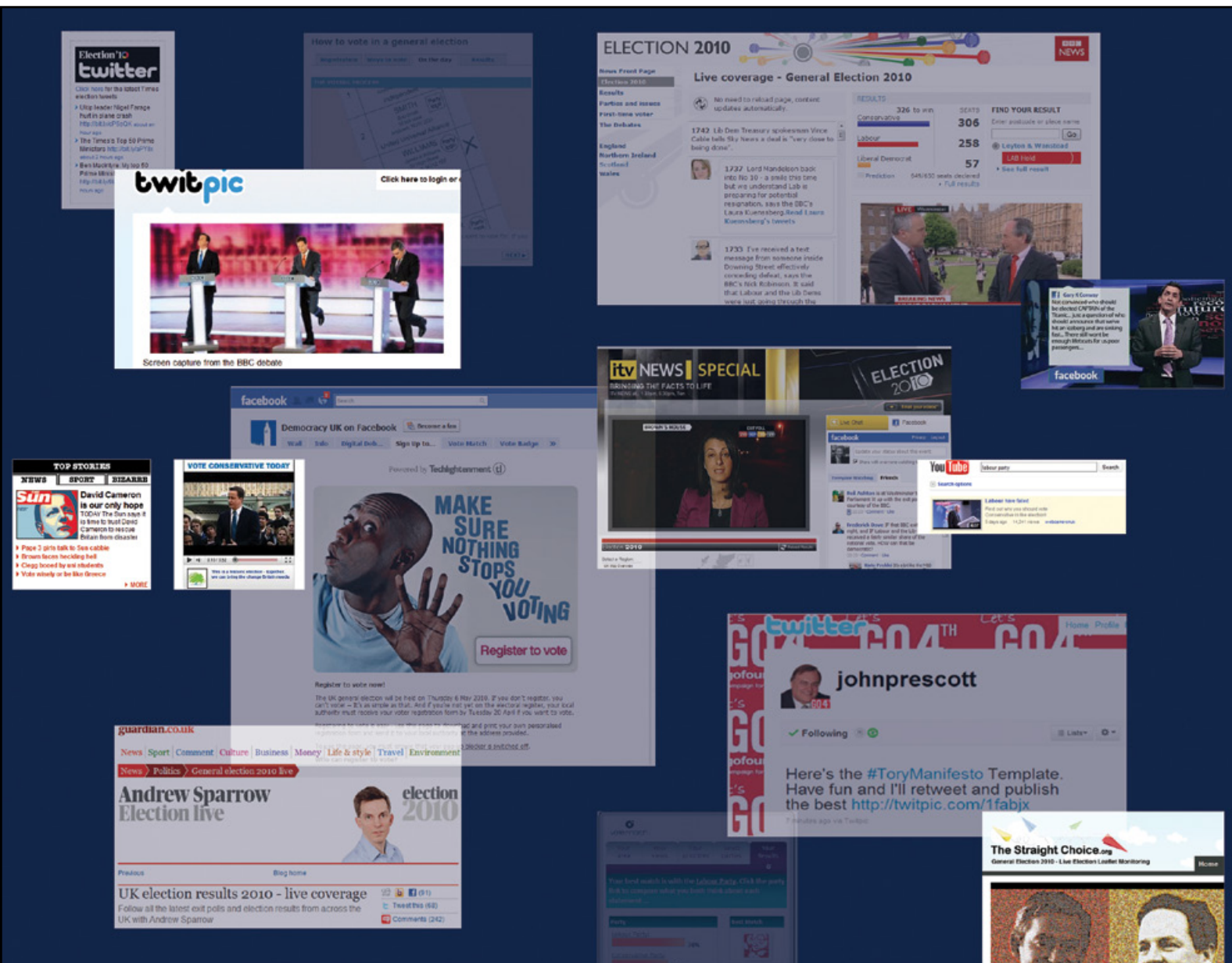


#UKElection2010, mainstream media and the role of the internet: how social and digital media affected the business of politics and journalism

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METHODOLOGY AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

This study was completed in just six weeks between 10 April and the end of May 2010. It draws on interviews with around 30 journalists, political advisers and social media experts directly involved with coverage or strategies for the campaign. I am enormously grateful for the generosity of all those who provided their time at extremely short notice and the openness with which they shared their knowledge and insight. The study also employed a variety of research methodologies including content analysis, a comparative analysis of media websites and an online audience survey of the media consumption of 18–24 year olds during the election. This was conducted between 3 and 10 May. The survey group was recruited via Facebook groups and email and included 219 respondents from the target group. I am also particularly grateful to Experian Hitwise for access to their online analysis tools in support of this research, to enable cross-checking of web traffic movements. I am also grateful to Dr David Levy and the staff at the Reuters Institute for their expert advice and guidance. The study aims to describe the extent of social media activity during the period 10 April–6 May, and also to draw preliminary conclusions about the impact of new internet tools on the business of politics and journalism. Any omissions, oversights or errors are entirely the fault of the author and, in the spirit of social media, this work aims to contribute to a living debate that can be built on in the months to come.

SUMMARY: The 2010 UK election was billed as the internet election, the social media election – with much attention focused on how campaigners, commentators and voters would respond to ground-breaking digital campaigns elsewhere; notably in the United States. From Twitter to Facebook, through viral crowdsourced ads, sentiment tracking and internet polling, technology appeared to offer political parties and mainstream media organisations powerful new ways to engage voters and audiences. And there were high hopes that new forms of personal expression through blogs and social networks would widen participation and the range of democratic voices. Ironically, the biggest media story of the 2010 election ended up being a television event: a set-piece leadership debate which turned the campaign on its head – with the internet seen as something of a sideshow. For the sceptics, this was proof that old media still called the shots and that the claims of the digital evangelists were overblown. But this paper argues that the 2010 election did mark another significant milestone in the onward march of the internet, with unprecedented levels of participation and new techniques providing extra layers of information, context and real-time feedback, which complemented and enriched more traditional forms of media. There are six core conclusions from this study which should be noted by politicians and media practitioners alike:

1. Social and digital media increased political engagement and appear to have contributed to higher turnout – particularly amongst the 18–24 group (+7% on 2005¹). This paper contains evidence of ways in which young people used social media to engage in political discussion and debate. One in four posted election related comments through social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter – 81% felt engaged in the election, the highest of any demographic group.² New records were set for use of – and engagement with – the websites of broadcasters and newspapers.
2. Social software helped political parties organise their activists more efficiently with political parties reporting three times more face-to-face contacts as a result of US imported virtual phone banks and party-based online social networks.³ In this case, the value of social media was as an internal tool, rather than influencing voting intentions directly.
3. Twitter cemented its place as a core tool of communication amongst political and media elites. It reached critical mass during this campaign and became an essential source of real-time information for journalists and politicians alike. 600 candidates engaged with Twitter during the campaign, alongside hundreds of journalists, party workers and spin doctors. 198 members of the new parliament are active, including five members of the cabinet.⁴
4. Newspapers and broadcasters have normalised their use of social media as source material, filtering the best for a mass audience – and developing new skills and roles for curated or ‘networked journalism’ in the process. Through the use of live blogs, digital correspondents and republication/retransmission, this study demonstrates how the mainstream media helped amplify the impact of social media tools like Twitter and Facebook.

¹ MORI study showed 44% turnout amongst 18–24 year olds. Turnout increase was highest in this group, which is most active in social networks (www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/poll.aspx?oItemId=2613&vview=wide).

² Digital election survey by YouGov for Orange (www.netimperative.com/news/2010/may/1-in-4-young-social-networkers-have-commented-on-1).

³ Labour reported 450,000 weekly contacts during the campaign compared with around 150,000 in 2005.

⁴ Tweetminster MP list details via their blog (www.tweetminster.co.uk).

5. Whilst television remained the dominant medium for many in this election, young people in particular got much of their news via online social recommendation and this in turn has increased the importance of online news sources at the expense of printed newspapers and broadcast news. Online news sites were the most important source of election news for 18–24 year olds, ahead of television and printed newspapers.⁵
6. Social media and internet activity provided new routes to transparency during this election. This study includes a number of examples of how social and digital media have improved the way in which politicians and the media are held to account, contributing to a new and more open political climate.

The issues and conclusions are framed within a wider international debate about the importance of these developments to the changing shape of mainstream media organisations, to levels of civic engagement, debates about quality, trust and accuracy, and to discussions about the practice and future of journalism.

⁵ Survey of media habits of 18–24 year olds for this paper: full details and results in section 7.

1. Social media, politics and the internet

The internet has been a part of people's lives for more than a decade, but until recently was mainly used for the one-way distribution of information. In the last few years, we've seen the adoption of sites that allow citizens to create, share and distribute their own content. This so-called Web 2.0 revolution has opened up new possibilities for debate and interaction – the creation of new personal media and the sharing of it through sites like YouTube, Facebook, Flickr and Twitter.

The first realisation that these powerful technologies could be harnessed for political purposes came in the United States. Presidential contender Howard Dean used blogs and emerging social media software, like meetup.com, in 2004 to engage supporters and raise money for his ultimately unsuccessful campaign. His web-savvy adviser Joe Trippi later declared: 'There is only one tool, one platform, one medium that allows the American people to take their government back, and that's the internet.'⁶

But it was the Obama campaign, through 2007 and 2008, which made political parties in the UK really sit up. Behind the headlines about friends on Facebook and millions raised in fundraising was a commitment to place the internet at the heart of his campaign. In the process a strong candidate was able to create a real connection with an emerging generation used to relating to each other digitally.

All of the UK parties spent time in the US studying these techniques. They hired some of Obama's former campaign advisers to help draw up and implement their social media and digital strategies.

The UK was different, with its compressed period for campaigning and a parliamentary system based on a series of local battles. But even here it was hoped that online networks might build intimacy between strangers quickly for political ends. Could the trust that exists between Facebook friends, and mothers on Mumsnet, be used to win votes or to help restore faith in a political system tainted by the parliamentary expenses scandal?

In an early sign of emerging digital strategies, David Cameron set up MyConservatives.com, a website to empower supporters by giving them the contacts and tools to campaign on their own. Labour did the same and all parties lined up Facebook fan pages and briefed parliamentary candidates on how to make the most of Twitter.

Together with the TV debates, politicians were hopeful that social media would increase their ability to talk directly to voters without the bothersome intervention of the traditional media. Douglas Alexander, Labour campaign coordinator, felt that this election would not conform to the agenda of old media – that the routine of morning press conferences, photo opportunities and evening launches would be disrupted by Twitter, bloggers and YouTube: 'There will be a much more exciting and anarchic environment in this campaign than ever before.'⁷

The traditional media too were gearing up for their biggest ever deployment of social media tools; looking in particular at ways to enhance the TV debates with interactivity. Like the parties, traditional news organisations were also looking to build direct and more personal relationships through engaging directly with their audience in social networks, rather than expecting them to come to their websites. And then there were the grassroots movements, the bloggers and the technology companies hatching plans for how to capitalise on four weeks of intense political engagement.

⁶ Comments made at a conference in 2004 and widely quoted (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joe_Trippi); also Joe Trippi, *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised: Democracy, the Internet, and the Overthrow of Everything* (William Morrow; July 2004).

⁷ Douglas Alexander at LSE seminar reported at www.charliebeckett.org/?p=2539.

And among all of this were some unlikely alliances, including Facebook and the Electoral Commission working to get young people to register to vote.

In the complex relationship between politicians, media and audiences, the stage was set for the UK's first social media election.

2. Campaign timeline and overview

The official campaign lasted just over four weeks from 6 April to 6 May, although activity had been building up for several weeks before. The examples below offer a snapshot of the way in which social media were used by audiences, but also how they interacted with mainstream media and with political parties themselves. The wider themes are then explored in subsequent sections, including a number of case studies.

21 March: Conservative Party – ‘Cash Gordon’

This was a social media campaign to drive awareness of the Labour Party’s funding by Charlie Whelan of the Unite Union. The website had to be temporarily abandoned after security flaws allowed it to be taken over by political opponents. By the end only 1100 people had taken part and the Twitter feed had been frozen.

23 March: Facebook – Democracy UK

This site aimed to engage UK users with the upcoming election campaign. Complete with Vote Advisor, Ministry of Mates and plans for a digital debate tie up with YouTube.

29 March: Liberal Democrats – Labservative.com

A mock campaign (www.labservative.com) treats Labour and Conservatives as one party: deeply ironic given that the final outcome was a coalition of Conservatives and Lib Dems.

29 March: Channel 4 – Ask The Chancellors debate

The TV debate is streamed live on the web, with an official hashtag (#) and Facebook presence.

1 April: Guardian – April fool

The newspaper’s joke⁸ about Labour campaign posters spawns a Flickr pool of tribute versions.⁹



1 April: Tweetminster election platform

An election platform is launched, measuring candidate activity and announcing an experiment to predict the election results via the medium of Twitter.

2 April: Labour – crowdsourced poster

The poster¹⁰ shows David Cameron as Gene Hunt, star of the BBC retro detective series *Ashes to Ashes* (right). Designed by 24-year-old Jacob Quagliozi, a supporter from St Albans, it was selected from more than 1000 submitted in just three days in response to the party’s ‘create Labour’s next ad’.¹¹



⁸ www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2010/apr/01/labour-gordon-brown-hard-man.

⁹ www.flickr.com/groups/poshboy/pool/show/with/4505155928.

¹⁰ www2.labour.org.uk/dont-let-him-take-britain-back-to-the-1980s.

¹¹ www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ZTUNPU__AY.

4 April: Conservatives – Samantha Cameron

Samantha Cameron makes her debut on ‘Websamcameron,’ distributed via the Conservative’s YouTube channel. Earlier she had blogged on the Conservative Party website.

5 April: Conservatives – fan page

Tories announce they have 30,000 fans on Facebook. All main parties operate pages keeping supporters up to date with key messages.

6 April: BBC News – Election 2010 site launched

BBC launches Election 2010 site with social features, official Twitter feeds and innovative live blog/event page.

6 April: Sky News – constituency pages launched

Sky News launches a page for each constituency, pulling in links to other news sources, tweets from the candidates, and aggregating other content from Twitter and Flickr.

9 April: Labour – Stuart MacLennan first Twitter casualty

The exposure of Labour candidate Stuart MacLennan’s Twitter stream for insulting chavs and abusive behaviour leads to his de-selection.¹²

11 April: Green Party – Caroline Lucas praises ‘vote for policies’

Green party leader cites the Vote for Policies website on Andrew Marr show as evidence of the popularity of her party (shows green policies winning in blind internet test where party policies are seen side by side).¹³

14 April: Evening Standard – don’t believe the e-hype

The Evening Standard publishes two opinion pieces¹⁴ in one issue claiming that this will not be ‘the internet election’ as the backlash begins.

14 April: UKIP – candidate quits over social media rant

UKIP candidate Paul Wiffin is forced to stand down from the party after a Facebook rant about the Queen.¹⁵

14 April: the Straight Choice leaflet watch

The Straight Choice, a website documenting user-generated and scanned election leaflets, adds a league table of submitted leaflets.¹⁶

15 April: ITV – leaders’ TV debate with ‘The Worm’

ITV streams the first leaders’ debate complete with ‘The Worm’ tracking live sentiment. Later, on *News at Ten*, a live Facebook is shown, exposing offensive comments to millions.

