, when a user signed up to follow Obama on Twitter, his account would return the favour and follow the user back, an action that Clinton's account did not emulate (Tapscott, 2009). Obama's campaign further encouraged this sense of community by striking a balance between top-down control and tactics that Talbot (2008) referred to as "anarchy" which, when he compared it to his perception of an iron-clad grip of control and careful crafting usually demonstrated during political campaigns, was not as hyperbolic a description as it first sounded. Chris Hughes, Obama's director of online organising, put it less dramatically in his explanation that "the overarching goals of the campaign

[had] been about getting supporters to reach out to other supporters by giving them the right information" (Tapscott, 2009: 250). The campaign armed supporters with the knowledge and means to set up their own fundraising pages and connected users when donations were made. Online donors were encouraged to compose a brief note expressing their reasons for supporting Obama or their feelings about the campaign; the campaign would send a thank you email and a randomly selected note from a fellow donor when they sent confirmations of donations (Tapscott, 2009). By creating an online, interactive community network, Obama's digital campaign produced higher levels of engagement amongst youth voters and demonstrated the ability to mobilise large numbers of supporters with a campaign that lacked the financial backing enjoyed by other candidates (Baumgartner and Morris, 2010; Kreiss, 2012).

When examining Obama's digital campaign, it is important to recognise that none of the social media sites were used in isolation. Instead, the various sites were used interconnectedly and in conjunction with other forms of communication to help spread the wider campaign message. To allow the effective use of each media outlet, the campaign needed to understand the design architecture of each site and then embrace their individual strengths and weaknesses. Following Obama's 2012 campaign, I next explore how social media was incorporated into the 2010 UK General Elections campaigns and how social media communications developed in the lead up to the 2015 election.

4.3 2010 and All That: An Unmemorable Social Media Election

“Everyone claimed that 2010 was the first digital election in British political history. Well we worked on it, and trust us – it really wasn’t” (Elder and Edmonds, 2015).

“Facebook and Twitter to have unprecedented impact”, exclaimed *The Daily Telegraph* on 6 April 2010 (Swaine, 2010). The newspaper was not alone in its expectation of a ‘social media election’. At the start of the 2010 campaign, newspapers and other media had been quick to predict that social media would take centre stage during the election campaign, bringing with it levels of participation echoing those achieved by Obama’s digital campaign two years prior (Gibson et al., 2010; Williamson, 2010; Deacon and Wring, 2011; Baxter and Marcella, 2012). However, just three weeks after publication, *The Daily Telegraph* followed its April headline with the question “This was meant to be the internet election – so what happened?” (cited in Gibson et al., 2010: 2). In reality, 2010 proved more memorable as the social media election that *was not* rather than the social media election that was. Despite the hype, two key reasons explained why the Obama Effect was not replicated across the pond. Firstly, the media failed to consider the difference between the two political systems (Williamson, 2010). Secondly, and more importantly, the technological know-how and willingness of the parties and candidates to embrace social media were greatly overestimated.

Obama’s success was difficult to replicate in the UK, and more widely across Europe, due to the candidate-focused nature of the US presidential elections (Williamson, 2010). The campaign was for a single individual with whom all literature could be associated. This helped create a more personalised

campaign suited to some social media features such as ‘friending’ on Facebook and following or messaging Obama (or at least his account) on Twitter. Some of this personalisation must inevitably be lost when connecting with an organisation, such as a political party, rather than a known individual. In contrast, a campaign built around one candidate provides a clear centre, with this person and their ideas packaged as the ‘product’ sold to the electorate. From a strategic perspective, a campaign structured around the election of an individual should generally be easier to control. Although leadership in UK politics has become increasingly ‘presidential’ in style, it has remained a party-centred system, and consequently, individual candidates often must coordinate with their party (Foley, 1993).

For the Conservatives, the adoption of Twitter as a campaign tool proved an even greater challenge as leader and figurehead David Cameron had not yet joined the site by the time of the 2010 general election. Nor was he looking to, having declared during a radio interview in July 2009 – the same month Ed Miliband set up his Twitter account – that “too many twits might make a twat” (commonly misquoted as “too many tweets make a twat”) and that he had no plans to be on Twitter (Barrabé, 2009). Cameron was not averse to digital media in general; when he became Leader of the Opposition in 2006, he launched his own website, webcameron.org. On the site, he published blogs and posted videos in which he “talked politics”, often from his kitchen or his hotel room. In October 2012, Cameron succumbed and signed up for a Twitter account. However, he raised an important issue with Twitter during the same 2009 radio interview, arguing that “the trouble with Twitter [is] the instantness [*sic*]” of it (Barrabé, 2009). On ‘WebCameron’, he and his team had authority over the

site, allowing him to broadcast his thoughts in the form of in-depth, structured arguments without the interaction, character limits, and ‘instantness’ inherent to Twitter.

In the broader context of online campaigning, the greater visibility offered by Twitter can be a source of anxiety for the parties’ central campaign teams. The platform reaches a much wider audience than local mainstream news outlets so the potential for views posted by candidates or MPs that deviate from the party line or might embarrass the party have a much greater chance of going viral. This urge for centralised control is at odds with the openness Twitter provides and could bring the national and local campaigns into greater conflict. As Chapter Seven examines, this proved to be a challenge for the parties in the lead up to the 2015 election when Twitter use amongst MPs rose to five times as high as 2010 and the platform became an integrated method of political communication.

The parties’ and candidates’ failure to adapt the Obama Model to their own pages during the 2010 campaign, combined with a rather blasé approach to social media, ended any misconceptions of a social media election. In actuality, confessed Craig Elder and Tom Edmonds, directors of the Conservative Party’s 2015 digital campaign, “none of the parties had a clue how to use digital [media] effectively” (Elder and Edmonds, 2015). As the common expression says, hindsight is 20/20, and Elder and Edmonds’ reflection on the 2010 election was written almost five years later when the digital campaigns had become much more streamlined and integrated into the parties’ wider election campaigns. However, even in 2010, the sentiment remained similar; social media was relegated to the “fun stuff”, incorporating memes and humour

in an attempt to connect with the electorate but with no aim of amalgamating social media into its central campaign communications (Channel 4 News, 2015). This was also at a time when the parties were still grappling with adapting to Web 1.0 features – party websites and emailing – and integrating them into their campaigns (Baxter et al., 2011). Only the Liberal Democrats seemed to show a deeper understanding of how sites like Twitter could be used in a more effective manner, as well as a willingness to adapt to the new technology (Fisher et al., 2011; Baxter and Marcella, 2012; Graham et al., 2013).

The Liberal Democrats had been the first of the three main UK political parties to sign up to the site in May 2007, eleven months before either Labour or the Conservatives. In 2010, 25.7% of Liberal Democrat candidates were active on the site during the final two weeks of the campaign, more than Labour (21.6%) and the Conservatives (18.7%) (Graham et al., 2013). They were responsible for 50% of the 26,282 tweets collected across all candidates' accounts (Graham et al., 2013). These posts were overwhelmingly 'broadcast' tweets; they provided no interaction between users and the candidates or parties (Baxter and Marcella, 2012; Jungherr, 2016). The parties primarily used broadcast tweets, an example of top-down campaigning, to publicise campaign messages or update users on the campaign trail (Graham et al., 2013; Graham et al., 2014). Although Twitter provided the potential for direct form of communication and dialogue between the political parties, candidates, and other users, the political actors still displayed a clear hesitancy in adopting this practice. This did not prevent netizens from attempting to open a dialogue however, they were often met with silence.

Despite the (generally) limited interactions on Twitter, the Liberal Democrats appeared drawn to the platform for three reasons specific to the party. Firstly, the high levels of engagement with social media sites amongst people under thirty complemented the party's younger voter base. Secondly, as a party with less financial backing than the Labour and Conservative parties, a new (and free) source of communication offered more opportunities to engage with the public. Thirdly, the Liberal Democrats have traditionally been structured as less top-down than their rivals, which is echoed in their more open-minded approach to the potential of Twitter and other social media. However, the extent to which they were more open-minded is only relative to the other two main parties. The levels of interaction the parties engaged with on the site are examined in relation to the 2015 UK general election campaign in Chapter Five.

4.4 2010-2015: The Interim

Several new developments were introduced to Twitter between the 2010 and 2015 UK general elections which influenced the expansion and development of the site. During this interim, Twitter's user base grew substantially, helped along by a series of technological innovations. In September 2012, the site celebrated reaching 100 million active users worldwide. By December 2012, this number had already doubled to 200 million. The UK alone saw an increase of more than half the number of users in three years, from 8.6 million in 2012 to over 13 million in 2015. As Twitter welcomed more users to the site, it also became increasingly integrated in everyday social interactions, business, news reporting, and political communication. In news reporting, it has been adopted into the process of releasing information; 'breaking news' could easily be

reported on the site, keeping people updated whilst ‘on-the-go’ and offering a link to updating news stories (Chadwick, 2013). Professional journalists also increasingly used the site not only to provide live updates to ongoing events but also to express their own opinions more freely (Murthy, 2013: 54-55; Lee, 2015). For example, Piers Morgan, the former *Daily Mirror* editor, has been well-known for airing his outspoken views on site. Although it has provided an additional outlet for journalists, Twitter has also been a space in which they have come under scrutiny (Lasorsa et al., 2011). The media landscape has also changed to one of greater diversity and complexity, and the previous dominance of the mainstream media has come under threat as social media sites like Twitter have provided a new global arena for news and citizen journalists (Bruns and Highfield, 2016: 101).

Two key developments in advertising and connectivity altered the direction of the site in the early 2010s. Firstly, Twitter introduced a new feature called ‘promoted tweets’, which allowed (paid) advertising on the site for the first time. Just over a year later, the company launched a second important update; a Twitter ‘follower button’ was made available for placement on external websites, which proved significant in expanding Twitter’s connectivity. These changes were introduced at a time when ‘data mining’ (using datasets such as online searches to identify patterns in online activity) and the use of ‘big data’ analytics (large sets of data that require computerised software to sort) were gaining traction as the technology became more advanced. The introduction of new ways to identify trends in behaviour signalled a move towards the challenges to radical-critical thinking that Habermas had been wary of. The use of personal information enables businesses or other groups to adapt their

campaigns or advertisements accordingly. This means an individual's digital footprint can potentially be used to predetermine the information they are exposed to and hinder the individuals' ability to make informed choices.

4.4.1 Promoted Tweets

One of the early criticisms levelled at Twitter was its lack of a business model (Stone, 2010). The founders had stated publicly that they did not want to resort to traditional website advertising but sought to incorporate it in a way that complemented rather than altering the site (Stone, 2010). This objective produced the concept of 'promoted tweets' (also referred to as 'sponsored tweets'); rather than allow advertisements to pop up or flash on the side of the screen, Twitter decided that any adverts would instead take the form of tweets. The company promoted this feature with the tagline, "ordinary tweets that businesses and individuals want to highlight to a wider group of users" (Stone, 2010) Utilising data mining, the content can be published to reach a broad or specific audience depending on the requirements of the client. Initially launched in April 2010, the concept expanded during the next six months to include promoted trends and promoted accounts.

When an advertiser creates a promoted tweet, they can decide how they want to target the tweet. Advertisers can pay for promoted tweets to appear at the top of a related search term – for example, Starbucks might want to promote a tweet that would immediately be made visible to anyone who types 'coffee' into the search bar. A promoted tweet would still be viewable as an ordinary tweet however, promoted-only tweets do not appear on the advertiser's profile

page, only in search results or for those who meet certain criteria. Advertisers can specify criteria for those who can view promoted tweets, including gender, interests, the type of device used to access the site, and geography. These tweets can still be engaged with like any other tweet; they can be replied to, retweeted, and favourited by users. The cost of a promoted tweet often depends on the levels of targeting attached to it but varied between $0.75 and $2.50 per engagement in 2010 (Heine, 2011). Charging per engagement presents a two-fold advantage. Firstly, if a promoted tweet does not attract much engagement, it is removed; Twitter will only allow one promoted tweet per search page as it prevents users from being inundated with advertisements and stops the advertisements from becoming stale. Secondly, by logging each engagement individually, data is collected on users' habits which are then fed back to the individuals or businesses who paid for the advertising to indicate how well users are responding to their advertisements. The latterly developed 'promoted accounts' were introduced to work in a similar way but with fewer targeting options, and the cost is based on the number of new followers acquired during the promotion period (initially between $2.50 and $4 each) (Heine, 2011).

In contrast, 'promoted trends' are usually built around hashtags. Although a keyword could be used instead, it is much less effective for marketing. Using algorithms, a list is published on Twitter of what it terms as 'trends'; these are the words or hashtags that are most commonly used on the platform at any one time. Each user is automatically presented with a list of the top ten trends at the side of their screen so they can see 'what's trending?'. Usually trends are identified by geography, such as the United Kingdom, but they can also be focused on more specific areas such as Scotland or even

London. A promoted trend is placed at the top of the list throughout the day, regardless of the amount of traffic it receives. In 2013, a promoted trend was reported to cost $200,000, but as Twitter requires any potential buyers to contact the company directly to set up these advertisements, the actual cost may vary (Fiegerman, 2013). However, promoted tweets and accounts can be directly set up by the user, making them accessible to everyone with a valid payment method. The integration of sponsored content into the Twittersphere echoed Habermas' warnings of the commodification of the public sphere. Additionally, the targeting of tweets to specific audiences reflects his concerns about echo chambers, raising questions around informal exclusion on the grounds of personalised advertising. However, although these devices are present on the site, they have limited impact on the deliberative potential of the site, the architecture of which ultimately remains reliant on the 'grassroot' users and their production of content.

4.4.2 The Follow Button

In 2011, Twitter introduced a hyperlinked 'follow button' for external websites. The inclusion of the follow button on a website, such as that of a MP, provides visitors with a direct link to the associated Twitter page, which opens in a new tab rather than redirecting the visitor from the original webpage. The user could then opt to follow the account. This feature was predated by the 'tweet button', introduced in 2010, which could be added to third party websites and allowed Twitter users to share the relevant article on their Twitter pages. Both these features were important in expanding the connectivity and information sharing of Twitter, making it easier and more user-friendly. The follow button marked a

particularly significant turning point, offering a new way of inviting website visitors to stay updated with the latest news in a faster but less personal way than asking for email addresses. Additionally, it removed the inconvenience of having to revisit several websites for news as Twitter provided users with a single space for updates from different sources to be delivered concisely. Follower buttons (and otherwise-named equivalents), as pioneered by Twitter, now represent a well-integrated part of websites which have been made available by a variety of social media and social network sites such as YouTube, Facebook, and LinkedIn to increase connectivity. With their pioneering introduction of the follower button, Twitter stopped being an experiment and became a recognisable player in digital social connectivity. These cross-media connections reinforce the acceptance of social media and Twitter as integrated, mainstream modes of communication and their positions as ‘networks within a network’.

4.4.3 Obama 2012

As a consequence of Obama’s successful digital media campaign in 2008, Twitter saw a sudden uptake in registrations by politicians across to the United States; by the time of the 2010 midterm elections, usage amongst candidates from both main parties was almost universal (Graham et al., 2013). As Obama stood for re-election in 2012, the gap in digital campaigning between his campaign team and that of Republican opponent Mitt Romney initially seemed to have closed; many of the social media methods employed by the Obama team in 2008, such as donations and the mobilisation of supporters, had been well studied not only in the US but also in Europe (Bimber, 2014). However, by

the time of the 2012 US presidential election, Obama's advisers were aware that Facebook was even more popular than it had been in 2008, smartphones were becoming the 'norm', and Twitter ("a stupid technology that would never go anywhere" as once described by Jim Messina, Obama's National Chief of Staff in 2008) – was here to stay (Cramer, 2012, November 10; Bimber, 2014).

Rather than a simple repeat performance of 2008, Obama's 2012 digital campaign had evolved to be more sophisticated, incorporating data analytics and behavioural modelling on a large scale, reflecting the changes in the social media landscape (Issenberg, 2012; Bimber, 2014; Jin et al., 2015). Around this time, the terms 'data analytics', 'behavioural modelling', and 'big data' became much more widely used as computer software was increasingly being designed both to gather and analyse data on a large scale (Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier, 2013). This form of data collection enabled Twitter to create its series of promoted content around micro-targeting. Although data collection by no means represented a new phenomenon in political campaigning, the ability to collect and analyse data on such a large scale with increasingly sophisticated algorithms presented new opportunities. The Obama campaign was particularly keen to consolidate this new data with information previously collected, creating a larger database and a greater ability to micro-target (Bimber, 2014). Obama's chief strategist David Axelrod surmised that 2012 made the 2008 campaign look "prehistoric" (Bimber, 2014: 141). Understanding how to utilise Twitter as both an open social media site and a source of data collection meant the site had become an integrated part of political campaigning.

4.6 Conclusion

Twitter was created as a social media site that emphasised content sharing above community networking. This decision informed the site's focus on providing a means for users to receive and post updates 'on the go'. However, many of Twitter's interactive features were introduced in reaction to users' methods of communicating and sharing information. The ability to become part of a dialogue through hashtags and reply to tweets in the form of a 'conversation' were significant user-led innovations that fed into the site's credentials as a deliberative space. The variety of communication features on the site all contributed to encouraging information-sharing and dialogue, with the potential to stimulate rational-critical debate.

However, the opportunities that the different features provide for participation and deliberation do not guarantee the presence of rational-critical debate. Instead, individual user preference also guides how the methods of communication are adopted. This does not undermine the site's potential but highlights the need for users to be receptive to the opportunities for discourse, a consideration that will be explored more closely in the next few chapters in relation to the political parties and candidates during the 2015 election.

A turning point for social media in election campaigns began with the 2008 Obama campaign. Obama's team had integrated Web 2.0 features into its online campaign and its willingness to encourage communication with and between Obama supporters helped reach and mobilise large numbers of people. The campaign was prepared to go some way towards embracing the user-led nature of social media. The 2010 UK general election campaigns were expected to follow this model, innovative at the time, and embrace the new

social media technologies as communication tools. However, a social media campaign failed to materialise, as the parties did little to engage with the technology. Two years later, the digital campaigns of the candidates in the 2012 US Presidential elections were heavily influenced by the Obama Model of 2008. The goalposts of digital success had moved, and Obama's team developed an even more sophisticated online strategy that incorporated big data analysis. The continued impact of digital campaign meant the UK parties were more receptive to it and looked to follow suit sooner rather than later.

The following chapter examines how political parties and candidates engaged with Twitter during the 2015 UK general election. It investigates the extent to which the political parties were willing to embrace the deliberative potential of Twitter through their use of the site's design features.

Chapter Five: Representative Publicity on the Party Twitter Pages

At its founding, Twitter was built on the accumulation of user-generated content and was, as established in Chapter Four, architecturally viable as a public sphere. Although the design of the platform reflected the ideas of Habermas' (1989) public sphere, the natural next point for consideration is the realisation of such goals in practice. Thus, this thesis aims to establish to what extent the political parties on Twitter engaged with the site's deliberative potential through the utilisation of Twitter's design features. This includes an examination of how far the parties' use of the site reflected Habermas' concerns of a return to 'representative publicity' through 'manipulated publicity'. In this capacity, they would display their power before the people instead of *for* the people, addressing them as the public but without engaging in rational-critical debate, thus creating a pseudo-public sphere. If Habermas' concerns are applicable to social media, political parties would be expected to broadcast their messages without encouraging citizen discussion and act as the dominant voices within the 'pseudo-public sphere'.

This chapter begins by outlining the debate between the 'normalisation thesis' and the opposing view that the internet and social media can transform political communication (Margolis and Resnick, 2000). Then, it focuses on the different modes of participation available through the interactive devices on Twitter – *following*, *engaging*, *endorsing,* and *contributing* – that provide the foundation for investigating the extent to which the parties have adapted to the opportunities for greater citizen engagement, rather than applying the traditional

method of one-way communication. Additionally, it considers the interconnected nature of different media platforms and the impact of external events. Finally, the use of sponsored content, a later addition to the site, provides an interesting challenge to the initial design intention of Twitter as a public sphere. The implications of this feature are examined in relation to the Conservative Party's use of sponsored tweets during the 2015 UK general election and other paid social media activity, acting as a case study into manipulated publicity and the advantages enjoyed by a resource-rich organisation.

5.1 Politics as Usual?

Scholars have debated the internet's likely impact on political communication since its early years, and the introduction of social media has only served to reinvigorate this discussion (Dahlgren, 2005; Farrell, 2012; Wright, 2012). The two sides of this debate reflect the divisions between Habermas' expectations of a public sphere and his fears of a pseudo-public sphere. Rheingold (1993) was an early 'revolutionary' from the inception of the internet who expected that online communication would bring about a significant or complete change in society's approach to politics. This revolutionary stance continued into the advent of social media (Davis, 2009; Shirky, 2011), with the expectation that it would increase citizen participation by providing them with a louder political voice (Carswell, 2012; Wright, 2012; Rehan and Zolkepli, 2021). These scholars identify with Habermas' vision of a deliberative space in which rational-critical debate takes place, and they see the internet and social media as a means to its realisation (Skoric et al., 2016). The other side comprises supporters of the

normalisation thesis, which posits that rather than bringing about change, “virtual reality [that is, the online world] has grown to resemble the real world” where political communication is centrally controlled and primarily consists of one-way interactions (Margolis and Resnick, 2000: 2; Hindman, 2009; Graham et al., 2013). Underlying this is a connection to Habermas’ concerns in the form of ‘consumer culture’ and representative publicity – profit and broadcast-orientated delivery of news – overshadowing any potential for rational-critical debate.

For ‘revolutionaries’, the internet’s virtue lies in its potential to provide democracy-enriching environments in which communication can become more open and interactive, unencumbered by time or space (Freelon, 2010). This view considers the internet as an interactive space which can accommodate digital platforms suitable for discussions involving a large number of netizens and bring about a more direct and reciprocal relationship between not only the different users but also the public and their elected representatives (Dahlberg, 2005; Wright and Street, 2007; Graham et al., 2013). The ‘normalisation’ thesis is far less optimistic. Attributed to Margolis and Resnick (2000), the term ‘normalisation’ has sometimes been misinterpreted as meaning that the internet has not brought about *any* changes to political communication (Wright, 2012). In actuality, the normalisation thesis does not dismiss a change in modes of political communication but instead argues that the *manner* of communication does not differ, as political actors refuse to adapt to new opportunities for political interaction (Margolis and Resnick, 2000). Instead, the potential of the new digital media is absorbed into the pre-existing ‘broadcast’ style of

dissemination found in the traditional media; hence, the online world tends to duplicate the practices of the 'real' world.

Although the normalisation perspective often focuses on political actors broadcasting to citizens, this was not the only type of communication political parties engaged with. There have been attempts by UK parties to engage in two-way communication; two examples are the Conservative Political Centre (CPC) and the 'Labour Listens' initiative. The CPC was formed as the new political education body of the Conservative Party after its shock defeat in the 1945 UK general election. The main purpose of the body was to facilitate dialogue between party leaders and party members by co-ordinating meetings, discussions and the delivery of responses through the local branches (Norton, 2013). Labour Listens was launched in 1987 after the party's third consecutive election defeat. Then-leader Neil Kinnock called it "the biggest consultation exercise with the British public any political party has ever undertaken" (Massey, 2020: 107). This involved open meeting held across the country attended by members of the public and Labour politicians. Significantly, however, these initiatives were both set up in reaction to unexpected electoral defeats and not during an election campaign or the party's time in government.

The contrasting viewpoints of the transformative and normalisation thesis have also been criticised for being too polarised (Wright, 2012: 245). A particular criticism on both sides has pointed to the lack of recognition of the implications of discourse architecture or how the design of a site can influence the ability of a platform to act as a space for deliberation (Wright, 2012; Freelon, 2015). The ideals behind Habermas' institutional criteria for the public sphere, as outlined in Chapter Three, have largely been acknowledged as implicit in the

commonly accepted interpretations of deliberation, and Twitter's inherent design reflects these principles as examined in Chapter Four (Freelon, 2010). Understanding the design architecture of Twitter is important to examine how it functions as its own sphere and differentiate it from other social media platforms.

Habermas' (2006) amendment to his original vision of a homogenous public sphere to one consisting of multiple networks formed of different publics was introduced in reaction to the growing fragmentation of different media platforms. Firstly, there was the division between the physical and virtual worlds. This initial separation was followed by internal fragmentation, seen earlier in the growing number of television channels and then in the expanding choice of television and internet service providers, digital streaming platforms, and the variety of social media sites available in the digital environment. Amongst the multiplicity of social media sites, the different design architectures ultimately make each platform unique. For example, YouTube is built for video sharing, Instagram is based on images, and Facebook is designed to connect people, while Twitter is shaped around sharing information. Although there are some similarities between Facebook and Twitter, as is illustrated further in the following sections, core divergences exist in their designs, as discussed in Chapter Four. The key differences are Twitter is an 'open' platform for information-sharing and deliberation whereas Facebook is a closed, community space.

5.2 Online Participation: Forms of Engagement

Initially explored in Chapter Three, further research has continued to show that the online environment has generally had a positive effect on citizen participation in politics, increasing their engagement (Skoric et al., 2016; Kutlu, 2018). However, participation can be measured in different ways. In social media, five distinct levels of online communication exist, and the movement down the list of these levels reflects an inverted triangle: the greater the level of participation required, the lower the likelihood of engagement (Knoll et al., 2018). These forms of online participation provide a framework to analyse the relationship between the parties' activities on Twitter and the design features of the site, culminating in a view of the parties' attitudes towards connecting with online citizens and the type of interactions they encourage. From this framework, I have derived five key levels for categorising user engagement.

The first level is the 'observation' of content posted. Rather than requiring a measurable attachment to any Twitter account, 'netizens' simply browse what has been written by other. Additionally, it does not necessarily come in the form of actively searching for a profile on the site. Furthermore, it covers passive viewing of content on the site when a mutual account shares the information, whether it appears as sponsored content or is even shared on other platforms such as news websites. Observation itself is difficult to measure and, as it also underlies the other modes of participation, it was not examined as an independent factor in this thesis.

'Following' an account represents the next level of participation. Still a very limited form of engagement, it creates a measurable digital attachment between accounts but does not represent an equal connection. The action of

following a page does not require authorisation (unless the account is set to ‘private’), nor is a reciprocating ‘follow’ from the account necessary to create the attachment, unlike Facebook. Thus, the connection is largely passive.

The third level is ‘engaging’. This level encompasses favouriting content, viewing a video, or clicking a hyperlink. Again, a somewhat limited form of participation but one that requires a more active contribution and demonstrates a greater interaction with the content.

