



Title: Social media use, online political discussion  
and UK political events 2013-2018: a  
phenomenographic study

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Social media use, online political discussion  
and UK political events 2013-2018: a  
phenomenographic study

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Ph. D

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# **Social media use, online political discussion and UK political events 2013-2018: a phenomenographic study**

**Volume 1 of 1**

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**RIMAP**

**October 2018**

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## **Author's Declaration**

I, Elizabeth Anne Bailey declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

### **Social media use, online political discussion and UK political events 2013-2018: a phenomenographic study**

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have cited the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
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6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
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## Abstract

Social media has had observably significant effects on the way many ordinary people participate in politics and appears both symptomatic and causal of a changing landscape. Research, often data-led, has shown marked trends in online behaviour, such as political polarisation, the tendency to form echo chambers and other distinct patterns in the way people debate, share opinions, express their self-identities, consume media and think critically, or otherwise, about political issues.

A review of the literature shows that current research in this area across disciplines explores an increasingly wide range of potential influencing factors behind these phenomena, from the social to the psychological to the physiological. However, there have been – far - fewer phenomenological or phenomenographical studies into people’s lived experience of being part of this cultural shift, how their own inclinations, practices and behaviour might be helping to shape the bigger picture, and to what extent they understand this.

Starting from an interdisciplinary theoretical framework, and based on in-depth conversations with 84 mostly UK-based adults spoken to one-to-one or in focus groups and webinars over an 18-month period, this study asked people’s about their own perceptions and understanding of their online engagement, focusing on recent major UK political events between 2013 and 2018, (including the Scottish Independence Referendum, The EU Referendum and the Labour Party leadership contests) and considers some of the inferences that might be drawn from people’s own insights.

It shows:

- People’s experiences are varied, influenced by a range of factors but there is a focus on personal needs and concerns as much as wider political ones
- Participants often struggle with behavioural self-awareness and understanding of the motives and actions of others
- They can have profound emotional responses owing to the difficulties of using social media but still value it as a medium for political learning and self-expression
- A lot of activity takes places in covert, limited or private spaces
- Social media itself is an unprecedented learning environment where people begin to understand their own behaviour better and adapt





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## Glossary

Term	Definition
Admin	Someone who manages, jointly (mostly) or alone a group on a social media platform such as Facebook and moderates exchanges, ensuring compliance with group rules.
Alt-left	Keyboard shortcut, also popular rejoinder and rhetorical response to ‘alt-right’ (see below). A very contested term which differs depending on context but broadly covering a range of mostly online left-activism.
Alt-right	Keyboard shortcut, also an umbrella term for (often online) activists operating in far-right political spheres such as white supremacism, neo-Nazism, Holocaust denial and ‘men’s rights’.
Backfire effect	The idea that people, when presented with evidence against their beliefs, will reject the evidence and believe their own viewpoint even more strongly. <sup>1</sup>
Bot	Automated system that on social media can generate multiple false personas and messages.
‘Centrist Dad’	Pejorative term used by supporters of Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn towards older, centrist or ‘Blairite’ supporting party members.
Doxing	Publishing the personal details, such as address of phone number as a form of threat or abuse
Flat-earthers	People who promulgate the idea that the Earth is flat rather than spherical. These beliefs gained popularity during the 20th century. Followers of the idea may be serious or motivated by mischief. Those who are serious are often influenced pseudoscience or religious fundamentalism.
Gammon	Pejorative. Older white man characterised as angry and who supports Brexit or other policies perceived as conservative and reactionary.
‘Generation Identity’	Self describes as a European patriotic youth movement promoting ‘homeland, freedom and tradition’ through activism. <a href="https://www.generation-identity.org.uk/">https://www.generation-identity.org.uk/</a>
Lexit/Lexiteer	Someone who supports leaving the EU from a socialist perspective.
Meme	An idea that spreads from person to person within a culture to communicate a phenomenon, idea or meaning. It functions as a unit for carrying cultural ideas and practices from one mind to another through

<sup>1</sup> Nyhan, B.; Reifler, J. (June 2010), ‘When corrections fail: the persistence of political misperceptions’, Political Behavior, Springer.



Term	Definition
	writing, speech, gestures, rituals, or other imitable phenomena. Popularly used for mainly image-based material shared on social media. The term was coined by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins
Red-pilling	Slang term in alt-right- internet communities such as those connected to the 'men's rights' and 'white supremacist' movements. From a scene in the cult science fiction film The Matrix (1999) where character Neo takes a red pill which allows him to see things 'as they really are'.
Sock puppet	False online identity.

## Chapter 1: Introduction and rationale for study

### 1.1 Statement of research questions, aims, objectives and hypotheses.

This study is about how people discuss politics online. The last five years have offered particularly rich pickings for students of political discourse. Using a phenomenographic approach to interrogate a series of case study events, it aims to provide insights into the lived experience of those who participate in political discussion on social media. In so doing, it addresses gaps in understanding of a complex contemporary phenomenon.

Based primarily on individual and focus-group in-depth interviews with more than 80 people around the United Kingdom (UK), it engages with participants' own perceptions of their experiences, and how they have interpreted them. It addresses the following research questions:

- RQ1: What factors influence the way UK users of social media engage in online political discussion?
- RQ2: How do these participants themselves understand and evaluate their participatory role, particularly in relation to key political events in the period studied?
- RQ3: How do they see the relationship between their online activity and real-life political outcomes?

#### Research objectives

To:

- add to the body of knowledge on political participation
- gain a deeper understanding of the meaning and significance of informal, online political expression as seen from the perspective of participants

#### Working hypothesis

That developing a more nuanced, observational understanding of why people believe that they act and interact as they do in the relatively novel medium of social media can support a more holistic

\*understanding of current macropolitical change. Further, it might open up ways of thinking about online public debate that support constructive agonism.

Anticipated contribution(s) to knowledge to be made by the thesis.

While part of a rapidly developing field of enquiry, this research is distinctive in taking a pluralist, phenomenographic approach - with a qualitative focus on lived experience and its variations as reported by everyday participants. It asks how people understand and make sense of their experience of online political participation and its impact over time; and what factors might have a bearing on their perspectives. Given the researcher's own, longstanding interest in how people discuss politics, this thesis also has a reflexive element.

## 1.2 Contexts of study

### Academic context

Internet-based political behaviour is a burgeoning research field. This is unsurprising, as the UK and indeed the wider world have witnessed much political transformation in the past decade. Online media seem both intuitively and demonstrably to be part and parcel of many of these shifts, a fact which has attracted a range of scholarly interest across disciplines. Research shows multiple overlapping scholarly communities studying social media. Early social media research used social network analysis and quantitative methods, but the most cited and influential work recently has come from other fields such as marketing and health (Foote et al. 2018). The literature and conceptual review which follows in Chapter 2 attempts to capture some of the range of perspectives on social media in relation to everyday political practice.

A review of key scientific studies on social media, polarisation and misinformation points out that research has already revealed many of the characteristics of online political discussion—but there is a lot more to understand. It argues that research might focus on the prevalence and types of political discussions which take place social media, the degree of exposure to wider opinions, the roots and outcomes of uncivil behaviour, and the characteristics of each channel that encourage particular sorts of expression (Tucker et al. 2018).

Wimmer argues that all cases of mediated participation should be seen as very contextual, and suggests empirical studies might investigate the varying contexts of engagement, and the ways in which digitally mediated social interaction shapes everyday participation, and the subjective as well as societal meaning surrounding this (Wimmer et al. 2017). Another study suggests there should be more attention paid to situational and dispositional factors when assessing the implications of social media for political communications (Vaccari et al. 2016).

The voices of participants themselves are often missing from accounts of the effects of social media on politics, and there remains further scope to explore the vast range of individual and community experience using qualitative approaches, for example, ethnographic or phenomenological studies.

In the introduction to his engaging personal examination of the effects of online media on democracy, *Ctrl Alt Delete*, Tom Baldwin concedes that many of the people he consulted were like him, political and media professionals of a certain age, background and social class (Baldwin, 2015).

Indeed, this cohort is very well represented in accounts given so far. So, there is ample room for the voices of everyday users to be heard.

#### Political context

The phenomena explored here are, of course, part of a complex interactive system being shaped by and in turn shaping external events. Worldwide, the political landscape has experienced apparently seismic shifts of late, but this is in line with longer term trends in changing behaviour. A rise in populism has been put down to a range of factors including economic insecurity and ‘cultural backlash’, that is, a ‘retro reaction’ by previously dominant groups to progressive changes in values (Inglehart & Norris 2016). In the UK, incremental political change has included a continued decline in engagement in traditional practices like voting, party membership and trade union activism (Hansard Society 2013). Over the past 50 years there has been a steady decline in membership of the main UK parties. ‘The political party is dying,’ wrote journalist Andrew Rawnsley in 2013 (Pickard & Stacey 2015). Members of the UK’s four main parties are now most likely to be male, middle class and over 50 (*Guardian* 2018). Certainly, in the five years since, each of the parties has undergone disruptive change.