¹² <http://waugh.standard.co.uk/2010/04/labour-ppc-jokes-re-slavery-attacks-chavs-on-twitter.html>.

¹³ <http://voteforpolitics.org.uk>.

¹⁴ www.thisislondon.co.uk/markets/article-23824354-dont-believe-the-e-hype-this-isnt-an-internet-election.do;
www.thisislondon.co.uk/standard/article-23824386-meet-the-voters-in-underwear-on-the-doorstep.do.

¹⁵ www.thisislondon.co.uk/standard/article-23824584-ukip-london-candidate-quits-after-launching-tirade-against-the-queen.do.

¹⁶ www.thestraightchoice.org/leaflets.php?p=1111.

20 April: Total Politics – making your mind up video

Total Politics launches viral music video to promote voting with Bucks Fizz, Alistair Campbell, Peter Tatchell (45,000 views on YouTube).¹⁷

21 April: Google – banner ad campaign

Google run a banner ad campaign for their UK election tools



21 April: Electoral Commission – About My Vote

Electoral Commission says there have been 1.8 million visitors to its About My Vote website. Around two in five visits have been by 18–24 year olds.

22 April: Twitter – #nickcleggsfault and social media backlash

Following attacks on the Lib Dems in the *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express* and *Daily Telegraph*, Twitter takes revenge with an ironic hashtag,¹⁸ where everyday trials and tribulations are laid at the door of Nick Clegg. Liberal Democrats set up a 'Fight the smears' Facebook group and Daily-Mail-O-Matic website produces randomised spoof Clegg-related headlines.



28 April: Twitter – Gordon Brown gaffe trending

Hashtags and phrases mentioned during Gordon Brown's 'bigoted woman' gaffe trend on UK Twitter. Spoof posters abound.

28 April: Labour – candidate tweets postal vote count figures

Labour candidate and so-called 'Twitter Tsar' Kerry McCarthy appears to break electoral law by tweeting the numbers of a sample of postal votes that have been counted in a constituency.

29 April: BBC News – third and final TV debate

Footage of the debate on the BBC News website has a 'worm' tracker overlaid on it, showing the responses of a panel of 36 viewers. Digital Correspondent Rory Cellan-Jones live blogs social media reaction to debate.

6 May: Facebook – voting application

Facebook puts a button on top of every UK profile encouraging people to vote and tell Facebook when they have done so. As the polls closed, the application said 1.8m had voted.

6 May: Telegraph – YouTube embed

Telegraph homepage features an embedded YouTube video of voter chaos in Sheffield. Twitter and Facebook carry accounts of queues in multiple locations with videos and pictures.

¹⁷ www.youtube.com/watch?v=q7OGUAQSYQ4.

¹⁸ <http://jonslattery.blogspot.com/2010/04/clegg-gets-clogged-on-eve-of-tv-debate.html>.

7 May: Facebook – ‘Cool it!’

A Facebook group entitled ‘Cool it! We’re not going to form a new government just to suit 24 hour news’ has over 4,000 members.

8 May: William Hague – announces restart of Lib–Con talks on Twitter

William Hague breaks news that the coalition talks were back on via Twitter. New MPs Twitter list published (198 MPs and 5 cabinet ministers), as a new generation comes to parliament and tweets live from the chamber.

3. Mainstream media and the digital election

3.1 Digital engagement and the challenges of participation

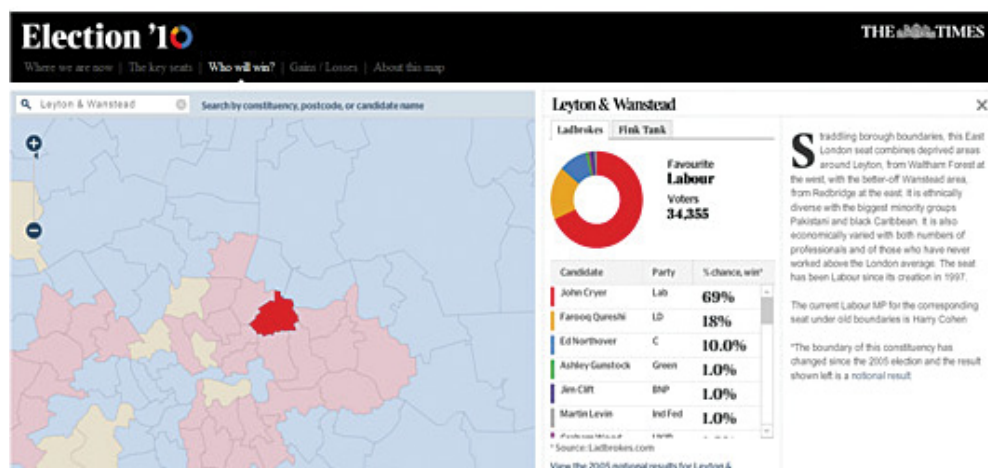
Despite the growth of social and personal media, most people continued to receive their news in this election through mainstream media organisations. The TV debates broadcast by ITV, Sky and the BBC were watched by up to 10 million people, while newspaper and broadcaster websites reported record usage. In total, over 40 million adults accessed the BBC's election news and information each week on TV, radio and online.¹⁹

Mainstream media embraced digital techniques more boldly than ever before in this election, with a range of strategies aimed at allowing users to interact with content. As noted in a previous Reuters Institute paper,²⁰ news organisations are interested in:

- using social newsgathering techniques to improve the way they tell stories, by acquiring user-generated content (UGC);
- using digital and social media to increase loyalty at a time of media fragmentation;
- using social networks like YouTube, Facebook and Twitter to distribute and market their content.

All three motivations were evident in this election, but with money increasingly tight, traditional news organisations focused efforts within their own websites on creating additional value, rather than replicating features available elsewhere.

At *The Times*, the focus was on creating really simple and visually impressive tools that allowed audiences to make sense of the mass of election data. 'We thought the thing people wanted to know was who was going to win and so we tried to help answer that question,' said Assistant Editor Tom Whitwell. The paper partnered with a Danish company to build a site which was able to incorporate the latest data from polling company Populus, as well as real-time predictions about who might win any particular seat, from Ladbrokes.



It was similar story at the BBC, where a core part of the 'making it clear' strategy was to produce digital tools which helped voters make up their own minds. A Where they Stand

¹⁹ www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2010/05_may/07/election_figures.shtml.

²⁰ Nic Newman, 'The Rise of Social Media and its Impact on Mainstream Journalism' (working paper, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2009).

feature allowed manifestos to be compared by party and policy, whilst the Seat Calculator showed how different national percentages could affect the number of seats won.

For the BBC, these kinds of tools are as important a way to engage audiences as working with Facebook or Twitter. Indeed, on the days before the election, hundreds of thousands of people visited the individual constituency pages to check the candidates and previous results before making their decision.

‘Our view is that we’d reached a point where a digital audience would want to participate and to take part in different shapes and forms’, says Edward Roussel, Digital Editor of the *Telegraph*. Live blogs, Twitter lists, election data and increased use of multimedia were all part of the strategy, but the biggest hit with *Telegraph* audiences was Vote Match,²¹ a simple application which allowed people to easily compare the policies of political parties. Roussel says that social and digital media made a real difference:

It was the main vehicle by which young people exchanged information, and used digital media to make fundamental decisions about who they were going to vote for and it had fundamental impact. Only now is data surfacing which shows strong traffic figures, very strong usage of tools and share functionality. Social media really was the undercurrent of this election.

Participation on the *Telegraph*’s own website was also fostered through Debate2010, a new community forum.²² This was an attempt to improve the standard of debates through setting questions and tasks which audiences could then respond to and rate on their own terms. ‘It was interesting to watch the community filter the conversation,’ says Kate Day, Communities Editor at the *Telegraph*. ‘We’ve been surprised at the quality of the debate.’



Popular threads included ideas about what policies a Prime Minister should introduce in his first hundred days and there were partnerships with other websites, as a way of attracting more knowledge into debates – for example about the future of nursing.

Debate and comment was also valued at the *Guardian*, where the comments at the bottom of stories often proved as interesting as the authored content itself.

²¹ Vote Match was an application developed by an independent group, Democracy Unlocked, but the *Telegraph* became its media partner and developed its Facebook application. Generated 30m page views on the *Telegraph* website. More detail in section 7.2 case study.

²² Partnership with Salesforce.com following a challenge from David Cameron to come up with innovative ways of engaging people using digital media.

And there was intense activity within the Comment is Free area, which has built a reputation as a place for strong opinions and robust debate. Openness to a diversity of news sources and platforms, in newsgathering and distribution, has been a hallmark of the *Guardian's* approach under Alan Rusbridger, who has championed a new form of mutualised journalism.²³ These ideas carried through to the campaign itself according to Meg Pickard, Head of Social Media Development at the *Guardian*:

The election was called at a point when the organisation was ripe and ready and looking outwards . . . So we harnessed the idea of mutualisation for the election in a way that we probably wouldn't have done if it had been six months earlier because we have more tools, more skills, more direction and focus.

One of the most interesting examples of this was the process by which the *Guardian* decided to endorse the Liberal Democrats in an eve of election editorial. Previously, the decision about which party to support had been a fairly closed conversation with senior editorial figures, but this time round it was open to all of the editorial and technical staff – as well as to the entire *Guardian* community on Comment is Free. The result was a two-hour meeting of several hundred people, with a representative sample of the 1500 comments and views placed on the walls and summarised in the conversation. Although the decision wasn't made in the room, 'it helped make the process more consultative and reflective', says Pickard, who took part in the two-hour meeting. 'Better than just making a decision and hoping they (the readers) are good with it and then managing the outcome.'

A key dilemma for many mainstream organisations is how to manage the interactions with audiences. Apart from the practical costs of doing so, there are the potential dangers of damaging the brand with the raw and unmediated nature of these conversations. Following the first TV debate, ITV broadcast offensive comments (see right) from a live Facebook stream to an audience of 6 million on national television.

The BBC was one of a small number of websites not to integrate similar Facebook Connect functionality into its debate coverage – an issue they agonised about for some time. Website Editor Steve Herrmann says it is important to understand and engage with social media, but not at the expense of confusing or offending audiences: 'In the end I think the boundaries are quite important and they expect certain things of us and they expect certain things of Facebook. As an Editor I think you have not to get confused about that.'

In the heat of events like the election, Herrmann believes that mainstream organisations are beginning to get the hang of where the boundaries should lie. The team at the BBC UGC hub have become expert and attuned to the nuances for some time, while



1. Let's see what people are saying on Facebook about the Leaders Debate...



2. Oh this one says 'Cameron - you're a first class... oh'



3. Is there any chance you didn't see that?

²³ Alan Rusbridger, Hugh Cudlipp lecture on how audiences can bring diversity, specialist expertise and on the ground reporting to a new mutualised journalism (www.guardian.co.uk/media/2010/jan/25/cudlipp-lecture-alan-rusbridger).

more and more correspondents are now developing a presence in social networks and appropriately joining in the conversations themselves. In this election Laura Kuenssberg, Jon Sopel and Rory Cellan-Jones were charged with being digital ambassadors, but Herrmann says journalistic use of social media tools is now increasingly just part of the ether:

Millbank, the political unit, is quite well attuned to the world of blogs, but during the campaign Twitter came out as a lingua franca – something that people were doing and picking up on whether they were digital correspondents or not.

Herrmann points to William Hague's tweet about how he was going back into coalition talks as a moment when Twitter really came of age. At the *Telegraph*, Edward Roussel identifies Twitter as the most important social network for journalism, in changing audiences' expectations of how information can be communicated:

It has great immediacy. It is a very fast platform and the way it forces people to condense their views into 140 characters is quite brilliant. It forces people to cut right to the chase. It is a fantastic journalistic tool.

3.2 Networked journalism and the live blog

For the first time, a consensus is beginning to emerge within digital newsrooms about how to reflect the best of social media and maintain editorial control in what is fast becoming a new journalistic format. The format is the live blog, a constantly updated stream of real events, reactions, pictures, videos and comments from social media and elsewhere – woven into a coherent narrative.

This is sometimes held up as an example of 'networked' or curated journalism, where the live blogger is effectively acting as a digital magpie, searching out the best content all over the internet – including tweets and pictures and YouTube videos.

The BBC and others pioneered the format with sporting events (live text), but news organisations have adapted it for political and geo-political events like the G20 protests in London (April 2009), the Iran street protests (June 2009) and the Haiti earthquake (January 2010), where bite-sized snippets of information in reverse chronological order proved a better way of telling a fast-moving story than a traditional pyramid style write through. Janine Gibson, Editor of the *Guardian* website, says that in this election this format has proved far more impactful with audiences than writing a series of stories:

What we are doing now, when it is done well, is more honest. We'll let you know what's happening and when we've got a sense of it we'll come back and try and guide you through it but we'll tell you what we know now.

While the *Guardian* used Andrew Sparrow (see section 3.3) to provide a single narrative voice to pull everything together, the BBC went for a more multi-authored and multimedia approach, and others like Sky and Channel 4 used software tools like Cover it Live²⁴ to pull together pictures, polls and updates from correspondents. Edward Roussel, Digital Editor at the *Telegraph*, says that the nature of the election story, with an epicentre spread over many days and weeks, meant there was no choice but to use a live blogging technique from early in the morning until late at night.

²⁴ Software that allows user-generated comments, pictures and videos to be mixed with publisher-generated commentary and real-time voting.

*We're in an environment now where it is all about instant gratification. People want to know what is happening straight away and they would rather know what is happening in a short pithy way than an hour later in a thought through way.*²⁵

The *Telegraph* is now already applying the format to other areas of its coverage such as the financial markets, the Cannes film festival and sporting events. In many ways this is an exposure of the traditional news agency model to the wider public, and culturally this does not always come naturally to a newspaper steeped in opinion and comment.

Wrestling with the same issues, *The Times*' also championed the approach through the regular Blow by Blow live blog, which ran through the campaign and its aftermath. Again, the immediacy of the approach proved popular with audiences, keeping them in touch with the views of *Times* writers and columnists, but also bringing the vibrancy and diversity of the wider web to the party in a consistently entertaining narrative. 'This is basically all journalism at the end of the day,' says Tom Whitwell, who as Assistant Editor is responsible for the website. 'Whatever the mechanism, there is a difference between good stuff and not so good stuff.' But with a paywall now in place at *The Times*, it remains to be seen whether this form of open, networked journalism can survive.

The screenshot shows the BBC News website's live coverage for the 2010 General Election. At the top, there's a navigation menu with 'ELECTION 2010' and 'News Front Page'. The main content area is titled 'Live coverage - General Election 2010'. On the left, there's a sidebar with 'Results', 'Parties and issues', 'First-time voter', and 'The Debates'. The main content area includes a 'RESULTS' table with the following data:

Party	Seats
Conservative	306
Labour	258
Liberal Democrat	57

Below the table, it says 'Prediction 649/650 seats declared' and 'Full results'. To the right, there's a 'FIND YOUR RESULT' section with a search bar and a 'Go' button. Below that, there's a 'BREAKING NEWS' video player showing two men in suits talking.

The process of monitoring and assessing activity in blogs and Twitter has become quite sophisticated at the BBC. Over the last four years, the user-generated hub has built up a considerable amount of expertise in social newsgathering.²⁶ During the election, the team used tools like Google Reader and Twitter lists to monitor the key political blogs and candidates to identify items of interest and feed these through to the writers of the live page, as well as informing programme-makers and producers across the BBC through an internal wire. 'The expertise that we have, allows us to operate in that arena and act with credibility and authenticity, internally and externally,' says Matthew Eltringham who runs the hub.