The final two are much more active forms of participation: ‘endorsing’ and ‘contributing’. The former consists of the active sharing of content with others, such as retweeting, which widens the potential audience but still does not require a user to comment with their own words. This stage leads to the final one, contributing, in which a user posts a tweet as part of a conversation with other users or engages in a wider narrative by using hashtags in their posts.

5.2.1 Following

As a low-level form of engagement, ‘following’ an account does not automatically translate as an endorsement even if it does create a measurable digital attachment. However, as following forms a traceable connection between accounts (listed as following and followed on the respective pages), users are more likely to follow accounts they are willing to be publicly associated with. As discussed in Chapter Four, the action of following a Twitter page creates a one-way relationship compared with the reciprocal friending on Facebook. The follower connection is easily formed through the touch of a button; by following an account, the user consents to allow content from the chosen account to

appear on their timeline (home page). This removes the need for the user to search out different profiles each time they want to view the content. Once the attachment has been made, it requires no maintenance on the part of followers but does keep the flow of information in the periphery whether or not the connection is still actively desired.

Although it reflects a minimal form of participation, follower data provides a basic numerical indication of online activity, attachment, and the receptiveness of other users. The real-time data records a reactive environment which in turn raises three questions about the parties' Twitter pages during the 2015 election campaign. The first question relates to the utility of follower statistics as a means of predicting election outcomes, or at least providing the parties with an insight into voting intentions. The second question investigates how the parties in 2015 in terms of follower numbers compared with other users on the site and what these rankings suggest about the most numerically popular profiles in the site. Finally, long-term trends are investigated to identify patterns in behaviour and their relationship with offline events and actors, notably the mass media, in influencing the Twittersphere. Each area is explored to consider how they influence the parties' engagement on the site.

5.2.1.1 Election Forecasting

Twitter's potential as a tool for predicting election outcomes was an early source of interest for researchers investigating the site's potential as a source of public opinion (Murphy et al., 2014; Anstead and O'Loughlin, 2015; Schober et al., 2016; Klašnja et al., 2018). First, there is the crude approach of using the

number of followers to predict relative election success for political parties. Of the four main parties identified for the purposes of this thesis (Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrats, and UKIP), the ranking by the number of followers on the final day of campaigning in 2015 was Labour, Conservative, UKIP, and Liberal Democrats, with Labour significantly ahead – a highly misleading forecast of the final results (**Table 1**). Similarly, the net gains in follower numbers over the five-week period leading up to and including the final day of campaigning implied an outcome that differed from the results. Notably, UKIP saw a greater increase in followers than the Conservatives whilst the Liberal Democrats had smallest increase, but it was UKIP that came out of the election with only one MP. However, the party did see their vote rise by 9.5 percentage points, the largest of the night.

Table 1. Follower Statistics for the Twitter Accounts of the UK Parties Suring the 2015 Election Campaign, Ranked by Vote Percentage in the Election (Highest to Lowest)

Party	Followers (6 May)	Net Gain of Followers (2 April – 6 May)
Conservatives	156,480	14,089
Labour	214,273	27,021
UKIP	102,997	16,746
Liberal Democrats	95,340	9,359
SNP	93,465	16,979
Green Party	136,228	21,427

Matters were further complicated when including other parties from the 2015 elections, such as the Green Party and the geographically focused Scottish National Party (SNP). Based solely on raw follower statistics, the Green Party would have placed a strong third, situated approximately 2,000 followers behind the Conservatives and 34,000 ahead of UKIP. The net gains presented an even more skewed version of the parties' final positions in the election results, with the Greens and SNP achieving the second- and third-highest net gains, respectively, amongst the parties. Overall, neither the follower statistics on polling day nor the net gains over the campaign period offered any clear indication of the election results.

There have been attempts to predict election outcomes through more sophisticated methods of collecting tweets that mentioned parties and recording their sentiments (Jungherr et al., 2012; Murthy, 2015). However, one of the challenges has been determining the sample of parties to investigate. In their research, Tumasjan et al. (2011) used this more comprehensive method to try to predict the outcome of the 2009 German Federal Election by exploring how Twitter reflected the political landscape. Their findings indicated that online sentiment (identified through the tone of the related tweets) somewhat reflected the political climate, but they did acknowledge a less equal sample size than those used in similar studies which produced contradictory findings. A consequent reapplication of the Tumasjan et al. (2011) methodology for the same election but with the inclusion of an additional party found that this newly included party – the Pirate Party – should have been the winner, at least if considering only Twitter coverage (Jungherr et al., 2012). However, in the election the party received only 2% of the vote and failed to secure a seat.

The reasons for the absence of a consistent approach to election forecasting through social media are due not only to an inability to find a sustainable methodology but also to the difficulties in finding one that generates positive results (Murthy, 2015). Another important factor, one that may underlie most of the methodological issues, is that the 'public' on Twitter differs from that of the electorate. For example, users can sign up to the site from the age of 13 (the minimum age to vote is 18), and only 57% of the UK population were active on any social media in 2015, whereas nearly 70% were eligible to vote (ONS, , 2017a). Similarly, the demographics of those choosing to engage on Twitter cannot be assumed to be representative of those who turn out to vote. Even if demographic data could be collected and weighted as is done for poll data, other non-demographic factors such as political preference influence who is more likely to participate in online discussion (Steinberg, 2015). However, it is important to recognise the limitations of the data so that patterns in follower statistics can be explored alongside other factors affecting the dynamics of Twitter.

Instead of approaching follower data as an indicator of voting intentions, this chapter continues by looking at how the real-time data of Twitter – not only follower numbers but also hashtags and retweets – can be a useful source for examining changes in data patterns and providing feedback to political parties on user engagement. First, I examine the political parties' relative status in the Twittersphere based on follower numbers.

5.2.1.2 Status

Beyond the relative party data, parties can be compared by ranking the metrics and reach of their Twitter profiles, not only amongst themselves but also relative to other users. Habermas' vision of the 'refeudalisation' evokes the sense of the re-establishment of the 'traditional' political actors to authoritative roles albeit in a pseudo-public sphere. It would therefore be expected that the political parties would have a significant following in relation to other 'political' accounts. The following sections examine how far the parties actively engaged with other communication devices on Twitter that required higher levels of participation. However, first, it is important to consider what the follower statistics can reveal about the potential reach and rankings of the parties on Twitter.

To provide some wider context, the follower statistics of the official party pages were lower than those of well-known political commentators. For example, the left wing activist and writer Owen Jones had approximately 280,000 followers at the end of the 2015 election campaign (Bastani, 2015) and the then BBC Political Editor Nick Robinson had more than 350,000 in February 2015 (Jenkins, 2015). When comparing the follower counts of British political parties in 2015 to those of British television celebrities such as Holly Willoughby (5.47 million) or Jeremy Clarkson (4.47 million), their comparatively paltry follower bases becomes more apparent (Somerset, 2015).

The presence of celebrities from the worlds of entertainment and sport on the platform competes with the idea of Twitter as a *political* public sphere. Although the site offers the opportunity for political deliberation, it is not exclusively bound to it. Instead of necessarily being a limitation of the site it suggests Habermas' overly optimistic view that citizens are hungry to seek out

rational-critical debate. However, the relative follower numbers of the political parties compared with non-political actors demonstrate the competition between the different user profiles on the platform. Additionally, the party leaders' pages had attracted more followers by 2015 than their respective parties' accounts, with Cameron's page recording just below one million and Ed Miliband less than half a million. Although higher than their respective parties' pages, the leaders' followings still fell noticeably behind those of the celebrity accounts.

Despite the rise of non-political voices, the platform has provided an opportunity for fringe groups to gain more attention and take on a more prominent role in online discussion (Lopes, 2014; Figenschou and Fredheim, 2020). To some extent, this phenomenon has been reflected by smaller political parties such as the Green Party, which received considerably less election coverage across the mainstream news media than other parties but demonstrated one of the larger Twitter followings (Centre for Research in Communication and Culture, 2015). However, although the users determine which accounts they follow, this does not guarantee support nor a willingness to engage in rational-critical debate. For example, the voices of celebrities, through their endorsements of parties, are primarily heard and used by political groups based on their popularity and image rather than their ability to formulate and engage in a well-considered discussion.

Perhaps the most memorable celebrity endorsement of the 2015 campaign was the Labour Party's decision to invite UK comedian and actor Russell Brand to interview leader Ed Miliband. Although the discussion was related to issues of apathy amongst young voters and how to mobilise them,

Brand's social capital including his 10 million Twitter followers was key to this pairing (Fielding, 2015; Watts, 2019). If nothing else, the interview attracted much attention, and later an endorsement of Labour from Brand – a turn-around from his previous messages of 'don't vote', but unfortunately delivered after voter registration had closed.

The parties also used Twitter to advertise some of their celebrity endorsements, with Labour most active amongst the four parties. Capitalising on the backing of well-known names such as Stephen Hawking and Sir Ian McKellen and campaign trail appearances by personalities such as Eddie Izzard or Coronation Street actress Sally Lindsay, the party had embraced the electorate's consumption of celebrity (Wheeler, 2015). On Twitter, Labour kick-started the campaign period with the release of a series of tweets containing links and video clips of actor Martin Freeman lending his support to the party. These were often prepositioned with quotes from Freeman such as "There is only one choice, and I choose Labour" (The Labour Party, 2015f) or "My values are about community, compassion and decency" (The Labour Party, 2015b). Additionally, the tactic was recycled at the end of the campaign with the comedian Steve Coogan featuring in similar videos including statements such as "I trust Labour with the NHS" (The Labour Party, 2015a).

In contrast, the Liberal Democrats were struggling to attract such high-profile endorsements, being considerably down on the support they enjoyed in 2010 after actors Colin Firth and Daniel Radcliffe notably ended their backing of the party (Wheeler, 2015). The Conservatives, meanwhile, were cautious about engaging with celebrity endorsements after 2010 saw two of their backers – actor Sir Michael Caine and singer-songwriter Gary Barlow – subsequently

being accused of tax-dodging. Instead, endorsements recognised on the Conservative Twitter account were primarily those of the former Prime Minister Sir John Major and newly appointed Conservative peer Baroness Karren Brady. For UKIP, the campaign was heavily built around leader Nigel Farage. Indeed, rather than referring to 'UKIP's followers', Goodwin and Milazzo (2016: 78) entitled one of their chapters "Farage's Followers" as a reflection of how the UKIP leader had become synonymous with the party's messages on shared anxieties concerning immigration and Europe. However, Farage was also seen as something of a Marmite figure: a piece of polling, later termed the "Mr Bean/Sean Bean effect", asked the public which actor they would like to see portray Farage in a film; although the UKIP supporters opted for Sean Bean, those who did not support the party nominated Mr Bean actor Rowan Atkinson (Cowley and Kavanagh, 2016a: 98).

Regarding the significance of celebrity backing, it is questionable whether this type of support actually leads to a measurable impact on voting intentions of the electorate (Mishra and Mishra, 2014: 410). However, as the public's consumption of "infotainment" news has grown, the parties have continued to engage with celebrity campaign politics (Wheeler, 2015). Indeed, in a world of social media, social capital, and the power of going 'viral', it appears likely that the continued capitalisation of 'celebrity' and the social media clout these individuals hold will continue into the future.

5.2.1.3 Reactivity

Follower statistics can also be used to track long-term patterns in user activity and highlight how offline factors can influence the online sphere. Habermas (1989: 211) observed that the public sphere had "disintegrated as a sphere of ongoing participation in rational-critical debate", and elections had become markers of political parties' attempts "to generate periodically something like a public sphere". In line with Habermas' observation, greater online activity would be expected to occur on the parties' Twitter pages during election periods, both in terms of an increase in the volume of tweets posted by the party accounts and the number of followers on their pages. **Figure 1.** illustrates how the number of followers rose irregularly over the period of more than a year, encompassing the 2014 European Parliament Elections (22 May) and ending with the 2015 General Election[6]. The general election campaign period from the dissolution of Parliament on 30 March to polling day on 7 May resulted in the most significant rise in the number of users attaching themselves to party accounts during the recorded period. This behaviour was shadowed, though to a lesser degree, throughout the election campaign period for the second-order 2014 European Parliament election (held in the UK on 22 May) when the number of followers of party accounts similarly spiked. Although the parties might not have been widely followed, this did demonstrate a marked increase in interest during national election campaigns.

[6] The follower data was collected in bi-weekly intervals except during the two national election campaign periods when they were recorded weekly.

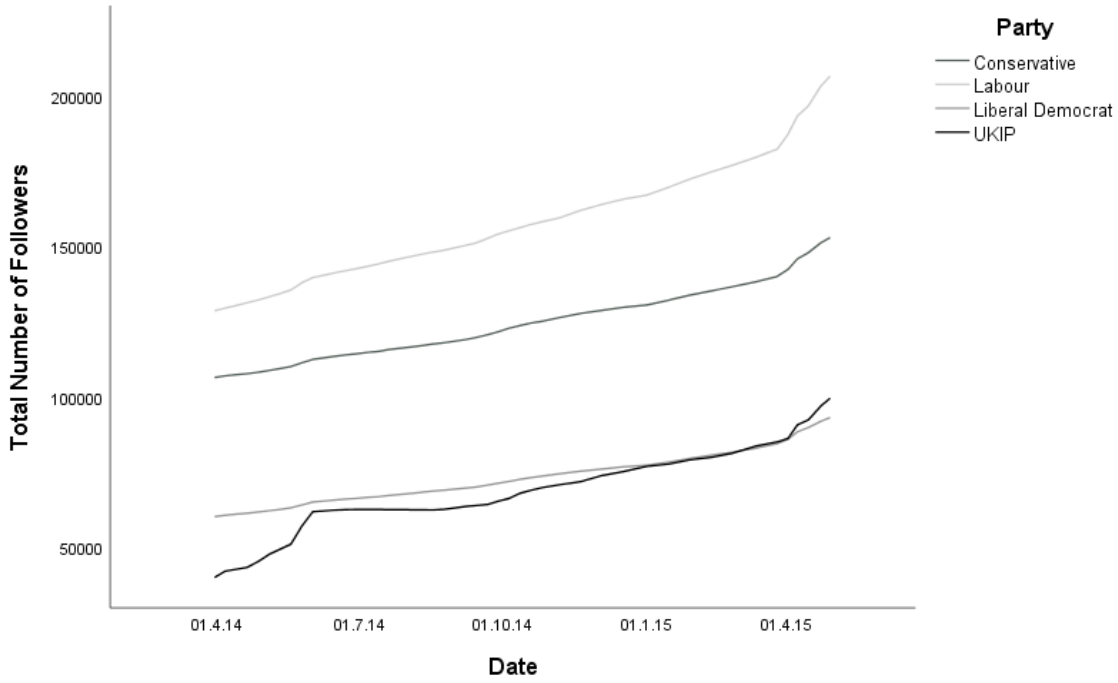

Figure 1. Increase in the Number of Followers on the Party Pages From 6 April 2014 to 6 May 2015.

On the face of it, the follower data supports Habermas' (1989: 214) contention that elections provide a period of time in which attempts are made to generate something like a public sphere, insofar as there was a measurable increase in engagement with the political parties' pages. Arguably, this increase in participation could be indicative of periods of heightened interest in the public for rational-critical debate. Habermas' assertion that the parties would be more active was also mirrored by the marked increase in the number of tweets the pages posted. Whether the parties were actively manufacturing a sense of democratic participation, with the consequence of creating a pseudo-public sphere, rather than genuinely trying to engage in the rational-critical debate of a public sphere proper remains an open question and one that is explored in

the latter sections of this chapter pertaining to the deliberative tools on the site. Chapters Six and Sevenextend this discussion as I examine the content posted by the political parties and the candidates. First, I consider how follower statistics can provide an insight into how long- and short-term events and external influences can affect engagement on the site.

An investigation of long-term patterns of Twitter user behaviour has shown a correlation between a rise in digital attachment and election periods. However, short-term events such as individual news stories or a televised election debate can also spark periods of increased interest. The dynamics of internal and external influence on the Twittersphere raise questions about the degree to which this sphere can be controlled internally or is reactive to external factors. Chadwick's (2013) theory of the hybrid media system reflected the interconnected nature of different media sources in news reporting and political communication, particularly between the traditional media (newspapers, television, and radio) and the new online media. Audiences have not only become increasingly fragmented but also, with multiple news sources to choose from, are able to view content and share it amongst numerous outlets at once. For example, television interview clips may be uploaded to YouTube, or newspaper articles can be digitised and shared on social media sites, which can be accessed through computers or on-the-go mobile devices. Although a hybrid system has become the norm and helps increase coverage, it also acts as a reminder of Twitter's position as part of a 'network of networks', and so the platform cannot be viewed in complete isolation (Habermas, 2006: 415).

This is most clearly observed during specific events, such as during election campaigns when the political parties have naturally received more

coverage than usual by the mass media. This phenomenon benefitted the Liberal Democrats in 2010 with the televised debates (Beckett, 2016: 280), and similarly, UKIP during the 2014 European Parliament Election (subsequently reflected in a marked rise in Twitter followers) when the party was also receiving more election coverage in the print media and TV news. However, further analysis of the 2015 election campaign showed that the net gain of followers was not consistent as each party saw relative peaks in engagement throughout. The weeks of greatest follower movement coincided with the weeks during which the televised leaders' debates occurred, with the parties gaining the most advantage during the weeks when their respective leaders were present for the debate[7]. For example, the ITV and BBC debates on 2 April and 16 April, respectively, were conducted in the absence of David Cameron who had decided not to attend. There was no notable spike was visible in the follower data for the Conservative Party during these debates however, the other parties, particularly the Green Party, Plaid Cymru, and the SNP saw a significant increase in followers in response to the coverage they received.

This phenomenon was also reflected at an individual candidate level, where online activity combined with reporting on other news platforms (both

[7] There were four televised election debates for the 2015 UK general election featuring leaders of the political parties. The first was broadcast on 26 March (prior to the short campaign period) and involved David Cameron (Conservative) and Ed Miliband (Labour). The second was held on 2 April and included seven party leaders: Natalie Bennett (Green Party), Cameron, Nick Clegg (Liberal Democrats), Nigel Farage (UKIP), Miliband, Nicola Sturgeon (SNP), and Leanne Wood (Plaid Cymru). The third debate took place on 16 April between Bennett, Miliband, Farage, Sturgeon, and Wood. The final debate was on 30 April with Cameron, Clegg, and Miliband, followed by an additional programme with separate question and answer sessions for Farage, Sturgeon, and Wood.

traditional and new), to attract high levels of new users. A vivid example of this is the response to a tweet posted by Labour MP Emily Thornberry on polling day for the 2014 Rochester and Strood by-election during her visit to the constituency to lend support to her party's candidate, Naushabah Khan. Thornberry's tweet contained a picture of a white van parked outside a house from which a St George's Cross flag was hanging, with the caption "Image from #Rochester" (Thornberry, 2014). The tweet quickly generated attention on Twitter, and within minutes, the account of the political blog Guido Fawkes (137,000 followers to Thornberry's 13,300) reposted the tweet adding its own caption "Snob" – the inference being that she was sneering at the patriotic working class (Donald, 2014). The online momentum against Thornberry mounted and, after two separate conversations with leader Ed Miliband, she resigned from the frontbench half an hour after polls closed. The incident had erupted on Twitter but, due to election day reporting restrictions, broadcasters could not report on the incident until polls had closed. The political effects of the fall-out were significant – resulting in the resignation of a shadow cabinet minister; however, the story's reach remained largely limited to Twitter until its reporting across mass media. In the three days after posting the tweet, the number of followers of Thornberry's account saw a sharp rise, increasing by 2,100 to over 15,400, despite a previous average gain of 200 followers per week. Although the numbers remain relatively small, this increase should be placed in the context of MPs' Twitter accounts at the time, most of which had fewer than 5,000 followers. Nevertheless, this bump was short lived, and just as quickly, the weekly increase of the account's followers returned to its original levels.

Importantly, these events demonstrate both the reactive nature of Twitter and its connection to traditional media. Differentiating between the two qualities in terms of cause and effect is far from easy: would the Thornberry tweet have been picked up as quickly as it was and gained the traction it did had it not occurred during an election campaign? In addition to highlighting the cyclical relationship between mass media and Twitter, this incident also indicated the lack of control of political actors (parties and candidates) on the site. Twitter's potential as an open platform to attract a wide audience is often portrayed in a positive light, but the Thornberry case also highlighted both the volatility of the reactions and views of such an audience and the inability to limit users' content to the 'echo chamber' of sympathetic users. Notably, in the context of discussion about Twitter as a public sphere, the increase in Thornberry's follower numbers did not arise from her presentation of a well-reasoned point of debate but rather a statement widely construed as a political gaffe. In Habermas' (1989) idealistic view of the public sphere, he claimed that if any prominent voices did emerge, they would do so on the basis of their ability to form and debate reasoned arguments. However, the Thornberry case suggests that the online environment does not entirely support this expectation. In fact, the behaviours of the users do not adhere to Habermas' expectations of rational-critical debate nor of a rational public.

Although followers do not provide a measure of electoral success, they are still desirable to the parties as a way of forging connection and, helping to spread information. Large numbers of followers can provide the parties with social capital; the accounts look more interesting to the unattached (non-followers) when there are signs of wider interest (Recuero et al., 2011). This in

turn entices users to follow an account, and an increasing number of followers leads to a greater chance that content may also be seen and shared. Although the connection created by it is tenuous as a sign of participation, the act of following a Twitter account still forms a basic digital attachment, which can lead to greater engagement between the users and the party pages. The following sections examine the more active forms of participation on the site to provide greater insight into how far the parties are proactively engaged with the different communication tools that the site offers.

5.2.2 Engaging and Endorsing

In terms of more active modes of participation, ‘engaging’ relates to the ‘favouriting’ of tweets (Twitter’s version of Facebook’s ‘like’ function, which indicates a reaction to a post), the viewing of video content, or the clicking of hyperlinks. Meanwhile, ‘endorsing’ (although a misleading term for its automatic presumption of accord with the content) refers to the sharing of tweets posted by other accounts by means of retweeting – much like forwarding an email to all contacts. The quality that distinguishes these forms of participation from the previous ones is that they imply the users have read the tweets in order to decide on whether, and how, to engage with the content. The digital attachment is formed on the basis of specific content rather than the looser association with an account that ‘following’ enables. Engagement, as a mode of participation, produces two effects: (1) it directs users to a wider network of information and (2) it provides an indication of the users’ response to content.

During the 2015 campaign, the parties relied heavily on the use of clips and hyperlinks, primarily as a method to overcome the 140-character limit imposed on Twitter. Additionally, images and videos were useful tools for attempting to gain visual prominence over the field of tweets that inundated a user's profile at any one moment. The effectiveness of images in capturing the attention of users is reflected in the heavy reliance of clickbait tweets on including visual materials such as photos or videos (Chakraborty et al., 2017). This diversity of mediums would naturally make the content seem more interesting than posts composed only of text. However, the campaigns' primary objectives were to utilise videos and hyperlinks to provide additional information on Twitter or to direct the viewers to the party's website or other media pages. One of the more frequent occasions on which this tactic was used was when the parties were posting tweets about their policies. For example, a tweet could contain an image of the key policy points and a hyperlink to the manifesto itself or a relevant page on the party website. On the one hand, such tweets brought in more literature to the public sphere and added to the pool of information that Habermas stated as necessary for rational-critical debate. On the other hand, the provision of information could also be indicative of parties trying to 'broadcast' information rather than engage in deliberative discourse. Ultimately, the emphasis was placed on the users to access the information with the parties determining the output. Unlike information dissemination, endorsing content through the act of sharing was an activity that the party pages both courted and engaged with themselves.

The parties most often retweeted posts generated from the accounts of the party leader, local party associations, or other groups with strong political

links. Often these consisted of campaign trail updates or endorsements of the political party. On some occasions, the authors of the retweeted posts were well-known individuals who were supporting the party, such as Eddie Izzard for Labour. These posts also served to provide updates on the parties' ground campaigns. These retweets were intended to aid a party's campaign and bolster its reputation by using the voices of others to reaffirm its position. Although some retweets related to the party were used to present its activities and policies in a positive light, others were used to publicise negative campaigns by the parties directed at their rivals. The selective nature of these retweets provided an example of 'manipulated publicity' – parties sharing content to present themselves in a positive light.

There was an underlying expectation that the most ardent grassroots supporters would automatically share tweets, and the Conservatives monitored this data to measure the response to different posts (Elder and Edmonds, 2015). Some evidence showed the party pages openly trying to secure online mobilisation. During the final day of the campaign, all four parties' accounts made concerted efforts to encourage users to retweet posts of support, as well as to remind and encourage others to turn out to vote. The posts typically read as "RETWEET: If you want a country that works for everyone, not just a privileged few, vote Labour tomorrow" (The Labour Party, 2015d) or "#VoteConservative tomorrow to secure a brighter future for you, for your family - and for Britain" (Conservatives, 2015e). This showed that, even though the parties were trying to set the issue agendas, they also recognised Twitter's potential to mobilise supporters to share content and help spread their messages. Once again, this was another form of information dissemination, but

the emphasis was on the users spreading the message without further follow-up from the parties or engagement in debates around the information.

5.2.3 Conversations and Hashtags

The final level of Twitter participation encompasses the use of hashtags and conversations. As the most active forms of communication, they rely on users generating their own content through the production of original tweets to participate in a narrative or dialogue. As we have seen in Chapter Four, hashtags represent a means by which users can connect their tweets to a wider narrative. Such a connection is achieved by the decision of a user to adopt a word or phrase into a hashtag, such as #GE2015 or #RegistertoVote; the site then collates the posts which contain the same hashtags so that they can be viewed together. Although a collection of related tweets can be viewed through searching key words, a hashtag denotes a clearly identifiable connection to a particular narrative. For example, #BritishGP is often widely used by Formula One fans who wish to comment on the British Grand Prix rather than the sport in general, or #SkyF1 for those who wish to pass judgement on the commentary.

The more direct form of communication comes in the shape of conversations which allow users to reply to tweets and create a dialogue with other users. Unlike hashtags, conversations connect users with specific tweets and accounts rather than a narrative theme. These tools offer the greatest challenge to the one-way, broadcast style of communication associated with traditional political activity. By connecting tweets, content, and accounts

together, an active narrative is formed through which opinions can be exchanged and challenged, and which can provide the necessary give-and-take environment for the rational-critical debate Habermas had envisaged in the public sphere. Twitter's original design was intended to centre around user-generated content, and the introduction of the hashtag and conversation functions were key stages in its development into a more interactive space. By first examining the use of hashtags, this section investigates how the parties explored these tools and whether they indicated a shift in communication methods or a case of 'politics as usual'.

