

Influence of twitter and social media in uk elections



Role and Influence of Twitter and other social media platforms during recent UK elections

Introduction:

Over the years, social media platforms have rapidly grown as a sphere for political activism due to its wide outreach. Sharing of information and news available across the social media networking sites in various ways is now turning into a vital strategy for the political leaders and parties to campaign (Thorsen, Jackson and Lilleker, 2017). Political leaders across the world have begun using Twitter, Facebook and other social networking sites as a medium for political communication and marketing during election campaigns.

The political parties try to increase the reach of their election campaign by channelling their message through the young audiences' personal networks (Thorsen, Jackson and Lilleker, 2017). The leaders are able to gain support either through direct interaction with the individuals or through messages that are shared within their connected social circle (Bright *et al.*, 2017)

This study talks about the extent to which Twitter and other social media networking sites played a decisive role in the recently held two elections in United Kingdom in relatively quick succession in 2015 and 2017. It will also assess how much did these platforms influence the political parties' strategy during the campaigning.

Twitter and 2015 UK General Election

The social media has been a part of the Britain's electoral scenario for a while since the 2015 general elections. With Twitter being a well-established social media tool in UK, Segesten and Bossetta (2017) note that the UK became <https://assignbuster.com/influence-of-twitter-and-social-media-in-uk-elections/>

the second largest country after United States following the British Twittersphere having an estimated 14.8 million accounts in 2015.

The 2015 general elections which was influenced by the social media for the first time saw Twitter being dominated by left-wing Labour party with 58,000 uses of #votelabour as compared to centre-right Conservatives 25,000 uses of #voteconservative (Bartlett and Jones, 2015). Other parties including UK Independent Party had 15,000 mentions with #voteukip and 27,000 #votesnp for SNP (Bartlett and Jones, 2015)

Margetts (2017) highlights that while the electoral success of the Conservatives was attributed to the giant expenditure of £1.2 million on the negative Facebook advertising targeted at Labour candidate Ed Miliband, it was the Labour's "bottom-up" campaign on Twitter which drew the attention of the users.

The Twitter campaign accounts of all the 8 political parties and leaders had produced a total of 22,397 tweets throughout the elections (Jensen, 2016) but of those about 13% of tweets were informative while generating only 2% of mobilizing content (Segesten and Bossetta, 2017). Even though the Labour and Conservatives tried to drive voter engagement, their mobilizing messages by them lacked as against the UK Independent Party (UKIP) and Scottish National Party (SNP), who tweeted number of times a day targeting specific constituencies (Segesten and Bossetta, 2017)

As (Lewis, 2015) notes that most of the politicians and their party used the social media platform as a digital marketing tool without interacting with the voters personally. Even the content posted on Twitter and Facebook
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appeared to prove the loyalty of the party rather than drawing the attention of the new potential voters.

2017 UK General Election: The “ first-social media” election

The GE 2015 had the potential to be the first social media election (Reuters, 2015) but the 2017 UK general elections was dubbed as the first social media election in the country. The GE 2017 which was announced as a “ snap election” by Prime Minister Theresa May ahead of the 2020 date in order to make Brexit a success (Boyle and Maidment, 2017) saw social media platforms especially Twitter turning into a political battleground for the political parties while attracting many first-time young voters (Thorsen, Jackson and Lilleker, 2017).

The number of Twitter users in 2017 rose to 16.4 million from 14.8 million in 2015 within the election period (Bright *et al.*, 2017 cited Statista, 2017). The social media became the dominant source of political news and information (Gallacher and Kaminska, 2017) more than the traditional media which influenced both the political candidates and public's opinion throughout the election.

“ Labour” was yet again the most active political party on social media to strategically plan and use their social media presence innovatively on a larger scale as compared to Conservatives. The party began its online campaigning even before the elections began to appeal and target the young voters while investing in a huge effort in using Twitter and Facebook to encourage them to register their vote (Booth and Hern, 2017).

Polonski (2017) notes that even though the Labour lagged in the election polls throughout the campaigning, it won the battle for “ votes” on “ social media election” by gaining the highest number of votes as against the Conservatives (Booth and Hern, 2017).