As one example, when the Labour parliamentary candidate Stuart MacLennan was exposed and had to resign over comments allegedly made on Twitter, a member of the team was able to find and identify the content of original tweets, through talking to

²⁵ Edward Roussel, interview with Nic Newman, May 2010.

²⁶ UGC hub consists of 23 people interacting with audiences on social networks and through direct contacts on the website and turning this into journalism and news lines – a clearing house and source of expertise for social media activity and community building.



social media contacts with access to archive copies. Hub members were then able to use the BBC's internal wire system to inform programme editors and producers and point them quickly to the most informed sources on the story.

Perhaps the biggest success for social media as a tool for social newsgathering came on election night itself, where the story of queues and frustrated voters at polling stations emerged first and extensively through Twitter, YouTube and Facebook. Video footage and eyewitness reports from Sheffield and Hackney provided compelling evidence long before David Dimbleby declared it a 'scandal' on the BBC results show. The UGC hub played a crucial role in collating and corroborating these reports and feeding these into the results programme.

3.3 Case study: Andrew Sparrow, online political correspondent

Andrew Sparrow is a traditional political journalist who has taken to online blogging and, with the help of a number of colleagues, covered the election exhaustively for more than a month, weaving together thousands of perspectives, but without



interviewing a single voter. He estimates he wrote around 14,000 words a day equipped with a TV, a computer and a broadband connection. The live blogging approach was a far cry from the way he had covered previous elections via battlebus (2001 and 2005) or as part of the Westminster press pack.

Guardian Editor Alan Rusbridger holds up Andrew Sparrow's blog as an example of a 'dazzling new form of reporting,' which relies on the ability to link out to sources and other media – where stories can be told, in real time, in one sentence plus a link.²⁷ Website Editor Janine Gibson described his role in this election as that of a studio-based anchor on *Grandstand*, the old BBC sports magazine; a trusted guide bringing together outside sources and varied perspectives. Sparrow himself thinks carefully about how to most effectively tell the story:

My job was to round up . . . what was new and interesting and make it available for people who don't have 10 hours a day to surf the internet and watch 24 hour TV. It is not sophisticated, but useful to comb through and identify what will be of interest to people who share your passion for politics.

Sparrow was keen not to overwhelm users but to publish when there was something really significant. In addition to monitoring live television (Sky and the BBC), the Press Association and political aggregators like Politics Home, he found himself relying increasingly on Twitter as a way of tracking and filtering the best material. Clearly it was impossible for one person to keep across a 24-hour story, so Sparrow was helped by others who took over the coverage for periods of the day or to enable him to have a break.

The comments and feedback from audiences is one of the most rewarding aspects. The tip-offs, the funny pictures, or just throwing out a question and getting the response. 'My favourite example came when I asked if anyone knew who coined the term balanced parliament. David Steel's wife, Judy, wrote in to say that she dreamt up the term in the days of the Alliance.'

Despite being chained to his desk, Andrew Sparrow found the process immensely satisfying. He felt that he was at the heart of the story at all times. The format also allowed him to use his experience to analyse and explain the significance of developments in real time:

During the first leaders' debate I could spot that Nick Clegg was winning within the first 20 minutes. So could everyone else. But I was in a position to say so immediately. If journalism is the first draft of history, live blogging is the first draft of journalism. It's not perfect, but it's deeply rewarding – on any day, I was able to publish almost every snippet that I thought worth sharing, which is not the case for anyone who has to squeeze material into a newspaper – and it beats sitting on a battlebus.

Over the campaign, Sparrow's blog brought ever larger numbers of users: more and more people came to rely on its speed and consistency, as well as its wit and humour. The blog became a must-visit gateway to wider election coverage, as well as a place for comments and active participation. The page received more than 100,000 page views in the early days, rising to 450,000 page views on the day of Bigotgate²⁸ and 2 million page

²⁷ Alan Rusbridger, Hugh Cudlipp lecture, Jan. 2010. He was referring to Sparrow's live blogging of the Chilcott inquiry, which inspired the later election approach.

²⁸ Gordon Brown referred to a Labour-supporting pensioner as a bigot, when he thought his microphone had been turned off.

views and 335,000 unique users in the aftermath of the results themselves. As Sparrow points out, that is more people than buy the *Guardian* newspaper on an average day.²⁹

3.4 Case study: Jon Sopel, BBC presenter and correspondent

Jon Sopel was an unlikely social media star. A BBC veteran who covered his first election in 1983, he'd not used Twitter or Facebook before the campaign started, but against his better judgement was persuaded by his editor at the *Campaign Show* to give it a try. He ended up with thousands of followers – an evangelist for the journalistic benefits: 'This was entirely different in that previously you'd have to wait for the morning papers to see what everyone else was saying – now I'm reading what people are saying and writing in real time.'



Via links on Twitter, Sopel was able to monitor the latest thoughts of Jonathan Freedland at the *Guardian* or Paul Waugh at the *Evening Standard* as soon as they were published . . . and then use and take those thoughts further in his TV programme. In this way, he says, the entire news cycle is compressed into an ongoing 24/7 debate:

I would ask a question and look at my Twitter account and Charlie Whelan had already tweeted about it or Eric Pickles says no Jon that's not right. It's unbelievable – everything is happening instantly. What is different is the ability of all the participants, all the key players to be having their say.

And Twitter also helped Sopel and his programme reach a bigger and different audience than would have been possible before. Clips of a disastrous interview with UKIP's Lord Pearson, where he couldn't recall policies in his own manifesto, were posted on YouTube and Twitter and quickly picked up by the other journalists. In the same way, hundreds of thousands were alerted by Twitter to a confrontation between *Sky News* Political Editor Adam Boulton and Alistair Campbell – available on YouTube within minutes. Sopel believes that in this election Twitter and blogging came of age, with journalists and politicians really engaging for the first time. He recognises that the vast majority of people are not on Twitter, but he does think these trends are breaking through to more than just the elites: 'What is happening now is that there is an instant communication that people feel they are part of. They are shaping it too.'

²⁹ Andrew Sparrow, interview with Nic Newman, May 2010, and his own account on the *Guardian* website (www.guardian.co.uk/media/2010/may/10/live-blogging-general-election).

In the future, Sopel has no doubt that politicians will increasingly wish to use these new tools to try and bypass the media, raising new challenges for news organisations wishing to ask difficult questions. On the other hand, he says that journalists also now have new weapons in their armoury. When he is able to entice a politician into a studio, Sopel believes he will be better informed than ever before to ask difficult questions – plugged into the collective intelligence of a networked community.

3.5 Case study: Krishnan Guru-Murthy, Channel 4 news presenter

Krishnan Guru-Murthy is a prolific user of social media, as a way of marketing his output and that of his employer, Channel 4 – but also as a way of interacting and engaging with viewers. He regularly sends 20 or 30 tweets as part of his journalistic day, rising to 40 or 50 during the leadership debates.

Twitter is developing a use almost as a wire service, in that so many journalists and news organisations and politicians are now on Twitter using it to get their material out very quickly, sometimes quicker than online or air.

Krishnan Guru-Murthy says Channel 4 often breaks stories on Twitter. He gives an example of a pre-recorded TV interview with Gordon Brown where he asked the Labour leader if he hit people. Guru-Murphy and his colleagues immediately began tweeting links to quotes and video extracts to try to get maximum media impact, knowing that it would be picked up by fellow journalists and bloggers like Iain Dale and Guido Fawkes:

I have around 15–20,000 followers so direct impact is relatively small, but the way Twitter works is that people pass on things and if something you do gets retweeted a lot then you have a reasonable chance of it getting to 100,000 or 200,000 people, but that is still small relative to the TV programme where perhaps 2m people watch over the course of the hour.

Guru-Murthy says it is unusual to get stories or scoops from Twitter. He says the main value is its effectiveness in passing stories and opinion around. In terms of journalistic practice he estimates that the majority of those in the Channel 4 newsroom are actively using Twitter every day – perhaps 80 or 90 journalists. He has a Twitter screen going on his computer at all times, often interacting with audience members on his laptop while the programme is going on.

I started it as an experiment, to be honest; to see where it led and to see what the point was, but I wasn't sure what the point was, but I saw the fun in talking to people and interacting with viewers openly and quickly and to market material; I enjoy it.

Guru-Murthy compares Channel 4's fairly unstructured approach to Twitter with that of the BBC, where there are more rules and guidelines around who can tweet and what kind of content is acceptable. In terms of the politicians, he is not convinced that many have fully embraced or understood the medium. He says many of them have attempted to use it like a broadcast channel, rather than listening and interacting with voters and with each other:

It has been interesting to see direct communication between leading politicians like Ed Miliband or Ed Balls or Eric Pickles, but I think the command and control mentality of politics is pretty hard to resist. I am a little bit sceptical about how much politicians who joined during the election will continue to use it now it is business as usual.

3.6 Mainstream media conclusions

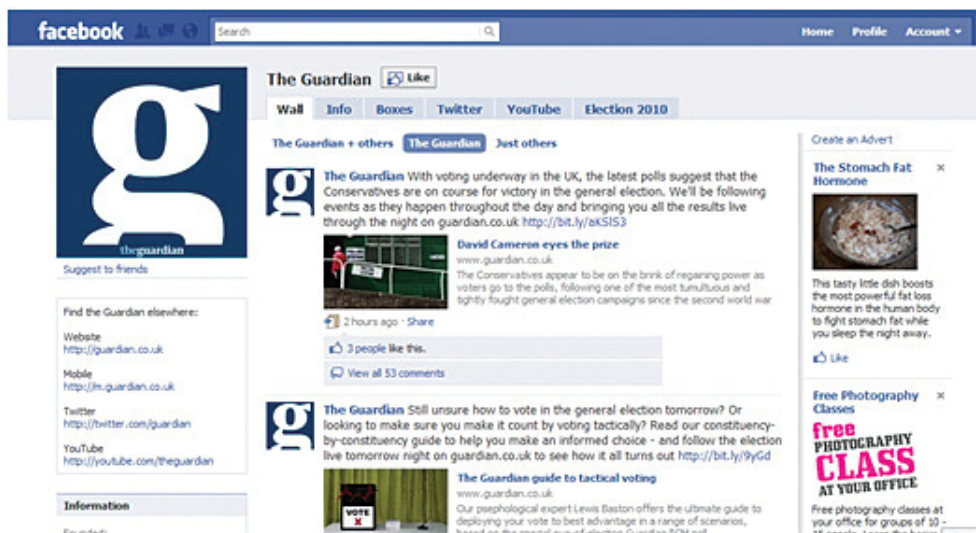
Mainstream news organisations are on a journey towards becoming truly integrated digital operations no longer defined by their past (print or broadcast), and this election marked another important step on that journey. In that sense this was not an internet election, but a multi-platform one, where social media were increasingly seen as an additional layer of activity.

The big battles may have been on television, but all the ‘back-channel’ discussion and debate was online – often in real time. Even veteran journalists have been surprised at how social and digital media continues to change the way journalism is practised; the growth and success of live blogging; the adoption of micro-blogging; the shortening of the news cycle and growth of a real-time conversation between political and media elites. More and more journalists are recognising that social media are not just something for the web team, but are relevant to every member of a modern newsroom.

Social media training and awareness efforts over the past 12 months have helped ‘normalise’ tools like Twitter, YouTube and Facebook. Sky’s Twitter correspondent Ruth Barnett has now progressed, for example, to become a general reporter and her old role has been dropped. Sky’s social media expert Maz Nadjm says this election saw ‘real enthusiasm and momentum’ amongst mainstream correspondents and producers, with the majority using tools like Tweetdeck to help monitor incoming tweets. At the BBC, social media are no longer just accepted; they have become valued. Matthew Eltringham, who runs the UGC hub, says there has been enormous progress, but there is still much further to go.

The way the BBC works is now more networked than four years ago. It’s been a cultural change. People have understood we need to do this but we have a long way to go before it is embedded in the BBC’s psyche.

This election has also seen media organisations become increasingly comfortable with partnerships and deeper relationships with social networks. There is recognition that it is essential to reach out to audiences on their terms, using the tools and services that



The Guardian using its Facebook fan page to promote its coverage

they use every day. The *Guardian* worked with YouTube on the debates; the *Telegraph* developed a Facebook application for its partnership with Vote Match and most news organisations operated Facebook fan pages and YouTube channels for election material.

While many of these only attracted tens of thousands of users, the ripples from the comments and posts often spread out through the wider communities. 'There is more thought about how we promote the best of our journalism in a 360 degree way,' says Alex Gubbay, the BBC's Social Media Editor. The BBC has worked with the in-house marketing team to plan where and when to seed information to maximum effect. Could Facebook, for example, help deliver a different and younger audience for a Jeremy Paxman interview with David Cameron? For this election the BBC also employed a digital correspondent, Rory Cellan-Jones, to reflect and interpret the activity in social media to a wider audience. He wrote more than 20 blog entries and sent hundreds of tweets, as well as filing for television and radio.

He says attitudes to the social media story from editors oscillated from wild enthusiasm at the start to periods of doubt after the television debates. Cellan-Jones says this yo-yo tendency is an inevitable part of a process which is gradually seeing social media integrated into the fabric of journalistic culture.

It is like saying the telephone is going to change the world or the telephone is going to have no impact. Eventually we all end up using telephones and we don't need a telephone correspondent any more. This is probably the only election where you need someone in this role, but it will be natural for all political correspondents to be involved in and understand.

4. Political parties and campaigning

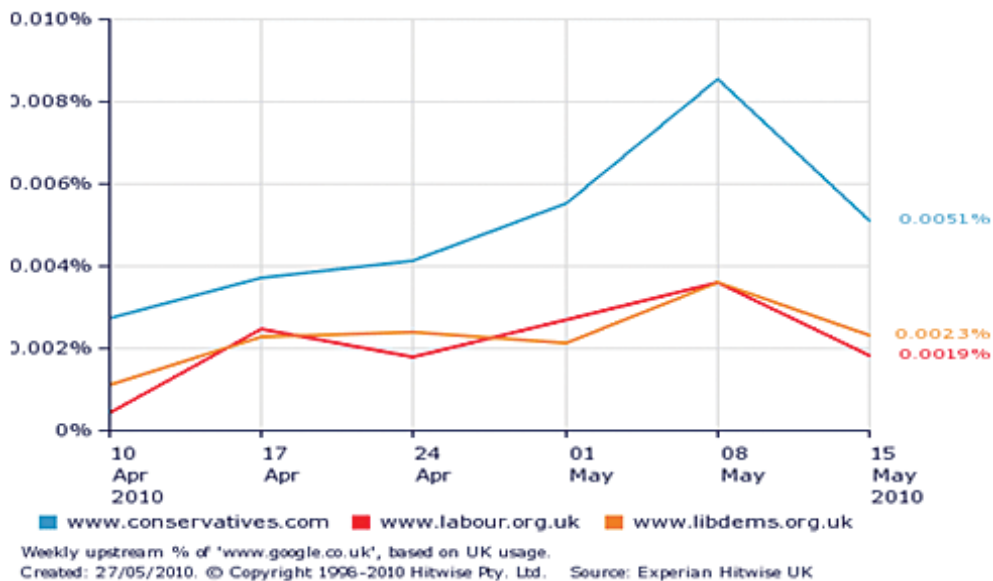
Although all the main political parties had studied the role played by social media in the US presidential election, in practice none of them looked to copy the techniques wholesale. UK parties do not need to assemble a bunch of supporters from scratch each time – they often already have a formidable machine in each constituency. In addition, a social network built around a party leader does not carry the same resonance in a parliamentary system, where these will not be the names that end up on the local ballot paper. Different rules on political funding and the shorter duration of the campaign are additional factors which suggested that the use of social media needed to be adapted considerably for this British election.