One of the difficulties of the use of hashtags as a form of communication is that while it denotes the active attachment of a user to a narrative, it does not necessarily indicate a wish to participate in a debate. The narratives created through hashtags are more disjointed than @-reply conversations as they insert one person's opinion into a wide pool of views. Without the dialogue structure that @-replies enable between accounts, tweets that use a hashtag are more likely to be lost in a wave of other posts and so have less chance of being checked or challenged by others or objectively reviewed by the original poster. Without rational-critical debate, Habermas (1989: 213) warned that mere opinions can soon be presented as 'fact' as they become assumed, a sentiment more recently brought to public attention with the discussion around 'fake news', particularly under the US presidency of Donald Trump. In these instances, the battle is often fought between the *volume* (quantity and status) of the online voices, or groups, rather than through deliberation (Hannan, 2018). However, hashtags can at least encourage some dialogue on the selected issue and help attract attention to the topic, even if the related posts are disjointed. Ultimately,

it is the prerogative of the individuals as to how they engage with the content connected to the hashtag. Various narratives appeared on Twitter in connection to the 2015 general election and were created with different intentions and results, as the rest of this section investigates.

Three primary categories of hashtags were used by the party accounts during the campaign. The first category was hashtags that referenced a party in the form of the party's name such as #LibDems, often including the prefix 'vote' (for example, #VoteLabour). The second category was hashtags associated with the televised debates or other television appearances, the most frequent of which included #LeadersDebate, #BBCqt (BBC Question Time), and #Marr (The Andrew Marr Show). The third category of hashtags comprised those formed from specific policies or catchphrases such as #DigitalRights used by the Liberal Democrats, #BedroomTax (Labour), #SecureTheRecovery (Conservative), and #BelieveInBritain (UKIP). Although it is difficult to claim 'ownership' of a hashtag, the parties chiefly used the ones that explicitly forwarded their own agenda, with the exception of those that mentioned the televised debates.

The use of #LeadersDebate (the most commonly used hashtag by both the Conservative and Labour Party accounts) denoted a more reactive mode of communication in that parties inserted themselves into the narrative rather than creating it. The content of these attributed tweets, however, was very much of a broadcast nature and used as part of the spin-doctoring process to applaud their respective leaders, repeat policy taglines, and on occasion highlight the policy (and personal) failures of the opposition. As discussed in Chapter Three, as common with hashtag use, the parties were trying to be heard amidst a

cacophony of competing voices. However, there were examples of the parties using hashtags as part of a drive to actively encourage users to share or engage with the campaigns. These included #LabourDoorstep and #WhyImVotingUKIIP.

The Labour Party campaign team had some success with #LabourDoorstep, which denoted an initiative introduced by the party with the aim to hold four million ‘doorstep’ conversations before the general election. Although an offline campaign at its origin, #LabourDoorstep was quickly adopted as an online tag by many party candidates and activists, creating a vibrant web of campaign trail updates. Despite the natural appeal to the Labour–supporting echo chamber, the hashtag also provided an opportunity to advertise the party’s willingness to engage with voters. In this respect, it was surprising that the official party page did not directly incorporate the theme into the tweets it posted, instead only acknowledging the activity second-hand through retweets. However, the apparent reluctance of the central party to endorse this online trend may be justified by concerns around the potential to lose control over the direction of the narrative.

The most striking example of this came during the 2014 European Parliament election when UKIP wanted to create a positive narrative online with users explaining #WhyImVotingUKIP. The hashtag, once picked up, quickly went viral, but it soon deviated from its original purpose, with many users posting sarcasm or witticisms as their responses (Cresci, 2014; Pillmoor, 2014: 21). The #WhyImVotingUKIP trend demonstrates the potential volatility of the site, where the users can react to content in a way unintended by the original poster. On the one hand, it is encouraging that users were able to engage with

the hashtag in ways that differed from UKIP's original intention for the narrative. However, despite this dissent, engagement in rational-critical debate was lacking, not only amongst the users whose primary focus appeared to be humourous one-liners but also from the UKIP party page in its lack of response.

Conversation, however, offered a more direct way for parties to engage in a dialogue. On the face of it, virtual conversations on Twitter – using @-reply to respond to a specific tweet – seemed like a natural extension of Labour's doorstep conversations into the virtual environment. However, as this section discusses, online conversations raised their own issues and were not widely conducted by the party accounts. The Liberal Democrats were the exception rather than the norm; they engaged in over 1,000 conversations – more than 20% of all their tweets during the official campaign period. This significant share far outstripped the negligible use of the tool by the Conservatives, Labour, and UKIP – Labour's total of 16 @-reply tweets meant it was the most engaged of the three. This situation echoed behaviour demonstrated during the 2014 European Parliamentary elections where, aside from the Liberal Democrats, such interactions were seldom conducted (Pillmoor, 2014: 13-14). Though still sparingly used, the most common method of interaction by other parties (aside from the Liberal Democrats) was tagging (@-mention) an account in a tweet to highlight a connection with other users, such as a celebrity endorser, but without engaging in conversation. Although the Liberal Democrats continued to respond to users' tweets during the 2015 election campaign, the style of conversations the account engaged in had evolved.

During the 2014 European Parliament election, the Liberal Democrats' digital campaign team would reply to Twitter users' posts, predominantly tweets

of endorsement. The response from the party account would often be to the autogenerated tweets that users had the option to post after completing a petition of support or making a donation via the party's website (Pillmoor, 2014: 14). These types of tweets from users most often drew a generic reply from the Liberal Democrat Twitter account of "thank you" and little more. Although they did employ the tactic of responding to users with their given name to add a further element of personalisation, the generic nature of this response was reinforced when the account accidently tweeted "@majabl Thanks for your question [NAME] As Nick said earlier "jobs, jobs, jobs"' (Liberal Democrats, 2014). This blunder highlighted the issues inherent in the use of automated replies, suggesting a party-approved template for the stylisation of responses. By 2015, the account began responding to more tweets asking for information on policy, both broad (the NHS) and specific (bicycle routes). This new approach signified the party's movement away from simply thanking followers for their support to more tailored tweets that would often point users to relevant manifesto sections and other literature or provide specific pledges on request.

In terms of users who received responses, the party looked to engage with a range of people rather than a select few. This strategy resulted in a wider reach as more users were able to establish a direct connection with the party page. However, the approach of connecting a broad number of accounts was done without sustaining the conversations. Most conversations consisted of a single response to a question and whilst the Liberal Democrats represented the most interactive political party on social media by far, this approach continued to highlight the tensions between superficially engaging and developing discussions. On the surface, the responses primarily served to disseminate

information, but, at the same time, such conversations were not private and in themselves served as an advertisement to other users that the page was willing to engage (quite widely) with others.

The selection of posts the Liberal Democrats elected to respond to, however, raises its own questions. From the outset, the responsibility of determining whether to engage in online conversations falls to the party or candidate account holders. It is not clear how this decision-making process took place – for instance, were they the most recent tweets posted, seen by a member of the digital marketing team when they logged in, or the product of an individual searching through a backlog of tweets to select the most appropriate or interesting? As already discussed, many of the tweets to which the party replied asked policy-related questions, but this may not have necessarily reflected the content sent their way for several reasons. Firstly, there have been increasingly well-documented reports and academic studies into the online abuse and concerted trolling efforts that politicians have faced on Twitter, behaviours that the party pages have also been subjected to by being tagged in abusive tweets (Akhtar and Morrison, 2019; Ward and McLoughlin, 2020). If Twitter is viewed as an example of a public sphere, then the dismissal of any abusive tweets by the parties seems more than reasonable as they do not contribute to a rational-critical discussion. However, this does not include other tweets that parties would not respond to, including those they perceived as negative, because they challenge certain policy positions. Similarly, the selection of tweets largely covered ‘safe’ topics, allowing the party to reiterate its stance on areas it felt most strongly about and to highlight more personal issues that also fed into its campaign message, such as questions about

transport and the environment. These choices reflect Habermas' concerns about 'manipulated public opinion' through representative publicity with the parties' creating an image of public engagement but on their own terms, an issue which is explored in the next chapter.

Although the parties' various levels of engagement with the site's features have so far reflected a trend of broadcasting rather than debating, the Twitter features discussed are available to all users on the platform and provide the 'same' space and potential for netizens to interact. The next section looks at the use of paid advertising. As it was introduced only one month before the 2010 general election, this form of advertising was not used in the parties' election campaigns at the time. Therefore, the 2015 general election acts as a case study into how the feature has challenged Twitter's position as a public sphere and how the parties implemented this new method of advertising.

5.3 Resource Rich: Sponsored Content

Despite Twitter's fundamental design concept supporting the potential of a public sphere, the site has not been immune to commercial pressures placed upon it by its investors or the economic requirements to keep the company afloat. Habermas (1989: 181) viewed the encroachment of a profit-driven mindset that often came with advertising as the beginning of the disintegration of the public sphere; in Twitter's case, this is examined with the introduction of sponsored content, which could be regarded as part of the same trend. Although the status of political actors is addressed more fully in the chapter on party election candidates, Chapter Three began this conversation by outlining

some of the difficulties in separating individuals from their offline status in the virtual world. This section instead focuses on Habermas' insistence that "economic dependencies…[should have] no influence" in the public sphere (Habermas, 1989: 36). In terms of the foundational structure of Twitter, all users were provided with the same generic page layout and restricted to the 140-character limit (whether Donald Trump or Joe Bloggs). Similarly, the site is free to access with only a name, email address, and confirmation of age required. It left some room for personalisation such as a profile and cover photos, written content, and follower choices, but superficially at least, Twitter represented a level playing field. However, the introduction of sponsored content undermined this concept of a level playing field; 'real-world' resources began to play a much more important role in political social media engagement.

Historically, the Conservative Party has consistently outspent its rivals, and 2015 proved no exception with their campaign expenditures totalling £15.6 million. This amount far exceeded the £12.1 million spent by Labour and £3.5 million and £2.9 million invested by the Liberal Democrats and UKIP, respectively (Cowley and Kavanagh, 2016a: 261). Onlookers overwhelmingly concluded at the end of the 2015 campaign that the Conservative Party had 'comprehensively outmanoeuvred' its rivals (Shipman, 2017: 363). Under the direction of election campaign director Lynton Crosby and digital consultant Jim Messina (a former member of Obama's team in 2008 and 2012), the Conservatives created a more sophisticated social media campaign. Financial resources proved pivotal to this success; not only did the Party comprehensively outmanoeuvre its rivals, it also comprehensively outspent them. Even before the start of the official campaign period, the Tories had managed to rack up

Facebook bills of over £100,000 on advertising slots purchased towards the end of 2014 (Hawkins, 2015). The final figures show the party spent over £1.2 million on social media, even though the overall sums could well be higher as only identifiable costs – itemised receipts – were recorded (Shipman, 2017: 191). This amount is much higher than the £160,000, £91,000, and £22,245 spent on social media by Labour, the Liberal Democrats, and UKIP, respectively, during the same election period (The Electoral Commission, 2016: 29).

However, the Conservative Party's success relied not only on its high advertising expenditure but also on the cost of skilled personnel, long-term planning, and data collection needed to ensure its effective investment (Shipman, 2017: 193). Upon his hiring in 2013, Messina set to work updating and expanding the party's catalogue of voter information (Channel 4 News, 2015). The increased storage of this data over a sustained period meant that by the time of the election, the campaign team demonstrated a clearer understanding of its key target audience and how to reach it. Additionally, this meant they were positioned to be able to introduce targeted advertisements well in advance of the campaign period. This long-term approach increased the likelihood that prospective Conservative voters would share these advertisements during the election (Shipman, 2017: 365). In the earlier years of the internet, this information primarily would have been sourced from party email lists and similar records (McGregor, 2010). However, sites such as Twitter, Facebook, and Google were able to sell targeted advertisement slots thanks to the data mining software and analytics that enabled them to identify appropriate accounts for targeting on the basis of online activity such as buying

habits, websites visited, pages liked or followed, or more personal data such as age, gender, and geographical location.

The Conservatives made particular use of data analytics and sponsored content to target ‘swing’ voters. This form of advertising meant the party did not rely solely on its Twitter followers to retweet posts in the hope that they would reach an intended audience. Instead, sponsored tweets allowed the party to ensure that they would appear as the first result for selected search terms on relevant pages as a suggested post, thus expanding their reach within a certain remit. One such example was a paid-for tweet sent out with the aim of attracting female UKIP waverers. The post proclaimed, “We’re building a brighter, more secure future for our children and grandchildren. A vote for Ukip, or any party other than the Conservatives, would let in Labour and the SNP – and risk everything we’ve achieved together over the last five years” and included a short video on the economic recovery (Delaney, 2016). In another instance, a paid-for advertisement was aimed squarely at Liberal Democrat waverers in the key battleground of southwest England and played on the notion of tactical voting (Delaney, 2016). Both of these messages underlined concerns about a potential Labour-SNP coalition, which played a crucial role in the Conservatives’ negative campaign approach. Moreover, each tweet had been tailored to a specific audience, making the message seem more personal and resonant, increasing the likelihood of some sort of reaction.

Although sponsored tweets represented a significant element in the Conservatives’ social media strategy, they were not the only method used by the party to ensure the campaign remained targeted and efficient. In an interview, Tom Edmonds (Delaney, 2016), who co-led the Conservatives’ digital

campaign, gave some insight into the ways in which, aside from sponsored targeted advertising, the process of creation and release of digital output represented a “complete turnaround from 2010”. In addition to its disproportionate campaign funds, the Conservative Party also had a strong digital communications team which could form ideas in-house, quickly create them, and just as quickly have them signed off by Crosby. Data analytics, both advanced forms and more simple ones that merely monitored the number of views, shares, likes or retweets of a post, allowed the campaign team to obtain a rapid readout of what was and was not working. If an idea resulted in less than the desired impact, it would be quickly scrapped, allowing a new one to take its place. This was also important as not all social media posts were aimed at the undecided voter; Twitter in particular represented an important way for the party to continue motivating and mobilising existing Conservative voters, as well as indirectly communicating with journalists (Elder and Edmonds, 2015). Creating content more likely to evoke responses from these users would not only reinforce their support of the party but also increase their likelihood of sharing tweets. The heavy reliance on targeted and sponsored content by the Conservative Party was in sharp contrast to the conversation focused and less wealthy Liberal Democrats who, relatively, were more likely to embrace the interactive features of Twitter.

5.4 Conclusion

Chapter Four concluded that Twitter is a platform that offers various communication devices to facilitate citizen participation, albeit within 140 characters at the time of the 2015 election. By extension, this creates the

opportunity for citizens to engage in rational-critical debate and supports the site's potential to function as a public sphere as per Habermas' thesis. However, this chapter indicated that UK political parties' engagement with these different devices primarily reinforces the desire for tightly controlled, centralised campaigns rather than engaging in discourse. Only the Liberal Democrats demonstrated any significant engagement with other users by directly replying to tweets. In this case however, the conversations that took place were dominated by responses to messages of support or, at best, a repeat of a relevant party policy to an enquiry, sometimes in the form of a link directing the user to the relevant page on the party website or manifesto. Although the Liberal Democrats showed a more personal involvement than other UK political parties in the Twittersphere, their conversations nevertheless lacked meaningful dialogue that encouraged further discourse. All the parties' pages demonstrated a high level of control over the output in terms of their engagement on the site, such as the use of generic-style hashtags or those formed of party slogans.

Although the parties shared an undercurrent of expectation that the netizens of Twitter would willingly and automatically participate in the viewing and sharing of content, they themselves did little to demonstrate sustained encouragement for such online mobilisation. Instead, they displayed their political messages and campaign trail updates with accompanying hashtags or calls to retweet but without creating a reciprocal relationship with their followers and other users. The use of paid-for advertisements by the Conservative Party reinforced the idea that parties tried to control the environment by targeting specific users, representing themselves to select groups and failing to encourage open critical debate. Additionally, this illustrated how status and

representative publicity was encroaching on the potential of Twitter to function as a public sphere. The parties' follower statistics, when compared with individuals and particularly celebrities, also highlighted the limited spread of their political online voices. Instead, they were overshadowed by users who held a certain status outside of Twitter and themselves often showed little inclination towards public discussion.

Overall, parties' engagement with different communication devices on the site up to 2015 indicated that the parties saw Twitter as more of a broadcast platform which was useful insofar as it was under their control. The parties' online campaigns placed the spotlight on the tension between the use of Twitter as a tool for 'representative publicity' by the parties and its possibilities for 'revolutionising' politics by opening a new channel of reciprocal communication. However, there have been indications that this 'control' the parties have tried to apply, whilst restricting rational-critical debate, has not been wholly effective. User reaction to offline events that translated to online activity and PR 'slips' by the parties and candidates have shown that whilst they may attempt to control their position on the site, it can prove to be a highly volatile environment.

Chapter Six: Election Issues, Public Opinion, and Agenda-Setting

The preceding chapters focused on Twitter's credentials as a public sphere by analysing the site's discourse architecture and the use of the features by political parties. It has so far been established that Twitter provides an environment with the *potential* to be used as a deliberative space, but indications so far are that the parties have been largely reluctant to embrace fully the interactive nature of the site. This chapter turns its attention to the content of the parties' tweets, assessing their engagement with different election issues and events and asking the questions: How did the parties conduct their online campaign through Twitter? To what extent did the Twitter campaigns demonstrate an engagement with public opinion? Did the parties use the site to react to events during the 2015 election campaign?

First, I frame the discussion around news media's role in agenda-setting and the potential challenges social media and Twitter pose to their position. The potential is juxtaposed with Habermas' fears, discussed in Chapter Three, that the parties would instead engage with their own agenda-setting through 'representative publicity' and the manipulation of public opinion, the concepts which provide the framework for my analysis.

The investigation begins with a study of the extent to which the Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat, and UKIP Twitter accounts engaged with the election issues which polling identified as most to least salient for voters in the 2015 election. This is followed by further examination into how the parties engaged with the three most important issues for the public during the 2015

election campaign: the economy, immigration, and health. Throughout this analysis, there is an interparty comparison to develop an understanding of how each party shaped their Twitter campaigns, considering reasons behind any similarities and differences in their approaches.

The second section of the chapter evaluates the parties' engagement with the election issues in the wider context of the campaign, examining how they interacted with different issues or events over the course of the campaign period and the various strategies they employed. This includes an investigation into how reactive the parties were on Twitter towards policy discussion and events which occurred both on and off the site.

6.1 Disintermediation, Agenda-Setting, and Manipulated Publicity

The rapid transition from the dominance of the old media (radio, television, and press) to a more hybridised media system at the beginning of the twenty-first century had numerous implications for political communication and, in turn, has raised new questions about agenda-setting roles (Chadwick and Stanyer, 2010). Gurevitch et al. (2009: 173) have commented on the early effects of the increasingly digitised and hybridised media environment, stating that the continued fragmentation and diversification of media beyond the limited range of radio, television, and press outlets which characterised the latter part of the twentieth century has required politicians to become involved in "multidimensional impression management". As a consequence, there has been "an inevitable loosening of [politicians'] control over the political agenda,

forcing [them] into an increasingly responsive mode rather than the pro-active agenda-setting role they would prefer to adopt" (Gurevitch et al., 2009: 173).

Although this article was written before social media had become a widely acknowledged form of political communication, it still raises three pertinent points about the media environment and agenda-setting. First is the importance of the context of the media environment; here, it was concluded that the early years of the new hybrid media had the effect of loosening politicians' abilities to control the agenda. This was compounded by the second point, the view that news media expanded their role as intermediary and subsequently their control over setting the agenda, albeit through more varied mediums. Finally, there was the view that politicians would prefer to interact with the public on their terms and take on the role of agenda-setting, though this has been further hampered. The question is: did the use of Twitter contribute to an alteration of the state of things?

Beginning with the context, a characteristic commonly cited about social media is that it allows a direct line of communication between the electorate and the political parties and candidates (McGregor, 2010; Murthy, 2013: 34). This has led to scholarly discussion around the process of 'disintermediation' across social media and social networking sites (Eldridge II et al., 2019; Robles-Morales and Córdoba-Hernández, 2019). It is argued that through this process, the role of the news media in the delivery of politics to the public (specifically television news and the press) has come under increasing question (Hermida, 2010: 300; Eldridge II et al., 2019). It does not determine that the news media are redundant—far from it—but that social media provide new opportunities for political communication by political actors, which, in essence, removes the

traditional ‘middleman’ – the news journalists (Fisher et al., 2018; Robles-Morales and Córdoba-Hernández, 2019). The removal of the journalistic “gatekeepers” can be an attractive proposition for parties across the political spectrum, particularly candidates like Trump, and also has the effect of removing journalistic scrutiny, at least at the point of tweeting (Muller, 2016; Bruns, 2018: 20). Without the need for a ‘middleman’ to share their messages, the parties are essentially left with the capabilities to post statements with no immediate follow-up questions, unlike when facing the news media in a press conference or an interview.

The opportunity to bypass the mediation process of news media through sites such as Twitter has also emerged at a time when newspaper circulation is in long-term decline (Deacon and Wring, 2016a: 303), television news has seen a reduction in its viewership as news sources have fragmented and diversified (Gurevitch et al., 2009), and, most significantly, the news media as a whole is facing low levels of public trust. A survey conducted at the end of 2014 found that only 31% of the public trusted BBC News journalists, and just 17% trusted ITV News journalists (YouGov, 2014). In the same survey, the print media fared worse with only 15% of people trusting journalists even of ‘upmarket’ papers, such as *The Times*, *The Telegraph*, and *The Guardian*. This reduced significantly to 3% and 2%, respectively, for ‘mid-market’ papers and ‘red-top’ tabloids.

Claims of political bias in the media are common both during and outside of election campaign periods, and have contributed to the declining levels of public trust in news media and its consumption (Ardèvol-Abreu and Gil de Zúñiga, 2016). During the 2015 UK election, it was found that there was a

positive bias across the television news and press coverage towards the Conservative Party, even when the content was weighted towards circulation (Centre for Research in Communication and Culture, 2015). Despite this appearing as an advantage, the Conservative Party was still placed under journalistic scrutiny and subject to the agenda-setting role of news media.

The primary focus of news media was the election process, or the 'horse race', which accounted for 45.9% of television election coverage and 44.5% of press coverage (Deacon et al., 2015). Twitter presented itself as an alternative platform through which political parties could directly engage with campaign issues. The question is: how did they utilise the space without the news media's intermediation?

To evaluate how the parties presented themselves through Twitter, I return to Habermas' (1989: 232) work on 'manipulated publicity', introduced in Chapter Three, and his concept of representative publicity. The core idea behind this concept is that political actors present themselves or their campaigns in a way that generates some form of "agreement or at least acquiescence" from the public but without engaging in discourse (Habermas, 1989: 177). Instead, it relies on creating the *impression* of being engaged with the citizens. This is achieved in three main ways: first by selecting topics or policy areas that would attract public support, second by selecting issues for which they, the parties, have a good reputation, and third by creating or capitalising on moments or events that attract positive attention to their messages or encourage support for their campaigns.

Regarding the first point, (Habermas, 1989: 177) argued that political actors “create an aura of goodwill for certain positions” by presenting opinions or policies which resonate with the public to generate some sense of general agreement. During election periods, this would be most evident in the parties’ choice of core election issues for their campaigns. In the first instance, this can be seen in the adoption of topics or policies which are considered ‘safe’; these are predominantly ‘valence’ issues, where there exists a consensus on the general direction of the policies amongst the parties and the public. For example, in 2015, there was a consensus amongst the four parties to shape their election manifestos around fiscal responsibility (Sowels, 2015).

The secondary element addresses the presentation of issues: how the parties’ market their policies to the public. In part, this relates to the choice of policies on which the parties focus but also their style of address. One tactic used by the parties is to pose rhetorical questions, a device often employed in campaign literature. The questions are framed so that very few people are likely to respond negatively, such as when being asked whether they “support the NHS?” (The Labour Party, 2015e), but they do trigger a positive internal response which creates a connection between the party and the reader. Another method is through repetition and the creation of different campaign strategies on how to introduce and engage with different issues, which is explored later in the chapter.

After the initial issue selection, Habermas (1989: 200-201) also stated that “public relations do not genuinely concern public opinion but opinion in the sense of reputation”. In this case, citizens rely more heavily on their perceptions of the political parties’ abilities to handle certain valence issues. As such, parties

will look to exploit the areas in which they have built good reputations and highlight issues on which their opponents are perceived as weaker. The application of this approach in the parties' Twitter campaigns is examined further in sections exploring the coverage of the economy, immigration, and health as election issues.

Although the parties' reputations on issues are important, the value of reputation is also dependent on the salience of these areas for the electorate. For example, the Conservative Party is traditionally seen as tough on crime (a key issue for only 2.6% of the public in 2015), whilst the Labour Party is more readily associated with high levels of state investment in areas such as welfare, which polled as the most salient issue for 10.1% of the public (YouGov, 2015c). Statistically, therefore, the Labour Party's reputation on welfare is more likely to hold higher value than the Conservative's on crime when examined against public opinion in issue salience. In addition, when examining reputation, it is also important to consider the issues which the parties do not cover as well as those with which they most openly engage.

The final element of manipulated publicity that Habermas (1989: 194) highlighted was the act of "creating news events or exploiting events that attract attention" to help put "the communications apparatus in motion", essentially capitalising on ways to draw attention to particular issues. The televised leaders' debates during the 2015 election campaign were key examples of occasions when the parties collectively chose to use Twitter as a space to add their own online commentaries to a mediated event. The parties' Twitter accounts acted as their own purpose-built, online spin-rooms, each providing a live commentary on the events as they unfolded, tweeting messages to highlight and support

their own leader's performance and policies as well as to undermine opposition leaders. Notably, they were also able to monitor in real time how their messages related to Twitter noise about the debate. The parties' accounts also used the debates as an occasion to retweet large numbers of messages from their own MPs or other supporters whose comments reinforced their positions. However, the events do not necessarily have to be in the form of organised press conferences, televised debates, or speeches. For example, the release of data on NHS winter waiting times during the campaign period was an event used by Labour to present the Conservative Party as failing to invest sufficiently in the NHS. In this case, the party had chosen to be reactive to a piece of breaking information.

Alternatively, the 'events' could be created by the parties themselves. One respect in which this was repeatedly seen was when new policies were announced. The release of the party manifestos, for example, served as events with plenty of fanfare in which the parties commanded a great deal of attention both on- and offline. Similarly, the announcement of individual policies could also be made the focal point of the day to draw attention to a party pledge. The evaluation of the parties' output on Twitter provides an insight into how they chose to integrate the site into their campaigns and the extent to which they used the site as a means to interact with public opinion, participate in manipulated publicity, and set the agenda.