The impact of Crosby and Labour party’s active engagement with the voters led to 622, 000 people (GetSet, 2017) supporting the party in the final 24 hours of the registration period alone.

Jeremy Corbyn himself tweeted on his personal Twitter account on a regular basis as a result of which 26% of his posts urged the public to vote for the party (MarketMakers’, 2017).

During the entire campaign as Thorsen, Jackson and Lilleker (2017) note, Labour garnered over 1 million shares on Facebook, which was three times more than the Conservatives besides posting over three times as often.

While the Conservatives spent over £1 million on negative Facebook adverts attacking Labour candidate Jeremy Corbyn (Kentish, 2017) and focusing on strengths of Prime Minister Theresa May, Labour focused more on gaining supporters by uplifting their campaign on both Twitter and Facebook (Kentish, 2017)

Even though Labour party did not win the election, the social media did increase candidate Jeremy Corbyn’s online popularity among the new age voters on Twitter (Polonski, 2017), which led to the Labour’s election result witnessing its share of vote rise by 9.6 points to 40 %, considered to be the

highest increase in a single election since 1945 (GetSet cited The Guardian, 2017)

Twitter as a news source and sharing of junk news:

During the 2016 US presidential elections, the presence and sharing of fake news and targeted advertising on social media platforms were largely debated. Though there were distribution of strongly opiated content with a political twist, but fake news was unable to make its way on Facebook and affect the outcome of elections (Littunen, 2017).

Similarly, in a study by Oxford Internet Institute highlighted by (Littunen, 2017) it was found that only 11. 4% of “ junk news” stories were shared as compared to 33. 8% during US election.

Though social media users shared five links to professional news and information, they even shared one link to junk news during election campaign (Howard *et al.* , 2017). However, in another study by Bournemouth, it was found that while 13 % tweets were regarding junk news, 54% tweets were linked to the professional news and information sources and about 16. 5% of traffic was generated by highly automated accounts about UK politics (Thorsen, Jackson and Lilleker, 2017)

The BBC was the most popular news source being shared with 22. 7% of the content coming from this source, followed by 17. 7% links directing to the Guardian’s website (Howard *et al.* , 2017). A majority of various other political content shared was from public generated sources like blogs and civil society organisations, whose links were more as compared to the links to junk news.

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However, unlike the 2016 elections where it was claimed that the spreading of fake news propelled Donald Trump to office (Tait, 2017), the UK election results did not see any influence of fake news circulation.

An analysis by BuzzFeed (Bauchowitz and Hänska, 2017) noted that among the 30 most frequently shared URLs, the Conservative supporters had shared almost 13 story links attacking Corbyn and Labour and only 2 stories were related to Conservative policy. On the other hand, Labour supporters shared 14 stories attacking conservatives while 7 focused on Labour's policy (Bauchowitz and Hänska, 2017).

Meanwhile, on Facebook there were more links to negative stories about Corbyn and absence of positive story links to May.

Twitter Analysis:

Hern (2017) highlighted a study by the Oxford Internet Institute which stated that the "Labour" party dominated the conversation on Twitter, with almost 40% of tweets on election-related hashtags and provided the digital strategists an analysis of Labour winning the 'social media election' (Thorsen, Jackson and Lilleker, 2017). On the other hand, the Twitter saw only 26% tweets about Conservative party, with the SNP, UKIP and Liberal Democrats receiving 19 per cent, 9.6 per cent and 5.7 per cent, respectively (Hern, 2017).

According to Twitter data (Gallacher and Kaminska, 2017), about 88% of the Labour candidates created account as compared to 73% of Conservative candidates.

With almost 63% of the online population (Polonski, 2017) using Facebook each week, of which 80% constitute the younger generation aged between 18 to 24, it makes Facebook the most widely used social networking site in the UK. During the 2017 election campaigning, Facebook was the most crucial social media channel on which content of articles or videos were shared 16 million times (Littunen, 2017) related to Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn.

Even though the most talked about politicians in the top 20 political subjects during the election on Facebook were Theresa May and the Tories, it was the Labour which gained popularity and whose posts were shared almost a million times (Shammas, 2017). This proved how the social media influenced and enhanced a serious political engagement while leading to young voters expressing their political opinion.