This long-term decline in engagement with establishment politics is in line with patterns seen over several decades in most established democracies (Whiteley 2011, D’Art & Turner 2007). A substantial body of scholarship has continued to focus on this ‘crisis’ with some suggesting terminal decline to a post-democratic situation (Crouch 2004). On certain measures, such as levels of trust in the system, Britain does appear to have been facing a predicament, however, people do not seem less engaged and participation beyond the ballot box has increased, (Bromley et al. 2004). This may

be influenced by factors such as the rise of identity politics, which has displaced collective, class-based political expression with more personalised, individual assertions based around values and multiple and often overlapping causes and identities (Bennett 2012). Meantime, while fewer people use conventional ways to make their voice heard, the use of social media for politics has ‘exploded’ (Miller 2016).

Coleman argues that relations between the public and political authority in democracies like the UK have been in a period of ‘transformative flux’ and suggests new ideas about citizenship are being created and put into action while mainstream political communication is entering a decline (2009). However, in early 2015, an observable spike in the membership of minor UK parties occurred. More than 100,000 people joined the Greens, the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and the Scottish National Party (SNP) in a few months (Pickard & Stacey 2015). This was something denied to the main two parties until the UK Labour Party elected as leader, twice over, a man widely viewed as an outlier candidate himself, and provoked an increase in membership to more than half a million, making Labour by any analysis one of the largest parties in Western Europe. UKIP, meanwhile, has experienced marked fluctuations in its fortunes over the study period. The increased availability of previously marginalised messages, primarily through social media has – possibly – been doing one of two things, either persuading people to change their minds, or indeed giving them ‘permission’ to follow some deeply inculcated or perhaps sublimated inclinations.

UKIP, the Scottish independence campaign and a revived Corbyn-led Labour left have, over this period, stood out as significant, emergent movements which, initially without the backing of well-established party infrastructures have relied on social media to build support. Each has won

involvement from the disengaged, and all have been focused towards major political events. New forms of affiliation have increased the reach of parties without extending their financial support base. Social media is a useful tool for parties to spread messages and win voter support and they use it in varying ways (Greenwood 2015). Digital activity is an add-on for members which some people do without formal membership, suggesting that digital affiliation can offer a new campaign resource (Gibson et al. 2017). Indeed, the 2015 Labour leadership contest, leading to the unexpected victory of late-nominated candidate Jeremy Corbyn, drew in large numbers of new supporters, partly because of online media activity promoting a new 'registered supporter' scheme and via an online canvassing 'app'. The outcome has been followed by often fierce, stubborn and ongoing online debate which has offered a rich, engaging and revealing source of vernacular conversation about fundamental political issues and moreover, a fulsome demonstration of the characteristics of informal political argument.

Studies over the past decade highlight a trend towards more direct forms of activism (Cantijoch, Cutts, & Gibson, 2012) and single-issue politics, (McHugh 2005; Coleman 2009; Dahlgren 2009, 2013). Key upswings in engagement in the UK indeed have single issues at their core – including the Scottish independence campaign and the growth of UKIP, for example. Questions of identity and values are at the heart of both UKIP and SNP campaigning and the Labour leadership debate - and indeed much current political discourse – these are significant and emotive existential questions which find fertile ground in the inclusive, opportunistic, immediate yet also often combative environment of online political discussion. Greater opportunities have coincided with perceived greater reasons to engage, and both social media companies and would-be influencers and manipulators have rushed to exploit the compulsive and highly engaging characteristics of social media and the behavioural effects they tend to provoke. The effects of and opportunities offered

by portable computing in the form of phones and tablets, enabling social media to flourish, thus can nurture, magnify and potentially distort many political trends.

In this environment, political engagement is clearly not foundering but does appear to be changing form substantially. Community action, and mass petitioning through online campaigning organisations such as 'Change.org', 'Avaaz' and '38 degrees', and lobbying for causes show that many people still want to have a say in public life, but factors like convenience and immediacy are important draws.

Surrounding all this focused activism lies a vast and increasing proliferation of online political, pre-political discussion, position-taking, meaning creation and belief formation. Huge in volume, and unprecedented in that the musings of so many are being (reasonably well) preserved, having effects long after their authors may have forgotten them, this material forms an extraordinary, passionate, living intertext, (inter)active record and public sphere, with its own distinctive sociological and political features.

The volume of online political discussion has been increasing. The period under study has seen an 'unprecedented digitalisation of politics' (Miller 2015). Social networking sites have become a key venue for political discussion and civic-related activities (Anderson et al. 2018). Political engagement is widespread on social media (Miller 2016). Facebook's 'Year in Review' for 2016 clearly shows politics topping the discussion table worldwide, although as it was a US Presidential Election year this is understandable (Neman 2016). 'Tribal' political posts on Facebook increased during 2017



(Rayson 2017). It is likely that these growth patterns are a function variously of the increased take-up of devices and media, the number of high-profile political events, organised attempts to motivate people and those people's increasing willingness to engage.

It is important to remember as well that political talk does not just take place in designated 'political' spaces such as dedicated discussion groups but is threaded through ordinary conversation on newspaper and broadcast media outlet 'comments' sections, social media and other online forums, and that anyway, people's own definitions of 'political' will vary and have fuzzy boundaries. Allen and Light et al (2015) note, for example that the ways in which we gather information and communicate it have been transformed by digital media. They observe that the political is no longer confined to formal arenas (if it ever was), and that has profound implications for how we understand participation. Graham et al discuss how, for instance, pre- and para- political talk infuses self-help forums such as *MumsNet* and *Money Saving Expert*, which might offer a more welcoming or accessible route to discuss the everyday concerns which are at heart, political (Graham, Jackson, & Wright, 2016). The material thus produced is a rich information source. Reagle argues that commenting is a specific cultural form, arising from complex and various impulses focused around the same opportunity, and can tell us a lot about the meaning of participation (Reagle 2015). This has been backed up by this researcher's own fieldwork.

The idea for this study grew from a long-term personal interest in the way people talk about politics and the challenges they experience in doing so, and an observation that something, or more accurately, some *things* of marked social significance were happening in respect of how people discussed and debated politics in online media in particular, an observation that has been borne out

abundantly by subsequent events. Moreover, it was apparent that academics and commentators had begun to articulate, from a variety of different perspectives, aspects of what they believed to be happening, but there were clearly many more angles from which phenomena might be understood. A key question therefore has been what these angles might be.

Whatever the proportionality and quality of participation, and whatever the factors one might speculate lie behind it, the significance of this online output both to participants and the wider social and political world offers many potential avenues for the curious researcher.

Environmental context

What sorts of factors are generating traffic and directing behaviour? These appear both simple and complex. The relative extent to which changing forms of political participation are internet-determined or provoked, or a reflection of wider cultural change will remain a matter of debate. Nonetheless, that the internet has had profound effects would be nonsensical to deny.

To give some prosaic examples, Rand Strauss of the political profiling website PeopleCount.org lists key aspects of how online media affect political practice (Strauss 2012):

- how people give their time has changed, they can organise meetings, rallies, and fundraisers on social network sites
- politicians can now reach constituents virtually
- breaking news, analysis, and statistics are available continuously
- people can learn about issues quickly by clicking

- they have more channels than ever to voice their opinion; and,
- online video has changed how we experience political debates.

Fenton identifies three 'dual and interconnected' themes (2016):

- speed and space – facilitating communication and reducing costs
- connectivity and participation - empowerment
- diversity and horizontality – decentralisation.

These might loosely be described as logistical factors.

Less well studied are the crosscutting interactions of our social practice, psychology and indeed physiology with these novel affordances, and the often difficult-to-predict outcomes of these processes. Some of these other factors driving behaviour are hard-wired, and our need to satisfy innate and visceral drives is an underlying mechanism that is effectively exploited by platform developers (Williams 2018). However, in achieving this, the law of unintended consequences has played a role, as online spaces also allow a free rein to base urges, particularly when it comes to politics. Based on current understanding in neuroscience, it is not unreasonable to speculate that these profound and affecting processes in themselves might be having significant longer-term adaptive or epigenetic effects on the human brain, as has been suggested by Swingle (2015). As will be shown, many political encounters on social media can be stressful, and we know that stressful interactions with an environment can induce specific changes in behaviour and in brain structure and function (Williams 2018).

So how do individuals experience this? What does this all mean to those taking part, as they articulate it, and beyond this, what relevance to the wider political environment is there? How do people learn to navigate and negotiate an entirely new and often challenging social environment and what effects might this have on them?