6.2 Data

The data collected for this chapter comprise of 5,630 tweets posted from the official Twitter accounts of the Conservative Party, Labour Party, Liberal Democrats, and UKIP during the short campaign period from 30 March 2015 to the end of the final day of campaigning on 6 May. Only original tweets from the party accounts were analysed as the parties' campaign teams directly controlled the content of these posts, unlike retweets which would still be associated with the original poster and not a direct message from the party. Such tweets would therefore provide a clear indication of how the parties chose to shape their own online output.

The coding relevant to this chapter excludes tweets which were @-replies (conversations) as these were not visible by default on the parties' Twitter pages. The content of images, audio, and videos which formed part of a tweet but did not require the user to select a link that would navigate them away from the site was all included in the coding. Those posts which did not meet the coding options were primarily activity updates from the campaign trail, such as reminders about upcoming television appearances featuring the party leader.

The tweets were coded against a list of thirteen election issues selected to correlate with the opinion surveys conducted by YouGov (2015c) asking respondents which issues they thought were the most important facing the country at the time. Inconsistencies in the issues highlighted across different polls meant that it was not possible to combine the results of multiple sources into one definitive poll. However, the YouGov results reflected the overall trends in opinion polls conducted by other surveys regarding the key policy concerns.

I also selected the YouGov surveys due to the distinction they made between immigration and Europe as two separate election issues. Prior to 2015, many opinion polls had made the same distinction, but some surveys had combined the two issues ahead of the 2015 general election campaign period. However, the content of the parties' tweets reinforced the view that these issues were not mutually exclusive and that coding the two under the same category would provide a misleading representation of their roles in the campaign.

The Twitter and polling data were transcribed into a comparative percentage format where the combined issues totalled 100%, and the percentage of each issue denoted the relative percentage coverage (on Twitter) or electoral salience (in opinion polls) they received. This highlighted the relative ranking of the issues against one another and allowed a comparison of the data between the different sources. In the case of the polling data, this transcription was also due to YouGov allowing respondents to select up to three options from those listed. Additionally, three polls were conducted during the campaign period at biweekly intervals (March 30–31, April 13–14, and April 27–28), from which the average was taken. As individual polls can only provide a snapshot of opinions for a single moment, the three polls were combined to balance the effects of one-off events (see **Appendix 2.**). Similarly, the coverage of the issues in tweets is also presented as a percentage, primarily to account for overlap, as some posts encompassed multiple topics. It also enabled a comparable view of the parties' focus as they differed in the number of tweets they posted. The next section begins by comparing the salience of election issues based on the opinion polls with the relative coverage they were given by the party pages.

6.3 Election Issues: Opinion Polls, Party Tweets, and Mass Media

The YouGov (2015c) data showed the economy as uppermost in people's minds during the short election campaign, alongside immigration and health, which rounded off the top three. The percentage of respondents that identified these issues as the most important facing the country remained high across the three polls taken during this period. Between 52-55%, 47-51% and 45-50% of respondents selected the economy, immigration, and health, respectively, as the "most important" issues (YouGov, 2015c). Looking beyond the campaign period, the poll conducted in mid-April showed that, for the first time since the start of the 2010 parliament, health had overtaken immigration as the second most salient issue for the public, though the latter still averaged higher across the campaign period (Jordan, 2015). Prior to this poll, the economy and immigration had always alternated between the two top spots. However, the top three were never separated by more than eight percentage points in any of the three surveys, equivalent to a gap of 2.3 percentage points when the polling data were weighted for comparison (see **Table 2**).

Table 2. YouGov Poll on Election Issue Salience and Issue Coverage on the Parties' Twitter Pages as Comparative Percentages

Election Issues	YouGov Poll	CON	LAB	LIB DEM	UKIP
Crime	2.64	0.28	1.83	0.86	0.85
Economy	19.09	49.44	26.16	34.59	20.99
Education	5.88	3.63	9.00	14.08	2.82
Environment	3.12	0.00	0.99	4.62	0.70
Europe	5.64	1.96	0.08	1.55	20.70
Family Life	2.64	5.03	3.59	3.11	0.56
Health	16.81	5.87	29.44	21.50	12.68
Housing	8.16	6.98	4.65	4.53	5.49
Immigration	17.53	0.84	1.53	1.55	20.85
Pensions	3.48	3.07	0.46	1.12	0.42
Tax	3.84	18.99	14.19	9.76	10.00
Transport	1.08	0.56	0.53	0.43	3.24
Welfare	10.09	3.35	7.55	2.29	0.70

Outside the top three, there was a significant drop in salience between the third- and fourth-placed issues, ranging from 13 to 18 percentage points in the poll data (welfare peaked at 32% in the first poll). This translated to a 6.7 percentage point difference in the comparative statistics. These other issues, placed fourth and below, collectively received less than 47% of the public's attention, highlighting the dominance of the three key issues in the electorates' consciousness. Excluding welfare (and housing in the final week), the poll data varied less for issues outside the top three, particularly those regarded as less significant. The interest in transport (the least salient) remained at 3% in the original opinion poll data, with crime and family life between 7 and 8%.

Across the parties' Twitter pages, the economy, health, and immigration generally, though not invariably, appeared amongst the most referenced issues. Only the economy received a top-two ranking from all four Twitter accounts, whilst health and taxation were also included in each page's top five. Only UKIP chose immigration as a key issue. Although the economy represented the most covered topic across all pages, each party differed in its level of interaction with the issues and the choice of which policies would dominate its agenda. The Conservative Party account was heavily weighted towards the economy (49.4% of all issue tweets), paired with taxation (19%) in a distant but clear second. Labour focused its attention on health (29.4%) with the economy (26.1%) a close second. The Liberal Democrats took the inverse approach, with the economy (33.5%) as its dominant issue followed by health (21.9%). UKIP was distinctive both in the key issues it selected and its coverage of them. Across the account, immigration, Europe, and the economy accounted for almost equal shares in the coverage, just short of 21% apiece. Whilst the economy still featured, the extent to which UKIP included content on immigration and Europe immediately distinguished it from the other parties, with its closest rivals offering only 1.6% (Liberal Democrats) and 2% (Conservatives), respectively.

The decision by the parties to emphasise certain issues on their Twitter pages inevitably lowered the amount of coverage which others would receive. With the exception of UKIP, the parties each had a key issue that dominated their content as well as a secondary one discussed in at least 18% of their policy-related tweets. The Conservative, Labour, and Liberal Democrat pages thus focused more than half of their issue coverage on two topics. Only UKIP covered the issues of immigration and transport beyond the relative statistics of

the opinion poll data. The Liberal Democrats were the only party to focus on education (14.0%) as a top-three issue. All four parties, however, chose to place more emphasis on the issues of the economy and taxation compared to the salience indicated in the opinion polls. In contrast, policy areas such as crime, housing, and welfare all received less coverage than the poll statistics by at least 0.4 percentage points. Of the three, welfare was weighed the least heavily by the parties, with the share of Labour tweets (which demonstrated the highest coverage) covering the issue at a rate of 2.3 percentage points below the share of individuals who selected it as an important issue in the survey data.

Coverage of the election by the television news was dominated by the election process, which accounted for 45.9% and 44.5% of election coverage across the respective mediums (Centre for Research in Communication and Culture, 2015). Considering coverage of the issues listed in the polling data, the economy was the most covered issue in the news media (8.1% of television news and 10.5% in the press), correlating with the most salient issue in the opinion polls. Taxation was the second most covered election issue in the news media, the higher coverage reflecting a pattern also seen across the party pages. Immigration and the NHS interchangeably rounded off the top four.

The correlation between the key issues in the news media and the opinion polls is important to note but is not a claim of causation. Instead, the key points include the focus on the election process at the expense of issue coverage, which contrasts from the party's Twitter pages, where there was a stronger focus on policies. Secondly, and following from the first, whilst the economy received notably more attention across the news media, coverage of the NHS and immigration accounted for no more than 3.7% of election

coverage. This highlights how the parties were able to craft issue-focused campaigns on Twitter free from the intermediating role of the media.

Whilst the parties' choices of issue coverage were similar in some ways, they also differed enough to distinguish each party. This diversity of approaches underlined the parties' online brand and agenda-setting attempts as they sought not only to differentiate themselves from one another but also to produce a campaign which would highlight their strengths and key campaign messages (Nielsen and Larsen, 2014). The avoidance of undesirable topics is in itself unsurprising, and it follows the patterns examined in Chapter Five, which established that the parties primarily adopted Twitter as a broadcasting platform. However, the following sections explore how the parties engaged with and presented the issues of the economy, immigration, and health. They compare the parties' approaches to covering these issues in terms not only of the relative share of total tweets but also the content of the tweets in the context of the 2015 campaign and the style of engagement with the issues.

6.3.1 The Economy

The economy collectively represented the key issue of the 2015 election for both the public and political parties. It is the long-held opinion of many politicians and commentators that the economy is *the* key election issue (Denver, 2007). These opinions do not, however, mean that the economy would necessarily be identified as the most salient issue in opinion polls. Rather, the message represents a reference to how, fundamentally, everyone wants prosperity, and even when not specified as the most important issue, it is inextricably linked to other voter concerns such as jobs and employment, state spending, and taxation (Denver et al., 2012). The extent to which the state of

the economy is seen as an ‘issue facing the country’ is therefore much more nuanced, with factors such as the economic context and the perception of the competence of the incumbent government playing a role.

At the time of the 2015 election, Britain was still recovering from the effects of the 2008 economic crisis. Although output had since steadily increased, the United Kingdom continued to run a trade deficit: with GDP per head in 2014 remaining below 2007 levels and the Bank of England reluctant to increase interest rates beyond 0.5% as part of a strategy to help stimulate economic growth. Although the unemployment rate amongst over 16s had fallen by 2.5 percentage points between March 2010 and March 2015, the figure still stood at 5.5% (Office for National Statistics, 2015).

The parties, at least, were united in the message that the budget deficit had to be reduced, offering various soundbites such as ‘eliminate the deficit’ (Conservatives), ‘deal with the deficit’ (Liberal Democrats), and ‘balance the books’ (Labour). As a topic for election campaigning, the economy slogans clearly identified the ‘goodwill’ position which Habermas had categorised as a component of manipulated publicity. This meant the parties campaigned on issues known to be salient for the public and backed by a public consensus (valence issues), but which the parties were also in a position to engage with, without damage to their reputations or campaigns.

However, whilst the parties broadly agreed that borrowing and spending needed to be controlled, they also distinguished themselves from one another with different economic focal points and key policy pledges. The Conservatives were conspicuous for their focus on the number of new jobs and businesses

created since 2010 to support their secure the recovery campaign. Labour, meanwhile, pledged to increase the minimum wage to more than eight pounds an hour. The Liberal Democrats also emphasised their commitment to extending paternity leave from two to six weeks. UKIP chose to focus on their promises to remove EU directives they saw as hampering the British economy and to renegotiate trade deals.

Across all four parties' Twitter campaigns, the economy proved a frequently referenced issue. Coverage exceeded 25% on all four party pages, with this share nearly doubling on the Conservative page. Although this correlated with public priorities reflected in opinion surveys, insofar as being a key issue, it raises the question of whether this represented a clear reaction to public opinion or was an example of manipulated publicity and, if the latter, in what way it was manipulated.

The significance of the economy in past elections indicates that the issue itself, rather than the survey results of 2015, affected the level of coverage it received. However, this also implies the underlying importance of the economy for voters and provides an assurance for the parties that the issue can be used to secure at least some level of public support. To consider this in more depth, it is therefore important to analyse other factors which influenced the parties' decision to engage with the economy and how they chose to do so. For this, I consider the behavioural factors which Habermas (1989) claimed would result from manipulated publicity, such as opinions based on reputation and to what extent these were observed in the parties' choices of policy focus and language of the relevant tweets. The Conservative and Liberal Democrat party pages provide the main point of comparison as the two accounts which focused most

on the economy. That the two parties had also been partners in the coalition government prior to the campaign provides an additional point of interest when examining the implications of their reputations. First, I examine the significance of reputation on the Conservative Party's engagement with the economy.

The Conservative Party has traditionally been viewed as a 'safe pair of hands' for the economy, a particularly appealing trait for voters during periods of economic turmoil. The 2015 economic context, therefore, offered a situation the party could capitalise on, despite the fact it had been the dominant partner in government for the previous five years. Going into the election, the relatively higher amount of trust in the Conservatives to "handle the problem best" was reflected in opinion polls (YouGov, 2015b). The Conservative Party were clear frontrunners on the issue of "the economy in general" with public trust in the party placed at around 40% and Labour 18 percentage points behind. When the same question was posed but on the issue of unemployment, the Conservative Party still ranked first, with up to 34% of respondents, but the lead over Labour had closed to within five percentage points. From a brand perspective, the Conservatives' Twitter coverage did engage with and expand on a key issue for the public but simultaneously exploited the situation and capitalised on public perception of the party's competence.

How the political parties engaged with the issue is also important when examining the use of manipulated publicity. For the Conservatives, the slogan 'secure the recovery', which was adopted as the second-most-used hashtag by the account behind #LeadersDebate, proved central to the party's economic rhetoric not only online but also off. The phrase built upon the party's previous slogan of 'long-term economic plan', which had characterised its 2010 election

campaign and continued into its time in government. The use of the 2015 slogan helped to create a sense of continuity in the narrative; it sent a message to the electorate that whilst the economic situation had improved during the previous parliament, only the re-election of the Conservatives would consolidate the economic recovery.

The party used its Twitter account to display its accomplishments and reinforce its reputation whilst also laying out future policies. One way it achieved this was through citing its record in areas such as job creation, such as "2 million jobs created since 2010 - let's keep going and build a brighter, more secure future. #SecureTheRecovery" (Conservatives, 2015b). This statistic, also broken down to '1,000 jobs created a day', formed a key component of the Conservatives' claims to competence, supported with mentions of the 760,000 additional businesses that were formed under the outgoing Tory-led coalition government[8]. However, deliberation was not directly courted: as discussed in Chapter Five, the hashtags were not used to encourage discussion *with* the party but rather as a tool to create a positive narrative and the presentation of accomplishments was a display of credentials rather than the basis for a debate.

Another element in supporting the assurance of its reputation as the sole party that could secure the economy was the Conservative page's repeated reference to Labour's record in comparison to their own. They frequently referred to Labour as the party which would 'wreck the economy', sometimes

[8] These statistics were most often repeated in the final two weeks of the campaign, the phrasing slightly altered but the messaging the same, reinforcing the Conservatives' track record on 'the economy' and why the party should be re-elected. For examples of tweets about creating 1,000 jobs a day, and references to 760,000 additional businesses, see **Appendix 3, section A.**

presented alongside the likely consequences, such as an inability to fund the NHS, a loss of jobs, or the continual increase in borrowing and the deficit, which they tagged as a legacy of previous Labour governments. In other tweets, particularly in the last few weeks of the campaign, the Conservatives also often invoked the threat of a possible coalition government between Labour and the Scottish National Party (SNP), warning that it would be disastrous for the economy. The Conservatives directed their negative campaigning almost exclusively towards Labour or the potential of a Labour-SNP coalition, which I discuss later, and which was largely connected to the issue of the economy. Twitter was ultimately used by the Conservatives as a platform to display their positive record on the economy through reinforcement, focusing on selected key achievements. Negative campaigning was present but did not dominate the rhetoric on the economy and was used as part of the effort by the Conservatives to reinforce their reputational advantage.

The Liberal Democrats similarly used their own track record to build up their reputation, but unlike the Conservative Party, this proved an exercise in salvaging rather than strengthening. After the initial honeymoon period of the coalition government and the prestige which came with forming part of the executive as a third party, the Liberal Democrats had seen a dramatic fall of support in the opinion polls, from a peak of 21% at the start of the coalition to a monthly average of single figures from May 2014 (Cutts and Russell, 2015; YouGov, 2015d). The party attempted to paint itself as a force that would ‘keep Britain on track’ with the economic recovery, emphasising its role in the recovery as an important balance to Conservative cuts. This message, alongside repeated references to a ‘Tory lurch to the right’ and Labour being too left, thus

implied that the centrist Liberal Democrats provided the best option to prevent either severe cuts to services or a return to high levels of borrowing [9].

Despite the decline in the public's perception of the Liberal Democrats' ability to handle the economy and the challenges this presented, the decision to focus the party's campaign strategy on the issue suggests an underlying desire to engage with a topic which was highly salient to the public. In some ways, the party was also riding on the coattails of the Conservative Party's line of 'securing the recovery' and relying on some of the successes of the pervious parliament in order to frame its campaign around the economy. However, the Liberal Democrats lacked a distinguishing policy or direction and instead came across as an exercise in damage limitation rather than proactively engaging in discourse or even proactively offering a new plan for the future (Cowley and Kavanagh, 2016c; Grender, 2017).

Thus, despite the consensus over the need to reduce the deficit, the parties all presented different approaches to the issue. The economy was also the issue with which all parties engaged as a point of negative campaigning, but these assertions were primarily based on reputation rather than reasoned argument. For example, the Conservatives frequently referred to Labour as having 'wrecked' the economy in the previous decade, an accusation also repeated by the Liberal Democrats. Meanwhile, Labour played on the Conservative Party's reputation for spending cuts, questioning how its policies to reduce the deficit would match the pledge to increase NHS spending. By

[9] 'Keeping Britain on track' was a phrase consistently repeated throughout the Liberal Democrats campaign, often in relation to the party counterbalancing the Conservatives and Labour. For examples of how this message was presented, see **Appendix 3, section B**.

highlighting traits associated with opposition parties which could be exploited in a negative light, attempts were being made to reinforce existing perceptions rather than challenge them on other areas.

Overall, the high engagement with the economy by the parties' Twitter campaigns reflected the issue's position as the most salient for the public in 2015 and an issue worth devoting a significant portion of their campaigns to.

6.3.2 Immigration

The topic of immigration poses an interesting contrast to that of the economy. Whilst both were interchangeably ranked as the top two issues facing the country throughout the 2010-15 parliament, immigration received little Twitter coverage except from the UKIP account. The issue itself had become increasingly prominent over the previous five years, in part due to its links with questions over Europe concerning the free movement of people and the United Kingdom's ability to control its borders. This period also saw the rise of UKIP in the public consciousness.

In 2010, Nigel Farage, UKIP's newly re-elected leader (having stood down for a year to focus on contesting the parliamentary seat of Buckingham, unsuccessfully), announced at the party conference that the party's goals were changing. Instead of limiting UKIP's ambitions to winning seats in the European Parliament, Farage wanted to build momentum towards the party becoming "the third force" in British politics in the 2015 general election (Ford and Goodwin, 2014: 89, 92). Farage also looked to change the party's rhetoric from focusing so much on *who* governed Britain to a more proactive argument for *how* it

should be governed (Ford and Goodwin, 2014: 90). Offering an anti-European Union (EU) agenda and openly discussing immigration, the party shunned a catch-all approach and instead actively made the decision to target its message at those in society who felt most hostile towards the EU and immigration (Ford and Goodwin, 2014).

By 2012, UKIP had increased its public support fivefold from 2% to 10%; it won over 140 county councillors in the 2013 local elections and contested 14 parliamentary by-election between 2011 and 2013, recording a best result of 27.8% in Eastleigh (Ford and Goodwin, 2014: 9, 92). Then 2014 resulted in UKIP's greatest electoral successes. In May's European elections, UKIP increased its total votes by nearly two million and became the party with the most UK MEPs (24), relegating the Conservatives to third place. Later in the year, two Conservative MPs, Douglas Carswell and Mark Reckless, defected to UKIP. The defections also resulted in UKIP gaining its first seats in the House of Commons by default, though both Carswell and Reckless opted to resign their seats, triggering by-elections, to seek re-election under the UKIP party banner. Both succeeded.

Media coverage of the party had also grown significantly during this time, with mentions of UKIP in British newspaper articles quadrupling from 6,200 in 2010 to 25,000 throughout 2013 (Ford and Goodwin, 2014: 9). In 2014, Ofcom announced that UKIP would be classified as one of the major parties in England and Wales for the European elections (Deacon and Wring, 2016b). This required commercial broadcasters to increase their offer of televised party election broadcasts to a minimum of two and to give UKIP equal prominence in editorial coverage with the other main political parties (Ofcom, 2015). The same

status was assigned to the party for the 2015 UK general election; this not only secured greater media exposure for the party but also raised the possibility of Nigel Farage participating in the televised debates (Deacon and Wring, 2016b). Despite both the growing media coverage of UKIP and the party's ranking above the Liberal Democrats in the opinion polls, UKIP's concentrated messages on Europe and immigration were barely acknowledged by the other parties in the Twittersphere.

This did not mean, however, that the parties failed to mention the issue in other formats. The party manifestos reflected a broad consensus that greater border control was needed, but the extent of such control and the methods of implementation differed considerably. The Liberal Democrats and Labour focussed on border reinforcement through strengthening entry and exit checks and the provision of more border staff. In contrast, the Conservatives pledged a reduction in net migration from the 300,000s to the tens of thousands. UKIP went much further in its plans to cap the number of skilled workers entering the UK at 50,000 per year, imposing a five-year ban on immigration for unskilled workers and introducing a new points-based system of immigration, using Australia as a template.

During the previous parliament, the public's perception of the parties' abilities to act on asylum and immigration had also shifted. Throughout 2010, on average, more than 40% of respondents viewed the Conservatives as best suited to handle the problem (YouGov, 2015b). By 2015, the figures had altered significantly; the 'other' party option ranked just above the Conservative Party with 27% to 22% in the final poll before the election. The new split in opinion meant figures for trust in the two major parties regarding immigration were low

compared to the statistics on the other key issues, only hovering around the early to mid-20s for each, compared to the mid to high 30s. Although the Conservative Party maintained its position ahead of Labour and the Liberal Democrats, in 2010 it had promised to bring net migration down to below 100,000 per annum and, by 2015, had clearly not met this target. Instead, by September 2014, the figure had increased by 50,000 since the start of David Cameron's premiership (ONS, , 2017b). It seemed mutually beneficial for the three 'main' parties to avoid an issue which left them open to criticism for failure to either deliver or to offer enough.

Immigration, with its connections to the EU's policy on the free movement of people, represented a politically 'unsafe' issue for the Conservatives as it symbolised a long-standing topic of division amongst its members and elected representatives. The Liberal Democrats are inherently pro-EU and freedom of movement and engaged little with the issue of immigration in their manifesto. The party refused to state a numerical goal for reducing net migration, and their stance placed them in opposition to the general public mood. Labour was divided between its progressive wing, which welcomed and encouraged free movement, and those in its voter base who were concerned about its impact on jobs. It seemed that a consensus had emerged to limit their engagement with the issue and control the direction of the narrative to avoid it. As such, immigration, deemed as one of the most important issues facing the country, was left largely undiscussed by the two main parties on Twitter (with less than 1.6% coverage, including the Liberal Democrat page). In contrast, UKIP cemented its brand identity as the anti-EU party which would openly comment on immigration.

UKIP's Twitter page primarily engaged with the issue of immigration by referring to 'control' – that is, the United Kingdom controlling its borders and mass migration in general. The perceived close relationship between the policy domains of immigration and 'Europe' resulted in the conflation of the two issues into a single one for some opinion polls. Whilst UKIP did connect the two, they mainly only did so in reference to the supposed threat to national security and border control from the common European migration and asylum policy that, at the time, was under discussion in the Junker Commission. Nearly 38% of UKIP's tweets mentioning immigration also referenced Europe. Whilst this was a significant proportion, UKIP still presented the issues as distinct from one another. When posting on Twitter about immigration in general, the party continued to emphasise the lack of border controls but repeated more specific claims about the strain on the NHS, public services, and housing[10].

Another aspect UKIP highlighted, which caused an uproar amongst other leaders during the ITV televised debate, was the claim that existing immigration policies were allowing and even encouraging 'health tourism' – individuals travelling to the UK with the purpose of using the country's health services. In addition, although the other parties had remained largely silent on the issue, UKIP used Twitter to emphasise the shortcomings of the Conservatives (poor track record) and Labour (not looking out for their voter base) in contrast to their own stance. Moreover, as almost the sole voice on immigration amongst the four parties, UKIP was able to reinforce its branding through the Twitter

[10] For examples of specific claims about immigration linked to other issues, see **Appendix 3, Section C**.

campaign and assure its reputation on the issue, a situation the party was determined to exploit.

Twitter was again displayed as a space the parties could use as a tool for self-promotion; the parties carefully selected the issues their campaigns engaged with and the policies they presented without responding to other parties or users. The extent to which the Conservatives, Labour, and Liberal Democrats opted to avoid the topic of immigration on a platform without the news media as intermediary highlights how little the three parties were voluntarily prepared to engage with the issues. It is perhaps also one of the clearest examples of manipulated publicity and an attempt at agenda-setting with three main parties choosing largely to avoid engaging with a topic which was highly salient for the public.

6.3.3 Health

The last of the top-three issues was health. Still a top-four topic across the party Twitter accounts, health was the most referenced issue by Labour, the only party which mentioned it more than the economy. The pages varied significantly in their coverage of this issue, with a coverage rate of 29.4% by Labour compared to just under 6% by the Conservatives, despite its importance for the public. The extent of Labour's coverage reflected the party's long-running association with the NHS, as it introduced the original National Health Insurance Act in 1946. The party's connection to the healthcare system had represented a constant source of pride for Labour over the decades and took a prominent role in its election campaigns, reinforcing the connection to the NHS and

reputation of protecting and investing in the service. When polled on the issue of the NHS, the public viewed the Labour Party as the most capable, by a significant margin of 14-16 percentage points (with nearly 40% of respondents perceiving the party as the most able) (YouGov, 2015b).

In the time leading up to the 2015 election, a great deal of criticism had been directed at accident and emergency (A&E) waiting times, which were exceeding their four-hour targets, as well as at the longer waits for GP appointments and routine operations. The election campaign period also began after another year of winter pressures on the NHS. In addition, the coalition government had introduced the Health and Social Care Act 2012, triggering a top-down reorganisation, which the Conservatives had previously disclaimed. Opinion was split on the degree to which the Act, which required more competition for contracts, commercialised the NHS; some believed that this strategy increased the viability of the NHS model, whilst others criticised it for privatising what should remain a publicly supplied service.

However, across the parties' manifestos, there was a consensus to pledge more spending to the NHS. The Conservatives promised to increase spending by £8 billion above inflation over the next five years, followed by the Liberal Democrats, who also promised to reach that figure by 2020, starting with £1 billion extra in 2018 and £3.5 billion extra for mental health. UKIP and Labour offered similar promises in terms of new NHS workers, though figures differed slightly. The spending consensus indicated a recognition of the issue as a priority for the public and was more generally engaged with than immigration (though the Conservatives engaged with health the least of the four parties). Nonetheless, the parties still differentiated themselves from one another by the

extent to which they focused on the issues and the policies they elected to showcase.