But (Thorsen, Jackson and Lilleker, 2017) notes that Twitter had the most crucial role to play throughout the GE 2017 campaign as the retweets made were more than the number of tweets as compared to the original tweets being only about one-quarter of the total GE 2017 discussion.

The Twitter debate around GE 2017 which was dominated by the pro-Labour conversation hashtags (Cram *et al.*, 2017) also witnessed the ongoing issue of "Brexit" as one of the top three most popular hashtag. Not only the external issues but also the hashtags introduced by various broadcast media outlets heavily influenced the GE 2017 Twitter debate (Cram *et al.*, 2017)

Brexit, which continues to be the hottest topic till date, saw an increase in the tweets and posts by the Conservatives from 20 per cent to almost a third
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while the Labour did not post any content related to it during the campaign (Express, 2017)

With the Labour party focusing on social issues especially healthcare as a part of the online campaigning, the posts on the party's Facebook and Twitter pages were being shared almost three times more in total by the users (Cecil, 2017). Twitter was the most powerful tool used by the Labour for which the party (Booth and Hern, 2017) had spent a huge amount of money just to promote its single #forthemany hashtag.

Corcoran notes (2017) that Corbyn's video message on the day of the election had over 88,000 engagements and 1.6 million views which prompted his followers to vote for him whereas May's lengthy status update attracted only 12,000 engagements (Corcoran, 2017)

The Labour which was much more active in posting content more than the Conservatives and any other party successfully generated about 2.5 total interactions as compared to the latter which had only 1 million interactions. Although 90% of shares, likes and comments for Labour was a result of their video posts (Thorsen, Jackson and Lilleker, 2017)

Even though Labour was a way ahead of the conservatives, the Conservatives did see a jump in its page for a brief period on May 27 following a video post encouraging its followers to share it if they didn't want to elect Corbyn as their PM (Corcoran, 2017). The video had about 150,000 engagements and almost 9 million views. Despite being considered to be the highest number of views for any other political campaign video in the British history, the young

voters were more inspired by the positive messages by Labour than the negative tone of the Conservatives (Reid and Ma, 2017)

The GE 2017 online campaigning witnessed a tough war between the two major parties with the Labour page receiving more number of shares, likes and love reactions as against Conservatives page which saw more comments on less posts besides receiving angry reactions to majority of their posts (Corcoran, 2017)

Out of every five posts on Twitter or Facebook by Conservatives, four posts had mentions of either Theresa May or Jeremy Corbyn, an increase from 75% to 84% (Express, 2017)

Due to the elections being called early only 63 per cent of the 2015 candidates used Twitter during GE 2017 as compared to 76% percent of the candidates in GE 2015. But, the twitter activity increased, with candidates having a Twitter account posting 86 tweets in 2015 (Technology Review, 2017) to 123.5 tweets in 2017.

Frequent Mentions and Postings:

Twitter witnessed Jeremy Corbyn as the most mentioned account with 1,367,392 and Theresa May at only 654,417, much more than their respective parties where @uklabour was mentioned in 323,027 tweets and @conservatives was mentioned almost 307,550 times (Cram *et al.*, 2017)

While #BBCqt was the most used hashtags followed by #GE2017, #VoteLabour was the third most used Labour hashtags (Thorsen, Jackson and Lilleker, 2017). Here, mainstream media also pla

During the beginning of the election campaign, Corbyn had more than twice the number of followers on both Twitter and Facebook as that of May's accounts (Cecil, 2017) and by the end of the election Corbyn also gained more supporters than May. With a 45 per cent increase in the number of followers on Twitter and Facebook pages of Corbyn over the campaign, the numbers reached from 850, 000 each to more than 1. 2 million (Cecil, 2017)

More than the Labour's account, Corbyn's personal Twitter account had Labour supporting engagement which led to Twitter attracting more Labour supporters as compared to Conservative engagement driven by May's account (Bauchowitz and Hänska, 2017)

The generation of famous memes by @laboureoin ended up being an exceptionally effective strategy for encouraging retweets conveying a socialist message (Cram *et al.* , 2017).