A working assumption has been that the behaviour, attitudes and self-perception of people choosing to participate, however modestly, in online activism or political debate, can yield further insights into how people think about political belief formation and expression generally. Further, based on this hypothesis, it matters because the small actions of many individuals, motivated by and arising from their own perceptions, over time and in aggregate, can amount to a significant force in shaping society and each other, regardless of their own self-awareness and intent.

In other words, with reference to the historical sociological debate over structure versus agency, the significance of individual agency is taken as read. Therefore, despite the obvious complexity of online political expression, it is valuable to try to understand its characteristics and possible effects at participant level.

Rationale for contextual case studies

For practical reasons which include scope, specific knowledge and interest, the context of this research has taken place in an established democratic setting, the UK, and to provide a useful working framework for participants, fieldwork questions focused around (although not exclusively) patterns of online involvement in relation to four major recent UK contextual case study events.

These events are the Scottish Independence Referendum; the EU Referendum (and associated growth of UKIP); the Labour Party Leadership elections of 2015 and 16 and their aftermath; and the 2017 UK general election. They were chosen in part because they have attracted high levels of ongoing online political involvement and few people avoided engagement of some sort with at least one of them. The online discussion surrounding them is notable for the richness of available evidence and all are both symptomatic and reflective of other changes in the demographic and political landscape and the public communications infrastructure generally. It should however be noted that during fieldwork, participants also made comments about other political topics with which they had engaged. Where this commentary is relevant, it has been included.

In the context of these events, and online, participatory behaviour has shown distinctive characteristics, in terms of style, attitude, approach and sociological features. Further, developments appear in many respects coterminous, suggestive of a *correlation* between the growth of emergent UK political groupings and events, the growth of online and social media use and take up of portable mobile internet devices. One aspect of this appears to be the potent encounter of hard-wired physical and emotional needs with well-designed technological affordances.

The interactive, iterative nature of the public conversation arising from this situation in turn lends itself to exploration from several perspectives, using a number of potential interpretive approaches, discussed further in the methodology chapter. Many of us like to talk about politics, the Electoral Commission claims there are more than 15 million political conversations in Britain every day, and we like the way social media allows us to do it (Miller 2016). What is not fully clear is the level and nature of any causative relationships vis-à-vis real-world outcomes, but there is scope for personal

accounts of involvement to shed some light on this. This work therefore explores possible motivations, mechanisms and meanings behind these phenomena seen (and sometimes not seen) from the level of participants. It will look at the perceptions of individuals and some of the issues significant to them.

### Timeframe

Fieldwork has asked about people's experiences during the (approximately) five-year period between the announcement in March 2013 of an independence referendum by the Scottish government up to the passing of the UK European Union (Withdrawal) Act in June 2018. The period 2013-2018 was chosen for two reasons: first, it covers the point at which social media enjoyed a significant boost in take-up supported by wider adoption of affordable portable computing like the Apple iPad introduced in 2010, and smart phones with similar features (OFCOM 2015, Pearce 2015). Mobile phones or smartphones are now the most popular devices used to access the internet in the UK (Office for National Statistics 2018). One in five UK people spend more than 40 hours a week online, want constant connection to the internet and check their phone every 12 minutes (OFCOM 2018). Second, it is a period of significant political events in the UK, including the Scottish Independence Referendum, two general elections, the EU Referendum and a major party leadership campaign. It has otherwise been one of relative uncertainty, including a coalition government from 2010-15, the rise of smaller parties, issue-focused movements and the emergence of what is commonly-termed 'populism'. Worldwide there has been significant political upheaval, including in the 2016 United States Presidential election, with the unexpected success of populist candidate Donald Trump. The participants in this study have been living in very interesting times and they have been able to navigate and reflect on that in a novel medium.

## Chapter 2: Literature and Conceptual Review

### 2.1 Introduction

The research questions and fieldwork discussion topics outlined in the introduction were developed after observation of online political talk over time and a wider review of current literature. This focused both on how the internet might be affecting individual political participation and on a diverse range of related factors considered by researchers to have a bearing on individual practice.

This literature review aims therefore to present a critical, interdisciplinary overview of significant topics and considerations emerging from this process. It attempts to offer a contextual understanding of the background to the research questions and the argument for the proposed way of addressing knowledge gaps identified. It reflects on the fact that the situation being observed is complex and the methods applied interpretive, and this benefits from a multidimensional and holistic exploration. It is helpful to reflect on the range of perspectives from which online political discussion is being or might be viewed by others - from the points of view of political theory, psychology or even physiology, for example, and which have been considered in the process of identifying gaps. There is also a need to be receptive to developing ideas. Social media has blossomed very quickly, and arguably, there is no field of communication studies developing so rapidly. Research gaps are being very quickly addressed. Thus, the research response must be equally agile and dynamic.

This chapter follows several main strands identified by the researcher as key to contextual understanding - reflections on the Habermasian public sphere in the social media age; a critical summary of key perspectives on the internet and political participation; political participation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century generally; some of the broader cognitive and behavioural factors understood to be

shaping political experience; issues of identity; efficacy; the lived experience of online participation; and the significance of the media to online participation. These form the background to the question domains addressed in fieldwork.

In their succinct paper on tackling literature reviews, Webster and Watson point to the complexity of assembling a review in an interdisciplinary field (2002). Attempting a multi- or interdisciplinary approach to understanding any issue means covering a substantial amount of ground. In practice, this has meant a literature review that is wide-ranging, discursive and narrative, and perhaps best fits in the category of conceptual review. For the reader who reads widely, from time to time very pertinent ideas will present themselves serendipitously. Nonetheless, the approach to collecting literature has been targeted around key domains and has used existing systematic reviews and bibliographies, Boolean searches of key databases and reference sources, subscriptions to a range of relevant online archives, scholar alert services and scholars' mailing lists. Based on this approach, this chapter starts with broad, contextual issues then focuses on the narrow.

## 2.2 Context: The Habermasian Public Sphere in the social media age

The topic of the internet and the public sphere now has a permanent place on research agendas, noted Dahlgren (2005).

This study has not been an attempt to evaluate the internet or social media as manifestations of a Habermasian public sphere. It is much more about the private realms of the individual minds whose various interactions contribute to one of a different kind. Nonetheless, any review of literature in this area benefits from positioning itself in relation to these ideas, which provide justification and further context. Habermas's ideas about deliberative democracy remain an immensely influential



benchmark in the field of political communications, an implicit point of reference, and ‘a source of inspiration’ (Dobson 2014). Rasmussen describes how Habermas distinguishes between three forms of power in the public sphere, political power which needs to be legitimised by agreement and which supports decision-making, power such as economic power, arising from functional systems, and media power arising from technology and infrastructure controlled by powerful individuals who set public agendas and inform public communications. All three types of power, according to Habermas, must obey the ‘communicative logic’ of the public sphere, all participants must contribute facts and arguments which get exposed to critical examination, and, in theory, despite inequalities the most reasonable and convincing arguments will prevail (Rasmussen, T. 2014).

Habermas supplies a critique of current democratic practice, with its declining participation and disaffection with the establishment, while still optimistic that ‘real participatory democracy’ is possible given the ‘right’ conditions (Henneberg, Scammell, & O’Shaughnessy 2009). This ‘rightness’ is a conception of the public sphere which by implication privileges aspects of the status quo and can marginalise more complex everyday political expression, discussed below.

The emergence of the internet, and in particular, social media, as settings for political debate have inevitably led to many assessments of their status as the ‘right conditions’ to be potential public spheres of this type. This persists despite the notion of a rational deliberative public sphere *per se* having been broadly criticised as coming from a particular, hegemonic perspective with ‘a number of significant exclusions’ (Fraser 1987). From current popular perspectives it might indeed be vulnerable to accusations of ‘tone policing’<sup>2</sup> or the ‘tyranny of decency’<sup>3</sup>, amongst other things. As Dahlgren notes, the rationalist bias excludes communicative modes including the affective, poetic,

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<sup>2</sup> See (Jasper 2017)

<sup>3</sup> See (Fogg 2012)

humorous and ironic which are enduring aspects of public political discourse. Worse, it downplays power relations built into such communicative situations. He quotes Kohn: 'reasonableness is itself a social construction which usually benefits those already in power' (Dahlgren, 2005, Kohn, 2000). It has indeed been interesting to note from this field research what types of people found the rational, deliberative Habermasian ideal most appealing, and also to hear very personal subjective accounts of the factors which challenged people's ability or willingness to comply with a rational 'ideal'.

It is arguable that in privileging such an abstract ideal, insufficient attention is paid to the ways people themselves account for the way they think, act and feel in practice and why. To ignore these realities is to risk having expectations of people that they are unlikely to deliver, or, as has been proved latterly, being surprised by the turn of events. Given newer understandings from fields ranging from neuroscience to social justice discourse, such a standard might indeed be seen increasingly to make hegemonic, subjective and unfair demands. This suggests a need for better all-round understanding of the wider and deeper factors behind people's behaviour in practice and allowing their voices to be respectfully heard.