4.1 Conservative Party

The Conservative approach was highly targeted towards the traditional elements of a digital campaign – such as email lists, the party website and paid search. Social media were important, say the Tories, but mainly in creating ‘buzz,’ due to the reflected impact in the mainstream media. With votes to be won, a key strategy was to use marketing, along with organic and paid search to drive people to their website where they could lay out their wares. During the course of the campaign they spent more money than other parties on online marketing, notably with Google, Mumsnet and YouTube, where they bought out the homepage advertisement on election day itself (right). Restrictions to political advertising on polling day do not apply online as they do in TV, radio or print.



According to Experian Hitwise, which tracks online traffic, the Conservative Party was the most successful in driving traffic to its core political website, particularly



Downstream referrals from Google UK to three political party websites 10 April–15 May. Left axis shows percentage of overall UK internet reach.

in the last two weeks of the campaign.³⁰ The chart opposite shows referrals from Google UK over the course of the campaign, illustrating the success of its paid search strategy.

Although traditional methods were to the fore, the Conservatives tried out a number of ground-breaking social ideas to engage and involve party members – many of which were directly imported from the United States. In January, they used ‘Google moderator’ software to allow people to crowdsource questions to David Cameron and vote on the best.³¹ The response was relatively modest – just a few thousand questions for online sessions on the NHS and education policy – but this was a new step for the party in terms of openness and accountability.

The New Media team were delighted a few months later when over 1000 people responded to their request for crowdsourced comments on dodgy figures in the last Labour budget. But a further campaign to highlight Labour’s ties to the Unite Union (cashgordon.com) proved to be something of an embarrassment when it was revealed that the template originated with a right-wing US group. The site was later hacked by Labour Party supporters.

Another import from the United States was MyConservatives.com, a site for activists inspired by the hugely successful MyBarackObama.com. Members were handed out tasks to be carried out on Facebook or other social networks, but again only a few thousand took part.

Conservatives were active on Twitter, where the main party account was the most followed political party, with 30,000 people receiving regular tweets.



³⁰ Robin Goad, Director Research Hitwise UK, interview with Nic Newman, plus http://weblogs.hitwise.com/robin-goad/2010/04/bigot-gate_and_the_role_of_social_networks_in_the_election.html.

³¹ www.brandrepublic.com/News/977198/Comms-chiefs-predict-first-internet%20election-UK.

Party Chairman Eric Pickles was particularly prolific, sending hundreds of messages to his 7000 followers. Rishi Saha, Head of New Media for the Conservatives, says Twitter proved useful for shaping media coverage:

Twitter was a great tool for communicating with, and between, journalists, bloggers and others connected to the news cycle – most of the Conservative Party press officers used Twitter to this very effect.

On the other hand, Facebook – which has a much bigger national reach – was most effective in recruiting new supporters, letting volunteers share content with their friends and for organising events. It was a much more useful on-the-ground campaigning platform than Twitter.³²

In total, 200,000 people signed up to the combined Facebook fan pages for David Cameron and the Conservative Party, where there were links to official party videos or information on the main website. The party also created official branded election spaces in Flickr and YouTube, which provided the engine for Webcameron videos; the personal video blog of the party leader.³³ In this way the Conservative Party strategy amounted to a web of social hooks – in text, pictures and video – all driving back to a core series of central messages. Communities editor Craig Elder sums up the approach of focusing on what was valuable, not what was fashionable: ‘We had a primary objective to build a website, organised primarily around policy issues, optimised for search aimed at one particular audience – floating voters – on one particular day.’³⁴

One big lesson from the campaign was the difference in online behaviour between the supporters of the three main parties. ‘It is all too easy to assume that political supporters behave in the same way online, use the same tools and campaign using a set methodology, irrespective of the party they belong to,’ says Rishi Saha:

Each party has its own culture, its own particular mores and values, and its own way of communicating to its base and the public at large. Also, the supporters of the various parties differ in terms of age, profession and demographic make-up, all of which contribute to the differences in digital behaviour that we observed during the campaign.

For all the attention on social media, the most valuable tool for the Conservative Party remains their email list, which currently stands at half a million people – bigger than the daily circulation of the *Guardian*, *Independent* or *Financial Times*. As one example of the power of these lists, a single fundraising email by William Hague generated £100,000 in just 24 hours and the ambition remains to double the size of these lists by the time of the next election. There is also a renewed focus on increasing the sophistication of party databases, which map the voting intentions in key constituencies to enable even more focused targeting of floating voters on the ground.

³² Rishi Saha, interview with Nic Newman, May 2010.

³³ Webcameron was set up in 2006 as a personal video blog to allow David Cameron to communicate directly with voters in an unmediated way. The blogs are distributed through YouTube and a range of party platforms such as email.

³⁴ Seminar at Royal Society for the Arts, Election 2010 (<http://feedproxy.google.com/~r/rsaaudio/~3/pqy8R2I26ls/lecture130510.mp3>).

4.2 Labour Party

The Labour Party was closest to Barack Obama ideologically and key figures from the party spent time in the US in the summer of 2008, studying the successful techniques that were used in his campaign. Obama advisers talk about how new media enable the ‘mobilisation of real people’³⁵ and the core Labour strategy that emerged was to use technology to motivate activists to make this a ‘word of mouth election.’ This message became a focus of the Labour team, which included blogger and strategist Mark Hanson: ‘We’ve made it easier for people to make calls, pass on and share content, organise together and find events happening near them.’³⁶

In order to do this, the party used traditional email lists and databases alongside MembersNet, an online social network of 35,000 activists, built on the idea that people would do more if you facilitate but don’t order them around. The software enabled party members and volunteers to manage their own events, share best practice and use expert skills where they were needed most. Facebook and Twitter also helped mobilise teams locally and reach out to a wider set of supporters through campaigns such as #labourdoorstep.

A key innovation this time – also imported from the United States – was the deployment of a ‘virtual phonebank,’ which allowed supporters to make calls from their homes, offices or even from their iPhones – at a time that suited them. Overall, 60,000 calls were made using this software, many targeted closely at floating voters in key marginal seats. Technology also allowed the party to use volunteers more effectively. Customer relationship management software (CRM) ensured that they received a follow-up phone call within two hours, with suggestions of specific tasks or events they could join in with. In total, these techniques helped the Labour Party make around 450,000 doorstep contracts during the campaign – around three times more than in 2005.³⁷

Unlike the Conservative Party, which used its main website to target floating voters, Labour’s aim throughout was to make the Labour website a place for organising its supporters. During the debates they ran a digital spin factory, where they brought together real-time tweets from MPs and candidates with live updates from the press office. The idea was to provide a one-stop shop where supporters could go to pick up messages to distribute onwards through Facebook and Twitter. The site was also aimed at the media and Mark Hanson says these tweets became a key way of getting the message out as the campaign went on: ‘A lot of the feedback that we got from mainstream media was that they relied on what Alistair Campbell and Peter Mandelson were saying for a) information and b) direct quotes.’

Labour was particularly effective in its use of Twitter, with Alistair Campbell joining John Prescott, David Miliband and others as high-profile contributors. Gordon Brown was also the only party leader to take part in a Twitterchat, where he answered a series of complex questions in 140 characters or less. The groundwork had been done in advance of the campaign, with the appointment of Kerry McCarthy – as so-called Twitter Tsar – to act as a new media spokesperson and help train cabinet ministers and senior politicians. Mark Hanson says this preparation was crucial:

We held clinics to show them how to use the various online tools. . . . The important thing is to help those that get it and encourage those that are unsure. We also made

³⁵ Quote attributed to Joe Rospars, web adviser to Barack Obama.

³⁶ Mark Hanson, interview with Nic Newman, May 2010, and Search Engine Watch blog (<http://searchenginewatch.com/3640289>).

³⁷ Figures from Mark Hanson, interview with Nic Newman.

the technology available to make it easier, for instance, for candidates to design their site, raise money online and sync up their presence on different social networks.

The Labour new media team also linked to other websites sympathetic to the party, notably those behind MyDavidCameron.com, which parodied the Conservative poster campaigns under the slogan ‘airbrushed for change’ (see section 6.1). The party saw the idea taking off and hosted a DIY poster tool on its own website to make it easier for supporters to take part.

The parodying of posters was also encouraged by heavyweight Labour politicians like John Prescott, who used his Twitter feed and his blog to routinely set challenges for supporters and encourage yet more poster spoofs.



As a symbol of the importance placed on the role of online in helping shape and share the content and messages, the party chose a young Labour blogger, Ellie Gellard, to introduce the manifesto launch and front the post-event email to party supporters. Embarrassingly for the party, it didn't take long for right-wing blogs to unearth some early posts highly critical of Gordon Brown's leadership.

The communication of the manifesto itself was also designed to point the party in a more modern direction. In addition to the normal weighty document, Labour commissioned an innovative cartoon video, designed to make the contents more accessible for the YouTube generation. This video, along with a party broadcast by Eddie Izzard, were amongst the most watched political videos on YouTube, both getting over 100,000 views and both aimed at reaching younger voters.

And after years of lagging behind in political blogging, there were some concerted efforts by the Labour Party to create lively alternatives to the hugely popular conservative bloggers Iain Dale and Guido Fawkes. Will Straw's LeftFootForward site was modelled on the ThinkProgress blog of the Center for American Progress, which worked with policy experts to regularly fact-check and rebut claims made in the press. Labour List provided a lively home for debate and comment, and Alistair Campbell's personal blog often gave a timely insight into thinking right at the heart of the campaign.

4.3 Liberal Democrats

Like other political parties, the Liberal Democrats looked to the 2008 Obama election for inspiration, but with less money and resources relied more on the grassroots benefits of social media. One difference which the Liberal Democrats tried to exploit was the way in which British people tend not to pass round serious political information, whereas they readily share jokes or amusing pictures or videos. This was the insight behind the highly regarded Labservative campaign, a set of spoof posters and YouTube clips, including a party election broadcast from Gorvid Cameroon, a Frankenstein-like digital mash-up of the two main party leaders. Mark Pack ran the Liberal Democrats' online campaigns in 2001 and 2005 and helped advise the party this time round:

The Liberal Democrat approach to online campaigning was to use caricature and humour upfront – which then makes it harder for others, as caricaturing a caricature rapidly becomes a bit self-referential, narcissistic, and boring. Humour also means people are more likely to share content with others, especially with friends outside the political party activist bubble.

The broadcast got less than 100,000 views, a mere fraction of the wider electorate, but this was still a significant number for political messages on YouTube. The launch also received positive press coverage, repeating the often seen pattern where the coverage of online campaigning gets to a bigger audience than the direct campaign itself.

Liberal Democrat candidates were particularly active on Twitter, where they often trended positively and the Facebook polls were almost all won by Nick Clegg. The likely explanation is that young people, who are much more active on Facebook, were predisposed to a change, especially after the TV debate. A post-election MORI poll showed that 18–24s did indeed vote for Liberal Democrats in larger numbers than any other demographic group.³⁸

Facebook and Twitter were also important in creating a backlash to the conservative press, which ran a series of negative articles about Nick Clegg in the run-up to the second debate. The hashtag #itsnickcleggsfault and associated social tools like Daily Mail-o-matic (right) proved a rallying cry for ironic tweets, which through the use of humour took some of the sting out of the newspaper campaign. Alberto Nardelli of the website Tweetminster felt this incident was illustrative of how the mainstream media are losing some of their power and influence:

*The fact that lots of people get angry when they read a headline from Daily Mail. That's not new. What's new is that today people have tools to organise themselves spontaneously and very easily to coordinate a response to information which a mainstream publication is putting out.*³⁹

Daily Mail-o-matic

A new Daily Mail headline every time you click the button.

Election Special For a limited time only, every headline is about Nick Clegg.

IS NICK CLEGG MAKING MIDDLE BRITAIN IMPOTENT?

Refresh

I was going to give the generator a sophisticated grammar for more varied sentences, until I realised the Mail's grammar is nearly always the same. If you like this, be sure to check out my [blog](#) and [follow me on Twitter](#) too!

You can also get this as a [Greasemonkey script](#) so you can produce random headlines when you browse the [dailymail.co.uk](#) website (thanks Edd).

If you like this, you might also like the [The \(New\) Daily Mail Oncological Ontology Project](#) – tracking Daily Mail's classification of inanimate objects into two types: those that cause cancer, and those that cure it.

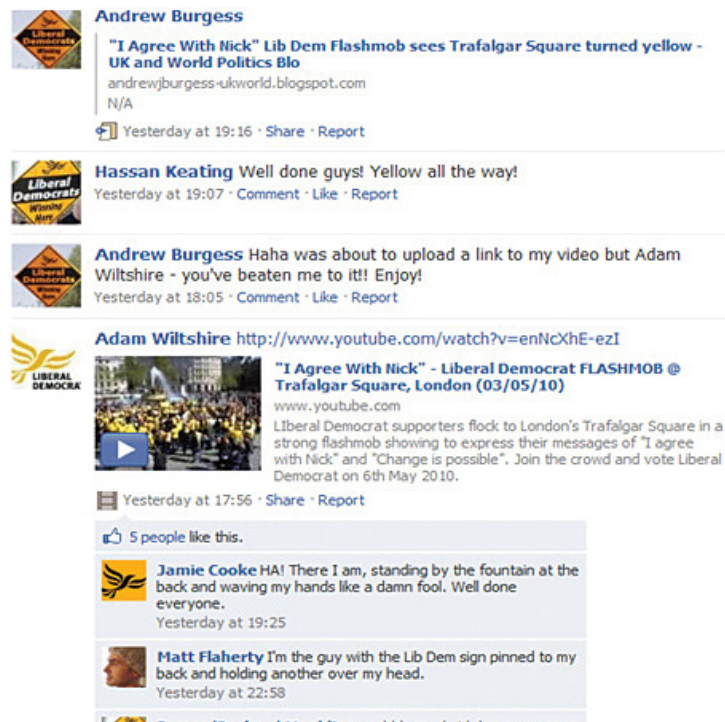
And if you get bored of this, why not try the [David Blunkett policy maker](#), [Michael Howard Sings The Smiths](#), or [Alastair Campbell's Wheel of Retribution?](#)

³⁸ *How Britain Voted*: www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/poll.aspx?oltemld=2613&view=wide.

³⁹ Alberto Nardelli, interview with Nic Newman, May 2010.

Liberal Democrats proved to be creative in using Facebook tools to mobilise ‘Flash mobs’: instant political rallies for a digital age. In the example below, they assembled a hundred people or so in Trafalgar Square – all primed to reveal the colour yellow and shout ‘I agree with Nick’ at exactly the same time (3pm). The event was then reflected through blogs and videos on YouTube, with wider press coverage too. Mark Pack says these trends are changing the nature of a modern campaign:

To a degree what Facebook does is restore what used to happen – public meetings. In recent times, there have been very few during the campaign itself, because not many people turned up. Now, Facebook allows those things to happen again.