While conservatives posted about 10 to 20 posts a single day, the Labour interacted more with its supporters through social media by posting over 30 posts (GetSet, 2017) each day across all the social media platforms.

Though the savvy use of social media platforms effectively by Corbyn and Labour helped them drive reach out to young first-time voters (Cram *et al.* , 2017), the microtargeting advertising strategy of Conservatives was

effective (Wendling, 2017) but because it did not go down well with the public's view led to their failure over social media (Wendling, 2017).

It can be said that instead of shaping the public opinion, the social media was simply contemplating the opinion.

According to the data by YouGov (Yaxley, 2017) the Brits believed that the broadcast media including 42% of television, print media including 32% of newspapers and magazines had more influence on them over social media, which only had 26 % influence, regarding how they decided to vote.

But about 50 % young voters (Yaxley, 2017) believed that it was the social media which helped them choose whom to vote for as it was not only primary source of political information but also helped them communicate with the politicians directly. While television still remained the first influence for the votes, social media turned out to be the second most influence on votes by younger voters aged between 18-24 years old (Yaxley, 2017)

With the social media campaign which encouraged young voters to register their votes, the Labour party was able to add a total of 33 parliamentary seats and outnumber the majority held by the Conservatives.

The Labour party believed that the effective use of social media helped them win the seats they lost during the GE 2015 with their message videos being able to reach to 30% of the UK Facebook users (Crabtree, 2017).

Conclusion:

The result of the GE 2017 would have been quite different if social media did not play a major role and influenced the campaign, as Twitter and Facebook only helped the Labour party transform its fate and gain support through its powerful messages.

The GE 2017 saw a massive use of Facebook and Twitter but the political leaders and parties did not make their presence felt on other popular social networking apps including "Instagram" and "Snapchat" much. Even though they lack the share feature, these apps are built around close ties which would have helped the parties and leaders make the content strongly effective among peer to peer (Thorsen, Jackson and Lilleker, 2017). While Snapchat was hardly used during the election, Instagram too saw only 33, 200 followers of Labour and 6, 555 followers of Tories (Thorsen, Jackson and Lilleker, 2017)

The social media networks give the politicians and their parties an opportunity to engage in new forms of community building and allow the general public to enter their political arena through direct interaction (Gibson, 2015; Gibson et al. 2016). The parties are able to mobilise not only members but also non-members to raise their voice and put forward their opinions on their behalf during elections (Bright *et al.*, 2017 cited Karpf et al). The new resources that such tools generate clearly offer a considerable boost to parties' capacity to fight and win elections (Lilleker *et al.*, 2017)

In order to reach out to the users, the political parties made use of the social media as a powerful tool by sharing video messages only because the

broadcasting of any political advertising outside of official party is banned from UK television (GetSet, 2017).

The emergence of political attack ads (GetSet, 2017) which was prevalent in the 2016 Presidential campaign was also seen for the first time during the 2017 general elections.

The success of the leftist Labour party in UK during the 2017 election on social media and the right Republican party by Donald Trump during 2016 US elections has been given to savvy use of Twitter and the immediate sharing facilities of social media by the leaders and followers (Segesten and Bossetta, 2017). Even the results of the election show how a well-planned social media campaign with a targeted audience can prove beneficial to any political party.

Witnessing the huge reach of social media in the US 2016 GE and UK GE 2017, it can be said that the social media platforms are now providing the politicians a new way of utilising their power. But, it is also to be noted that with social media becoming increasingly crowded and dripped with fake articles and clickbait articles (Polonski, 2017) it gets difficult for many political leaders and parties to build meaningful relationship with the public (Polonski, 2017)

The social media especially Twitter brought the volatility and change within the political mobilisation and collective action in the GE 2017 (Margetts, 2017)

Twitter is obviously not illustrative of the voters as a whole and along these lines it is not really a clear impression of "the many, not the few". While

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Twitter can't be utilized to anticipate elections and (Cram *et al.* , 2017) the mind-boggling support that GE 2017 saw for Labour and Jeremy Corbyn may not be completely reflected in the polling booths, it is a helpful tool in giving us the mind-set of the individuals who are spurred enough to remark on social media platforms.

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