Papacharissi notes that the internet has the potential to revive the public sphere, but aspects of the technology have both positive and negative effects on this. Information storage and retrieval features support political discussion, but access inequality and online literacy affect representativeness. Also, while enabling discussion between people geographically distant, it can also fragment political discourse. She suggests that internet-based technologies may adapt themselves to the political status quo, rather than create a new environment. She concludes that the internet has indeed created a new public space for political discussion, but whether it amounts to a public sphere is not up to the technology itself (Papacharissi 2002). Arguably, this perspective has been challenged by the course of political events in the decade-and-a-half since, where surprising

new pockets of space have presented many challenges to the status quo and access has become very widespread.

Dean dismisses the idea of the internet *per se* offering a public sphere in the Habermasian sense, and described it as ‘a zero institution’ – ‘an empty signifier without deterministic meaning but signifying the presence of meaning’ and having no governmental or constitutional type role (2003). It ‘provides an all-encompassing space in which social antagonism is simultaneously expressed and obliterated’ and ‘...it is a space of conflicting networks and networks of conflict so deep and fundamental that even to speak of consensus and convergence seems an act of naïveté at best.’ The internet is subject, Dean maintains, to the conditions of contemporary techno culture she characterises as ‘communicative capitalism’ - the online merging of democracy and capitalism into one neoliberal form that subverts the democratic inclinations of people by privileging emotional expression over logical discourse. Something along these lines can clearly be observed, although whether the result of design-led, deterministic ‘privileging’ or not is arguable. It is not always clear if the issues are with the internet *per se* or of the inculcations, inclinations, predispositions and indeed general mental wellbeing of its users – or indeed the exploitation of these. It might also be interpreted as people, despite what they themselves might believe, acting in line with some very visceral drivers. Further, other commentators challenge the notion of emotion in public discourse as necessarily being a negative thing. This is discussed further on in the chapter. Lastly, it is difficult to support the idea of social antagonism becoming obliterated, although it has taken on a very complex form.

Dean expressed her own optimism about the internet and chose to interpret the actions of what are understood to be relatively well educated middle-class web-fed movements such as Occupy (in the US) as being evidence of the beginnings of a ‘revolt of the knowledge classes’ (Milkman, Luce, &

Lewis, 2013, Dean, 2014). However, more recently, reflecting on the conditions giving rise to the success of Donald Trump, she has commented:

‘The shift from message to contribution subjects speech or language to an economic logic. Communicative interactions take on crowd dynamics. This is because the channels through which we communicate reward number: the more hits and shares the better. Words are counted in word clouds, visualized in terms of numbers of time repeated. What they might have meant, signified, implied doesn’t matter’ (Dean 2017).

Not untrue, but given insights from network theory, for example around scale-free networks, this probably oversimplifies the picture. Twitter, for example can be considered as a scale-free network fulfilling the small world (short paths between nodes) property (Aparicio et al. 2015). In practice, a simple utterance of one individual and what it means and signifies can have enormous impact given the right circumstances.

Dean notes that Habermas more recently modified his own views on the internet’s role in political participation. Indeed, in an interview published in mid-2013, he observed:

‘After the inventions of writing and printing, digital communication represents the third great innovation on the media plane. With their introduction, these three media forms have enabled an ever-growing number of people to access an ever-growing mass of information. These are made to be increasingly lasting, more easily. With the last step represented by the internet we are confronted with a sort of “activation” in which readers themselves become authors. Yet, this in itself does not automatically result in progress on the level of the public sphere. [...] The classical public sphere stemmed from the fact that the attention of an anonymous public was “concentrated” on a few politically important questions that had to be regulated. This is what the web does not know how to produce. On the contrary, the web actually distracts and dispels.’ (Schwering 2014).

The implication is that he views the distraction and dispelling as a failure, rather than part of a normal process of murmuration and negotiation between agents in a complex network. It might be observed that the internet does often concentrate around a few politically important questions, but then not often in a regulated or directional manner pleasing to a type of academic viewer. As for the

tendency to 'distract and dispel', this simple phrase hints at a multiplicity of inputs, both negative and positive, both political and otherwise, which make the environment exhilarating, sometimes dangerous and an unprecedented communal learning-ground. It also raises questions around why the medium is such an effective distraction, to which psychology and neurosciences can provide at least some answers, to be discussed further on.

Fuchs discusses the concept of the public sphere for understanding social media and argues against an idealistic interpretation of Habermas and in favour of a cultural-materialist understanding grounded in political economy. He goes further to propose a theoretical model of public service and commons-based media as a potential antidote to 'unmanageable turbidity' (Fuchs 2014). Yet the difficulty with turbidity, and an urge to manage chaos *per se* might come from a particular political perspective. Maybe the mess is the message.

The internet is, of course, just one more part of the real world, but it has its own characteristic affordances. Mahlouly notes that social scientists often distinguish virtual environments from the normative public sphere and one of the reasons is because digital technologies provide everyone with the opportunity to contribute to public discourses. In other words, the factors likely to affect the rationality of social interactions, as well as the sustainability of public opinion in a digital world, might rest on the very fact of the high level of public accessibility. This is one of the more significant distinctions between Habermas's bourgeois public sphere and the online spaces of today, she notes. It might therefore be exposing to bright light some of the inherent difficulties of democracy, revealing often hidden realities (Mahlouly 2013).

This situation might also, from some perspectives, be seen to bolster the case for a ‘competitive elitist’ world view. Henneberg et al discuss how contemporary competitive elitists do not necessarily believe that deliberation produces ‘better’ democracy by building consensus about the common good (2009). They quote Shapiro who argues, ‘there is no obvious reason to think that deliberation will bring people together’(2002). This observation is not contradicted a great deal by much online political chatter. Further, if deliberative consensus is achievable, it may lead to the suppression of difference. Even if there are more people who are interested and informed, the majority may remain ignorant and easily manipulated.<sup>4</sup> This relates tangentially to the vision of agonistic pluralism put forward by Mouffe that ‘... theory needs to acknowledge the ineradicability of antagonism and the impossibility of achieving a fully inclusive rational consensus.’ Yet Mouffe also argues that the idea of agonistic pluralism offers a solution to what she sees as the principal current challenge to democratic politics, developing democratic forms of identification to mobilise people’s passions in support of democratic design (Mouffe 2000). It is interesting to speculate whether this is what people think they are doing. While this might suggest a role for the internet, she has nonetheless expressed personal scepticism about the extent to which online spaces support democracy in practice, owing to tendencies to exclude, or form echo-chambers (Carpentier & Cammaerts 2006). The frustration is that the reality is failing to match the model.

In a description that might be applied to each of the major social media platforms, Facebook has been characterised as a ‘privately-regulated public sphere’, a social editor which combines content aggregation and distribution, detailed understanding of users, and moreover the ability to control the structures, processes and terms under which users engage, share and develop social interactions. This, it is asserted, allows Facebook to control ‘the entire process of political

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<sup>4</sup> Democratic elitism therefore focuses on the role of leadership (which it suggests should be safeguarded) as well as the political competitive process (ideally fair, open and designed to produce the best leaders), which has a bearing on one of the contextual case studies.

persuasion', meaning content, space to deliberate about politics, and the network of people to whom they speak (Helberger et al. 2015). However, platforms would not have take-up if they did not respond to the perceived needs of users. As indicated by a survey undertaken by the Adam Smith Institute many academics have left-leaning sympathies (Carl, 2017, Morgan, 2017). With this might go an inclination towards seeing individuals as vulnerable to bigger machinations of power, to side with a 'structure' over 'agency' perspective. However, there is a risk of underplaying individual agency and the ability of those actors to be insightful of the conditions within which they act. Understanding this is surely helped by engaging with participants. One must indeed be mindful of the many 'nudge' factors that encourage people to interact the way they do, and the interplay between these and their own private motivations. Whether in the case of Facebook this constitutes 'the entire process of political persuasion' is open to debate.

The presentation of just some arguments around a conceptualised online public sphere is primarily to acknowledge an important debt to Habermas, as well as to theories about macroeconomic and political drivers. At the same time, it is implicit that more attention might be paid to the multiplicity of individual human interactions that underpin these arguments and trying to understand what lies behind them.

## 2.3 Context: 21<sup>st</sup> century perspectives on the internet and participation

### 'Theorists and thought leaders'

There is now a substantial body of literature on how the internet has been affecting political participation, from sweeping metanarratives to highly-focused individual studies. This section summarises some foundational ideas from the past two decades briefly but critically to give a sense of context.

Presciently, Sunstein warns against the threat of cyberbalkanisation ‘information cocoons’ and ‘echo chambers,’ wherein people avoid the news and opinions that they do not want to hear, where the ideologically compatible cluster together and avoid becoming exposed to, or communicating with, opposing views (2001). The validity of this concern has been borne out by recent evidence (Polonski 2016, Krasodonski-Jones 2016).