Most frequently cited on Labour's Twitter account was the promise to invest extra funds to pay for 20,000 more nurses, 3,000 more midwives, and 8,000 more GPs[11]. In addition, the party's Twitter account also pledged to increase the speed of NHS treatment, particularly referencing its pledge to ensure that patients would be able to get an appointment with their GP within 48 hours. However, Labour also maintained continuous rhetoric that emphasised the threat of a privatised NHS under the Conservatives in an attempt to persuade voters to back them. The Liberal Democrats represented the second-most engaged party with the issue of health, particularly focusing on mental health (mentioned in 23% of all 'health'-related tweets), an aspect they had increasingly associated themselves with over the previous years. The party drew attention to both the issue of mental health and their pledge of investment, with the orchestrated release of a distinctively styled poster background to help identify the connected posts and pledges[12]. The promise of greater investment in mental health services took on a central role in the Liberal Democrats' Twitter output for the first few weeks of the campaign before becoming more of a background issue in the final week as the party started to focus more on the economy and encouraging voter turnout.

[11] These numbers were referenced throughout the short campaign: the pledge for 20,000 more nurses was mentioned on 11 separate occasion, 8,000 more GPs (10), 3,000 more midwives (seven).

[12] For example, the Liberal Democrats (2015c) tweeted "Under our manifesto plans we will invest £3.5bn more in mental health care by 2010".

Meanwhile, the Conservative Party limited its engagement with health (less than 6% coverage) to referencing its pledge to invest more in the NHS. This contrasted particularly with Labour's engagement with the issues, correlating with the reputation of the two parties on the issue, much like the economy. Labour embraced its largely positive reputation by extensively campaigning on health, whilst the Conservative campaign largely chose to avoid the subject. This was also reflected in the fact that Labour offered a more extensive range of pledges around its plans for the NHS.

The different campaign strategies around health once again demonstrated the focus on party branding, with each party selectively engaging (or not) with the issues with which it most strongly wanted to be associated. Although there were some points of correlation with public opinion – inevitably as the parties still need to attract votes – the decision of exactly which topics with which to engage and how is heavily influenced by reputation, in line with Habermas' concern for the encroachment of manipulated publicity. Overall, the coverage of election issues in the parties' Twitter campaigns reflected the desires and attempts by political parties to try to control the agenda in their offline campaigns.

6.4 Campaign Strategies

As we have seen, creating an online 'brand' and capitalising on offline reputation played an important role in the parties' choice of campaign content. This section assesses the final element which Habermas outlined in manipulating publicity: the manipulation of events.

It became evident across collected Twitter data that the parties had two primary strategic approaches towards the sharing of content and events, presenting them as either long-term or short-term campaigns or events. Each internal campaign or 'event' often centred around a particular issue but differed in their content and intention. The use of long- and short-term campaign methods also complements Twitter's design as the site revolves around the continuous flow of user-generated content which is constantly updating and evolving. As users usually access Twitter repeatedly for small pockets of time, rather than over a single, protracted visit, the content to which they are exposed alters with each viewing. As such, repetition proves an important method to try to increase the likelihood of tweets being viewed.

Long-term campaigns consisted of the sustained coverage of a particular issue or policy over the course of weeks during the election period. Such campaigns were mostly conducted through the repetition of key policies related to the parties' self-selected dominant electoral issues. In comparison, short-term campaigns typically lasted no more than a day, but the content of the tweets posted during that time primarily concentrated on a single topic. The intention of these styles of campaigns was to generate attention, for example, for the release of a new policy or to sustain and reinforce a point in the party's favour, both in an attempt to control the election agenda.

In considering the use of long- and short-term campaigns, this section considers individual examples of each as well as the patterns in the types of events for which they were used. It highlights how the approaches differed and examines the extent to which it demonstrates a realisation of Habermas' concern for the use of manipulated publicity. Firstly, the Conservatives'

sustained campaign around the issue of a hung parliament provides the central study for the long-term approach. This examination is followed by an investigation into the Labour Party's coverage of their policy to scrap the non-dom tax status, which also serves as an example of how a news event created by a party can be taken out of its control.

6.4.1 Long-Term Campaigns

Most often, long-term campaigns were linked to the key issues for each of the respective parties. The level of coverage given to these topics, by sheer volume of tweets, meant this linkage occurred almost by default. A long-term campaign, however, was not identified by a broad theme but rather the reiteration of a specific policy or event over a period of weeks. The Labour Party, for example, continually referenced its pledge to scrap zero-hour employment contracts, whilst the Liberal Democrats repeated the promise to ensure greater investment into mental health. For each party, the policy was an identifying characteristic of its brand. Long-term campaigns, however, were not exclusively related to election pledges. The Conservative Party used the possibility of another hung parliament and the potential of a Labour-SNP coalition to conduct a sustained campaign against Labour. This provides an interesting case study into the relationship between public opinion, attempts by the parties to control the agenda, and mass media.

Even before the dissolution of parliament to signal the start of the 2015 general election campaign, opinion polls indicated the result would be unlikely to return a single party majority in the House of Commons. The expectation of

a hung parliament had been based on the Conservatives and Labour polling neck and neck from the start of the year; indeed, they were tied at 34% each on the final day of campaigning (YouGov, 2015a). Meanwhile, after five years in coalition with the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats were polling in single figures. The previous coalition had done little to recommend a repeat of a hung parliament to the public. Despite its mixed record, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat alliance was widely expected to continue into the next parliament as no clear majority party emerged, unless the Labour Party could form its own coalition. Whilst the ability of the Liberal Democrats to return even 10 MPs was under question, the SNP, in contrast, were seeing a surge in support. From early 2015, the SNP were projected to win all but four seats in Scotland, and in the end the party was only three short of a clean sweep (Brooks, 2015). Such a result would prove detrimental to Labour, which entered the election with 41 of the 59 Scottish seats. With predictions of such a result, a Labour-SNP coalition looked possible, and the Conservatives were quick to capitalise on this prediction. The party shifted part of its campaign to focus on the potential coalition pairing, widely viewed as more unpopular than its own. Despite the likelihood of another hung parliament, surveys suggested the public was unenthusiastic about the prospect of *any* coalition (Karwatowska, 2015).

The combined effects of the expectation of no outright majority, the predicted damage to Labour's seat share with the rise of the SNP, and the public's distaste for the idea of another five years of a coalition government created a circumstance ripe for exploitation by the Conservatives. The utilisation of this situation by the Conservative campaign was interesting; whilst it correlated with public opinion in the sense of recognising a lack of public

appetite for another coalition government, it was reacting against the opinion surveys forecasting another hung parliament (which was also being widely reported by mainstream media).

The fact that the Conservatives did engage with this information at all, however, indicates some sensitivity towards public opinion. The campaign strategy was executed to exploit the public distaste for another hung parliament to help counteract the possibility of another and (as the Conservatives emphasised) 'worse' coalition. As also demonstrated earlier in the chapter, this was another example of parties being aware of the public opinion data and responding to it, but almost *only* in situations where a reference was considered to contain no risk. Although the response to public opinion was selective, it nonetheless demonstrated some (indirect) influence on the campaigns.

The Conservatives were not the only party using this as a strategy; the Liberal Democrats defended their record in the coalition in the light of the expectation of a repeat of the 2010 results. Posts used throughout the campaign included, "No party will win a majority – only #LibDems can deliver stability unity and decency #GE2015" in addition to similar sentiments, as well as examples which purported to show their positive influence on government policies and results (Liberal Democrats, 2015a). UKIP likewise drew on poll results – often recording them in tweets, providing links and sharing images of the data – to show that the party was considered a viable option in the general election and had public support for its proposals for tackling immigration[13]. Sustaining these campaign messages through the election and reiterating areas of public

[13] For examples, see **Appendix 3, Section D**.

concern were tactical decisions to keep the issues and events at the forefront of the parties' campaigns and the minds of their audience.

6.4.2 Short-Term Campaigns

In contrast, short-terms campaigns were often constructed so that the content of the day's tweets would primarily be linked to a specific election policy. Such campaigns were often used when a new policy was being unveiled. Labour and UKIP used a similar tactic when they released their women's manifestos. Labour's launch (15 April) emphasised issues included in the manifesto such as equality, childcare, and making employment changes as more women than men were in low-paid jobs. UKIP (9 April) chose to highlight their pledge to remove the so-called tampon tax on female sanitary products, an issue which had come under much discussion in the lead-up to the campaign. The parties thus created a great deal of noise around a particular issue, ensuring it received attention from as many people as possible, especially journalists.

The Labour Party intended to follow a similar path when announcing its policy on non-dom tax status. The policy aimed to abolish the non-domicile rule, which allowed UK residents with permanent homes outside the United Kingdom to be exempt from paying UK tax on foreign income. The policy was announced on 7 April both online and during a speech given by Ed Miliband at the University of Warwick. The event itself was live-tweeted and served as the focus of the party's Twitter page for the day. However, in this case, the party encountered a significant backlash, particularly from the mass media. Rather than confining the promise to a single day, releasing, and spreading the announcement in a

controlled way, discussion of the issue on Twitter also continued into a second day, which was mainly spent defending the policy[14]. This represented a fairly unusual reaction; rather than Labour treating Twitter as the controlled environment it usually did, the party's Twitter account was used as a way to defend and reassert its position on the policy. These attempts to defend the policy were not helped by an old quote from then Shadow Chancellor Ed Balls which was brought to light from an interview with BBC Radio Leeds reporter Daragh Corcoran in January 2015. In the clip, Balls stated, "I think if you abolish the whole status then probably it ends up costing Britain money" as a consequence of some people opting to leave the country (BBC News, 2015: 00:23). The policy itself was not completely dropped as the party page referred to it on occasion, but outside of the intermittent mentions the party had made the announcement and moved on from it; non-dom status did not become a further key policy talking point on the party's Twitter page despite the early reaction.

This example highlights how, despite the attempts of the parties to control their output on Twitter and limit engagement with others on the site (Chapter Five), this did not always protect them from backlash. The decision to respond to the criticisms was somewhat unusual, but the response from the mainstream media had put pressure on the party, both online and off. The

[14] Tweets from the Labour Twitter page the following day took on a more defensive approach which included: asking Twitter users to vote on their position on non-dom tax status (The Labour Party, 2015c), posting a video of Ed Miliband explaining why the policy was so important, (The Labour Party, 2015h), reinforcing the reasons for the party's position on non-dom tax status (The Labour Party, 2015i) and mentioning the Conservatives inaction on the issue (The Labour Party, 2015g). For the original text of these tweets see **Appendix 3, Section E.**

party's reaction suggest it was decided that responding on this occasion would prove far more beneficial than ignoring what was being said. This event serves as an example of the possibility of subjecting even a party's controlled environment to external criticism, although the force of the mass media was required for such an event to occur. Normally, a policy is introduced to the public, and then the party moves on without needing to return to defend it. This occasion demonstrated the lack of complete control by the parties over the direction and focus of their output and their ability to be swayed by external pressure.

6.5 Conclusion

Habermas outlined 'manipulated' public opinion as a key element of 'representative publicity', political actors displaying their position before the public instead of engaging them. Attempts to manipulate public opinion – content, reputation, and exploitation of events – were evidenced through the parties' choices of policies, campaign messages, and long- and short-term strategies. It manifested itself as the parties' used their Twitter pages as a space for self-promotion as they tried to control the election agenda. Each party selected key issues that reflected public opinion but only when it matched the party's owns strengths and reputation. Similarly, the posts connected to election issues were dominated by policy achievements or pledges which broadcast the parties' stances to the public instead of engaging them. The parties were, in essence, creating their own echo chambers.

This was also reflected in the long- and short-term campaign strategies the parties employed. These comprised another method to manipulate the agenda and create noise around an event, such as the release of a new policy. Primarily an exercise in self-promotion and agenda setting, the parties were shown to be reactive to events if they could be used to benefit their campaign. However, many events were planned and created as part of the wider campaign strategy, used to create excitement around an event or campaign pledge. Although the parties attempted to promote their policies by trying to create hype around the issues, as we also saw in Chapter Five, they did little to engage with the users beyond posting the content. Thus, the strategies were essentially employed as a means of effectively broadcasting information.

Ultimately, the parties were attempting to manipulate public opinion through setting the policy agendas, and though some of these conformed to issues deemed the most salient to the public, the parties focused on issues that allowed them to capitalise on their reputations. Though the site was used as part of the wider campaigns, Twitter also provided a space where they had more control over the output. This reinforced the 'politics as usual' argument that the site would be absorbed into the traditional campaign styles, though it also provided a space where the parties could exercise more control without the intermediation of the mainstream media.

The next chapter offers a comparison by examining how candidates engaged with election issues in their 2015 Twitter campaigns. It considers to what extent the candidates were more adaptive to Twitter as a deliberative space and to what extent they kept 'on message' with the parties' national campaigns.

Chapter Seven: Local Candidates

The previous two chapters emphasise the use of Twitter by the political parties. So far, we have established that the parties primarily used the site as a means for self-promotion through what Habermas termed ‘manipulated publicity’ without making a serious attempt to utilise Twitter’s deliberative potential. This chapter turns to examine how candidates standing for the Conservative Party, Labour Party, Liberal Democrats, and UKIP incorporated Twitter into their election campaigns. This invites a comparison between the behaviours of individuals (the candidates) and organisations (the parties) on the site. As such, this chapter considers how the candidates used the functions of the site and their engagement with different election issues. These enquiries are framed under the questions: How did the output of the candidates’ accounts compare to the parties’ accounts? What was the balance between national and local campaigning?

I begin the investigation by outlining the developments in constituency campaigning in past general elections, examining how local campaigning altered and how it was affected by the introduction of the internet and social media. I then introduce some of the tensions between the deliberative potential Twitter offers the candidates and concerns of the parties. This poses questions around the balance between centralised control of the candidates’ campaigns from their party HQs and the opportunities Twitter provides for a more personal and localised campaign.

The second part of the chapter then analyses the candidates’ use of Twitter during the 2015 election campaign. First, I investigate how the

candidates engaged with the interactive features of the site, drawing a comparison with the party pages as well as examining different patterns in activity amongst the groups of candidates from the four parties. I also consider to what extent offline status affects their potential audience reach to provide a context for their online presence. Finally, I revisit the debate around issue coverage and public opinion from Chapter Six, exploring to what extent the candidates kept ‘on message’ in their coverage of different election issues and how far their campaigns took on a national or local slant.

7.1 Local Campaigning and the Internet

From the 1950s to the turn of the century, national campaigns had dominated electioneering in British general elections; local campaigning was generally viewed to be, in practice, of little importance (Denver and Hands, 1997b). The growing emphasis placed on television news from the late 1960s also negatively affected local electioneering as it further turned the attention of the parties, national media, academics, and the public towards the national campaigns (Denver and Hands, 1997a; Denver et al., 2003; Lee, 2014: 46). Around this time, interest also began to shift towards the party leaders, personalities, and images, and the work of PR consultants became more prominent (Norris, 2000; Gibson et al., 2008; McNair, 2012; Lee, 2014). However, these changes did not mean the local campaigns had entirely been written off; rather, they were viewed as a secondary form of campaigning which represented an exercise in voter mobilisation more than persuasion (Denver et al., 2003).

Another turning point came in the 1990s, when a partial revival of local campaigning began under New Labour, which realigned the relationship between the national and local campaigns (Denver et al., 2003). This shift was triggered by the introduction of new information communication technologies; parties “began to take constituency campaigning much more seriously” after monitoring experiences in the United States (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999; Denver et al., 2003: 542; Gibson et al., 2008). The local and national campaigns then became increasingly integrated as parties took on more centralised co-ordinator roles and placed particular emphasis on marginal seats (Norris, 2000; Denver et al., 2003).

Two primary examples of new communication methods introduced through the development of the internet and Web 1.0 were emailing lists and party and candidate websites. The ability of parties and candidates to communicate with the electorate through email has been likened to a “new tele-marketing technique” (Gibson, 2013: 186). As with telephone records, the parties were able to collect and compile lists of email addresses to contact individuals; the information they gathered could also be subdivided to create targeted indexes, allowing for a more sophisticated communication and marketing operation (Plasser and Plasser, 2002: 5). The nature of emails also meant there was a greater sense of personalisation between the sender and the recipient, particularly when they were signed off by (or on behalf of) a specific candidate or even the party leader. It also required fewer resources such as personnel and working hours to produce and send an email than to conduct a telemarketing campaign (Ward and Gibson, 2003).

Although email also provided a new way for constituents to contact their MPs or election candidates, the adoption of this mode of communication during election campaigns was largely asymmetrical, with the political actors primarily using the service to disseminate information rather than responding to queries from the public (Gibson, 2013).

From the late 1990s, party and candidate websites had also gradually been developed by the political parties. After the initial introduction, the technological advancements and wider adoption of these websites was slow to materialise; the internet was still a novelty for the parties by the time of the 2001 general election campaign (Jackson, 2007) However, it was around this period that attitudes began altering and the opportunities which web pages could provide to communicate with the electorate were gradually becoming more appreciated by the parties. As the parties became more familiar with the digital platforms, the websites became “more extensive in content and sophistication” (Baxter et al., 2011: 465). This development was still underway in the lead-up to the 2010 election, when significantly higher numbers of party website visitors were recorded in comparison to figures from 2005, with some sites logging up to seven times more visitors (Gibson et al., 2010; Williamson, 2010).

Significantly, the potential of websites had been recognised beyond the bulletin-board-style of information dissemination which had characterised the limited designs. Instead, the parties began to view websites (and email communication) as a means of resource generation, a way of mobilising volunteers and raising money, as we saw in Chapter Four with Obama’s US election campaigns (Ward and Gibson, 2003; Jackson, 2007).

However, those who signed up to email lists and visited party or candidates websites were almost exclusively existing members or already supporters of the respective parties, and whilst this made the technologies valuable tools for keeping supporters connected to the campaigns, it highlighted the limits of Web 1.0's ability to reach a wider audience (Williamson, 2010). Similarly, email lists and websites provided only limited scope for public participation in online communication, and websites were still not particularly prominent features of the campaigns despite a higher volume of traffic. Information dissemination was still the primary function of these technologies, and the output was heavily controlled by the central party campaigns (Margolis and Resnick, 2000; Williamson, 2010; Baxter et al., 2011). However, when the second wave of technological developments occurred under Web 2.0, more opportunities became available for the constituency candidates and local campaigning (Lee, 2014).

As discussed in Chapters Three and Four, the development of Web 2.0 sparked a debate about the internet's potential impact on political communication and participation, which can also be applied to constituency campaigning. As early as the 2009 European Parliamentary elections, research had found that social media and social networking sites were "superseding [the] centralising party websites" as a focus for voters within the digital campaigns, a trend which was reinforced during the 2010 election campaign (Williamson, 2010: 20). The parties, as seen in Chapter Four, generally limited their responses to users on Twitter and, as we examined, chose to use the site as an unmediated platform from which to promote their campaigns, reflecting the broadcast style which dominated their websites. However, the candidates'

pages are arguably more suited to utilising social media as a means of interacting with the electorate as they can create person-to-person relationships rather than organisation-to-person. This naturally creates a more personal dynamic (when the individual who is communicating is known) which, in turn, can allow for a more personable style of communication.

Twitter's design of enabling on-the-go updates also allows more freedom when communicating through the site than updating a candidate website or composing blog entries. This is primarily because Twitter does not require the candidate, or one of their campaign team members, to sit at a desk to post updates as they would with a website, which restricts resources when many of them would prefer to be 'out and about' on the campaign trail (Ward and Gibson, 2003). Instead, candidates are able to provide real-time updates about their campaign trail and also have the opportunity to hold 'conversations' with users at any point throughout the day. This not only makes the candidates more accessible, but Twitter itself has a greater potential 'reach' than party or candidate websites, which are self-contained.

Overall, candidates have the opportunity to create a space for deliberation over which they can exercise much greater control. However, before I begin the investigation into how the candidates utilised the deliberative potential of Twitter, and the balance between the national and local focus in the constituency campaigns, I first consider how social media introduced a dilemma for parties: finding the balance between 'releasing' candidates to campaign but still maintaining some control over the output. This is explored through several well-documented political gaffes on Twitter, assessing the impact of these incidents on the candidates and the party's reactions.

7.2 Twitter: The Rules of Engagement

As established in Chapter Four, the 2010 UK general election had fallen far short of expectations of it being *the* social media election; instead, parties experimented with some of the features and at best used the platforms as a side note to their campaigns. However, in the five years leading up to the 2015 general election, the continued rise of social media led the parties and MPs to integrate social media more seriously into their political communication efforts (Chadwick, 2013; Murthy, 2013). Although each of the four parties was more active on sites such as Twitter, they were also at different stages in their online campaign approaches: The Liberal Democrats had already been the most actively engaged in social media campaigning and used Twitter to interact with other users, albeit to a limited extent. The Conservatives and Labour Party had used the site mainly for images and humour in 2010, although the Conservatives were also in the early stages of gathering data to support micro-targeted campaigning on the site (see Chapter Four). UKIP, the party with the least election experience of the four, was also the least experienced in digital campaigning.

For the election candidates, social media still held an element of novelty as a communication tool, and it was only widely adopted by MPs after the 2010 general election. Some MPs and candidates were wary of using Twitter, however, after chastening experiences on the site (Barnes, 2009; Baxter and Marcella, 2012).

An early causality occurred in February 2010, when a tweet was posted from the Twitter account of the then-Labour MP and party whip David Wright, calling Conservatives “scum-sucking” pigs (BBC News, 2010). Wright

apologised but disputed that he had written the offending section of the tweet and claimed his account had been hacked by a third party which added the controversial phrase (BBC News, 2010). Unsurprisingly, this explanation was dismissed by Conservative MPs. Regardless of the identity of the actual author, this incident represents an early example of an MP – and one with a high position within the party – falling foul of social media. Wright subsequently decided to delete his account and stood for re-election in both the 2010 and 2015 general elections without ever reactivating it.

However, not all MPs who deleted their accounts did so after political gaffes. In 2012, Conservative MP Gordon Henderson decided to delete his account after, along with 57 other MPs, signing a letter which spoke out against the government's decision to introduce same-sex marriage. After receiving messages of abuse, Henderson claimed that he was unable to have a "meaningful" debate on the topic on Twitter (BBC News, 2012). This comment is significant in that Henderson saw the *potential* of Twitter to act as a deliberative forum where politicians could interact with the public. Instead, he attributed the failure to recognise this potential not on the site but rather on those who were using the platform to dismiss his viewpoint without engaging in a discussion, and particularly those who then resorted to abusive language. Many studies have pointed to online abuse and 'trolling' as confined to a vocal minority of users; however, the disruptive nature of their posts can also snowball to influence the behaviours of other online users, creating a herd mentality and drowning out the voices of those who disagree or are open to discourse (Cheng et al., 2017; Akhtar and Morrison, 2019; Sun and Fichman, 2020). Like Wright, Henderson opted against re-joining Twitter for his 2015 election campaign.

In the year prior to the 2015 general election, a number of UKIP representatives made headlines over statements they posted on Twitter. Two of the most high-profile episodes occurred during election campaigns. First, Andre Lampitt, standing for Merton in the May 2014 local elections, was suspended from the party after posting racist views online (Hall, 2014). This event was even more embarrassing for the party as Mr Lampitt had taken a starring role in one of the party's election broadcasts which had aired only days before his tweets had come to light. It also suggested a failing by UKIP to sufficiently vet candidates' social media accounts, for which the party had already been criticised.

Secondly, the UKIP candidate for Eastleigh, Patricia Culligan, deleted her account only days after candidate registration closed for the 2015 general election. The move came after she apologised for claiming on Twitter that the Liberal Democrat candidate for Vauxhall, Adrian Hyyrylainen-Trett – who on the previous week had spoken publicly about contracting HIV – had "deliberately" caught the disease and proceeded to criticise him for the cost of treatment to the NHS (Duffy, 2015). Culligan was not suspended from the party but, after posting an apology on her Facebook page, deleted her Twitter account. Although they appeared to be more widely reported, such incidents did not remain exclusive to UKIP; the high-profile sacking of Emily Thornberry from the Shadow Cabinet in November 2014, discussed in Chapter Five, had resulted from online backlash over one of her tweets.

However, UKIP were sufficiently concerned about the damage such incidents could cause to make changes to the party rule book to include detailed instructions on "online conduct" (UKIP, 2015d: 26). It covered the content of

social media posts, explicitly instructing members to “refrain from any posting expressing racist, homophobic, xenophobic or otherwise discriminatory views” or engage in activities such as spamming or trolling (UKIP, 2015d: 27). Members of the party’s executive committee reserved the right to request the immediate withdrawal of online content, and failure to comply promptly was considered grounds for disciplinary action.

As another example of UKIP’s attempts to keep control over online content and its ‘brand’, the use of the party’s logo was only allowed when a member had been given “express written consent to do so” (UKIP, 2015d: 27). The strictness of such rules was indicative of how little control the party HQ had over its representatives’ activities on social media, concerns over the potential damage they could (and did) cause, and a recognition of the need for clear guidelines to help navigate social media campaigning. The Labour Party’s 2014 rule book, in contrast, made no reference to online content or social media, nor were there any references to similar rules found on the Conservative or Liberal Democrat websites. However, UKIP’s actions did highlight the tensions between the tightly controlled, centrally coordinated local campaigns and the relative freedoms Twitter offered to individuals, which made the site attractive as a more personal method of communication.

So far, this chapter has outlined how the local campaigns have developed alongside the introduction of new technology and the opportunities which social media offer for a more personalised, candidate-orientated form of campaigning. It has also highlighted some of the concerns of the parties about the potential lack centralised control over the candidates’ campaign output. The second part of this chapter focuses on analysing how the candidates used

Twitter in their 2015 general election campaigns, beginning with the site's features.