But as more people get involved, notions of party allegiance and party membership are becoming more fluid. Digital avatars and membership of a political Facebook group are replacing the party window posters and stickers of the past. The *Rage Against The Machine* pro-Lib-Dem Facebook group reached double the paid-up membership of the Liberal Democrat party itself, at 160,000⁴⁰ – an extraordinary achievement in just a few weeks, according to blogger Mark Pack:

Never before in British politics has an online grouping got even close to the size of a party, let alone double it. Despite the TV domination of the campaign, there's a lesson there about how political organisation could develop in future.

Despite all the activity and positive sentiment for the Liberal Democrats within Facebook, at the end of the day they were unable to convert that support into hard votes. For critics, this is further evidence that social media does little more than enable activists to talk amongst themselves more efficiently. Party strategists will be thinking very hard about how to change that dynamic the next time round.

⁴⁰ The group had 162,000 members in May 2010.

4.4 Case study: Brighton Pavilion

Brighton Pavilion was a hard-fought three-way marginal constituency, eventually won by Caroline Lucas who became the first Green Member of Parliament in the process. But it was also interesting because of the intense social media activity surrounding the campaign, from the candidates themselves as well as from local media groups. Brighton's famous Marine Parade, the University of Sussex and quirky shopping areas are all found within the constituency's boundaries. Brighton is also very much a new media hub, with a high density of online companies and freelancers. Against this background, it was not surprising that all three parties were active online with websites and a lively presence on both Facebook and Twitter. Caroline Lucas ended up with over 5000 followers on Twitter and a huge number of Facebook groups, many set up independently of the party by university students.



The Twitter debates in particular were lively, with some especially combative exchanges between the Tory candidate Charlotte Vere and activists from other parties. Dan Wilson, who advised Nancy Platts, the Labour Party candidate, on social media says the personal aspect worked very well:

Nancy talked a lot about everyday aspects of the campaign. She said (on Twitter) that she was cooking veggie chilli and listening to the Stone Roses and that was the thing that got the most replies. It is humanising and authentic and it personalised Nancy as a candidate.

Jason Kitkat, who was part of the Greens' election team, agrees that social media did change the dynamics of the campaign and made the politicians more accessible to voters than in the past:

The fact that they could engage with Caroline and her campaign team through new media made them feel that she was more likely to understand where they were coming from in methods that they felt accustomed to.

Although the direct impact of tweets can be relatively small, as we've seen elsewhere this can be amplified through the relationship with mainstream media. The *Brighton Argus* newsdesk routinely monitored the tweets of candidates and key party activists and published a number of stories as a result – such as how the Conservative candidate appeared to give her support on Twitter for a website that linked the policies of the Green Party and the BNP.⁴¹ *Argus* website editor Jo Wadsworth says social media gave the paper more access to candidates:

It was interesting seeing how members of the public were able to interact directly with candidates and, whereas we would never have had access to rows between voters and candidates, now on Twitter it is all there – Charlotte Vere, for example, has to defend herself against accusations of foul play when voters objected to her comparing the Green Party to the BNP. That wouldn't have happened without Twitter.

For the political parties, much of the practical value of social media proved to be in helping organise their support more effectively than ever before. The Greens used Facebook to promote action days, where people assembled to leaflet and canvass. The Labour Party also found social media to be a good way of mobilising support around local issues, such as over their plans for a local skatepark – or for saving a firestation – where the Facebook groups took on a life of their own.

Despite this, all of the parties were acutely aware that there was a danger of spending too much time on social media, talking to other political activists or to people outside the constituency who couldn't vote anyway. Not surprising then that the focus of the campaign for all the parties ended up being fairly traditional: distributing election leaflets, holding meetings and knocking on doors. Dan Wilson believes that in that sense this was not the television election or the social media election but a doorstep election:

You can't beat knocking on doors. That direct contact with candidates is still where minds are changed and I didn't get the sense that on Twitter that we changed anyone's mind. I think we solidified views, we might have tipped people over the edge but it is not a persuasive medium.

It is difficult to show that social or online media changes votes, but there were many examples in Brighton Pavilion where it helped motivate activists and channel messages either directly or indirectly through the mainstream media. And for the media itself, under enormous pressure with changing business models and the decline of print sales, the election offered some pointers on how new social tools could benefit local journalism. In the newsroom, tools like Twitter are enabling a more networked form of newsgathering and quicker and more immediate contact with local politicians. In terms of output the *Brighton Argus* election coverage was transformed though new social and aggregation tools like Cover it Live, which has increased the immediacy with which the paper was able to cover a fast-moving story like the election results, with the full participation of readers and candidates, along with local reporters.



⁴¹ www.theargus.co.uk/news/elections/news/4834688.Brighton_Tory_hopeful_sparks_political_row_over_BNP_comparison.

4.5 Political parties' conclusions

The different approaches illustrated above in part reflect the parties' different electoral positions going into the campaign. The Conservative Party had to attract millions of new voters to regain power, while Labour were an incumbent party of government, trying to hang onto their 2005 vote share and get their base out. These factors, too, influenced the overall strategies, with Labour focusing on mobilisation and motivation of existing supporters and the Conservatives looking to use digital media to take their message to new groups.

This campaign has also highlighted the lack of regulation over political advertising on the internet, and the disparity between the amount of money the parties had to spend – something that the Conservatives were able to exploit with their YouTube advertisement on election day.

Prohibitions on political advertising on commercial TV have arguably been an important factor in limiting the role of money in UK elections. Instead the parties are accorded party-political broadcasts, but in this election these were overshadowed by the televised leaders' debates (see section 5). In the era of convergence, it is hard to see how different rules between TV, radio and online can continue to be justified. And if the rules don't change we could start to see an escalating amount of money spent, along the lines of a US political campaign.

There is also a question about the nature of political advertisements themselves. In a social media context the lines between a Facebook fan page, a political tweet and an advertisement become increasingly blurred. This issue is beginning to create confusion in the United States.⁴² If media and political messaging becomes more of a conversation and less of a broadcast, then the question of regulation becomes very thorny indeed.

But as we have seen, digital and social techniques aren't just changing relationships with audiences, they are changing the business of politics itself. Databases are becoming more sophisticated and social software is enabling more volunteers to be deployed more efficiently – in a more targeted way. Even so, Polis Director Charlie Beckett is not convinced that the wider digital possibilities are yet being embraced:

I don't think the medium will be exploited properly until the politics changes . . . we have a corporate, top down, old fashioned party system and I don't think they have moved on – there are brilliant people working in the parties but they haven't convinced the politicians of the need to do things differently.⁴³

In many ways this was an experimental election for the political parties, in terms of their use of digital media. Some elements, like Facebook, really took off and delivered value at a local and national level; other initiatives like MyConservatives.com did not have the kind of impact that similar sites achieved across the Atlantic. The parties all recognise that the nature of political campaigning and marketing is changing, but the idea of politics as an ongoing networked conversation may take more time to catch on.

⁴² State of Maryland is looking at legislation to clarify and label better the different political messages in elections (www.clickz.com/3640568).

⁴³ Charlie Beckett, Director Polis think tank, interview with Nic Newman, May 2010.

5. The TV debates and the story of social amplification

5.1 Debate overview

The three television debates created some of the defining moments of the 2010 campaign – as well as some of the biggest ever audiences for a political event on television. The unprecedented surge in support for Nick Clegg after the first debate was proof for many of the pre-eminence of television, as the ultimate medium of political persuasion. But it was also quickly evident that social media had become a powerful and engaging back-channel to the debates, amplifying and extending their impact.

‘You want to watch the debate on TV, because that is the right medium, but you also want to chatter about it with your friends on social media,’ according to Richard Allan, Facebook’s director of policy in Europe. He says that operating two screens (TV plus mobile or laptop) has now become commonplace for many of Facebook’s 23 million users in the UK:

I think that is the expectation now. Social media provides the water cooler for all of the activity in an election campaign. Now, to have an election and not be able to post a link to a YouTube video or talk about it with your friends, is unthinkable.⁴⁴

On Twitter, the same two-screen approach was in evidence. Political website Tweetminster reported that 184,000 tweets were posted by 36,000 people during the first debate – at a rate of 29 tweets per second. While these numbers represent just a fraction of the total TV audience of 9.4 million,⁴⁵ journalist and academic Charlie Beckett argues that all this adds up to a far greater level of engagement than we have seen before:

One person twittering about a debate is far more engaged than someone just sitting on the sofa watching it, I would argue. Also there is a networking effect that you may tweet or re-tweet a link that sends someone off to a forum or website. I suspect if you added up all the people who used social media . . . email, Mumsnet, Facebook, YouTube . . . social media touched the vast majority of people online.

Social media activity also reached those who were not online – through the attention it received from mainstream media. Immediately after the debates, ITV’s *News at Ten* showed a selection of tweets and Facebook messages to a television audience of 6 million people.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Richard Allan, interview with Nic Newman, May 2010.

⁴⁵ The first election debate on ITV1 averaged 9.4m viewers between 8.30pm and 10pm, a 37% share of the total TV audience over that period (www.guardian.co.uk/media/2010/apr/16/leaders-debate-tv-ratings).

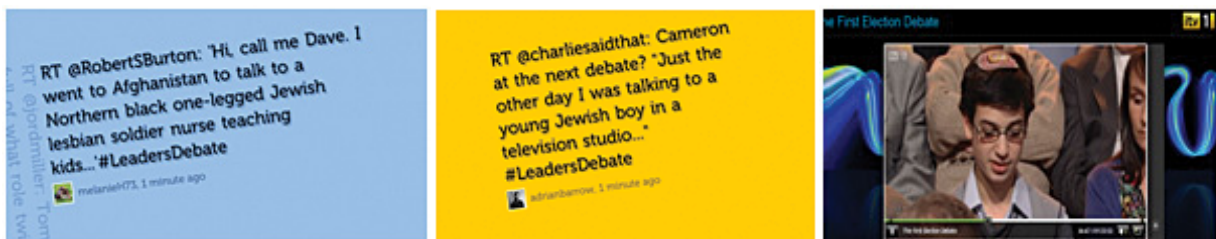
⁴⁶ www.funnyordie.co.uk/videos/aa17cc6cfe/c-nt-on-itv-s-election-debate-itv.

On BBC2, *Newsnight* reporter Justin Rowlatt was assigned to report on the reactions in Facebook and Twitter, devoting around five minutes each night. And newspapers also reported extensively on social media. Google News reported 475 mentions in press and online articles under the search term 'Twitter AND Leaders debate', compared with 391 for Facebook.⁴⁷ Janine Gibson, Editor of the *Guardian* website, says it is the reflected impact of social media that ends up being most important:



The TV debates would have not had the impact that they had if it hadn't been for social media. Everybody says it is a niche – especially Twitter – but these are the people informing the coverage, which is then how it was picked up. So there was a woman on the Today programme saying 'I didn't watch it but I saw the coverage' . . . and that is informed by people following every cough and spit on the social networks with each other in an incestuous way.

A key attraction of social media during the debates – and one of the reasons for the extensive re-reporting by mainstream media – was the sharpness and consistency of the humour. Twitter was quick to pick up on the overuse of anecdotes by all three party leaders, particularly by David Cameron, and more and more outlandish parodies appeared as a running gag.



Two tweets as seen through 'Visual Tweets' software. The second comment references a young Jewish questioner, who was one of the stars of the first debate (as pictured right asking his question on ITV)

Twitter helped party spin doctors realise very quickly that the homely anecdote did not go down as well in the UK as it did with US audiences, and this element was toned down for the remaining debates. Twitter was also quick to pick up on the 'I agree with Nick' line, which played so strongly in the national press the next day. As Shane Richmond remarked in the *Daily Telegraph*: 'The constant stream of one-liners and sarcastic observations was so much fun that I was actually a little sad when the debate finished.'⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Search query via Google News monitored by Nic Newman, 10 April 2010.

⁴⁸ <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/technology/shanerichmond/100004935/twitter-was-the-place-to-watch-the-leaders-debate>.

5.2 Content analysis: the third debate (29 April)

An analysis of over 1000 tweets taken at four different time points in the third debate showed a variety of content types, serious as well as humorous. In general, the study did not bear out a popular perception that Twitter conversations are of low quality.⁴⁹

Category	%	Comments
Who is winning	11	More at the start and end of debate
Serious comments on content	39	Mix of party-political and neutral – highlighting points, facts, posting links
Humour/heckles	34	Comments on appearance, running jokes, absurd
Coverage	11	Dimbleby tie, BBC coverage vs ITV, Sky
Rude/offensive	5	Rude words or just insulting. Comments that would be removed from mainstream sites

Categorisation of 1000 tweets during the third leadership event

The discussions bore some resemblance to a Roman forum, where everyone was able to have their say – cynics and humourists heckling from the back, with activists closer to the debate making more serious interventions.

The Twitter stream provided a constant stream of one-liners, which proved an entertaining complement to the television debate. In the early stages of the third debate, these often focused on the appearance of the three party leaders. Users asked, for example, why David Cameron’s chin was so shiny, but they also poked fun at Gordon Brown’s disastrous encounter with a Rochdale pensioner the day before.

*Note to Gordon: There’s a microphone on your tie.*⁵⁰

*David who have you met this week? We all know who Gordon has met.*⁵¹

A further 39% of contributions provided a real-time commentary on the debate. Mostly these highlighted points that had just been made with an exact quote; sometimes they expressed disagreement or added facts or links to take the debate further. In this example a Labour supporter pointed out that the Lib Dems had questions to answer about party funding.

*Lab and Tories too close to the city? What about Caroussel Capital Hedge fund run by Lib-Dem donations?*⁵²

⁴⁹ Four batches of 250 randomly selected tweets were chosen using Twitter search on the #leadersdebate hashtag. These were categorised with percentages and the content analysed.

⁵⁰ Gordon Brown was still wearing a broadcaster’s microphone when he made his comments. He later had to apologise in an incident that came to symbolise his difficulty with engaging with real people.

⁵¹ This alludes to previous Twitter obsession about over use of personal anecdotes in the first debate.

⁵² Refers to a row about non-domiciled donations to the Liberal Democrats of some £3.5m (www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/politics/article7107236.ece).

Professional journalists were also much in evidence. Richard Adams, who blogs from Washington for the *Guardian* newspaper, offered helpful background detail on Greece's debt with comparative figures to complement the leaders' discussion (Greece public sector deficit 13.6% of GDP, UK 10.9%). He then added a link to a revealing *Wall Street Journal* graph for those who wanted to know more:

RICHARDADAMS'S
BLOG



WSJ chart of public sector debt levels in Greece, UK, US and eurozone [#leadersdebate](http://bit.ly/ayn2at)

Bill Neely at ITV tried his hand at some 140-character analysis based on the spin room, to explain some of the leaders' behaviour as the debate continued:

[billneelyitv](#) So far, the Tory spinners have been attacking Clegg more than Brown. He's the threat to Cameron on who represents change.

Other interventions included highly respected independent institutions like the Kings Fund, a specialist in information on health issues:

[thekingsfund](#): Still not decided after the last [#leadersdebate](#)? Get the facts on their health care policies with our election guide <http://cot.ag/bUMLZ9>



Finally, there were the comments that attempted to sum up who was winning. These included individual views, independent groups as well as media organisations marketing their own polls.