Writing before the widespread use of the term ‘web 2.0’ and indeed of mass social media use, Bimber argues that internet developments have created the fourth in a series of ‘information revolutions’ each of which have resulted in structural political changes. Further, the latest technologies fuel ‘information abundance’ and ‘post-bureaucratic’ pluralist political organisation and behaviour and generate multiple and unpredictable political effects. In post-bureaucratic pluralism, organisational boundaries are permeable, and informal affiliation can replace formal membership. He notes that the links between information, knowledge, and behaviour at individual level are complex and contingent (2003). Evidence from fieldwork supports this, although bureaucratic organisation endures in many respects.

Dahlgren sees the potential to foster diversity as a positive benefit of the online communication space: ‘It is here where the internet most obviously contributes to the public sphere’ - the negative side of which is fragmentation (2005). He argues that the idea of civic cultures is a way to understand the significance of online political discussion. Yet Hindman notes there is an inclusivity issue – at that point although hundreds of thousands of Americans were blogging about politics, most got a tiny proportion of visitors, and most readership was still dominated by educated professionals (2009). Eight year later, and given more recent political events, it should be noted that online participation has increased enormously, and in key pockets of activity, it is not always dominated by the educated and privileged.



Jenkins suggests digital developments empower people by offering more freedom of expression and affording them greater influence on their cultural and political environment, while 'transmedia storytelling contributes to coproduced narratives (2006). Benkler discusses how the internet might radically alter political practice because of the way it lends itself to participation and interaction. These characteristics could support a pluralistic public sphere and nurture engagement. He suggests that people gain communicative freedom through the reduction of costs (2006). Shirky discusses how social media and collaborative platforms like Wikipedia support group conversations and action in a way that previously could only be achieved through organisations (2009). Leightoninger, suggests the internet impacts politics in two main ways: through giving individuals greater access to the information needed for decisions and by empowering groups (2011). Flichy argues however that online political engagement tends to be less sustainable and does not nurture communities of people with similar views. He suggests that the digital era has transformed the traditional types of political networks that existed in the twentieth century (2007).

Castells argues that the media have become a social space where power is decided, and he discusses the links between politics, media and the 'crisis' of political legitimacy. He posits the idea that the development of interactive, horizontal networks of communication has led to a new form of communication, mass self-communication. He suggests that as people are now able to enter the public sphere from many different positions, this increases possibilities for radical social change - self-managing horizontal networks, for example, and enhances the ability to challenge resistance to this process (2011). Arguably, it also paves the way for more chaotic, transient and unpredictable effects.

Amongst helpful aggregations of data and metrics, Boulianne undertook a meta-analysis of 38 highly-cited articles and books about US internet use and civic and political engagement, and found

strong evidence to suggest overall, the effects are (mildly) positive. This was followed up by a further analysis published where metadata again showed a positive link between social media use and participation. However, questions remain about whether this is a 'causal and transformative' relationship. The metadata at that point suggested that social media use has minimal impact on participation in election campaigns, which is interesting given more recent events (Boulianne, 2009; 2015). A study based on Australian electoral data meanwhile shows the internet can mobilise not only those who are already interested in politics but also those who are inactive to become more politically engaged (Jiang 2016).

A meta-analytic review of studies from 2007 to 2013 indicates that social media use overall has a positive relationship with social capital, civic engagement, and political participation. It also found positive relationships between expressive, informational, and relational social media use and these indicators of engagement. For identity- and entertainment-focused uses of social media, they found less indication of a relationship with engagement (Skoric et al. 2016).

The accessibility of the internet has clearly affected volume of participation, as with online petitioning sites like Avaaz, Change.org and 38°. Not all have thought this a positive trend, quality-wise. Farina, Newhart and Heidt are critical of government 'magical thinking' around relying on technology to encourage participation in policy making (2012). Also, commentary from serving politicians interviewed by this researcher suggests the volume and homogeneity of such correspondence can sometimes be a cause of frustration.

Other studies have explored the internet's influence on levels and styles of participation, again with a lack of consensus. Polat warns against technological determinism and looks at the relationship

between online media and offline participation by examining three aspects: the internet as a source of information, as a communication medium and as a public sphere. These facets may affect levels and styles of political participation (2005).

Gladwell argues that activism generated through social media only thrives in situations which do not require people 'to make a real sacrifice'. Such media, 'make it easier for activists to express themselves, and harder for that expression to have any impact' (2010). Morozov challenges the idea of the internet as a force for enhancing democracy, highlighting its potential to support oppression, through data collection, access management and censorship (2013; 2011). One might add overt or covert information wars, regarding all three case study events, the 2016 US election, and the well-documented and discussed Russian 'troll houses' for example. It is now possible to create large numbers of fraudulent accounts with plausible credentials. Called sock-puppets or Sybils, these can be used to generate influence effects through giving the false appearance of collective action of multiple individuals (Duncan 2015).

Technology may be altering attitudes towards basic democratic values. A cross-sectional survey of the American public found strong correlation between Facebook and personal blog use, for example, and support for civil liberties. Social media sites encourage people to share and seek personal information constantly and can alter how they view the world in ways that political scientists have not been able to fully capture (Swigger 2012; 2013). Calling on Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field and capital, Sterne notes that technologies are shaped socially, as are their meanings and use, and all can change over time for groups of people. They should be considered not as special phenomena but much like other kinds of social practice (Bourdieu 1993, Sterne 2003).

Van Dijck argues that digital media are also driven by economic interests, and far from being neutral, are affecting the nature and rules of social interactions (Van Dijck & Poell 2013). This is a key point to consider, and one that relates to Dean's point about communicative capitalism and also the idea of privately controlled public spheres.

Participation in online groups was strongly correlated with offline participation, according to a study of the 2008 US election, possibly by engaging members online. However, researchers could not prove a positive link between group participation and political knowledge, which they note might be down to low quality discussion (Conroy et al. 2012). Social media used for social purposes supports political engagement and expression and news consumption via social media has direct effects on offline participation, and indirect effects on both offline and online participation through political expression (Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2014). Engagement by young people with some forms of non-political online activity acts as a conduit to civic or political participation such as volunteering, community action and protest (Kahne et al. 2013).

Past research, one study noted, has focused on informational use of technology, overlooking the wider potential for supporting political talk in personal spaces. Media 'multiplexity' and chat about civic issues online are associated positively with online participation. People who discuss politics amongst friends and participate socially online were more likely to contact politicians directly online and share political opinions in online public spaces (Hsieh & Li 2014). Experience in internet use increases significantly the probability of political participation online, independent of motivation showed one study (Johansson 2018). Exposure to political information that reinforces one's point of view predicts higher levels of online political participation (Sood & Lelkes 2018).

Wimmer et al argue that participatory practice is full of complexity and contradiction and deeply rooted in human behaviour. Therefore, mediated participation should be seen as highly contextual and not attributed to one media logic. They discuss how analytical frameworks can benefit our understanding of mediated participation under digital conditions and the ways in which interactions, practices and environments shape participation and engagement, through their subjective as well as societal meaning (Wimmer et al. 2017). This insight is in line with the researcher's own approach, which suggests that that metanarrative models may simply not be adequate for understanding this phenomenon. This will be achieved over time through multi-layered approaches, but an understanding of the human factors involved is surely crucial.

## 2.4 Participation now

So, what is political participation now, and who gets to define it? How does it differ from engagement? Is it just about voting and party membership, or does sitting round the kitchen table talking to your family about politics over many lunches and suppers count? (The evidence from participants in this study is that domestic inculcation matters and has long term effects on behaviour). One working distinction gives engagement as having an interest in or having knowledge and beliefs about political or civic matters and participation as undertaking political and civic participatory behaviours (Barrett & Brunton-Smith 2014). Yet there is no hard and fast line. Metrics and categorisations vary wildly. Researchers are finding it increasingly difficult to measure and conceptualise participation, notes Sheppard, who points out that even van Deth's concise map involves a seven step algorithm and four different dimensions (Sheppard, 2015, van Deth, 2014). 'Politics' likewise is a term for which we might feel we have some sort of common understanding. Looked at more closely, however, consensus diminishes. What matters, politically, and moreover who decides what matters and how? Amongst many definitions of participation, there are 'establishment' (governmental) definitions, scholarly ones and those of people such as those taking

part here. Are small-scale, but visible protest movements transient expressions of temporary rage or the seedbeds of long-term change? Is there a risk that we project desires, and valorise the energy of protest over the day-to-day discourse of established communities? Is iterative, incremental change, instilled through habit and repetition, a less aspirational objective? As Fenton notes, what constitutes 'the political' is a topic of significant debate– but broadly, 'it has to do with the difficulties of living together locally, nationally and on this planet' (Fenton 2016). Difficulty is central to the matter in hand, and this manifests clearly on social media.