7.3 Data

To understand the relationship between the national and local campaigns, I analysed the Twitter accounts of candidates representing each of the four main UK parties (Conservatives, Labour, Liberal Democrats, and UKIP) across 45 constituencies (**Appendix 1.**). The constituencies selected were marginal seats and considered most likely to change party hands. The decision to use such constituencies was based on the belief that, as likely target seats, the chances of constituents being active on Twitter would be higher. This follows the reasoning for selecting an election campaign period for analysis, as outlined in Chapter Two: to investigate the potential of Twitter and how parties and candidates to engage during a period where there *should* be heightened activity. Overall, I identified the 12 seats which each of the Conservative, Labour, and Liberal Democrat parties were most likely to gain on the basis of vote marginality. Due to UKIP's limited record in general elections, with only 3.1% of the vote share in 2010 and a lack of established marginals to contest, the constituencies for UKIP were selected from the list of 12 seats which they had decided to target in 2015 based on private polling (Holehouse and Swinford, 2014). It was the number of seats identified in the commissioned data that informed my decision to select the top 12 seats per party to make the data comparable. From the 48 constituencies listed, since six seats were regarded as key targets by more than one party, the total number examined was 45.

The Twitter data were collected during the short campaign period from 30 March 2015 to the end of polling day on 6 May. The number of followers for each account was recorded when polls closed on 7 May. Three criteria were set for a Twitter account to qualify as part of the research: firstly, the candidate's page had to be active (at least one tweet posted during the data collection period). Secondly, accounts had to be accessible to the public; this meant the page was not set to private so content could be viewed without the need to acquire permission. Finally, the page had to be associated with an individual and not used as a communication tool for the local branch or local association of the party. This also excluded accounts which explicitly stated the page would be updated on behalf of the candidate without the individuals themselves using it during the campaign. These criteria excluded 11 Twitter accounts from the dataset. In addition, one account (that of Patricia Culligan, the UKIP candidate for Eastleigh) was deleted during the campaign. The Twitter pages of Nigel Farage (South Thanet) and Steve Beasant (Liberal Democrat, Great Grimsby) were classed as ineligible for analysis, though the tweets were still collected as a point of interest. Farage's account was excluded on the grounds that his position as UKIP leader automatically attached hm to the national campaign to a degree which was not comparable with the other candidates. Beasant's account was not used for analysis due to the considerable number of tweets posted on the page: 2,777 during the short campaign period, 2,000 more than the number posted by the second most active account (673 tweets by the Liberal Democrat candidate for Morley and Outwood, Rebecca Taylor) and far exceeding the average number of posts (130 tweets each) by the sample of

Liberal Democrat candidates when excluding Beasant's contribution [15] . Therefore, these data were classified as an outlier to avoid distorting the coding results.

In total, 16,549 tweets were collected and analysed from 133 candidate Twitter accounts drawn from the 45 constituencies. The content of the data was coded using the same list of election issues as the YouGov (2015c) surveys and party accounts in Chapter Five to allow comparative analysis of the party and candidate pages. Only original tweets and @-replies were coded, and retweets were excluded. The decision to include replies was made on the basis that there was a greater expectation that candidates would engage in conversations through Twitter than the parties. It also allowed an extra point of analysis as the tweets could be divided into party groups and then analysed to show the spread of original tweets and replies.

7.4 Candidates on Twitter

By 2015, Twitter had become a popular communication tool for MPs and electoral candidates. Whereas only 51 MPs were active on Twitter in June 2009, by the end of 2012, this number had increased substantially to 451(Jackson and Lilleker, 2011: 92; Pillmoor, 2013: 4) During the 2015 general election campaign, the percentage of candidates with active Twitter accounts in the 45 marginal constituencies was 74% (see **Table 3.** and **Appendix 1.**). This

[15] Beasant's tweets were almost exclusively related to the national campaign and often included links to either the Liberal Democrat party website or, even more commonly, his own candidate website (www.stevenbeasant.4mp.org.uk). For examples, see **Appendix 4, section A**.

compared to 45% of candidates across 100 UK-wide “key battleground and high profile seats” during the 2010 campaign (Baxter and Marcella, 2012: 111). In the 2015 election, the Labour and Conservative candidates were most likely to have active Twitter accounts with an adoption rate of 91% and 84%, respectively. In contrast, only half of UKIP candidates (including Nigel Farage) were active users of the site. Those standing for Labour tweeted most often, averaging 164 posts each, compared to the Liberal Democrat candidates with 130, Conservatives with 104, and UKIP with 76. The candidates also interacted more frequently with other users through the @-reply function than the party accounts, with around 7,700 replies to 8,900 original tweets. The Liberal Democrat candidates represented the only group to post more replies than original tweets.

Table 3. Number of Tweets (Original and @-Replies) by Candidates in the 45 Target Seats

Party (number of eligible seats)	**Number of active candidates**[16]	**Tweets**		
		Original	@-replies	Total
Conservative (45)	38	2153	1780	3933
Labour (45)	41	3759	2972	6731
Lib Dems (44)	33	1981	2316	4297
UKIP (44)	21	979	609	1588
Total	133	8872	7677	16549

[16] Steve Beasant (Liberal Democrat, Great Grimsby) and Nigel Farage (UKIP, South Thanet) are both excluded from these statistics.

Returning to the ‘revolutionist’ stance introduced in Chapter Four, two factors which are argued in favour of Twitter’s potential to provide a level playing field for users are its low cost and high impact (audience reach) potential (Shirky, 2011; Carswell, 2012; Murthy, 2013) . This suggests the site would be particularly appealing to parties with more limited resources such as UKIP and the Liberal Democrats. By the 2015 election the Liberal Democrats were a party which had not only lost activists but also the ‘Short Money’ granted to opposition parties due to its stint in the 2010-2015 coalition government (Ford and Goodwin, 2014; Cowley and Kavanagh, 2016a). However, some studies have shown that candidate engagement with social media is often higher amongst those representing parties with larger campaign budgets (Gilmore, 2011; Peterson, 2012). Other studies have found a correlation between the political leanings of parties and their levels of engagement with social media; left-leaning parties are more likely to actively campaign on social media sites than those with right-wing politics (Tumasjan et al., 2011). Although data from across the four party candidate groups tends to support the latter argument, there is still no definitive explanation for which parties or candidates are most or least likely to engage with social media.

Starting with the revolutionist expectation that Twitter is an appealing platform for less resource-rich parties, this section uses the Liberal Democrat and UKIP candidates’ accounts for the main comparison, beginning with the Liberal Democrats. The Liberal Democrats were fairly well represented on the site with 75% of candidates active on Twitter. Although the party’s candidates were, on average, the second most active group on the site, this was down on the party page, which posted significantly more than any other party. However,

the clear trend across the datasets for both the party and candidate accounts was that the Liberal Democrats interacted the most with Twitter users through the @-reply function. Indeed, 53.9% of all Liberal Democrat candidates' tweets (nearly nine percentage points higher than any other group) were replies. The party page also demonstrated a notably higher level of interaction, with more than 1,000 replies compared to the other parties, whose responses comprised less than 0.5% of their total tweets.

Although fewer Liberal Democrat candidates were active Twitter users compared to the Conservatives and Labour, the decision to use the conversation function on the site which required high levels of participation (see Chapter Five) did indicate a partywide pattern of behaviour around how to communicate on the site. However, there was also a significantly higher engagement with the conversation feature across *all* the party candidate groups. This suggests a general willingness by the candidates to embrace the opportunity to engage in dialogue with other users on Twitter, perhaps aided by the candidate-led nature of the constituency campaigns being better suited to the conversation feature.

In comparison, UKIP, the least-financed party of the four, had by far the fewest candidates on Twitter (48%) and also the least active, with an average of only 76 posts each. This reflected the activity on UKIP's Twitter account, which was also the least active amongst the four parties. It is also notable that UKIP's support base, mainly consisting of older, male, blue-collared workers, did not match the younger and more internet-savvy characteristics of Twitter users (Cowley and Kavanagh, 2016a: 113). This was in comparison to the Liberal Democrats, a party which lacked a traditional support base but had

become a popular party for younger voters during the 2010 election campaign due to its opposition to tuition fees (Russell and Fieldhouse, 2005; Cutts et al., 2010).

Although these factors add more complexity to the reasons behind social media adoption, the data still correlate with studies which showed candidates from better-financed parties were more likely to use the site. It also provided evidence for another trend: less progressive and more right-wing parties demonstrating more resistance to social media use. To some extent, this pattern was also supported by the Conservative Party and the Conservative candidates' pages. Although a high percentage of Conservative candidates had active Twitter accounts, both they and the party page represented the second least active group in the sample, ahead only of UKIP. These statistics suggest an acceptance of social media by the Conservatives but with a general wariness over how to engage with the site. This is further explored when I examine the interactions on the site in more depth and the candidates' attitudes towards Twitter's deliberative potential. First, the follower data of the candidates are examined to understand if there were any trends in the number of followers an account had based on the parties they represented, or if the statuses of the candidates had an effect.

7.4.1 Followers and Status

Chapter Four established that party follower numbers were not indicative of election results. The statistics for the individual candidates' pages also showed no identifiable link between follower numbers and electoral success. However,

some studies have found that an incumbent candidate is more likely to use Twitter (Gilmore, 2011; Evans et al., 2014). This pattern was also reflected in the marginal seats and led to questions about the links between the status of a candidate, such as incumbency or previous parliamentary roles, and follower numbers.

Out of the 45 constituencies, there were 13 seats where the incumbent was either not standing for re-election (eight) or did not have a qualifying Twitter account (five). In total, 29 of the 32 active accounts held by incumbents had more Twitter followers than their constituency rivals. The remaining three constituencies each had one candidate with more followers than the incumbent: Polly Billington for Labour (Thurrock), Andrew Dismore for the Labour (Hendon), and UKIP leader Nigel Farage (South Thanet). Of these, Farage's follower count of more than 220,000 the week before the election was significantly higher than any other candidate in the sample and was presumably connected to his high profile and status as party leader. The leaders of the other parties also had a considerably higher following; Conservative David Cameron had more than 980,000 followers, Labour leader Ed Miliband over 450,000, and Liberal Democrat head Nick Clegg boasted followers in excess of 230,000. Whilst no consistent hypothesis exists to explain why the other two candidates (besides Farage) had more followers than the incumbents in their seat, it can be speculated that Polly Billington's previous role as a BBC journalist and then special advisor to Ed Miliband may have been a contributory factor. She was not particularly active on the site with only 92 tweets during the campaign (see **Appendix 1.**), below the average for a Labour candidate, and across the total sample of candidates (124). Overall, the data conclusively show that comparing

the accounts of candidates from the four main parties in the marginal seats indicates that an incumbent had a 90% chance of attracting more Twitter followers.

In terms of comparative follower numbers, Chapter Four highlighted the relative position of the follower statistics for the party accounts compared to celebrity accounts and those of mainstream media political commentators. The relationship between follower data and the status of election candidates can at least be placed in a more comparable context by examining how follower numbers contrasted amongst the Twitter accounts of party leaders as well as front- and backbench MPs. Using 10,000 followers as the benchmark, up to 5,000 being the most common range across MP pages at the end of 2014, pages with follower numbers of five figures or more were identified in the sample to establish whether they denoted a prior frontbench position in parliament. Ten accounts existed in this highest follower bracket, of which three had belonged to frontbench MPs at the end of the 2015 parliament: Brandon Lewis (Minister for Housing and Planning), Toby Perkins (Shadow Minister for Small Business), and Ed Balls (Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer). A role on the frontbench, however, did not guarantee reaching the 10,000-follower mark, as seen with David Lidington (Minister of State for Europe), who fell short but still had 9,000 followers. Ed Balls' following of 172,000 placed him significantly above the other candidates. As a comparison, his Conservative counterpart George Osborne had over 118,000 followers. Therefore, status did have some bearing on follower numbers, although this effect was most evident in key positions such as leader, chancellor, and foreign secretary. For those without frontbench roles, no pattern behind their high follower numbers could be identified; there was no

clear correlation between follower data and the number of tweets posted by the account, and all had a diverse employment background.

Overall, the only clear pattern which emerged was the relationship between incumbency and follower numbers. Status, insofar as past parliamentary roles, only becomes a key factor in follower numbers in high-profile roles, for whilst a ministerial position may return a higher than usual number of followers, the figures remained relatively low when considered in the wider context. The next section examines how the candidates used the site to interact with other Twitter users.

7.4.2 Interacting with Users

Chapter Four showed that the parties' Twitter accounts mainly refrained from replying to users through the site, though the Liberal Democrats proved an exception. Offline, campaign dialogue mostly occurred on the local level between the public and party candidates or activists. The Labour Doorstep was an example of such an offline initiative, which also predated the 2015 general election. The purpose of Labour's doorstep campaign was to conduct more door-to-door conversations in constituencies, with leader Ed Miliband announcing a target of holding four million of these conservations before the end of the election campaign (Alexander, 2015; Cowley and Kavanagh, 2016a). The initiative was seen as a move to contrast with the Conservatives more national approach with emphasis on posters and big business backing (Wintour, 2015). Labour Doorstep was instead intended to bring campaigning back to the local level.

This local style of campaigning was also reflected on Twitter, where constituency candidates showed high levels of interaction when replying to users. The site, after all, offered candidates an opportunity to engage with constituents they might not otherwise have been able to see on the (offline) campaign trail. Out of the 133 candidates, 125 engaged in at least one online @-reply conversation, comprising 46% of all tweet output. The Conservative and Labour candidates averaged within a couple of percentage points of the total figure, with the greatest deviation coming from the Liberal Democrats with an above-average 54% conversation rate and UKIP candidates with 38%.

Several of the candidates responded to questions posed by Twitter users regarding the amount of time they dedicated to the site and their opinions on its use as a conversational tool. All but one who engaged with this line of questioning expressed the view that even in "the age of social media, face to face [is] king" (Williams, 2015d). Candidates lamented that they "can't do [it] justice on Twitter" when responding to a question online and would often request a user to send them either a direct message or an email address for further correspondence (Mathers, 2015). It is notable that despite their reservations about engaging in conversations through Twitter, these candidates were nevertheless active on the site and interacting with users in this way. However, Bob Smytherman, Liberal Democrat candidate for East Worthing and Shoreham, was a vocal exception to this opinion. Despite being a single voice of disagreement, his situation provided some interesting insight.

Smytherman was a last-minute replacement after the previous Liberal Democrat candidate, Jemima Bland, dropped out four days before the campaign started. Although Smytherman had experience as a former mayor in

Worthing, Bland had been chosen as the prospective parliamentary candidate two years earlier, and so the infrastructure and campaign had been built around her (The Newsroom, 2015). Introducing himself on Twitter, Smytherman openly referred to himself as a “modern candidate”, alluding to his embracing of social media as the key reason for this self-description (see Smytherman, 2015a; b). He also defended Twitter as being “much more engaging” and “less intrusive” than some of his peers believed and stated that he relied on social media as a point of access between himself and the electorate (Smytherman, 2015c). This statement was partly in response to other candidates in the constituency (notably Labour candidate Tim Macpherson and Conservative Tim Loughton) who repeatedly criticised Smytherman on Twitter for spending too much time on the site and not getting out and about to meet his constituents – a fairly ironic turn of events, especially as they often used conversation feature on Twitter to comment to other users, and Smytherman, about the latter’s screen time[17].

Although Smytherman openly embraced Twitter as an important communication tool, this did not signify that he saw it as a replacement for face-to-face contact; rather, he used Twitter to complement doorstep campaigning, which he still viewed as an integral way of communicating with voters (Smytherman: 2015c). Other candidates indicated that whilst they widely adopted Twitter as a way of interacting with other users, they still saw it as an ‘optional extra’ rather than a fully integrated part of the campaign.

Ultimately, the candidates used this function as frequently or infrequently as they themselves wished, so whilst conversations comprised a high portion

[17] For examples of tweets by Loughton and Macpherson see **Appendix 4, section B**

of all tweets, activity levels varied amongst individual candidates, ranging from not replying at all to using the reply function for more than half of their output. Similarly, as with the parties, the candidates also had control over *who* they chose to engage with. Overall, these behaviours suggest that though there was a preference for face-to-face conversations, there was also some recognition of the opportunities and potential to converse through Twitter.

The final part of this chapter considers how the parties engaged with election issues. It examines to what extent the candidates referenced the campaign issues explored in Chapter Six and how this compared to the party pages, before exploring in more depth the balance between developing either a national- or local-oriented campaign.

7.5 Issue Coverage

Across the four party groups of candidates, certain issues clearly dominated the agenda (see **Table 4.**). The economy was a top issue for the Conservative (31.5%), Labour (26.4%), and UKIP candidates (18.9%). It ranked second in the Liberal Democrat sample (19.0%) behind health (23.1%). The economy and health were the only issues to receive more than 10% coverage across all party candidate groups. Health was also the second-most referenced issue by Labour and UKIP candidates. In contrast, crime, 'family life', and pensions were amongst the least mentioned topics, never exceeding 3.2% of the coverage. Pensions averaged below 1%, making it the issue candidates least engaged with. However, it can be argued that this was partly influenced by Twitter's audience, which was generally younger and therefore less likely to be interested

in pensions as an election issue. Similarly, pensions had only received around 1% of issue coverage on the Labour, Liberal Democrat, and UKIP party pages, which increased to 3% on the Conservative Party page but remained below the opinion poll weighting (see **Table 2.** in Chapter Six). UKIP candidates, however, did not post at all on the topics of pensions or family life.

Table 4. Election Issue Coverage on the Candidates' Twitter Pages by Party as Comparative Percentages

	Party Candidates			
Election Issues	CON	LAB	LIB DEM	UKIP
Crime	3.41	2.62	3.09	0.65
Economy	26.15	23.12	16.60	16.80
Education	9.61	9.77	13.89	5.43
Environment	2.52	4.27	7.08	6.72
Europe	4.13	1.65	4.88	15.50
Family Life	1.71	3.17	1.06	0.00
Health	10.96	23.47	23.68	16.54
Housing	11.77	6.95	8.06	6.46
Immigration	1.80	2.00	7.08	12.92
Pensions	1.89	0.34	0.49	0.00
Tax	12.22	8.67	4.80	4.39
Transport	10.24	4.45	3.99	10.85
Welfare	3.59	9.43	5.45	1.81

Transport was a notable exception as it was given a higher percentage of coverage across all four party groups of candidates than by any of the party accounts. For the Conservatives, Labour, and Liberal Democrats, the coverage was more than eight times higher on the candidates' pages; for the UKIP group, coverage was up by three times the amount of the party account, but the party

page had been significantly more vocal than the other parties. The candidates' engagement with 'transport' is explored in more detail later in the chapter.

Comparisons of the candidates' Twitter pages and those of their respective parties demonstrated some similarities in the coverage of election issues. For the Conservatives, the economy represented a key issue across the party page *and* the candidates' accounts. Although the Conservative candidates did not show such a heavy bias towards the issue (the party's page had made nearly 50% of its posts about the economy) it still represented the most mentioned topic in the sample by 13.9 percentage points. The main issues on the Labour and Liberal Democrat party pages (health and the economy, respectively) were reversed; the Labour candidates placed more emphasis on the economy and the Liberal Democrats on health, both of which had been ranked second on their respective party pages. However, the two remained the top issues, and for the former, this was by a clear margin, with more than 22% coverage for each and less than 10% for the third-place issue (education).

UKIP saw more of a contrast between the party and candidate data. Whilst the economy, Europe, and immigration had all been given a virtually equal share of the coverage (to within 0.5 percentage points), the UKIP candidate pages demonstrated more diversity, with no issues that were as clearly dominant. The economy topped the rankings (18.9%), but Europe was placed third behind health, and immigration was fourth with 12.6%. Mentions of transport, which were relatively higher on the UKIP party page than those of other parties, increased to 10.6% amongst UKIP candidates.

Overall, with the exception of UKIP, the candidate groups tended to dedicate more coverage to the key issues that dominated the party pages. This suggests some co-ordination between the national and constituency campaigns. However, the extent of the coverage bias was not as great across the candidate accounts, and some of the 'other' issues became relatively more prominent. The following sections focus on *how* the candidates engaged with different issues and examines to what extent they engaged in national or local campaigning. First, I explore how the candidates engaged with the economy, the most salient issue for the public, followed by transport, which received notably higher recognition as a campaign topic on candidate pages than the party pages. I finish by considering several of the other issues which emerged in the data and the candidates' personalisation of their Twitter activities.

7.5.1 The Economy

The issue collectively referenced the most by the candidates on Twitter, the economy was also a dominant issue across the national Twitter campaigns, as seen in Chapter Five. As coverage of the issue was highest amongst the Conservative and Labour candidates (over 23% for both), these two groups are the primary studies for investigation.

Returning first to the key features of the national campaigns, the Conservative account frequently reiterated its message that a Labour government would 'wreck' the economy and the Conservatives were the only party which could 'secure the recovery'. The Labour Party, in contrast, focused on ending zero-hour contracts and pledging to raise the minimum wage. These

key campaign messages were subsequently adopted by the candidates into their Twitter messaging. However, these party lines were not just parroted by the candidates but were also reconfigured into a local context. For example, Conservative candidates often shared figures which showed that unemployment had reduced in their area since 2010. This was part of a local adaptation of the national party message that more than two million new jobs had been created under the Conservative-led government of the last parliament. Similarly, candidates would also use this opportunity to highlight how the party had helped support key industries in the local area through job creation.

Meanwhile, opposition candidates, especially those representing Labour and the Liberal Democrats, would counteract these claims by highlighting local industries which had been 'let down' by the last government and needed more protection or investment. However, in general, most criticisms around the economy were directed towards the national outlook, and despite the localisation of the economy as an election issue by the Conservative candidates, they were primarily rehearsing the national campaign messaging.

For Labour, the key campaign pledge was to abolish zero-hour contracts, a topic which was widely adopted by the candidates. However, zero-hour contracts did not remain an exclusive topic for Labour Party candidates, with around 60% all candidates engaging with the topic. During the election campaign, reports from 2014 resurfaced that listed a number of Labour MPs and Labour council offices which had been employing workers on zero-hours contracts. The Conservative Party page did not react to this information, but it did become a talking point amongst a number of candidates from across the

different parties. For example, the Liberal Democrat candidate for Chesterfield referenced a report which accused Toby Perkins, the incumbent Labour MP, of having employed staff in his office on zero-hour contracts (Cambridge, 2015). Perkins did not respond to this but did continue repeating the party's pledge to abolish such contracts[18].

Although the majority of Labour candidates repeated the party message and did not rise to the baiting of other candidates, there were a number who engaged in dialogue with netizens about the issue. A notable example was Cardiff North candidate Mari Williams; responding to a tweet asking about those who are happy working on a zero-hour contract, she replied, "This is the right to be offered – people could stay on zero hours cont (sic) if they wanted" (Williams, 2015c). Even though the candidate ultimately followed the party line, Williams used the opportunity to expand beyond the party rhetoric of abolishing zero-hour contracts and their 'exploitative' nature. This was part of a wider pattern which emerged of candidates using Twitter conversations to expand beyond the party soundbites, but while still remaining on message.

These differences in approach between the national party and local candidates – replying to tweets and responding to queries – indicated that constituency campaigning was more conducive to discourse on the site. Overall, it became apparent that candidates and their campaigns were less controlled on Twitter than at the national level, they were more reactive to events and responsive to users. The uptake of discussion around zero-hour

[18] For more examples, see Liberal Democrat candidate for Morley and Outwood, Rebecca Taylor (2015), UKIP candidate for Cardiff North, Ethan R. Wilkinson (2015), and Conservative candidate for Great Yarmouth, Brandon Lewis (2015) in **Appendix 4, Section C**.

contracts by candidates from parties other than Labour was a demonstration of this, especially as the other party accounts had not engaged with the fall-out. It could be construed the candidates were left to execute their own negative campaigning on the issue because it was not damaging their own parties' campaigns (but was damaging Labour without the other parties' pages being directly involved). However, staying on message with key issues in the national campaigns ultimately dictated how the candidates engaged with 'the economy'. The next issue examined, transport, provides an alternative study as an election topic which received very little attention from any of the party pages.

7.6.2 Transport

Some issues lent themselves more readily to local campaigning. For example, 'transport' was more extensively covered by all four groups of candidates than any of the party pages. In total, it was referenced by more than 50% of all candidates, only those sanding for UKIP falling below this average. In the national campaigns, little attention had been given to the issue, though any engagement with it was dominated by talk around the controversial high-speed rail (HS1 and HS2) projects, particularly the increasing costs and planned routes. However, a greater variety of transport-related topics were introduced at the local level, including potholes, buses, and cycle routes, to name a few. The constituency of Broxtowe in the Nottingham areas is used to provide an insight into how the topic of local transport was addressed by candidates.

The three candidates on Twitter who were standing in Broxtowe – Stan Heptinstall (Liberal Democrat), Nick Palmer (Labour), and the incumbent Anna

Soubry (Conservative) – all engaged with transport as an election issue. Heptinstall's related tweets mainly covered new traffic regulations, referring to the approval of a new puffin crossing and improvements for pedestrians and cyclists[19]. In contrast, Palmer used Twitter to highlight the need to protect the bus services in Beeston which were coming under threat[20]. Finally, Anna Soubry expressed vocal opinions on the state of the trams in Beeston (incorporating the trend #tramshambles), as the network was undergoing maintenance which had overrun and was causing disruption in the town centre[21].

Broadly, the candidates had each chosen a distinct theme within the issue area: green travel, bus services, and tram travel. The variation created different focal points in their campaigns; linking back to the concept of 'brand' identity in Chapter Six, the candidates were using local issues to differentiate themselves on the campaign circuit beyond their party labels. Soubry's choice to commentate on the disruption caused by the works taking place on the tram line was a particularly evident method of 'personalisation'. Revealing that her constituency office was situated in Beeston and therefore in the midst of the tram works, Soubry had taken a particular interest in the matter and sympathised with locals who were likewise being affected.

The Broxtowe case was broadly representative of other approaches by candidates towards transport and other locally focused issues; they were

[19] Heptinstall also included links in these tweets to his candidate website, where further information was provided, see **Appendix 4, Section D**.

[20] See **Appendix 4, Section E**.

[21] For examples of Soubry's updates on the tram service and #tramshambles, see **Appendix 4, Section F**.

engaging with specific aspects which made the candidates distinct from one another within the broader issue. The main exception to this was in the constituency of Wirral South, where the Conservative and UKIP candidates, John Bell and David Scott, respectively, both mentioned the upcoming review into axing the Mersey Tunnel tolls for Wirral residents. However, unlike the Broxtowe examples, the tunnel tolls had also been mentioned at the national campaign level by former Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond and UKIP deputy leader Paul Nuttall. Bell and Scott referenced the statements of their respective party members in all their tweets on the topic. As such, whilst being a local issue geographically, the recognition from individuals involved in the central party campaigns appeared to be a significant factor in ensuring it was mentioned by both local candidates.

Overall, the data showed no strong indications of specific issues that candidates would rally around under the broader issue of transport. In general, individual candidates identified their own local concerns which they chose to integrate into their campaigns, which was in contrast to their coverage of the economy. This indicates that the candidates did use Twitter to conduct their own stye of campaigning, demonstrating some autonomy over the election issues, but only when it did not directly infringe on the party's central campaign messages. The fact that the national economic policies could impact the provision of services, such as public transport, does not appear to be a connection that was made on the local campaign trails.