The most re-tweeted (viral) link during the third debate was a very funny picture (not a spoof), which later also appeared on the front pages of both the *Guardian* and the *Times*. Ironically, the image was taken by a photographer from the mainstream media (Jeff Overs of the BBC), but its impact began while the debate was going on, whereas in a previous age it would have taken far longer to come to wider attention.

There were 49 offensive or tasteless comments (5%) in the analysed sample and this was a far lower figure than a number of personal Facebook streams monitored at

the same time. This may be partly because everything in Twitter is public and on the record, whereas most Facebook comments are only visible to user-defined networks.

5.3 Mainstream media and digital coverage of the debates

The debates also provided an opportunity for a wide range of innovations, with media companies falling over themselves to find ways to increase participation and differentiate their coverage in a crowded market.

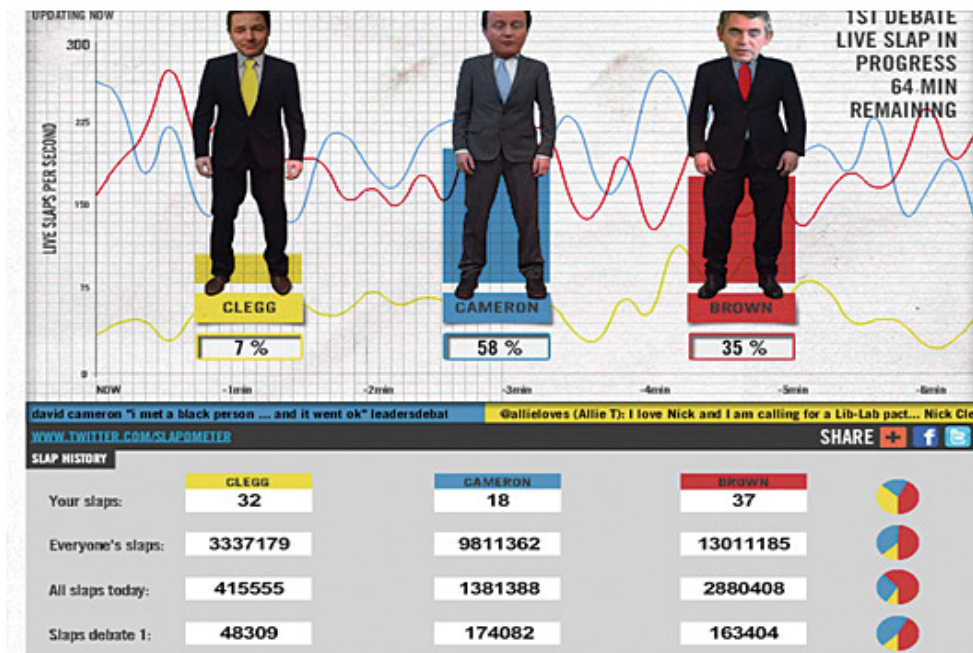
Perhaps the most eye-catching was ITV's use of the 'worm,' a real-time social tracker (driven by a live focus group), layered on top of the TV pictures online, as the debate went out. The worm showed which answers were liked and disliked by the focus group in real time.



Other techniques were used to try to show who was winning the debates while they were going on. The *Guardian* pioneered an online tracking system, where audience members clicked their approval in real time.

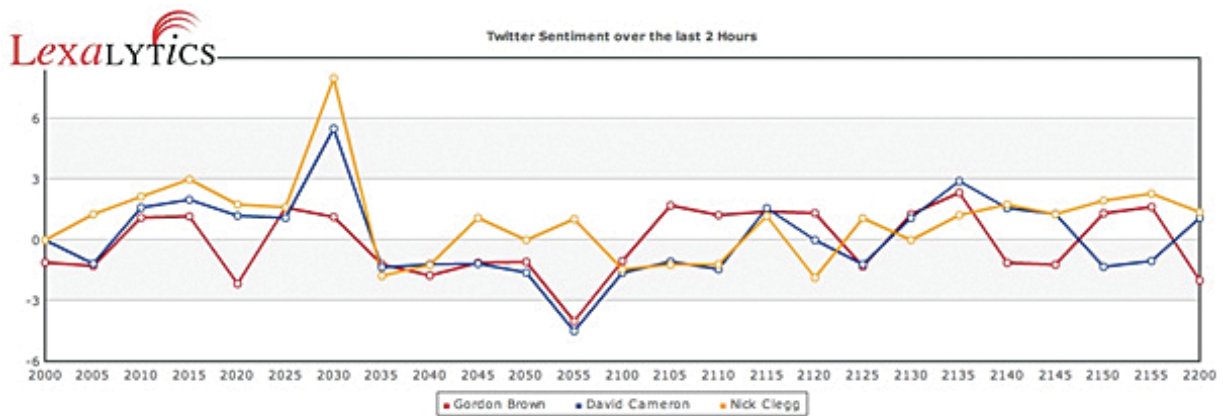
Facebook created a 'Rate the Debate' application, where users could click on a moving dial to indicate their feelings, at the same time as interacting and discussing the event with friends.

Elsewhere, it was possible for audiences to register their views using a Slapometer, where digital slaps could be administered to party leaders as the debate went on. Hundreds of thousands of individual acts of protest were registered, and the application was used by around 20,000 people during the first debate.



One different technique, used in anger for the first time in a UK political context, was automatic sentiment tracking. This is a new branch of computer science, which sets out to analyse language and try to draw conclusions about its ‘emotional’ content. Lexalytics is a company which used this technology to track the rise of Barack Obama in the United States and made some bold claims for the technology when interviewed by Rory-Cellan Jones for BBC Television and BBC Online: ‘We think during the debate we’ll be able to follow what the world is thinking in real time.’ The Lexalytics system tracked thousands of tweets minute by minute. The chart (for the third debate) showed overall scores of Nick Clegg and David Cameron roughly equal, ahead of Gordon Brown – a result not too far out of line with the later telephone polls. The Lexalytics results were reported to mainstream audiences on BBC television and via the BBC website. The results of similar online trackers were reflected in pages of newspapers the following day.

Twitter sentiment during third debate (8pm-10pm 29th April)



However, the result of all this activity and all the different methodologies involved was often extremely confusing for audiences. For example, on its website, ITV was reporting that Nick Clegg had won the first debate based on an online poll, but on television their ComRes telephone poll suggested that David Cameron had won.

Selection of polls: Who won the first debate?

	Poll organisation	Size	Brown	Cameron	Clegg
Sun	You Gov	1000	19%	29%	51%
ITV	ComRes	4000+	24%	36%	35%
ITV.com	ITV	2000+	35%	20%	45%
Times	Populus	1000+	17%	22%	61%
Facebook	Facebook	114	15%	24%	61%

Polls during and after the first debate as monitored by RISJ, 15 April 2010

Joe Twynam, Director of Political research at YouGov, says this election has seen a massive increase in the number of polls and the number of different techniques used, but this did not necessarily aid understanding: ‘Some of those polls are good and others are worthless. In some cases you can’t tell if they are good or worthless because

there is no transparency.’ But to what extent did all this online activity – the discussion and polling – increase participation and engagement in the election, especially with younger groups?

Both Twitter and Facebook reported significant peaks of activity around the debates, while the official Facebook fan pages of Nick Clegg and the Liberal Democrats also saw a significant surge in membership and support immediately after the first debate, increasing by five times by polling day.⁵³

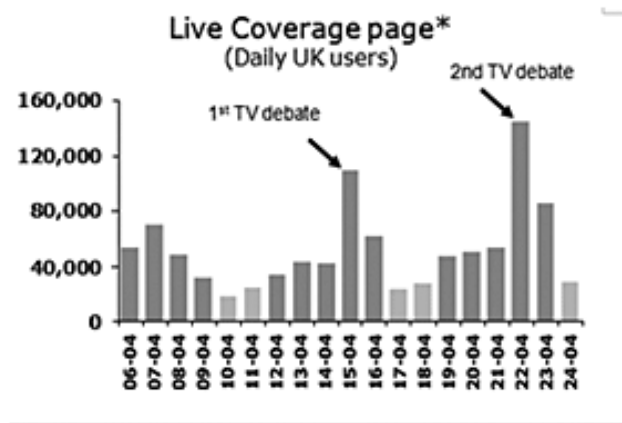
Growth of Facebook pages for UK political parties

Leader/party	Pre-leaders debates	5 May
Liberal Democrats	17,978	82,258
Nick Clegg	6,063	57,606
Conservatives	45,615	81,492
David Cameron	23,924	36,001
Labour	19,000	7,231
Gordon Brown	No page	No page

Pages monitored before the debates and just before polling day. Source: Facebook

Mainstream media companies like the BBC also reported peaks of interest on their websites during each debate (below),⁵⁴ indicating greater engagement and confirming again the complementary nature of online activity. The BBC said that 350,000 users watched their live video stream of the third and final political leaders’ debate, beating both Sky and ITV’s figures for the previous debates.

Overall it is clear that the TV debates spawned a wide range of complementary activity in the social and digital sphere. In the final analysis, the debates reveal a truth about communities and about conversation in general. ‘Most people don’t talk for the sake of talking,’ says Shane Richmond, blogger and digital commentator at the *Telegraph*. ‘Social media are at their best and most powerful when they are wrapping around other things.’ In this case, they enabled an unprecedented sharing of thoughts and opinions about politics – but in the future they could equally be about sporting or cultural events as the socialisation of television gathers pace.



⁵³ The Facebook election: www.netimperative.com/The%20Facebook%20Election%202010.pdf/at_download/file.

⁵⁴ Chart from the BBC’s internal server logs (source Sage analytics).

6. The fifth estate: grassroots activism and the openness agenda

The development of the internet, and in particular the falling costs of production and distribution, has led to the development of a so called Fifth Estate,⁵⁵ where voluntary groups, bloggers and individuals can have a significant influence or hold politicians and the media to account. The 2010 UK election has seen a flowering of this activity and this section explores four case studies.

6.1 Case study: MyDavidCameron.com and the changing shape of the political poster

A traditional feature of a UK election campaign has been the ‘unveiling’ of a new billboard poster, with the media coverage of the launch event being crucial to success, since the number of poster sites bought is often limited. These posters have often defined elections in the past, most famously the 1979 ‘Labour isn’t Working’ and the 1992 ‘Tax Bombshell.’ This time around saw a very different story as the political poster went digital, opening the process up to a series of amusing pastiches.

The website MyDavidCameron.com, which helped the public generate ‘spoof’ versions of Conservative Party advertisements, was an early hit of the campaign. Despite its name, the site was an *anti*-David Cameron vehicle set up by a Labour-supporting graphic designer, who’d bought the name a year or so before the election. The site emerged out of a conversation with friends as the first ultra-smooth David Cameron posters emerged. It was a short step from there to the ‘airbrushed for change’ strap line which became a calling card for the site and its posters.

Starting with just two spoof posters of his own, the site took off when founder Clifford Singer opened it up to a wider community, through the posting of a raw template – allowing others to create their own. Overall, the site received 3000 posters before and during the campaign, of which about 5% were used on the website. In helping the site go viral, Singer says the role of social media sites like Twitter and Facebook proved crucial.



We announced new posters in Twitter and Facebook and that triggered a growth in visitors outside of those platforms. It's essentially what enabled us to contest a £500,000 Tory advertising campaign at zero cost.

The chart overleaf shows this process in action with the launch of a new poster leading to a small increase in activity and then, following a tweet by comedian Bill Bailey, a ten-fold increase in traffic to the website within an hour.

⁵⁵ Phrase coined by William H. Dutton, *Through the Network of Networks: The Fifth Estate* (Oxford Internet Institute, 2007).



Many thousands of people visited MyDavidCameron.com, but millions more found out about it through the mainstream media, where the posters were reprinted by a number of newspapers. The story was also covered by the BBC and Gordon Brown mentioned the spoof posters at Prime Minister’s Questions, just before the formal election campaign began.

As the campaign went on, many other spoof sites sprang up and the political parties also got in on the act, crowdsourcing official political posters that they hoped would go viral in the same way. Many of these were better funded and technically more sophisticated, but few of these posters had the impact of the original, claims Singer: ‘It was ironic in a way that what started as a low tech site became such a viral hit. And the key lesson there was that it really was about the concept, that it was a funny website.’ Singer believes that, although television proved its power and influence through the TV debates, other forms of media have lost something of their resonance in an era where real-time developments and interactivity are becoming increasingly important. It seems likely that the traditional static political poster campaign will need a substantial rethink before the next election.

6.2 Case study: Vote Match and election quizzes

Some of the most widely used digital tools of the campaign were the online election quizzes which allowed people to match their views against those of different parties as a way of raising awareness of policy differences.

Vote Match was the most popular of these tools (see right) with statements devised by an independent academic panel based in the politics department of Goldsmiths University of London. The parties themselves submit the answers which are used on the website. Peter Facey, Director of Unlock Democracy, sets out the vision:

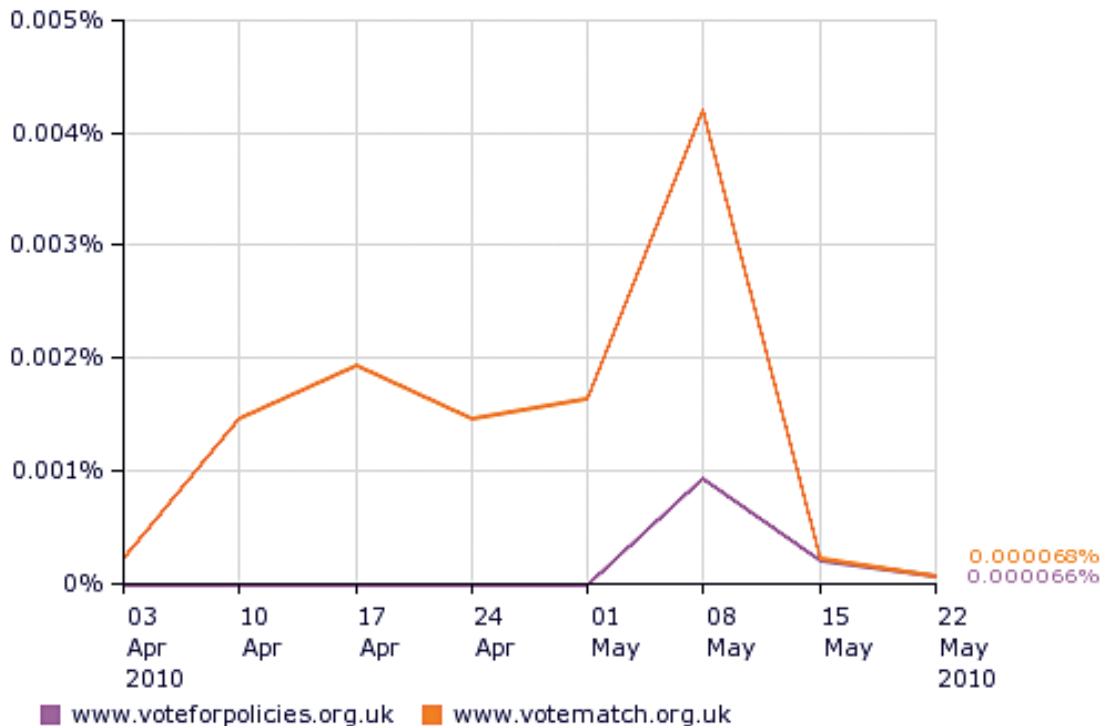
Vote Match is designed to try and help the genuinely undecided ‘punter’ make an informed decision on who to trust with their vote . . . Vote Match provides a quick and easy way to research the runners and riders.