While this study is concerned with and accepts the definitions of participants as having their own validity and significance, nonetheless it should also be noted that formal and scholarly definitions have expanded considerably over the past half century. By the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the rise of representative democracy and the expansion of suffrage led to a rather formal and demarcated understanding of 'participation' (van Deth 2016). By the 1960s definitions began to expand. Verba and Nie distinguished four kinds of political participation: voting; campaigning; communal activity; and interaction with a public official to achieve a personal goal. This was subsequently expanded to: voting, contributing to organisations and campaigns; contacting government officials; taking part in demonstrations; working with others on community issues; serving voluntarily on local committees; being active politically through voluntary associations or contributing money to political causes (Verba & Nie 1987, Eliasoph et al. 1996). In the social sciences, Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation, the rungs relating to citizens' power in affecting policy, is a classic model, and she gives a broad definition of participation as 'a categorical term for citizen power'(Arnstein 1969). More recently, Fung's model is based on three key questions: who participates, how participants communicate and make decisions and how discussions are linked with policy or public action (Fung 2006). Dalton distinguishes between duty based and engaged citizenship norms, the first being state

positive and affirmative, compliance with laws and voting and so on, and the second more focused on helping others and personal ethical behaviours (Dalton 2009).

All in all, there is a substantial body of literature focused on understanding the wider characteristics of political participation. Varied approaches have been taken including from cultural studies and political and behavioural science, which in turn draw from philosophy, history, anthropology, economics, sociology, international relations, and media studies amongst the ‘...sheer range of factors at the macro-contextual, demographic, social and psychological levels that have been implicated in previous research’ (Barret & Zani, 2014). In their overview of the factors which influence political and civic engagement, Barrett, Zani et al identify five key areas for exploration. These are: collation and analysis of current policies; development of political theories; development of psychological theories; modelling existing survey data; and collection and analysis of new data on participation. According to Cicognani and Zani, social and community psychology also offer several perspectives to understand participation, ranging from prosocial activity like volunteering to a range of collective actions like protest (Ross & Nisbett 2011).

Verba and Nie’s analysis of participation in the US pointed to some key trends that continue to hold – broadly – true. Socioeconomic status predicts formal participation well, as more affluent people have a greater disposition to develop ‘civic’ attitudes which lead onto this. Being involved in voluntary associations does. Partisanship and political beliefs also increase the gap and participation is higher in smaller communities. Urbanisation appears to decrease participation (Verba & Nie 1987). However, context matters, and the opportunities and infrastructure supporting this varies from country to country (Verba, Nie, & Kim, 1978, Vrablikova, 2013). In a landmark study of participation, Olsen found that this related strongly to community involvement. People active in trade unions, or

community groups for example were also more likely to be involved in political activity. This idea was explored in the field research for this study.

Increasing abstraction allows us to consider newer forms of engagement more easily, but this makes it harder for scholars and modelers to apply analytical rigour and precision (van Deth 2016).

Whatever one's subjective or academic view, movement is towards not defining political participation and engagement solely in terms of partaking in formal, establishment politics, which are in one sense the artefacts of certain types of power. This suggests we could think broadly about what is 'political' in this environment and consider the self-definitions of participants more.

The current consensus accepts that a focus on voting bypasses a range of things that people do in practice, and researchers of political participation have been slow in responding to change (Sheppard 2015). Dalton argues that normative concerns over decline in participation might have inverted the problem, and it is the metrics of participation that are no longer fit for purpose (Dalton 2008).

Margetts et al discuss how 'tiny acts' of participation or 'micro-donations' of time on social media draw people in who wouldn't have participated previously. Mobilisations often have one thing in common – an activity surge among social groups previously less likely to participate politically, including young people and members of ethnic minorities. They raise issues about the implications for democracy, representation and governance of 'turbulent politics', the 'unpredictable commotion' and the emergence of what they label 'chaotic pluralism'. Based on their own evidence they describe a world 'too heterogeneous, too individualised, too chaotic, and too ill-suited to deliberation' for a traditional, pluralist public sphere, but argue that:



‘...social media allow individuals to conduct their lives in a ‘time-based world stream’, pumping out and receiving information and social influence, in which they are exposed to many contradictory and overlapping currents of information, views, influences, causes, campaigns, and of concerns that widen rather than narrow their political experience . . . our claim is that what has emerged is a new form of pluralism: what we call chaotic pluralism.” (Margetts et al. 2015)

Ekman suggests a new typology needs to be developed, distinguishing between overt participation and latent forms, including civic engagement and ‘social involvement’. Ekman argues understanding these latent forms is fundamental to understanding new types of engagement as a whole and the outlook for participation generally (Ekman & Amnå 2012). This has direct relevance to some of the tentative and peripheral forms of political expression found online.

Is participation so important?

It is worth remembering here that there are contrasting views on this point. The emphasis on participation as deliberative dialogue has been characterised by Henneberg et al as the key contribution of recent deliberative democracy theory (2009). They argue that it supports the idea that democratic government should embody the will of the people, and that legitimate law making should arise from public deliberation. This rejects the view of, for example, Schumpeter and others that common will does not exist, and that the public is not able to be rational. Theorists of deliberative democracy argue that democratic legitimacy depends on rational public consensus, thus recalling Habermas’s ideals, informed by Rousseau, and argue citizenship should mean more than the protection of rights and the ability to vote but must involve participation and commitment (Savelsberg 1997). Barber’s *Strong Democracy* with its list of initiatives to encourage public debate, is cited as an important case in favour of deliberative democracy (1984). It compares a model of strong democracy to a ‘thin’ democracy of Schumpeter-influenced liberalism, which actively

encourages less participation between formal elections. Again, this depends on a particular definition of 'participation'.

What of non-participation? Growing disengagement with formal politics has been a concern for decades for governments and political scientists and has been put down to many factors, for example, cynicism about the political establishment, and apathy. Perceived social restraints, feeling that it is futile, and insufficient motivating factors affect participation (Rosenberg 1954). Is disaffection something that is tacitly encouraged, however, or something people are naturally disposed to embrace for more human and visceral reasons? What about the 'difficulty' of politics? Eliasoph spoke at length to individuals about their understanding of their own experience of talking about politics generally, and notes that while many people willingly get involved in community and civic matters, many deliberately avoid discussing related political issues often for fear of confrontation (Eliasoph 1998). This is no baseless fear, according to this field research and casual observation of online conduct. For Eliasoph, participants were prepared to talk about thorny issues in private, but not in public. This was echoed in subtle differences in responses between focus groups and individual interviews for this research, the latter being overall, more confessional in tone. So, the visceral experience of confrontation and the need to exert control in public is a significant issue. Eliasoph found also that group membership could have a negative effect on individual action. Her study related to offline participation and engagement, and it is interesting to note from this fieldwork how participants suggest online media have to some extent allowed them to overcome barriers of normative peer pressure. This might just reflect changing social attitudes, or interestingly, suggest something distinctive about the way people experience the medium, where many physical indicators of the reality of others are absent or diminished, and the consequences of negative engagement are reduced. The potential to objectify, in other words, is assumed to be increased.

It has been noted frequently that detachment from establishment politics does not mean lack of interest *per se*, rather a detachment from formal, bounded, existent systems of power to a less rigid scenario where boundaries between politics, cultural values, identity issues and local concerns become looser. So politics are not merely goal-oriented but expressive, and a way to demonstrate group values, ideals and belonging (Dahlgren 2005).

It is accepted that these are academic views, therefore this study asks respondents whether they consider their participation important.

Post-democracy?

A sceptical, or indeed cynical view might be that the freedom to chatter about political abstracts in a commercial environment where the effects might be limited, or not self-serving but might yield a considerable amount of information to power might almost support a post-democratic view. Crouch points to the decline of mass politics owing to social and economic changes which have given rise to a business-focused political class (Crouch 2004). Yet he suggests there is a role for social media where voters can participate actively in debates and join groups advocating for single issues that do not necessarily call for government action but for example target companies for various abuses, tax-dodging and so on. He sees this as a possible response to post-democracy, the remoteness and failure of formal politics, and also a strengthening of pluralism and civil society. Not democracy or a substitute for it, but a positive development (Brown 2014).

## Online participation in the UK

The internet and social media have arrived during decades of perceived challenge for democratic participation. The term 'perceived' should continue to be borne in mind and from whose perspective considered.

The UK Hansard Society Audit of Political Engagement includes willingness to engage in online political discussion as one of its metrics. In the UK, between 2016 and 2018 the percentage of people self-reporting to engage or be willing to engage in political discussion on social media grew significantly. Previously, at just under 20 per cent reported willingness (2016), this did not seem to tally with the amount of material then available to this researcher nor the experiences of those interviewed for this study. Perhaps it suggested a Pareto-like phenomenon.<sup>5</sup> Or perhaps those who were participating this way, like those who pay to join political parties, were at that point atypical.