The next section continues to examine the level of 'personalisation' and local campaigning on the candidates' pages through analysis of the coverage

of other issues within the constituency campaigns. It explores patterns which emerged in the types of topics candidates engaged with.

7.6.3 Other Issues

So far, this chapter has demonstrated that candidates kept to the party line on key election issues, repeating many of their parties' pledges. However, the candidates applied a distinctly local perspective to issues which were less prominent in the parties' national campaigns.

The candidates enjoyed a relative freedom when engaging with 'other' issues, which allowed them to personalise their online campaigns and create their own 'brands' by focusing on distinctly local concerns. For example, decisions made by the local or county council were often highlighted and either positively or openly criticised, depending on the candidate's relationship with the party in control of the council[22]. Library closures represented one of the more common local criticisms, but other areas included the cleanliness of streets, post office closures, and building or planning works. The last category included local updates on repairs to churches (see Warman, 2015), the withdrawal of plans by Tesco to open a store in the 'wrong location' (see Williams, 2015b), and preventing a pub from being turned into a McDonalds restaurant (see Davis, 2015). In a number of cases, the candidates were

[22] For example, criticism came from UKIP candidate Bill Etheridge, which was directed towards the Labour-held council of Dudley (Etheridge, 2015c) and the Conservative candidate for Cardiff North was critical of the 'short-sightedness' of the Labour-held Cardiff council over library closures (Williams 2015a). However, many candidates were openly endorsing local council candidates from their own parties who were standing in the concurrent local elections.

engaging with local issues which were not necessarily within their prospective role as an MP to change but rather would require them to liaise with the local councils. However, by associating themselves with various constituency complaints or local events, they were displaying their credentials as representatives of the community.

The opportunities for personalisation which Twitter allowed to candidates was seen in number of other ways, including updates from the campaign trail, often accompanied by photographs of the candidate meeting local people, knocking on constituents' doors, attending events, or even sitting down in a local café for a quick coffee between engagements. However, a notable trend that emerged was candidates engaging with issues which were personal to them, rather than being a primary focus for the national campaigns or even closely related to their constituencies. Two particular examples were animal welfare and refuges for women. Animal welfare was a broad topic mentioned by a number of candidates but with varying approaches. For example, the Labour candidate for Waveney, Bob Blizzard, was vocal in the need to pass a hunting and animal welfare bill to update animal welfare laws and made clear his anti-hunting stance[23]. Lyla Moran, standing for the Liberal Democrats in Oxford West and Abingdon, on the other hand, shared an article she had written in a detailed response to a request from Vote Cruelty Free to support their campaign to end 88% of current animal experimentations (Moran, 2015a) [24] . Moran's engagement with the issue not only demonstrated a deliberative approach to

[23] For examples see **Appendix 4, Section G**.

[24] For the article, see www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/six-ways-to-break-british-research/ (Moran: 2015b).

the topic but also showed her presenting a reasoned explanation for her view which, while sympathetic, felt the six aims laid out by the Vote Cruelty Free group were impractical and would have negative implications for British medical research.

The endorsement of the need for more women's refuges, in comparison, was much more direct in its purpose. This issue was particularly interesting since it transcended not only constituency but also party boundaries; despite its specificity, the issue received coverage from a number of Labour and Liberal Democrat candidates[25]. All were supporting the need for more protection for women escaping domestic violence and highlighted reports of increasing cases of assault. Although far from widely covered by the candidates, it showed the issue as being distinctly personal to the those who mentioned it, with candidates of the different parties united in their position and using their platform to draw attention to the issue.

A final pattern of behaviour which became evident from the dataset concerned the accounts of UKIP candidates. There was no clear pattern in the issue coverage across this group of candidate accounts, which was the least visible and least active of the sample. It became clear during the coding process that the lack of identifiable 'key' issues across the UKIP candidate sample was a consequence of each of the candidates taking highly individual approaches to the content of their Twitter campaigns. This contrasted with the other party groups, which showed a general adherence to the parties' central policies, thus

[25] For example, Labour candidates Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood), Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn), Sally Copley (Oxford West and Abingdon), and Liberal Democrat candidates Steve Lambert (Aylesbury), and Simon Rix (Truro and Falmouth).

providing their collective output with a more coherent narrative. Although the UKIP candidates' level of personalisation across their Twitter pages, on the face of it, appeared to reflect the optimism that site would be used to give the candidates more freedom, this was not necessarily conducive to rational-critical debate.

It was notable that a number of UKIP candidates were often fighting against candidates from other parties, mainly due to their association with UKIP. For example, the Labour and UKIP candidates for Dudley North (Ian Austin and Bill Etheridge, respectively) often came to (indirect) verbal blows on the site, with Austin airing strong views against the party and its candidate[26]. Etheridge's pushback against Austin and other users on the site was typical of many of the UKIP candidates[27]. Perhaps this was a reflection of the inexperience of UKIP and its candidates in campaigning, as highlighted earlier in this chapter. However, one UKIP PPC (Owais Rajput, Bradford East) took a more innovative approach and posted images of UKIP supporters in the constituency representing a variety of demographics. Although this was a much more peaceful approach, the defensive stances which many of the UKIP candidates took moved their focus away from both national and local campaign issues. It also meant that candidates were not prioritising election issues (local or national) and limiting their opportunities for (rational-critical) discourse with netizens.

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[26] Although Austin and Etheridge did not directly tweet each other, the tensions between the candidates became apparent in the content of their tweets. For examples of Austin's tweets on UKIP and Etheridge's comments on Austin, see **Appendix 4, Section H**.

[27] For examples of Etheridge's exchanges with other users on the site see **Appendix 4, Section I**.

7.7 Conclusion

The integration of Twitter into constituency campaigning provided a different perspective through which to view the site's role in election campaigning. Compared to the parties' Twitter pages, the candidates in the target seats displayed higher levels of engagement with Twitter's interactive functions. There was an almost unanimous adoption of the conversation tool across the candidates' pages as a method for opening up direct communication with users and potential voters on the site. However, personal preference from the candidates ultimately dictated their levels of engagement with Twitter: some had poor experiences of exchanges on the site and decided to deactivate their accounts, others decided to post sparingly, while some embraced the site as a natural extension of their (offline) campaigns and were frequently active.

Although the candidates were generally more embracing of Twitter's potential as a public sphere, insofar as they more readily interacted with users and engaged in dialogues, the tension between the local and national campaigns limited the extent of their interaction with election issues. However, it was not that Twitter, as a platform, did not provide (or had not been used for) the potential for candidates or MPs to influence or challenge their parties' policies. In 2013, Labour MP Stella Creasy ran a Twitter campaign in her constituency to clamp down on pay-day loans, a campaign that went on to first gain the backing of her own party and then of the Government. Conservative MP Robert Halfon has also utilised the site in a similar way, and in 2012, almost single-handedly, pressured the Chancellor to scrap rises in fuel duty (Sylvester, 2013).

However, despite the above instances, under the scope of an election campaign, Twitter was used by the candidates less as a site to transform election campaigning and more as an extension of ‘politics as usual’. For the most part, key election issues in the national campaigns and core party messages were rehearsed across the candidates’ pages. The limited ‘localisation’ of these issues came in the form of applying a key national issue to the local context but still keeping on message and not damaging the party’s central campaign.

There were some opportunities for candidates to present more constituency-orientated and ‘personalised’ Twitter campaigns, such as public transport, local planning, and roadworks. However, these were primarily shaped around elections issues outside the focus of the national campaigns. Equally, these issues were unlikely to lead to too many concerns for the parties if the candidates were not given an official line to follow. Overall, the candidates’ pages appeared to be shaped by a concern for ensuring the preservation of the national campaign, protection of the party’s image, and the avoidance any potential repercussions if they stepped off message.

Conclusion

This thesis was undertaken to examine how political parties and candidates used the social media site Twitter during the 2015 UK general election. Using empirical data, it set out to explore how the political actors engaged with the various features of the site and to what extent they embraced its deliberative potential. It also examined the coverage of election issues by the parties' and candidates' Twitter accounts to understand how the online campaigns were conducted. The thesis was devised as a contribution to the ongoing debate about the potential of the internet and social media to change how we 'do' politics; can it bring about transformative, 'revolutionary' change, or is it just a new tool to help parties and candidates deliver 'politics as usual'? (Margolis and Resnick, 2000; Shirky, 2011; Wright, 2012). Central to the debate of this thesis were the tensions between the perceived *opportunities* the internet and social media could provide – such as open, egalitarian spaces through which parties, candidates, and citizens could engage in discourse – and the opposing expectation that the digital spaces would simply be absorbed into existing forms of political communication (Rheingold, 1993; Margolis and Resnick, 2000; Carswell, 2012).

Underlying this debate is the claim that social media *can* provide spaces for deliberation. The deliberative discourse is rooted in Habermas' (1989) concept of 'the public sphere' which relied on the assurance of 'rational-critical' debate. Habermas' analytical framework has not as yet been rigorously applied in the context of the internet or social media. Thus, a secondary aim of this thesis was to use Habermas' ideas as a means of appraising the potential of

Twitter and its part in the online environment more generally, rather than simply for electoral purposes.

Chapter Three began the investigation into Habermas' thesis on 'the public sphere'. I first examined his key criteria – 'access', 'disregard of status', and 'common concern' – in relation to the online environment. It was established that the internet enhanced opportunities for citizens to participate in debates with few 'formal barriers' to entry, should they choose to exploit it. Universal access is much closer to being realised through the internet than the eighteenth century 'salons and coffee houses' that, according to Habermas, hosted the 'bourgeois public sphere' from which he shaped his ideas. Online, the socio-economic barriers are significantly fewer, and even location has become less of an obstacle to individuals communicating with one another, ensuring citizens have better opportunities to engage in deliberative discourse. These factors also encourage more inclusive discussions on determining and debating issues of 'common concern'. The development of social media platforms has been central in providing these spaces through which citizens can add their own content and engage in debates.

Although the internet and social media provide online spaces with the *potential* to create public spheres, Habermas warned about a process he termed 'refeudalisation' which endangers the free exchange of ideas and opinions in 'rational-critical' debate. Habermas' was particularly sensitive to the damaging effects of a developing 'consumer culture' and a return to 'representative publicity' through what he termed 'manipulated publicity'. These factors are also applicable to the internet and social media, which have become important tools for PR consultants and advertising executives. This pattern has

already become particularly prominent in (offline) political activity in the UK, seen especially in the work of so-called ‘spin doctors’, present since the days of Margaret Thatcher’s controversial press secretary, Bernard Ingham, but becoming a key element even of routine political activity under the ‘New Labour’ premiers, Blair and Brown (Jones, 1995; Giddens, 2010). From the perspective of liberal democracy – especially that of idealists like Habermas – slogans, soundbites, and party ‘brands’ could be regarded as the antithesis of ‘rational-critical debate’. Their ubiquity in UK politics coincided almost exactly with developments in information technology which produced new opportunities for political communication. However, the more recent rise of social media and continued advancement of technology has also produced new techniques which Habermas could not have foreseen, and which had obvious implications for political campaigning, such as the rise of ‘big data’ and ‘data analytics’.

Despite these developments, the rise of social media ‘influencers’ of diverse backgrounds made it possible for Habermas’ followers to retain their faith in the internet’s potential. It could be argued that the emergence of ‘ordinary’ citizens who had made a name for themselves through social media sites demonstrated the potential of the virtual world to realise Habermas’ hopes for public debate which showed ‘disregard of status’. However, the internal hierarchies that subsequently formed on these sites also highlighted a tension between the egalitarian status of future ‘influencers’ upon *entering* the space and the commercial considerations that emerged *within* the space. Even the least materialistic content-providers were unlikely to be immune from the forces which had ‘refeudalised’ the offline public sphere. All the more, those ‘influencers’ who had made their reputations through the quality of their

contributions to ‘rational-critical’ debate in social media could soon find their status confirmed, and hardened into an online hierarchy, especially by means of commercial considerations.

With the analytical framework in place, Chapter Four evaluated the deliberative potential of Twitter through an examination of the site’s features. Unlike other social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter provides an ‘open’ space through which ‘netizens’ can communicate with one another, share information, and react to content. The open nature of the site ensures general access to the content – even for those who have not signed up for a (free) account. The intention behind Twitter’s design is to allow information to be seen and disseminated, contrasting with Facebook’s closed community network that focuses on connections between specific individuals rather than being content- or discussion-led. This ethos of the Twitter developers was also reflected in other features of the site which encourage interactions and dialogue between users who might be (and usually are) complete strangers, and with few restrictions.

The primary deliberative features were ‘hashtags’ and the ability to engage in ‘conversations’. Both of these features were introduced in response to user behaviour on the site and highlighted the willingness of Twitter’s designers to adapt to the demands of the netizens for more interactive tools. This feature of Twitter highlights the suitability of the site for a case study informed by Habermas’ hopes for free, rational-critical debate; to an unusual extent, the architecture of Twitter reflected the perceived wishes of users, rather than being imposed from above. Hashtags primarily function as a way to identity and collate tweets that are engaging with the same topic. The collation of the

content help creates narratives, raising awareness of subjects of particular interest to users, and this can help to initiate far-reaching dialogues across the platform, as demonstrated by the #MeToo campaign. While ‘conversations’ are not intended to provide the same level of exposure as hashtags, they enable a direct line of communication between Twitter accounts.

Although it was established that Twitter was fundamentally a site designed to promote information dissemination and user discourse, there were some developments that allowed elements of consumerism to move into the space, notably in the form of ‘sponsored’ content. However, as Chapter Four also found, the impact has been limited compared to other social media sites (e.g., Facebook) due to Twitter’s contrasting design-features. Thus, it seems reasonable to suggest that, if by the time of the 2015 UK general election there was a significant public appetite for ‘rational-critical debate’, Twitter was the kind of platform on which it would have taken place.

Chapter Five began with the question ‘politics as usual?’ to characterise the debate about the impact of the internet and social media on political communication and election campaigning up to the 2015 general election. Offline communication had been largely, but not exclusively, characterised by a top-down, ‘broadcast’ approach from political parties when seeking electoral support. Some initiatives had been introduced by the parties over the years, such as the CPC in the early post-war years (as seen in Chapter Five), and campaigns associated with ‘New Labour’ which ostensibly were intended to encourage a dialogue between the main parties with constituency members, supporters, or the public. However, Twitter provided a new, ‘open’, public platform that had developed independently from the parties, so that parties,

candidates, and citizens all enter the space as Twitter ‘users’ and potential participants in debate, not as instigators of a ‘listening’ process which is ultimately under the control of the parties.

The investigation into the use of Twitter’s features by the political parties in the 2015 general election campaign demonstrated a divergence between their use of the site and its discourse architecture. Although the parties employed different communication devices on the site such as ‘retweeting’ messages, including ‘hashtags’ in tweets, and to a limited extent engaging in ‘conversations’, their attempts to realise the deliberative potential of Twitter was half-hearted at best. For examples, ‘retweets’ were often self-serving messages of support, and calls for other users to retweet posts from the party accounts were primarily concentrated in the final week of the campaign, appealing for voter mobilisation rather than attempting to initiate discourse.

Similarly, hashtags were a feature the parties often adopted to spread party slogans (such as the Conservatives’ ‘secure the recovery’). Although these hashtags had the *potential* to start a wider dialogue around the party’s economic pledges and credentials, there was no indication of a pro-active engagement with any narratives suggested by the hashtags. The hashtags also lacked the kind of invitation to enter a dialogue that UKIP’s short-lived 2014 #WhyImVotingUKIP campaign had infamously started. The ‘#LeadersDebate’ was an exception insofar as all four parties adopted the hashtag(s) associated with the televised leader debates and involved themselves in the ensuing narratives. However, the content demonstrated that the hashtag was not being used to respond to the online dialogue about the debates but was primarily adopted as merely another platform for political spin; the party pages repeated

key policies and party lines, and echoed comments made by their respective representatives in the post-debate 'spin rooms'. Overall, the parties were using these features to raise awareness to an extent that was presumed to serve their purposes but without fully embracing the opportunities the features provided for rational-critical discourse. In this respect, it can be argued that during the 2015 general election the main UK parties were concerned to *limit* the potential for online debate, rather than *maximising* it.

Engagement with the 'conversation' function – a direct method of communication between users' Twitter accounts that supports a more 'traditional' type of dialogue than the hashtags – was notably lacking from the Conservative, Labour and UKIP pages. Only the Liberal Democrats engaged with the function to a significant extent. The contributions of the parties to these conversations, whilst incorporating some policy information, were also fairly generic and focused on repeating key pledges, while others were simply acknowledgements of supportive tweets from other users.

In contrast, the candidates standing in target seats were much more actively engaged in genuine dialogue on Twitter, as illustrated in Chapter Seven. 'Conversations' accounted for more than 45% of the tweets posted from candidates' accounts. These findings were not unexpected: after all, communications between individuals in any medium are more natural than dialogue between individuals and organisations. However, the findings provided important insights into the different approaches of the candidates and parties, and the different ways in which the parties and their candidates attempted to strike a balance between national and local campaigning.

On the one hand, Twitter had the potential to supplement, or even go so far as replacing, 'offline', face-to-face conversations between candidates and constituents. The site provided an opportunity for candidates to engage with citizens they might not otherwise have encountered on their local campaign trails. While Labour's Doorstep initiative was introduced in the hope of encouraging more conversations between party representatives, activists, and members of the electorate, Twitter offered a potential route to bypass some of the limitations of such traditional and excessively time-consuming campaigning, such as the chance of finding someone at home and the time taken to travel to different destinations. Despite this, almost all of the candidates included in this study – the ones who were standing in 'target' seats, in which every vote was regarded as crucial – were vocal in their preference for holding face-to-face conversations with the electorate. Since 93% of the candidates whose Twitter activities were monitored in the research for this thesis engaged with the conversation tool, the inference is that most of them did so in the belief that, at best, they were using social media as a second-rate *supplement* to traditional campaigning methods, rather than *superseding* 'politics as usual'.

The fact that parties and candidates did not take full advantage of Twitter's deliberative potential in 2015 does not preclude the possibility that social media might transform future election campaigning as the online world increases its impact on citizens as consumers as well as voters. Indeed, much of the prevalence of Jeremy Corbyn and Momentum in 2017 was attributed to online organisation and debate. However, the clear preference of candidates for face-to-face canvassing gives rise to speculations which cast doubt on the likelihood of other UK candidates ever warming to the potential of social media.

For candidates, the major draw-back of social media as compared to doorstep conversations is that the latter are *private* while the former are 'on the record'. If, for example, a candidate is confronted by a voter who expresses negative feelings about a specific party – or about the character of the current leader – she or he could return an ambiguous or even sympathetic answer without having to fear the consequences. Except in very unusual circumstances, words spoken on the doorstep stay on the doorstep. Such candour in Twitter exchanges, particularly during election campaigns, would be far more hazardous; responses to controversial questions are open to view, by officials of the central party as well as the panoply of media outlets scouring the internet for any hint of a 'gaffe'. Equally, while 'paper' candidates in hopeless seats normally have a license to say almost anything in the quest for one more vote to help save their deposits, their chances of securing nomination from the party in a more 'winnable' contest in future elections can be harmed if they can be shown to have blotted their Twitter copybook in by-gone days. The key point here is that the potential of the internet and social media began to be recognised in the UK at a time when (in sharp contrast to the situation in the US) the main parties were more interested than ever before in aspects of their electoral campaigns which they could hope to *control*. From this perspective, one might almost regard Twitter as a new and very effective way of allowing parties to identify and punish potential dissenters, rather than a medium for rational-critical debate during (and between) elections. Candidates who want a licence to stray 'off-message' had better stay 'offline'.

These suggestions that the deliberative potential of Twitter might be thwarted by the established practices of UK politics are reinforced by the

research findings presented and discussed in Chapters Six and Seven. Chapter Six focused on the coverage of election issues by the political parties in the context of public opinion surveys and academic theories of media influence, particularly that of 'agenda-setting'. Without the intermediation of the mainstream media, the parties had an opportunity to shape their Twitter campaigns and output as they desired. The limited adoption of the interactive features of the site, particularly for the 'rational-critical' exchange of views, was an early indication of the reluctance of the main parties to engage in any reciprocal and reactive online communication. Even the Liberal Democrats, who did engage in 'conversations', were selective in the tweets the pages responded to. In the context of 2015 this relative reticence, in a party which takes pride in its propensity for free and open debate, could be explained by the vulnerability of its performance within the coalition government to searching criticism by its own supporters, and the possibility (which became a reality) of a very heavy defeat at the polls. However, it is also the case that the Liberal Democrats have often (and sometimes with considerable justification, especially in by-elections) been accused of conveying contrasting messages in different constituencies, depending on tactical considerations (Russell and Fieldhouse, 2005). The party's supporters can argue that such practices are enforced, thanks to a 'simple plurality' voting system which discriminates against them. Be that as it may, the 'liberal democratic' transparency of Twitter made it far more difficult for the party's candidates to deviate from the central party line, so that a medium which promised to satisfy the Liberal Democrats lust for engagement and debate also acted as a reason for reticence.

The evidence of these chapters suggests that, in the UK at least, parties regarded Twitter as at least one facet of campaigning over which they could exert a significant degree of control and thus to plough ahead with their pre-planned campaigns without paying much attention to developments in the 'real world'. Each party had two or three topics that clearly dominated their online content with the economy being a notable issue for all four accounts. However, there was deviation in *the* primary issues for each party. UKIP, for example, focused on immigration and 'Europe' as well as the economy, while Labour concentrated on health, their long-standing electoral strength. The parties also asserted their own distinct 'brands' by focusing on key policies that differentiated them from their rivals. There was a correlation between the secondary and even tertiary issues that the pages covered, although the public salience of issues, as recorded in opinion surveys, clearly affected the agenda of the main parties. However, the scant acknowledgement given by the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat Twitter pages to 'immigration' indicated that the main parties regarded social media as a 'safe space' in which they could ignore issues on which they sensed their policies were weak, or an unsafe space where it would be dangerous to acknowledge the issue – even when these were of significant public concern. In this respect the online campaigns of the main UK parties were broadly analogous to their offline counterparts, the big difference being that their leaders would find it very difficult to avoid encounters with robust interviewers on the mainstream media, whereas they could plough ahead with their preferred agenda online as if nothing (unhelpful opinion polls, etc) had happened in the 'real world'.

The actions taken by the parties to control their Twitter campaigns did not immunise them from ‘events’. The online campaign ‘bubbles’ the parties had tried to construct on their pages were still susceptible to external pressures. For example, Labour used Twitter in an attempt to arrest the fallout from a viral clip of an Ed Balls interviews from January 2015 where he spoke against abolishing the non-dom tax status, contrary to Labour’s subsequent election pledge. This decision by the Labour team deviated from the otherwise structured campaign it had crafted on the site (and did little le alleviate the situation). However, this type of intervention was uncommon from the parties’ pages; overall, the ‘disintermediation’ of Twitter from mainstream media made it easier for the parties to enjoy a feeling of control over the election.

Chapter Seven provided evidence which suggests that the engagement of party candidates with Twitter was confined by the influence of the central organisations. In 2015, candidates who used Twitter on a regular basis could feel reasonably free to express their views on issues of *local*, as opposed to *UK-wide* concern. Readers who examined the tweets of candidates in marginal seats, and who lacked any knowledge of the increasing ‘presidentialisation’ of UK general elections could be forgiven for concluding that all political decisions are indeed ‘local’. There was some deviation in the ‘national’ election issues the candidates’ pages engaged with compared to the online output of their respective parties. The key issues for the parties – i.e., the ones which suited their pre-planned agendas – were largely covered by the candidates’ pages, which rehearsed their party’s policies and campaign lines; in the target seats they evinced a concern to stay ‘on message’, though there were some attempts to add a local ‘spin’ to the context. The main variation came in the engagement

with issues such as transport, which naturally lent themselves to a more local setting. Equally, local planning applications, local businesses and industries, places of natural interest, and other locally relevant topics were discussed. To this extent, campaign content on Twitter can be assumed to resemble traditional, confidential 'doorstep' campaigning.

Overall, there was a clear separation between local and national campaign issues. On the one hand, the parties' key issues were repeated by their candidates' pages, maintaining a national perspective. Meanwhile the local element was based on election issues that were not a priority in the parties' central campaigns and were unlikely to damage the party if the candidates engaged with them on a local level. The findings of the research conducted for this thesis suggest that the *potential* of Twitter to 'transform' politics, inaugurating an era of 'rational-critical debate', were nullified in the 2015 general election by the expectation among candidates and parties alike that election campaigning in Britain can only be successful if it is centrally controlled.

8.1 Moving Forwards

The consistent themes informing this thesis have been the *potential* for Twitter to provide a deliberative space and the actual utilisation of the site by the political parties and candidates during the 2015 UK general election campaign. It became apparent through the research that the major parties did not embrace Twitter's potential in 2015. The opportunities to engage in rational-critical debate were overshadowed by the parties' pursuit of controlled campaigns through which they attempted to promote their preferred election agendas. The

candidates, although more likely to engage in dialogue on the site, were careful to keep ‘on message’ during the campaign. However, the scope of this thesis has left open areas for further research.

I began the thesis with an exploration of Habermas’ (1989) ‘public sphere’ and an outline of its development. Habermas’ vision of a ‘rational’ public actively seeking opportunities for ‘rational-critical’ debate is certainly optimistic – possibly even utopian. Nevertheless, there are good grounds for using Habermas’ ideas in academic research into social media. After all, Habermas claimed that something akin to his ideal has existed in the past, despite the existence of obvious formal and informal barriers to a truly ‘free’ exchange of ideas and opinions. At least in theory, the most important of these obstacles to ‘rational-critical’ debate have been removed by the emergence of social media in an age where access to the internet has become virtually compulsory for citizens, whether or not they are habitual contributors to public debate. As a result, Habermas’ ideal can be regarded as a viable means of evaluating the role of social media in enhancing – or, perhaps, impairing – the quality of liberal democratic practices in a country like the UK. While this matter has not been addressed explicitly in this thesis, there is no reason why future research, expanding beyond general election campaigns which are the ultimate litmus test for the health of any liberal democracy.