Overall more than 1 million people completed the Vote Match survey,⁵⁶ with a quarter taking part in the final two days of the campaign. The application was focused on

⁵⁶ 1,014,028 completed surveys between 31 March and polling day, 6 May 2010 (Matthew Oliver interview with Nic Newman).

18–35 year olds, which is why there was strong tie-in with Facebook, which integrated it into their Democracy UK portal. Vote Match has been successful in increasing turnout in the Netherlands and the project says the huge take-up is proof that digital media can engage young people in the UK too. Going forward there are plans to extend the idea into local and council elections. The team also plans to work closely with other groups such as Democracy Club and My Society to raise awareness and increase the transparency of the political process.



Weekly market share in 'All Categories', measured by visits, based on UK usage.

Created: 28/05/2010. © Copyright 1998-2010 Hitwise Pty. Ltd. Source: Experian Hitwise UK

Visits to quiz sites Vote Match and Vote for Policies peaked dramatically in the final week of the campaign. The left axis gives the percentage of UK internet traffic.

6.3 Case study: the Straight Choice, Democracy Club and transparency initiatives

Local election leaflets have never been the most truthful of documents, but the information contained normally goes unscrutinised and unchallenged. The Straight Choice, named after a particularly vicious Liberal Democrat leaflet in Bermondsey in 1983, is a grassroots project that aims to digitise these party statements, so they become more transparent and permanently accessible. During this election the project came of age, with 4000 leaflets uploaded by volunteers from around the country, and the front page of the website today contains a montage of the three party leaders, made up of all those individual submitted leaflets. Julian Todd, who was the driving force behind the project, says part of the value will be apparent over time: ‘These spent shells of the campaign were never meant to be seen online. We’ve left our cameras running, and (now) we can show the newsreel of the ground war.’⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Julian Todd explains motivation on the Straight Choice blog (<http://blog.thestraightchoice.org/author/goatchurch>); also in an interview with Nic Newman, May 2010.



In presenting its findings at the end of the campaign, the Straight Choice highlighted the ways in which polling figures were regularly being misused in the leaflets to present an inaccurate picture of the position of the various parties in the polls. They also drew attention to some particularly shocking examples, such as a Labour pamphlet in Birmingham which showed pictures of notorious serial killers beside a suggestion that the Liberal Democrats wanted to give them votes. The pamphlet was subsequently disowned by Labour nationally.

Once again, the direct number of people uploading or viewing leaflets on the Straight Choice has been relatively low, but the reflected interest from the mainstream media was significant – particularly when a Labour election leaflet became the subject of an argument between David Cameron and Gordon Brown in the third debate. Many media organisations were able to link directly to the offending leaflet on the Straight Choice website.

Supporting the Straight Choice was another group of volunteers who were passionate about making politics more open and transparent. Democracy Club is made up of several thousand volunteers from across the UK, who are each allocated a number of small tasks each week, such as finding out a candidate's email address or uploading leaflets in a particular area. Seb Bacon is one of the founders of Democracy Club, setting out to create an army of armchair activists: 'Democracy club gives people who want to get involved the chance to get involved, an opportunity to engage with civic society projects from their computer in bite sized chunks.' Bacon's long-held ambition was to create an online candidate quiz where party positions were set out clearly on the most important local issues. To achieve that, volunteers had to create a comprehensive nationwide candidates' list, identify the issues and then persuade candidates to submit answers – in every constituency.

By the end of the campaign, over 6000 volunteers had taken part and answers were forthcoming from around half of all candidates. This ranged from 65% of all Liberal Democrats to only 11% for Conservatives. The quiz didn't have as much impact as hoped, because by the time all the candidate information was gathered, it only had a week of full operation. Even so, 120,000 people used the tool and the project received encouraging feedback that this attempt at local transparency was fulfilling an important democratic need:

I was really genuinely unsure who to vote for this time around and this site really helped me make my mind up . . . I have now made my mind up as this website has helped clarify which local candidate holds similar views to myself.

I passed the site around the office. Never thought I'd see the day when political debate dominates the conversation LOL!

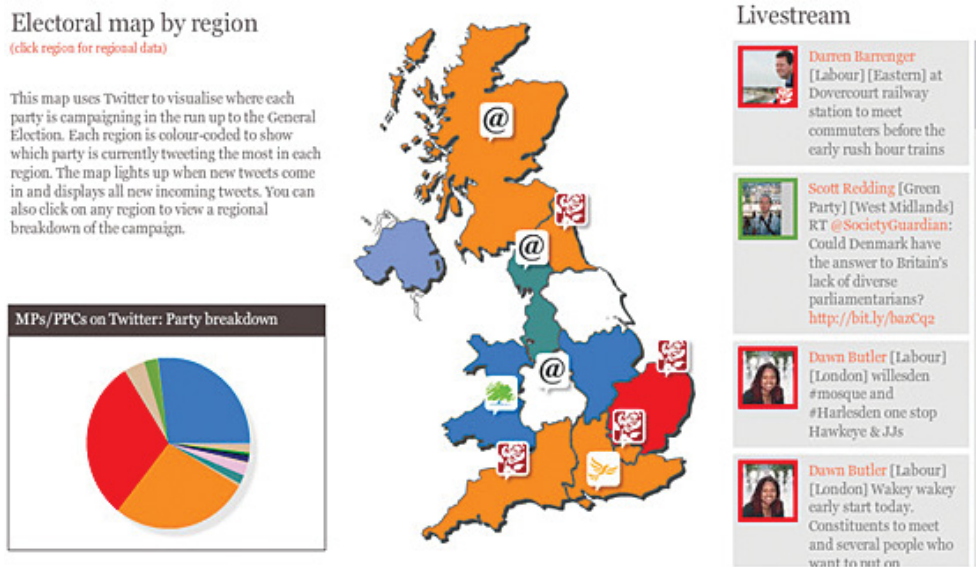
In the future, Seb Bacon would like to build on the data collected around local issues. There are some formidable obstacles, including resistance from some political parties, but he believes that things are moving in the right direction. He hopes that digital tools can combine with local activism to create a more open, transparent form of politics.

6.4 Case study: Tweetminster and prediction of results

Tweetminster is a website and set of services which tries to make sense of all of the political conversations that are happening on Twitter. During the campaign, it maintained the definitive lists of all of the MPs and parliamentary candidates, tracked the amount and type of political activity and surfaced trends through links and data visualisation. Founder and CEO Alberto Nardelli has a clear mission:

We want to make politics more open, to improve the way that people can connect with politicians, journalists, media sources, and interact with themselves about the issues that matter. Twitter is perfectly positioned to facilitate all of that.

Tweetminster was heavily quoted by mainstream media in providing definitive figures on the amount of activity during the campaign and especially during the debates.⁵⁸ The service also monitored the number of candidates using Twitter (600) and now keeps a list of MPs (198) and members of the government (28) with active Twitter accounts.



But the most eye-catching features were its real-time tools for monitoring election activity. The image above, which appeared on the front page of the website, visualises which parties are more active on Twitter in particular regions of the UK at any particular time. In this case, during the second week of the campaign, it shows Liberal Democrat activity in the South West and Scotland, with Conservatives showing strongly in the Midlands and Wales.

⁵⁸ Over 30,000 people posted comments during each event with an estimated 5–10 times more watching and listening to the output.

More widely, Tweetminster set out to do a series of experiments⁵⁹ to see if it could predict the final results based on constituency-level activity. This was inspired by an earlier study of the Japanese elections, and another on the popularity of new films in the United States, which indicated that there was a strong correlation between buzz on Twitter and eventual box office takings. Throughout the four weeks, Tweetminster counted the mentions and activity of candidates and mapped that to political parties to produce results very much in line with national polls. Its final predictions, published on 5 May, are listed in the chart below, where the party percentages are compared with the final results. This outcome compared favourably with the margin of error shown by a number of polling companies.⁶⁰

	Conservatives	Labour	Lib Dems	Other
Tweetminster poll	35% (-2)	30% (0)	27% (+3)	8% (-2)
Actual results	37%	30%	24%	10%

Just as impressive was the accuracy of regional predictions (87%) based on Twitter activity. Tweetminster correctly predicted, for example, that the SNP would win no new seats in Scotland and that Labour would do better in London than the polls were indicating. But at a constituency level the approach showed some notable flaws where a candidate's levels of activity or notoriety could be misleading. Based on mentions, it predicted the TV personality Esther Rantzen winning her seat in Luton South, when in reality she came fourth. In retrospect it is also clear that Twitter, like other social networks, mistook buzz for the type of sentiment that translates into votes at the ballot box.

Whatever the doubts about the validity of the approach, Tweetminster's tools are bringing a new real-time transparency to the business of politics, which is unlikely to be reversed. The way Twitter accounts are used by politicians, the media and the public will remain a subject of intense interest over the course of the next parliament.

⁵⁹ Tweetminster predicts findings (www.scribd.com/doc/31208748/Tweetminster-Predicts-Findings).

⁶⁰ UK Polling report post-mortem: <http://ukpollingreport.co.uk/blog/archives/2692>.

7. Social media and the Facebook generation

A key question in this election was the extent to which the internet generation – those who have grown up with My Space, YouTube and Facebook – would navigate the media and political landscape. Fewer than 40% of 18–24s voted in 2005. Could social and digital media re-engage this age group with politics? What would be the pattern of their media consumption throughout the campaign? How would they react to traditional campaigning techniques and to the new online methods imported from the United States? And what factors would ultimately prove critical in influencing their votes?

The following section reveals the results of an online survey conducted for the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism of more than two hundred 18–24 year olds, polled between 3 and 10 May 2010. The survey is useful in indicating trends and generating verbatim observations rather than claiming to be statistically representative. The group was recruited by email and Facebook group, and almost certainly over-represents the younger end of the spectrum and university students, but the results show a radically different pattern of media consumption from a control group of one hundred people aged over 25, also recruited via email and Facebook and who were asked the same questions.

7.1 Survey

Of the survey group, the majority described themselves as only interested in politics when something big happens (60%), with the remainder split on a scale between not caring at all to political junkie. Almost all of those surveyed used Facebook during the election campaign – 97%, compared with 40% for YouTube and just 18% for Twitter. This is consistent with other data which show Twitter usage to be older and more professional, with Facebook dominating with teenagers and university students.

In terms of media consumption, online news sources and television were most important with both the younger and older survey groups, but in other areas there were radically different results.

News sources rated important or very important for information about the election

News source	18–24	24 and up
Online news sites	89%	81%
Television	81%	72%
Newspapers	59%	61%
Social media	57%	38%
Official (e.g. political parties)	39%	6%
Radio	27%	81%
Leaflets	21%	9%
Posters	20%	0%

It is interesting to note that the younger group seems far more willing to go directly to party materials such as posters, leaflets and online manifestos. This could be because they are less cynical than the older group or it could be because it comes naturally for digital natives to actively compare and make up their minds themselves, rather than relying on the media to filter these sources.

Radio was far more important for the over-25s as a source of information, while both groups used social media for discovering and sharing news stories with friends. In most cases, the links came from and went directly to traditional brands⁶¹ like the BBC and newspapers' websites – not to blogs or other news sources. It is likely that the high score for newspapers amongst 18–24 year olds reflects their online presence rather than print, which the younger group rarely buys.

Online news sites were by far the most important source; I don't think I read a single newspaper! I did however read Guardian/Times/any other newspaper websites a lot.

TV only ever to dip into news channels occasionally, and to watch it on election night.

The televised debates were crucial. Links posted on Facebook to other sites were also very important.

In terms of online news, the broadcaster websites (BBC, Sky, ITV and Channel 4) were used most frequently by 18–24 year olds (89% used them during the campaign), followed by newspaper websites (62%) and independent sites (25%) and blogs (14%). The issue of bias was frequently cited in the 18–24 verbatim comments as a reason not to trust newspapers exclusively:

They are informative but, again, I don't just rely on them, I like to have a well-rounded understanding. This means I use a lot of other sources for information e.g. party websites.

I read a lot of newspapers, however I was very aware of Rupert Murdoch's influence on many of the headlines and was therefore biased towards the conservatives.

I find newspapers too repetitive and extremely biased; they prioritise media-hype over facts.

I only really trust the BBC news website as all the papers have an obvious swing towards a particular party.

In their use of social media, the 18–24-year-old group used a wide range of techniques; discovering and sharing content, debating and discussing issues with friends, and making political statements such as joining a Facebook group or visiting a fan page of a political party. Levels of activity were extremely high, with most respondents doing all or most of the activities listed opposite. In sharp contrast, the older group was less engaged with the range of possibilities and focused on sending and clicking on links. Just over half engaged in conversation and debate, but were very reticent in discussing voting intentions:

⁶¹ Pew Research Centre, *New Media Old Media* (May 2010) shows 90% of links in blogs to go to mainstream news sites, 80% to just three sources: BBC, *New York Times* and CNN. 50% of links from Twitter are to mainstream sites (www.www.journalism.org/node/20621).

Most popular uses of social media sites

Type of activity	18–24	24 and up
Discussing election events (bigotgate/debates)	64%	53%
Discussing which party to vote for	54%	9%
Clicking on a link from a friend	64%	72%
Joining a group (politically motivated)	64%	14%
Visiting a fan page (politician or party)	46%	19%
Organising an online or offline event	9%	5%

All of the quotations below come from the 18–24 group and give a sense of the range of activities that went on:

I messaged the local Tory candidate to tell him he didn't have my vote.

I didn't organise an event, but my friend made a Facebook event for an election night gathering, to watch the results together.

I clicked on YouTube links posted by the green party.

Most important factor in deciding how to vote

Voting factor	18–24	24 and up
TV debate	30%	14%
Newspapers	11%	11%
TV news coverage	10%	11%
Family	12%	2%
Social media	5%	0%
Friends	4%	2%
Leaflets	3%	0%
Radio	1%	11%
Other	23%	46%

Again, the surveys suggest radically different behaviour between the two groups. The TV debate was a bigger factor for the younger group, perhaps because they had had less exposure to the party leaders and Nick Clegg in particular beforehand. Family and friends appear to influence older voters less. Speech radio is not used by most younger voters. Once again, 18–24s show that they are more influenced by engagement with primary materials from political parties, such as leaflets, than the over-25s. The issue of voting intention is incredibly complex, as evidenced by the high percentages for 'other' and the following quotations give a flavour of the range of interrelated factors involved:

No one factor influenced my choice. News sources provided information, but I made up my own mind.

I always have supported the party I voted for because I feel that their MP for my local area has been amazing.

None of the above changed my mind, I knew already who to vote for. Newspapers were useful for info only.

Sharing different pieces of information and articles we had read via social media gave me a better understanding of the parties and their policies. I think it served to reinforce my existing views though.

Those surveyed also spontaneously mentioned online manifesto comparison sites like Vote Match (see section 6.2), and the BBC's Where They Stand. There was almost no mention of these tools in the older group, where there was less evidence that media, online research or politicians had changed their opinion:

Not influenced by media in current campaign – allegiance driven by values.

I already knew who I supported, checked 2005 results online to check the margin.