Nonetheless, by 2018 Hansard reported that digital and online media, while yet to supersede traditional media appeared to be clearly heading in that direction. News programmes on TV or radio were still the main source of election-related information at the 2017 election, and almost half of those responding had undertaken no form of online political engagement in the past year. However, this was heavily influenced by age, with under 34s undertaking actions much more frequently than over 55s.

Online news sources (such as the BBC or newspapers) were the most mentioned digital source of information used during the election (a third), just below direct face-to-face engagement and

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<sup>5</sup> The **Pareto principle** or 80/20 rule, the law of the vital few, or the principle of factor sparsity developed by Joseph Juran and named after economist Vilfredo Pareto, states that, for many events, roughly 80 per cent of effects come from 20 per cent of causal factors.

discussions with others (just over a third). Social media provided election-related information to no more than 20 per cent of respondents polled, a result different to that found in this study and which may be subject to misattribution errors.

With regard to debate about the extent to which social media may have influenced the outcome of recent elections and referendums, Hansard says that over and above concerns about the ease with which 'fake news' can be disseminated online, debate in the UK tends to focus around two polarised positions. Enthusiasts for social media assert that it is a political leveller, helping to open politics up and to make politicians more accessible. Critics argue that the immediacy of the medium lends itself to aggressive, abusive and unthinking behaviour and impulsive and reactive commentary and while debate may have broadened, it has been at the expense of depth. Limited character contributions tend to limit nuance. However, people do use their critical faculties when considering social media use in a political context and see there are both benefits and drawbacks (Hansard Society 2018).

## 2.5 Physiological, psychological, cognitive and behavioural factors

'Recent advances in neuroscience make a compelling case for finally abandoning the nature vs. nurture debate to focus on understanding the mechanisms through which genes and environments are perpetually entwined throughout an individual's lifetime' (Francis & Kaufer 2011).

What affects the way we interact politically online? Clearly, many factors: technological, sociological, cultural, psychological, physiological, our education, self-awareness, literacy, socialisation, normative notions, wellbeing, personal circumstances, and mental health for example.

While people can offer a unique insight into their own political perceptions, they cannot be fully objective about their own unconscious biases and vulnerability to visceral, environmental and social

pressures. Fieldwork has repeatedly borne this out. Insights from social and behavioural psychology can suggest ways of viewing and understanding individual behaviour. Theorists of thinking and decision making can also shed some light on the unconscious processes and biases that thread through our choices. More recently, insights from fields such as genetics, neuroscience and endocrinology have increasingly been drawn into the mix. As early as 1968, there were suggestions that some, though certainly not all political behaviour may be rooted in genetically programmed predispositions (Somit, 1968 Peterson & Somit, 2011). Since the 1990s advances in neuroscience mean that the brain has been increasingly privileged over the mind as the way we understand ourselves (Davies 2018).

The social science or humanities researcher should rightfully be circumspect and tentative when attempting to apply insights from the natural sciences to illustrate a point, not least being mindful of the controversy around ideas of biological determinism, and the risks of cherry-picking alluring insights and using them in a superficial way. There is a strong risk that biological explanations of behaviour can be employed in contingent, contextual ways to absolve people of examining their own privileges and hegemonic advantages, which has been referred to as 'pastiche hegemony' (Matthews 2016). There are challenges to claims of biological origins for human behaviour, which can be flawed by their misunderstanding of the nature of social interaction, encouraging inappropriate realist epistemologies (Dingwall et al. 2003). Nonetheless, there is also a risk of positioning biological science as the enemy when the truth likely lies somewhere in between. In challenge to the idea that political behaviour is learned through socialisation, Peterson and Somit discuss the contributions of biology to political science, and demonstrate that behaviour is shared by both learning and biological influences (Peterson & Somit 2011). Recent research has used data on brain structure and function from MRI scans, physical responses, eye-tracking and behavioural genetics which show personal political orientations are strongly linked to biological forces beyond

individual control (Hibbing & Smith, 2015). However Lieberman et al caution: '(although) cognitive neuroscience does provide new sources of information, it is no more a royal road to truth than self-reports or reaction time measures' (Lieberman et al. 2003).'

This researcher claims no specialist expertise in complex areas of neuroscience, however it is helpful to this thesis to understand at a basic level why our brains can act against more considered behaviour in some instances, not least because there are those who do understand these mechanisms well and are prepared to exploit them for financial and political gain. Williams suggests digital technology is making ordinary political practice difficult if not impossible as it encourages us to lead with our 'fast thinking' impulses over our 'slow thinking' intentions and is 'designed to exploit our psychological vulnerabilities in order to direct us toward goals that may or may not align with our own'. Social media companies employ whole teams of psychologists to advise on how to trigger interactions by pushing emotional buttons (Williams 2018). This 'persuasive design' is an area of commercial practice which seeks to influence behaviour and continued engagement by means of the characteristics of a product or service using psychological and social theory and calling on innate characteristics of our brains (Reevell 2018). Facebook 'addiction' influences decisions about use by altering beliefs, and intensifying cognition around Facebook use fulfilling needs (Thadani et al. 2016). It is also clear that people exploit these characteristics, unbidden, themselves, some willingly playing 'devil's advocate' for stimulus, compulsion or even digital self-harm (Ktena 2018).

#### Affective factors

Field research undertaken for this study has highlighted the significance of emotional response in political engagement and the often-uneasy coexistence of human emotion and online political practice. Emotion can be a more difficult thing to process on social media given fewer visual clues. People often show more frequent and explicit emotion on computer mediated communication

owing to the absence of visible others (Derks et al. 2008). While theorists such as Dean suggest this emotionality is part of a negative pattern, the position is not universally shared. It has been questioned why we should expect people to approach politics in general using logic and reason alone, when in fact participation requires involvement, which is borne of 'hot cognition' (thinking influenced by emotional state) arising from the significance of an action (Lilleker 2014). Many other theorists stress the importance of emotion in political motivation.

Marcus argues against seeing emotion and reason as incompatible and suggests we should understand that reason depends on emotions, essential for deliberation and political judgment. He refers to neuroscience showing emotion to be generated by the unconscious brain, and certain characteristics, such as anxiety, play a very significant role in political choice (in Beier & Buchstein, 2004).

Scholars have emphasised the role of emotion in collective action (van Zomeren et al. 2004). Fenton also discusses the role of emotion in activism. She notes:

'To deny the passion in politics is to deny what politics is. There is no politics without contention, there is no contention without feelings of injustice, unfairness, sadness and anger.' (Fenton 2016)

Indeed, the notion of 'tone policing' and the idea that one does not have the right to defuse the anger of those seen as being oppressed, is now well-established in online political chat (see Everyday Feminism 2015). This might be seen, from one perspective, as an affront to the Habermasian ideal. However, it might be more helpfully in line with the way people are, rather than how some think they should be.



Papacharissi considers online and offline solidarity created by public display of emotion. Social media can support engagement by re-energising people about politics and involving them as part of a developing story, so the technology provides the network, but it is our accounts of events that connect us or otherwise. She considers how storytelling and 'soft structures of feeling' allow people to connect, disrupt, and feel their way into everyday politics (Papacharissi 2016).

Pariser has asserted the belief that the web might be 'a tremendous force for empathy' simply because information only goes so far, and facts don't change minds without emotion. He foresees the potential of the web to create unifying emotional responses that cross demographic boundaries and suggests that understanding and empathy are a critical pre-condition of action and effective democracy (Jasper 2017). Yet partisanship can be quite hard-set. People may lack empathy for those who are hungry or cold if they perceive them to be of another political party. A study showed that participants outside in the winter overestimated how much others were feeling the cold and participants who ate salty snacks without water thought others were thirstier. This changed when participants learned that the other people held different political views to their own, which shows the effect of dissimilarity on social judgments. Dissimilarity may thus be a boundary condition for embodied cognition and limit empathic understanding. Findings suggest a need for better understanding of how people's internal experiences shape their assessment of the feelings of people who have different values (O'Brien & Ellsworth 2012). It is easy to see how this tendency would support objectification and othering. Hypocrisy is a fundamental bias in moral reasoning note Valdesolo and Desteno. People see their own transgressions in a better light than those of others. People excuse unfairness by others in their own groups. This supports a context-dependent view of moral reasoning. Preservation of a positive self-image appears override objective moral principles (Valdesolo & Desteno 2007).

In business terms, investor comment suggests Facebook and Google make more money when people become emotional, and Facebook has been accused of selling adverts targeting users who expressed extremist views. Fear and anger, it appears, encourage content sharing (Salinas 2017).