This thesis focused on the use of Twitter by political parties and candidates as a site designed to allow open, user-generated, content-orientated communication between users (from politicians and celebrities to ‘ordinary’ citizens). For the purposes of the research questions, Twitter provided the most obvious potential as a transformative space. However, future research should

not be limited to Twitter. In order to create a better understanding of the application of the term ‘public sphere’ other social media platforms should also be examined. This will create a better understanding of the variations between the sites and the opportunities they provide for discourse. For example, Facebook is community-orientated but could still support rational-critical discourse. The architecture of the site may come into some conflict with Habermas’ criteria due to its promotion of closed community networks; but the space does allow users opportunities to engage in dialogue and if too often it promotes ‘echo-chambers’ of opinion it is well worth asking why this should be the case. The evaluation of the potential of different sites will also allow further research into how social media is adopted by political parties and candidates. This thesis has focused on the *output* of parties and candidates on social media and has drawn conclusions from this bank of empirical data. However, the findings could be supplemented (and perhaps even challenged) if future researchers were able to monitor the social media campaigns of the parties from ‘the inside’, conducting interviews with the key participants at regular intervals during election campaigns (rather than asking them to provide their insights with the benefit of hindsight). Analysis of tweets – however sophisticated – can only tell us what social media actors *did*; since this medium is sure to be a feature of future election campaigns in Britain and elsewhere, it is at least important to enhance our knowledge of what they were *trying to do*.

The online environment is also constantly evolving as new platforms are introduced or updated, some more successfully than others. For example, former Conservative MP Louise Mensch, was instrumental in setting up a site called Menshn in the of summer 2012 as a rival to Twitter with the intention to

support political discussion. The site was short-lived, partly due to disputes within the business partnership. However, the introduction of the site demonstrated an interest in the provision of deliberative spaces of this kind. In mid-2021 a former aide and spokesperson for US President Donald Trump, Jason Miller, launched a site (GETTR) as a space to host political discourse, encouraging its use by those with ideas 'outside the mainstream media norm'. Only time will tell how the site functions and what the discourse architecture is and how it is actually used, but such initiatives suggest that future researchers will not suffer from a dearth of opportunities, whether or not they choose to apply Habermas' principles.

Within Twitter there are also ongoing technological changes that may infringe on the potential of the site and, consequently, how it is used. On 1 September 2021, the company began a limited roll-out to some small areas of the United States of subscription services to become 'star followers' (Crawford, 2021). This could potentially lead to a closing off content of the site to the non-paying public. The implications on use will be interesting to follow, particularly from a site that has so far been careful to restrict the impact of commercial considerations on the core ethos of the site. Could this leave room for a 'new' Twitter to emerge, or a more radical alternative?

Beyond the technological environments of Twitter and other social media sites, the research for this thesis has also opened up new lines of enquiry around the use of Twitter by political candidates and parties. A recognised limitation of this thesis has been the choice of parties and target seats for analysis. These samples were chosen to understand the use of the site during a period of heightened interest and activity and to measure the dynamics

between the local and national campaigns leading up to the 2015 general election. Nonetheless, they cannot be considered a representative sample, even in a field where ‘representative samples’ of any kind are unusually elusive. To expand on this research, an investigation into the use of the site by additional parties could enhance the debate about organisations which are resource-rich and resource-poor, and their respective usages of the site. For example, Green Party candidates often ‘crowd-sourced’ the modest deposits which were legally necessary to allow them to stand in the 2015 election, and for them the free access to Twitter would likely have been appealing. Crowd-sourcing has become a well-publicised feature of internet activity in recent years, especially in respect of single-issue campaigns; but does it lead to ‘rational-critical’ debate, or is it just another aspect of social media which attracts members of particular online ‘echo-chambers’? Crowd-sourcing seems particularly relevant for parties with nationalist or geographic interests such as the SNP and Plaid Cymru, but also for movements with a desire to promote regional causes within England. The established fund-raising potential of the internet has obvious implications for would-be candidates who want to put themselves forward in specific constituencies as ‘independents’, either to publicise a personal cause or themselves. While this thesis has focused on the major UK parties, the rise of ‘others’ has been a notable and under-researched feature of elections in Britain in recent decades; but has the advent of social media advanced or arrested this development? More generally, research in this area could also inform the long-standing academic discussion concerning the national-local balance of campaigning in general elections.

The 2015 general election was a key turning point in the adoption of social media into first-order election campaigning in the United Kingdom. It was widely anticipated that social media would play a significant role; after all, it was presumed to have helped to topple tyrants during the 2011 ‘Arab Spring’, in addition to its more mundane but still significant part in the campaigns of President Obama. It was widely anticipated that social media would be important in the UK’s 2015 general election campaign, but until the polls closed it was not certain if its impact would be *decisive* one way or the other. This uncertainty was reflected in the approach of the major parties and their candidates, even in the ‘target seats’ where a little difference could be expected to go a long way. In short, the 2015 general election was undoubtedly an important moment, but one which should not be regarded as a conclusive test of the electoral impact of social media outlets like Twitter.

However, whether they like it or not, parties and candidates are now expected to become more ‘tech-savvy’ in their political communications. By the time of the 2017 and 2019 UK general elections social media has become an established part of the election campaign toolkit. Despite this, the existing literature on social media and UK general elections has remained stubbornly quantitative. The trend for ‘big data’ has only grown as the technology has continued to develop. Consequently, the body of literature has remained dominated by quantitate investigations into public reaction, network flows, and election forecasting. This thesis aimed to introduce a more qualitative approach to understand how political parties and candidates used Twitter during the 2015 election, an election taken at a unique point of time in the development of social media electioneering. This has opened questions about how the use of the site

changed over later elections. Will the same patterns of online behaviour be seen as 2015? Are the candidates more open and engaged on the site or is there a still a clear pressure to be ‘on message’? Will data analytics become a much more integral part to the campaigns? Have the parties become more responsive or is ‘manipulated publicity’ still the dominant approach?

In addition, the 2015 general election campaign can also provide a point of comparison for looking at other electoral contests, such as parliamentary by-elections but also the choice of local councillors. Such elections retain both national and local interest; but is there more freedom for candidates to campaign ‘locally’ on Twitter, expressing themselves without fear of central direction? Or are they essentially treated as mouthpieces for the national party messages? This question is particularly important in the context of Habermas’ views on the potential for ‘rational-critical’ debate. If candidates in local contests demonstrate more open engagement with ‘netizens’ on the site and generate an expectation that this would be repeated in general elections, this helps to realise the potential of Twitter as a forum for continuous rational-critical discourse which (as it should, in liberal democracies) reaches its height during general election campaigns?

When the research for this thesis began, it was unclear if social media would play a significant role in the 2015 general election or if it would prove to be ‘politics as usual’. However, the general view (not least within the mainstream media) was that social media would be very important indeed. If, in retrospect, social media outlets like Twitter – notwithstanding their potential as hosts for ‘rational-critical’ debate amongst citizens with important messages to convey – merely reflected the established patterns of electoral campaigning,

this is in itself significant. If, in the context of the 2015 general election, Twitter was at best a secondary factor, it is all the more important to ask *why* its influence failed to live up to the pre-election hype. From the academic perspective, this thesis has shown that the 2015 election campaign is an excellent basis for the evaluation of future election campaigns.

Appendix 1: Candidate Twitter Data for Marginal Seats

Italics – denotes incumbent

Constituency and Candidates	Party	Followers (6 May '15)	All Tweets	Replies
Amber Valley	**CON Hold**			
Mills, Nigel	CON	*954*	*22*	5
Gillott, Kevin	LAB	314	97	15
Smith, Kate	LIB DEM	28	13	12
Bent, Stuart	UKIP	70	1	0
Ashfield	**LAB Hold**			
Harrison, Helen	CON	214	7	6
De Piero, Gloria	LAB	*29,543*	*245*	31
Smith, Philip	LIB DEM	-	-	-
Ashcroft, Simon	UKIP	-	-	-
Aylesbury	**CON Hold**			
Lidington, David	CON	*9,010*	*21*	*11*
Cass, Will	LAB	678	16	9
Lambert, Steven	LIB DEM	1,553	30	15
Adams, Chris	UKIP	439	126	46
Bolton West	**CON Gain**			
Green, Christopher	CON	1,027	97	*48*
Hilling, Julie	LAB	*3,761*	*80*	11
Martin, Andrew	LIB DEM	-	-	-
Horsefield, Bob	UKIP	-	-	-
Boston and Skegness	**CON Hold**			
Warman, Matt	CON	13,778	360	*302*
Kenny, Paul	LAB	1,456	51	1
Watts, David	LIB DEM	1,002	83	29
Hunter-Clarke, Robin	UKIP	2,623	148	46
Bradford East	**LAB Gain**			
Ahmed, Iftikhar	CON	133	3	3
Hussain, Imran	LAB	-	-	-
Ward, David	LIB DEM	13,153	197	*9*
Rajput, Owais	UKIP	824	300	26

Appendix 1 (cont.)

Constituency and Candidates	Party	Followers (6 May '15)	All Tweets	Replies
Broxtowe	**CON Hold**			
Soubry, Anna	CON	*8,849*	*185*	86
Palmer, Nick	LAB	1,107	36	11
Heptinstall, Stan	LIB DEM	160	48	16
Dunne, Frank	UKIP	-	-	-
Camborne and Redruth	**CON Hold**			
Eustice, George	CON	-	-	-
Foster, Michael	LAB	468	190	30
Goldsworthy, Julia	LIB DEM	3,985	109	63
Smith, Robert	UKIP	-	-	-
Cardiff North	**CON Hold**			
William, Craig	CON	1,569	239	58
Williams, Mari	LAB	3,779	318	105
Clark, Elizabeth	LIB DEM	89	19	5
Wilkinson, Ethan R	UKIP	379	92	29
Chesterfield	**LAB Hold**			
Vivis, Mark	CON	251	26	0
Perkins, Toby	LAB	*14,656*	*411*	111
Cambridge, Julia	LIB DEM	1,161	271	145
Yeowart, Stuart	UKIP	81	7	4
Derby North	**CON Gain**			
Solloway, Amanda	CON	451	1	0
Williamson, Chris	LAB	*9,812*	*725*	471
Care, Lucy	LIB DEM	173	10	7
Ward, Tilly	UKIP	-	-	-
Dudley North	**LAB Hold**			
Jones, Les	CON	748	63	41
Austin, Ian	LAB	*8,937*	*247*	131
Collins, Mike	LIB DEM	-	-	-
Etheridge, Bill	UKIP	3,841	83	52
East Worthing and Shoreham	**CON Hold**			
Loughton, Tim	CON	*11,970*	*114*	73
Macpherson, Tim	LAB	815	372	182
Bob Smytherman	LIB DEM	4,589	630	267
Glennon, Mike	UKIP	39	0	0

Appendix 1 (cont.)

Constituency and Candidates	Party	Followers (6 May '15)	All Tweets	Replies
Eastleigh	**CON Gain**			
Davies, Mims	CON	963	118	82
Latham, Mark	LAB	963	183	86
Thornton, Mike	LIB DEM	*3,705*	*97*	54
Culligan, Patricia	UKIP	-	-	-
Edinburgh South	**LAB Hold**			
Briggs, Miles	CON	-	-	-
Murray, Ian	LAB	*9,585*	*89*	23
Subbaraman, Pramod	LIB DEM	-	-	-
Marshall, Paul	UKIP	-	-	-
Forest of Dean	**CON Hold**			
Harper, Mark	CON	*4,493*	*8*	0
Parry-Hearn, Steve	LAB	748	27	10
Coleman, Christopher	LIB DEM	-	-	-
Stanbury, Steve	UKIP	545	16	5
Great Yarmouth	**CON Hold**			
Lewis, Brandon	CON	*13,944*	*627*	181
Norris, Lara	LAB	1,570	113	47
Joyce, James	LIB DEM	-	-	-
Grey, Alan	UKIP	-	-	-
Great Grimsby	**LAB Hold**			
Jones, Marc	CON	2,264	170	61
Onn, Melanie	LAB	1,576	230	119
Beasant, Steve	LIB DEM	1,001	2,777	-
Ayling, Victoria	UKIP	2,792	72	12
Hampstead and Kilburn	**LAB Hold**			
Marcus, Simon	CON	1,339	40	28
Siddiq, Tulip	LAB	8,391	378	305
Nawaz, Maajid	LIB DEM	2,542	418	333
Nielsen, Magnus	UKIP	94	27	26
Hendon	**CON Hold**			
Offord, Matthew	CON	*2,515*	*42*	0
Dismore, Andrew	LAB	4,102	29	9
Hill, Alasdair	LIB DEM	536	184	124
Shamash, Raymond	UKIP	-	-	-

Appendix 1 (cont.)

Constituency and Candidates	Party	Followers (6 May '15)	All Tweets	Replies
Kingston-Upon-Hull North	**LAB Hold**			
Davison, Dehenna	CON	505	103	54
Johnson, Diana	LAB	*12,435*	*98*	*47*
Ross, Mike	LIB DEM	193	15	12
Singh, Sergi	UKIP	-	-	-
Lancaster and Fleetwood	**LAB Gain**			
Ollerenshaw, Eric	CON	-	-	-
Smith, Cat	LAB	3,140	107	67
Long, Robin	LIB DEM	37	2	2
Atkins, Matthew	UKIP	26	0	0
Mid Dorset and North Poole	**CON Gain**			
Tomlinson, Michael	CON	746	46	19
Canavan, Patrick	LAB	699	23	4
Slade, Vikki	LIB DEM	1,087	265	139
Turner, Richard	UKIP	303	3	0
Morley and Outwood	**CON Gain**			
Jenkyns, Andrea	CON	2,062	227	86
Balls, Ed	LAB	172,310	180	5
Taylor, Rebecca	LIB DEM	3,033	673	510
Dews, David	UKIP	-	-	-
Newton Abbot	**CON Hold**			
Morris, Anne Marie	CON	*6,142*	*24*	*4*
Freer, Roy	LAB	263	91	52
Younger-Ross, Richard	LIB DEM	432	83	54
Peers, Rod	UKIP	-	-	-
Norwich South	**LAB Gain**			
Townsend, Lisa	CON	603	38	10
Lewis, Clive	LAB	3,162	343	207
Wright, Simon	LIB DEM	*3,688*	*9*	*8*
Emmens, Stephen	UKIP	-	-	-

Appendix 1 (cont.)

Constituency and Candidates	Party	Followers (6 May '15)	All Tweets	Replies
Oldham East and Saddleworth	**LAB Hold**			
Hussain, Sajid	CON	-	-	-
Abrahams, Debbie	LAB	*14,081*	*275*	*92*
Marbrow, Richard	LIB DEM	656	37	33
Klonowski, Peter	UKIP	-	-	-
Oxford West and Abingdon	**CON Hold**			
Blackwood, Nicola	CON	*7,149*	*44*	*17*
Copley, Sally	LAB	733	107	44
Moran, Layla	LIB DEM	2,675	304	173
Harris, Alan	UKIP	-	-	-
Portsmouth South	**CON Hold**			
Drummond, Flick	CON	1,071	24	11
Castillon, Sue	LAB	487	102	35
Vernon-Jackson, Gerald	LIB DEM	729	61	6
Harris, Steve	UKIP	-	-	-
Sheffield Central	**LAB Hold**			
Roes, Stephanie	CON	-	-	-
Blomfield, Paul	LAB	*7,087*	*92*	*53*
Otten, Joe	LIB DEM	1,207	167	86
Cook, Dominic	UKIP	211	86	34
Sherwood	**CON Hold**			
Spencer, Mark	CON	*5,875*	*23*	*4*
Mathers, Leoni	LAB	2,264	89	27
Mosley, Dan	LIB DEM	-	-	-
Chadd, Sally	UKIP	-	-	-
Sittingbourne and Sheppey	**CON Hold**			
Henderson, Gordon	CON	-	-	-
Nicholson, Guy	LAB	321	9	3
Nevols, Keith	LIB DEM	859	73	40
Palmer, Richard	UKIP	1,770	20	16
Solihull	**CON Gain**			
Knight, Julian	CON	925	83	28
Knowles, Nigel	LAB	-	-	-
Burt, Lorely	LIB DEM	*4,431*	*134*	*78*
Henrick, Phil	UKIP	520	76	38

Appendix 1 (cont.)

Constituency and Candidates	Party	Followers (6 May '15)	All Tweets	Replies
Southampton Itchen	**CON Gain**			
Smith, Royston	CON	1,474	100	44
Davis, Rowenna	LAB	16,363	140	99
Bell, Eleanor	LIB DEM	155	117	3
Rose, Kim	UKIP	-	-	-
Stockton South	**CON Hold**			
Wharton, James	CON	*6,023*	*122*	*93*
Baldock, Louise	LAB	5,274	377	232
Durning, Drew	LIB DEM	198	27	7
Strike, Edward	UKIP	-	-	-
Swansea West	**LAB Hold**			
Lane, Emma	CON	184	36	14
Davies, Geraint	LAB	*5,591*	*68*	*4*
Holley, Chris	LIB DEM	-	-	-
Ford, Martyn	UKIP	44	0	0
Telford	**CON Gain**			
Allan, Lucy	CON	2,068	346	140
Wright, David	LAB	-	-	-
Croll, Ian	LIB DEM	-	-	-
Allen, Denis	UKIP	288	5	3
Thanet North	**CON Hold**			
Gale, Roger	CON	-	-	-
Rehal, Frances	LAB	245	43	8
Cunningham, George	LIB DEM	211	53	10
Wauchope, Piers	UKIP	978	0	0
Thanet South	**CON Hold**			
Mackinlay, Craig	CON	2,418	75	13
Scobie, Will	LAB	3,300	392	126
Timpson, Russ	LIB DEM	213	47	5
Farage, Nigel	UKIP	224,407	N/A	N/A
Thurrock	**CON Hold**			
Doyle-Price, Jackie	CON	*2,109*	*92*	*51*
Billington, Polly	LAB	9,072	92	29
Jamieson-Ball, Rhodri	LIB DEM	190	5	2
Aker, Tim	UKIP	6,595	94	35

Appendix 1 (cont.)

Constituency and Candidates	Party	Followers (6 May '15)	All Tweets	Replies
Truro and Falmouth	**CON Hold**			
Newton, Sarah	CON	*2,483*	*7*	*0*
Roden, Stuart	LAB	-	-	-
Rix, Simon	LIB DEM	680	21	9
Hyslop, John	UKIP	36	144	119
Warwickshire North	**CON Hold**			
Tracey, Craig	CON	819	189	110
O'Brien, Mike	LAB	805	42	17
Beddow, Alan	LIB DEM	122	0	0
Cash, William	UKIP	257	25	4
Waveney	**CON Hold**			
Aldous, Peter	CON	*4,163*	*25*	*0*
Blizzard, Bob	LAB	2,868	72	52
Gordon, Stephen	LIB DEM	-	-	-
Tobin, Simon	UKIP	304	32	1
Wells	**CON Gain**			
Heappey, James	CON	999	5	0
Inchley, Chris	LAB	210	27	11
Munt, Tessa	LIB DEM	*5,350*	*90*	*60*
Hims, Helen	UKIP	328	86	58
Wirral South	**LAB Hold**			
Bell, John	CON	647	181	97
McGovern, Alison	LAB	*15,013*	*116*	*51*
Jewkes, Elizabeth	LIB DEM	197	5	0
Scott, David	UKIP	219	145	54

Appendix 2: YouGov Poll Data

Data extracted from the YouGov (2015c) opinion polls on issue salience during the short campaign period.

Issue	Poll Dates			Average	Comparative Percentage Weighting
	March 30-31	April 13-14	April 27-28		
Health	45	50	45	46.67	16.81
Immigration	48	47	51	48.67	17.53
Crime	8	7	7	7.33	2.64
Economy	52	55	52	53.00	19.09
Tax	11	11	10	10.67	3.84
Pensions	11	9	9	9.67	3.48
Education	16	17	16	16.33	5.88
Family Life	8	7	7	7.33	2.64
Housing	21	20	27	22.67	8.16
Environment	9	9	8	26.00	3.12
Europe	15	19	16	16.67	5.64
Transport	3	3	3	3.00	1.08
Welfare	32	26	26	28.00	10.09

Appendix 3: Examples of Tweets by Political Parties

Section A

Examples of Conservative Party tweets on the creation of over 1,000 jobs since 2010:

- "1,000 jobs created every day since 2010. #VoteConservative to keep going and #SecureTheRecovery" (Conservatives, 2015a)

- "We're getting Britain back to work – with over 1,000 jobs created every day. Let's keep going an #SecureTheRecovery" (Conservatives, 2015f)

Examples of Conservative Party tweets referencing the creation of 760,000 additional businesses since 2010:

- "760,000 more businesses. 2 million more jobs. Let's stick to the plan that's working. #SecureTheRecovery" (Conservatives, 2015c)

- "There are 760,000 more businesses since 2010. @Karen_Brady on why we should stick with the plan: #SecureTheRecovery" (Conservatives, 2015d)

Section B

Examples of tweets by the Liberal Democrats on the theme of 'keeping Britain on Track':

- "A 'stability budget' within 50 days of #libdems in govt will ensure the economy stays on track" (Liberal Democrats, 2015b)

- "We'll keep Britain on track rather than lurching dangerously to the right or left #GE2015 #theleaderinterviews" (Liberal Democrats, 2015d)

- "We will borrow less than Labour & cut less than the Tories, keeping Britain on track #GE2015"(Liberal Democrats, 2015e)

Section C

E*xamples of UKIP tweets on specific claims about immigration that are linked to other issues:*

- “Ending health tourism could save £2bn to be ploughed into frontline services for British taxpayers #leaderslive”(UKIP, 2015b)

- “Problem with high immigration isn’t just benefits issues. It’s the huge increase and great strain on our public services and housing #bbcqt”(UKIP, 2015c)

- “#UKIP understands that with our public services under increasing strain we have to draw a line under the past 11 years of mass immigration” (UKIP, 2015e)

Section D

Examples of UKIP using opinion polls to demonstrate electoral viability and public support:

- “Best on immigration? (#BBCdebate snap poll | Survation): Farage – 53% Miliband – 18% Sturgeon – 13% Bennett – 10% Wood – 6%” (UKIP, 2015a)

- “YouGov poll shows 50% of people support @Nigel_Farage’s stance on HIV treatment” (UKIP, 2015f)

Section E

Examples of Labour responses to non-dom tax status

- “POLL: Do you agree that wealthy non-doms should pay their taxes like the rest of us? http://t.co/VWW81XPOWG” (The Labour Party, 2015c)

- “Watch @Ed_Miliband explain why it’s so important to abolish the non-dom rule → https://t.co/Kuk5jYJH0f” (The Labour Party, 2015h)

- “Yesterday we announced we will scrap the non-dom tax loophole. Here’s a recap → http://t.co/UFuweDI0i7” (The Labour Party, 2015i)

- “The Tories refuse to abolish non-dom status that benefits thousands of wealthy people. Surprising? http://t.co/oinww69NYo” (The Labour Party, 2015g)

Appendix 4: References to Tweets by Candidates

Section A

Examples of Beasant incorporating links to his own website (1st tweet) and the Liberal Democrat website (2nd tweet):

- "Lib Dems pledge to enshrine state pension guarantee in law @ http://t.co/OS2u8pMkaz" (Beasant, 2015a)

- "#LibDems £150m package will help Britain's 6.5m carers #GE2015 http://t.co/zRLBU3BomD" (Beasant, 2015b)

Section B

Examples of Loughton and Macpherson commenting on Smytherman's 'overuse' of Twitter:

- "…for modern read lazy. Not much good if most of them cannot vote for you even if they wanted to Bob" (Loughton, 2015)

- "Bob if you paid the same attention to voter as you did to your Twitter account you might save your deposit" (Macpherson, 2015)

Section C

Examples of candidates calling attention to Labour record on zero-hour contracts:

- "@BBCr4today reports that #Labour run councils have 22,000 staff on zero hours contracts. What will @Ed_Miliband do about that?" (Taylor, 2015)

- "@UKLabour to ban zero hours contracts whilst 36 of their MPs employed staff on said contracts last year #HappyAprilFoolsDay #JokingNotJoking" (Wilkinson, 2015)

- "zero-hours & fact that Labour Party use them http://t.co/7DuxgOnXsU via @MailOnline" (Lewis, 2015)

Section D

Examples of 'transport' tweets by Heptinstall that included a link to his website:

- "Improvements along the A52 for pedestrians and cyclists http://t.co/CuiNWS84Ox" (Heptinstall, 2015a)

- "New Puffin Crossing on Pasture Road http://t.co/6EmgurLiX1" (Heptinstall, 2015b)

Section E

Tweets by Palmer that highlighted the need to protect local bus services (including links to petitions):

- Save North Beeston Buses https://t.co/8RLoQYLusN via @UKChange"(Palmer, 2015a)
- "Trent Barton Bus Company: Retain bus services from Beeston Rylands to Nottingham https://t.co/zKjG0UJnie via @UKChange" (Palmer, 2015b)

Section F

Examples of Soubry's updates on the tram service and #TramShambles:

- "After 2.5 years of misery @NETTram play an "April Fool" claiming the line abt to open #tramshambles" (Soubry, 2015a)

(The above tweet was actually in response to a post by a spoof account, an error by Soubry)

- "Apparently first tram testing tomorrow 11am #Beeston #tramshambles #NG9" (Soubry, 2015b)

- "My constituency office has been in Beeston since 2010 right in the tram works #IloveBeeston #tramshambles" (Soubry, 2015c)

Section G

Examples of Blizzard's tweets on animal welfare:

- "Bloodsports & #Badgercull are barbaric. I'm committed to #KeepCrueltyHistory in #Waveney"(Blizzard, 2015a)

- "Last night #Beccles hustings I spoke against animal cruelty esp hunting I contributed in Parliament for the Hunting Act #keeptheban #Waveney" (Blizzard, 2015b)

Section H

Examples of Austin's tweets on UKIP:

- Replying to a user: "…it is pretty typical for him and UKIP. Moaning and whining about bias and unfairness when someone dares disagree with them" (Austin, 2015a)
- "UKIP & the SNP: two peas in a pod. Nationalist politics of grievance so unpleasant & dishonest. Pretending easy answers to complex problems" (Austin, 2015b)

Etheridge's comments on Austin, replying to a user:

- "…I laughed off an over eager young man and put your beloved Austin under pressure he couldn't take" (Etheridge, 2015a)

Retweet by Etheridge from a supporter:

- "Rt @mracolbourne: @BillDudleyNorth @UKIP good luck Bill – send Austin packing" (Etheridge, 2015e)

Section I

Examples of Etheridge's exchanges with other users on the site:

- "…why? I've got lots to do and justifying myself to a member of the labour party isn't a huge priority sorry" (Etheridge, 2015b)

- "…does membership of Labour Party cause you to make idiotic Twitter comments or have you always been this way?" (Etheridge, 2015d)

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