7.2 Case study: Steven Begley

Steven Begley is a 20-year-old student of politics at Queen Mary College, University of London. He felt social media were important in engaging people in political discussion and opening up the process. He said about half his conversations about politics happened online via social media and about half face to face. He says he 'can't imagine what the election might have been like before, but it must have been very impersonal, very passive.' Through Facebook he joined a number of groups like 'Defacing David Cameron' and 'Don't you hate it when Sue puts you with that bigoted woman?'⁶² He noted: 'Anyone can start a campaign on Facebook and it can become really popular.'

Social media often reinforced the views he already had, but he said that Facebook was used to discuss with friends which way to vote, especially during the Clegg surge following the first debate. Links were posted around the policies and pointing to previous statements of the parties.

Steven didn't buy a newspaper during the campaign, though he read a few physical copies of the *Independent* that were given away free on campus. He read comment and analysis from all political viewpoints and in this respect newspaper websites like *The Times* and the *Telegraph* were very important for him. He used both Twitter and Facebook, but used them differently; Twitter for following people and getting the inside track (for example, from Sally Bercow, the wife of the Speaker); Facebook was much more for friends and debate.

⁶² After Gordon Brown's overheard remarks after meeting a Rochdale pensioner (www.facebook.com/pages/Dont-you-hate-when-Sue-puts-you-with-that-bigoted-woman/114740898560199).

8. Social media and the election – conclusions and the final balance sheet

Election 2010 produced unprecedented levels of participation and creativity online. This is not surprising given the extraordinary growth of new tools for expression and interaction. YouTube and Facebook were still in their infancy in 2005, while Twitter hadn't yet been invented. According to the Oxford Internet Survey (2009),⁶³ participation in online social networks doubled in just two years to almost 50% of UK internet users. Around 20% of all time spent on the internet is now with these networks⁶⁴ and this growth has fuelled many of the activities that make up the bulk of this study.

But while the adoption of digital and social media is clear, a more difficult question to answer is whether outcomes have changed as a result. Did more people vote or become engaged in political discussion? Did the way in which political information was received and processed by the media change? Did the new digital and social media tools play a part in that process?

Some of the most revealing statistics relate to voter turnout and voter registration, particularly as they apply to the younger age groups. In the light of figures that showed that only 37% of 18–24 year olds voted in 2005, the Electoral Commission launched a targeted campaign to increase registration, which included TV and radio advertising, as well as a social media tie-in with Facebook. In total, half a million people downloaded the registration form from their website, with almost half coming from the 18–24 age group. A MORI survey estimates that actual turnout increased by 7% amongst 18–24s.

Election turnout by age

Age	Con	Lab	LD	Oth	Turnout	Con	Lab	LD	Turnout
18–24	30	31	30	9	44%	+2	-7	+4	+7
25–34	35	30	29	7	55%	+10	-8	+2	+6
35–44	34	31	26	9	66%	+7	-10	+3	+5
45–54	34	28	26	12	69%	+3	-7	+1	+4
55–64	38	28	23	12	73%	-1	-3	+1	+2
65+	44	31	16	9	76%	+3	-4	-2	+1

How Britain Voted in 2010 : Source: Ipsos-Mori⁶⁵

A nationwide YouGov survey found that in total a quarter of 18-24 year olds had commented on the general election via social networks and that 81% of 18-24 year olds expressed an interest in the election campaign.⁶⁶ This reinforces the interviews and

⁶³ Oxford Internet Survey: 49% of internet users had created or updated a social networking profile in previous 12 months (www.oii.ox.ac.uk/microsites/oxis).

⁶⁴ Nielsen figures from 2009 say one in every six minutes in the UK (<http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/global/social-networking-new-global-footprint>).

⁶⁵ www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/poll.aspx?oItemId=2613&vview=wide.

⁶⁶ Orange Digital Election Report (June 2010) reported at www.netimperative.com/news/2010/may/1-in-4-young-social-networkers-have-commented-on-1.

data from our own survey in section 7.1, which show the extent to which this age group was meaningfully engaged through social and digital media.

Facebook almost achieved its target of 300,000 users of its Democracy UK hub, a space for open interaction where it developed a series of tools for engaging young people on their terms. The Ministry of Mates was one innovative application used by tens of thousands of users, which allowed users to place pictures of their friends in an imaginary cabinet and share it with friends. Richard Allan, Director of Policy at Facebook, says this may not be traditional engagement but it did 'get young people thinking about the fact that there was a cabinet,' and in this sense represented the start of a new type of digital political literacy.⁶⁷

Elsewhere political online polls proved increasingly popular as the election wore on. Half a million people participated in a Facebook poll on the eve of the campaign (Nick Clegg won) and an impressive 1.8 million shared the fact that they'd voted by the time the polls closed, using a real-time counter placed on every page of the UK site.



As for Twitter, a number of studies have shown that the demographic is older and more professional and by no means represents the wider UK population. And yet the tool also facilitated an amount and type of communication that wouldn't have happened before. During each of the debates more than 30,000 people sent messages at an average rate of 27 per second, with a total for the three debates of 480,000 tweets.⁶⁸ Social media theory suggests that, for each active participant, there are at least another 10 who would have passively consumed the output,⁶⁹ so it is possible more than 300,000 people had a social experience of the debates with a wider network of contacts – a rich and different experience as illustrated by the content analysis in section 5.1.

Looking at any of these numbers in isolation, it is hard to make the case that this was the social media election. But that – in a way – is to misunderstand the nature of social media, a series of small personal actions and interactions that together can add up to a very great deal indeed. Indeed, if it has shown anything, Meg Pickard at the *Guardian* says this election has produced further evidence of how the internet and social media can sit alongside television, complementing the linear stream in new and powerful ways: 'Where we have seen social media really come alive in this campaign has been where it has been able to add extra perspective and community or social discovery and fun in the case of the posters and playfulness.'

⁶⁷ Interview with Nic Newman, May 2010.

⁶⁸ Tweetminster figures for each debate 184,000, 142,000 and 154,000 with analysis at <http://tweetminster.co.uk/posts/index/page:4>.

⁶⁹ Participation inequality theory says there are 90% lurkers and 10% of active participants in most networks (www.useit.com/alertbox/participation_inequality.html).

Television producer Peter Balzalgette, writing just after election day,⁷⁰ talked about a great paradox where audiences come together in bigger and bigger numbers to watch the candidates spar, but they then split into a thousand postmodern splinter groups to vote and debate:

Remember the classic Riepl's law:⁷¹ innovations in media add to what went before rather than replacing it. We've now got the mass and the micro audience . . . but we've yet to learn how to maximise them and work out how these things go together.

The complications of this new reality are most evident in the survey of 18–24 year olds (section 7.1). This generation uses both television and social media, often at the same time. They enjoy big live events like the TV debates, but they are not prepared to consume political messages passively. They say they derive most of their political information online (90%) and rarely read a physical newspaper or listen to radio for information. They scavenge information from a range of sources and want to make up their own minds, not be told what to think.

This tendency was particularly evident in the Facebook and Twitter campaigns in support of Nick Clegg after the attacks on him in the right-wing press – and the spontaneous groups supporting tactical voting, and a popular movement urging everyone to ‘cool it’ and calm down once the election was over. Rory Cellan-Jones says that, although a minority is taking part, this is a significant change:

The difference is that people have felt empowered and especially younger people, who are used to getting involved with Fantasy Football and Big Brother and have seen a route to get involved in politics.

They expect to have their say, take part in polls, join groups to debate and share links with friends. Emily Bell, Director of Digital Content at the Guardian, started off thinking that the key drivers of the campaign were broadcast, but ended up feeling that under the surface the tectonic plates really had moved:

The barrier to entry in terms of participating in politics has tumbled because you publish your own opinion or link on any platform and I think that fundamentally changes the way people view the political process.⁷²

For mainstream media organisations, one of the key challenges of this election was how to reflect that torrent of personal expression, without losing editorial control or the clarity of their output. There is a recognition that media organisations need to be part of the conversation, to reflect the buzz and the action. And yet the irony is that much of that conversation revolves around original distinctive content from the mainstream media itself. The primary destination for political information amongst 18–24 year olds remains the websites of traditional broadcasters and newspapers – even if the way they got there was via a link from a social network.⁷³

⁷⁰ www.guardian.co.uk/media/2010/may/10/television-general-election.

⁷¹ Riepl's law is a hypothesis formulated by Wolfgang Riepl in 1913. His hypothesis is still considered to be relevant, explaining the fact that new media never make the ‘old’ media disappear. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Riepl%27s_law

⁷² Emily Bell, interview with Nic Newman, May 2010.

⁷³ RISJ survey shows most 18–24s passed links to mainstream media. In the US (as noted in n. 62) 90% of links in blogs and 50% in Twitter go to mainstream media outlets.

So there was much to be learnt in this election about *how* mainstream media should link to Twitter and Facebook, and how it could add value in the process. One innovation to have come of age as a result is the ‘live blog’ – so brilliantly executed by Andrew Sparrow (section 3.2) and others in incorporating official sources and blogs and tweets into a new form of networked journalism. Audiences have flocked to this new journalistic form, in part because of the diversity of voices and in part because this has proved a convenient format to serve the ‘time poor’ with a filtered feed of bite-sized news, all in real time.

So, to another paradox of the internet age: there is so much space and time to explore issues in detail, but audiences are increasingly demanding journalism in short chunks – 140 characters plus a link. And this raises new challenges, at a time when paywalls are going up and business models are under pressure. How can mainstream organisations maintain their reputation for quality whilst satisfying the intensifying expectation of speed and engagement? How can they be part of the conversation if they need to put commercial barriers around their prized content to ensure economic survival? By the time of the next election, it will be clearer how different visions of the future⁷⁴ will play out. But, as Tom Whitwell, Assistant Editor of *The Times*, makes clear, ‘the idea that people won’t talk about things they have to pay for – is not true.’ But no-one is quite sure yet how new commercial models will disrupt the open, click and link world we’ve been used to.

In terms of journalistic practice, this election has seen yet more giant strides in the integration of internet techniques and thinking – in particular social newsgathering and marketing. Over half the newsroom at Channel 4 regularly used Twitter in this campaign. Pioneers like Krishnan Guru-Murthy at Channel 4 (section 3.5) and Rory Cellan-Jones at the BBC are no longer on their own. More and more journalists are now researching, and then selling and marketing their stories directly through Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, thereby reaching larger audiences and achieving greater notoriety than they would do by relying on their employer alone.

Many of the same dilemmas and changes have been evident within the political sphere too, as we saw in section 4. Despite all the talk about Obama’s use of social media, few within the political parties expected the same to happen here; not least because our constituency system is so different, with its well established networks of party volunteers. It was unrealistic to expect these systems to be transformed, but technology did make things more efficient. Upgraded databases and email lists meant more volunteers on the ground and more face-to-face contacts. Social media did help at the margins in recruiting new supporters and creating a more open and responsive campaign – as we saw in the case study of Brighton Pavilion in section 4.4. And there were genuine attempts to use new tools to input into the key policy documents in the first place.

One of the most significant changes has been the way the political parties embraced Twitter as a way of shaping and influencing the agenda with media elites. William Hague’s tweet that he was going back into coalition talks with the Liberal Democrats marks a start of a slow change where these tools are likely to be adopted more widely by press offices and political correspondents.

Take-up in the political sphere remains patchy, but this election has at least marked the start of a process of change, one that long-time observers like Professor William Dutton of the Oxford Internet Institute have seen many times before:

⁷⁴ Alan Rusbridger of the *Guardian* and John Witherow of *The Times* debated different visions of the future of journalism in the *Media Show*, May 2010 (www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00scxbn).

People downplay the internet as having an important role because of the small percentage using it, but there's a classic theory called the two step flow of information. Most people are not directly affected but opinion leaders, people who are active and really care about elections, will be heavy users and they then influence others to take it up.⁷⁵

And in this election we really saw that process happening. The way old-style political heavyweights like John Prescott and Eric Pickles embraced social media in an authentic and enthusiastic way offers the possibility of a more open and direct approach to politics. There are 28 members of the new government now represented on Twitter and it will be interesting to see if they use this tool to communicate and engage directly with members of the public, as well as with the elites within the Westminster bubble. It is possible, of course, that the old command and control instinct will reassert itself when parties are no longer up for re-election, but voters and audiences may have something to say about that.

So what of the future? The landscape and tools are likely to be very different again. For mainstream journalism, new business models may have developed and a range of new devices and techniques for creating and receiving information will have caught the public's imagination. More UK citizens will be online and they will be more confident in using tools like Twitter and Facebook to create, debate and share content and ideas. There'll be a better and stronger sense of online identity, which will include location for many people, offering new possibilities for political campaigning in the UK's geographically based electoral system. All this could provide more meaningful political engagement, says Meg Pickard at the *Guardian*: 'I think we need to think more next time round about how you translate what happens in the digital world into real mobilisation, agenda changing, hustings hijacking, to answer specific questions about specific topics.'

Technology will remain central to making elections more efficient. It will also continue to put more tools in the hands of audiences to make politicians and the media more accountable. The next election won't be a social media election either – indeed the question may not even be asked – yet the strategies of political parties and mainstream media organisations will be more focused than ever on the need to build meaningful two-way relationships with voters and audiences of the future.

⁷⁵ Professor William Dutton, interview with Nic Newman, May 2010. Two step flow: Elihu Katz and Paul Felix Lazarsfeld, *Personal Influence: The Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communications* (Transaction Publishers, new edn, 2005).

Interviewees

Emily Bell Director Digital Content, Guardian News and Media

Janine Gibson, Editor Guardian.co.uk

Martin Belam, Information architect, Guardian News and Media

Meg Pickard, Head of Social Media Development, Guardian News and Media

Andrew Sparrow, political correspondent, guardian.co.uk

Steve Herrmann, Editor BBC News website

Matthew Eltringham, Assistant Editor UGC hub, BBC News

Alex Gubbay, Social Media Editor, BBC News

Rory Cellan-Jones, Digital election correspondent, BBC News

Jon Sopel, Correspondent and presenter the Campaign Show, BBC News

Krishnan Guru-Murthy, Presenter Channel 4 News

Edward Roussel, Digital Editor, Telegraph.co.uk

Kate Day, Communities Editor, Telegraph.co.uk

Shane Richmond, Technology Editor and social media expert, Telegraph.co.uk

Tom Whitwell, Editor Times Online

Maz Nadjm, Online Community Product Manager, Sky

Richard Allan, Director of Policy Europe, Facebook

Rishi Saha, Head of New Media for the Conservative Party

Mark Hanson, Labour blogger and new media strategist

Mark Pack, Liberal Democrat blogger and online strategist

Dan Wilson, social media adviser to Nancy Platts, Brighton Pavilion

Jason Kitkat, Green campaign team, Brighton Pavilion

Jo Wadsworth, Web Editor *Brighton Argus*

Robin Goad, Director Research Hitwise UK

Joe Twynam, Director of Political Research at YouGov

Charlie Beckett, Director Polis, journalism and society think tank

Seb Bacon, Democracy Club

Julian Todd, The Straight Choice

Clifford Singer, founder MyDavidCameron.com

Matthew Oliver, projects manager Unlock Democracy (Vote Match)

Alberto Nardelli, Founder and CEO Tweetminster

Professor William Dutton, Director Oxford Internet Institute

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