### Personality factors

Putting aside person–situation debates and accepting a broad definition of ‘personality’ as enduring psychological characteristics that affect a person’s behaviour and attitudes, the ‘Big Five’ personality traits (openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and emotional stability) have been linked to characteristics of general political participation. Research findings include that high levels of interest in and knowledge of politics are linked to openness, ideological liberalism is linked to high openness and lower conscientiousness and that people are more likely to participate if they score highly on openness and extraversion (Gerber et al. 2009). The effect of personality has been shown to be comparable to, or greater than, the effect of factors previously implicated in participation, such as religion, age, education, and income (Gerber et al. 2009). Using self- and other-ratings of the ‘Big Five’ beliefs of political efficacy and participation it was shown that traits contribute beyond usual predictive socio-demographic characteristics. Openness and extraversion accounted for significant variance in political self-efficacy belief, which in turn accounted for political participation (Vecchione & Caprara 2009). The effect of personality on participation is often comparable to, or larger in magnitude than, the effect of factors that are central in earlier models of turnout, such as religious attendance, age, education, and income (Gerber et al. 2009). However, only openness to experience and extraversion seem to affect online political engagement in another study.

Conscientiousness, agreeableness, and emotional stability had only small effects (Quintelier & Theocharis 2013).

Factors associated with both planned (social recognition and altruistic motives) and unplanned behaviour (extroversion and impulsiveness) affect the way people share political content, according to a study which also showed that sharing political content is not like sharing other types as it can attract significant negative reaction in some environments. Thus, trait impulsiveness is negatively associated with political content sharing. Collective opinion can alter planned but not unplanned behaviour. So personality traits are not affected by others' opinions, but characteristics that can be controlled can be shaped by others (Hossain et al. 2018).

#### Thinking patterns and cognitive bias

Kahneman discusses how a person thinks using two cognitive systems, 'fast and slow thinking'. The first works automatically without much effort, making quick judgments based on familiar patterns, the second takes more effort and focus and operates methodically. Both interact continually, but not always smoothly. As has been observed often, people prefer to make simple stories out of a more complex reality, seek patterns and causes in random events, consider rare occurrences more likely than they are and overemphasise the significance of their experiences. Overall, he contests economic theories that say that people act rationally (Kahneman 2011).

An understanding of cognitive biases is helpful to the insightful interpretation of political discussion online or indeed, in any forum. A set of ideas from psychology and behavioural economics, cognitive bias refers to the latent tendency to think habitually in ways that can be characterised as irrational or lacking in judgement. That these biases exist is supported by a wide range of research, although there is some dispute over their interpretation and classification. Some are to do with common information-processing rules, mental shortcuts or heuristics. Common cognitive biases such as 'confirmation bias', 'availability cascade', 'backfire effect', 'bandwagon effect', 'false consensus effect', 'continued influence effect' and so on can be observed often in online political discussion.

There is some debate over whether biases are simply irrational, or they have some practical function. For example, when getting to know someone new, people tend to ask questions that appear biased towards confirming their assumptions about that person. However, it has been suggested that this can be interpreted as a social skill and a way of building a connection (Dardenne & Leyens 1995). Researchers identified three types of bias making social media users vulnerable to misinformation. Bias in the brain rests on capacity to deal with a finite amount of information. Competition for users' limited attention means that some ideas go viral despite their low quality. Bias in society happens because when people connect with their peers, the social biases that affect their choice of friends in turn influence the information they see. The third type of biases come from the algorithms used to determine exposure to online content tailored to the user. This can reinforce existing biases and make users more vulnerable to manipulation (Ciampaglia & Menczer 2018). In fact, a substantial body of evidence suggests we are hard-wired to deceive ourselves to best convince others. If, as it often seems, we can only see our own point of view, we can put forward our case most convincingly because our self-deceit clouds the truth (Trivers 2012).

#### Physiological factors

Gazzaley and Rosen argue that many difficulties arise owing to the inability of our 'ancient' brains to adapt quickly to a very new environment. We have limited attention spans, and we do not, as we imagine 'multitask' but rather switch quickly between tasks. Distractions and interruptions offered by technology disrupt our immediate intentions. We want to complete a task we have set ourselves, but a notification from our phone signals makes us stop to check in on social media, for example (Gazzaley & Rosen 2016). When this notification calls on our deep-rooted beliefs, the effect can be marked.

Many of our political responses are, observably, physical. There is increasing evidence that biological characteristics play a role in political behaviour in a variety of subtle and not-so-subtle ways.

Researchers investigated the role of variations in hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) stress axis parameters to account for differences in political participation. They showed that lower baseline salivary cortisol in the late afternoon was significantly associated with increased voting frequency above variation based on demographic variables, suggesting that HPA-mediated characteristics of social, cognitive, and emotional processes may influence such complex behaviour (French et al. 2014).

Specific brain regions, including the amygdala and the prefrontal cortex, are likely to affect political motivation and response. While the amygdala triggers immediate feelings, the prefrontal cortex permits thinking, self-regulation and rational judgements. Researchers used neuroimaging to investigate neural systems involved in maintaining political belief in the face of challenge. Challenges caused increased activity in the default mode network - structures associated with self-representation. Greater belief resistance was associated with increased response in the dorsomedial prefrontal cortex and decreased activity in the orbitofrontal cortex. Participants who changed their minds more showed less activity in the insula and the amygdala when considering challenging evidence, showing the role of emotion in belief-change resistance and insight into the neural systems involved in belief maintenance and reasoning. However, it is acknowledged that it is not difficult to see areas of the brain spark up, but much harder to reach a conclusion about what they are doing (Kaplan et al. 2016). Damage to the ventromedial prefrontal cortex has been shown to result in greater credulity towards misleading information (Asp et al. 2012). Reward-related activity in the left nucleus accumbens in relation to reactions to reputation gains for the self relative to others predicts Facebook use. Individual sensitivity of the nucleus accumbens to self-relevant social information leads to differences in behaviour (Meshi et al. 2013). A study looked at the role of the

dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (DLPFC) in the alteration of political beliefs. This region is involved in the regulation of cognitive dissonance. Activation of DLPFC does not necessarily result in the rejection of political beliefs but appears to show a significant increase in conservative values irrespective of starting orientation (Chawke & Kanai 2015).

The impulse to engage with social media has been connected to several chemicals produced in the brain including dopamine, oxytocin and adrenaline. Dopamine is a neurotransmitter operating in the brain's pleasure and reward centres. Amongst other things, it helps regulate emotion and encourages us to seek reward. People with low dopamine levels may be more prone to addiction. Once considered a pleasure-seeking molecule, it is now thought that dopamine creates desire. It makes us want and seek, suggesting a relationship to our primitive gathering instincts. Dopamine makes people seek, and gives a biochemical hit encouraging more seeking. It makes it more difficult to stop behaviour like checking phone notifications (World of Chemicals 2017). Dopamine appears to be simulated by unpredictability, finding nuggets of information, and other reward cues, so it should be clear how social media fits the bill (Weinschenk 2009). Dopamine systems are necessary for 'wanting' incentives, but not for liking them or for learning new likes and dislikes (Berridge & Robinson 1998). As reported in *The Guardian*, the appeal of the dopamine hit is so strong that studies have shown tweeting can be more difficult to resist than cigarettes and alcohol (Meikle 2012). Oxytocin, commonly understood as the 'love' molecule and associated with lowered stress, feelings of love, trust, empathy and altruism, which plays an important role in maternal bonding, for example, can increase considerably during social media engagement. An experiment conducted for *Fast* magazine showed that in 10 minutes of social media time, oxytocin levels can spike by nearly 13 per cent (Penenberg 2010). Social media users have been shown to be more trusting than the average internet user (Hampton et al. 2011). Engaged in combative debate, our brains will also

secrete adrenaline, resulting in anxiety or shakiness, a visceral response reported by a number of field respondents.

Jost and Amodio discuss ideology as a powerful motivational force which can lead people to commit acts of generosity, courage or atrocity, even sacrificing their lives for abstract beliefs. They describe it as 'motivated cognition', and consider epistemic, existential, and relational motivations and what this might mean for left-right orientation. They refer to behavioural evidence suggesting that the need to reduce uncertainty, ambiguity, threat, and disgust are all linked positively with conservative views and with liberalism. They refer to neuroscientific and genetics evidence suggesting right-wing political sensibilities are linked greater neural sensitivity to threat and physically larger amygdala volume, as well as less sensitivity to response conflict and smaller anterior cingulate volume. They suggest this emphasises the usefulness of political neuroscience in understanding cognitive, neural, and motivational processes underlying ideological expression (Jost & Amodio 2012).

#### Genetics and epigenetics

A literature review of the moral-psychological and neuroevolutionary basis of political division identified three issues; partisanship depends on deep moral emotions, is processed automatically and is difficult to change. Moral motifs of political partisanship are set epigenetically across different cultures. Partisanship is linked to personality, the neural bases of which are associated with moral feelings and judgement. Self-deception is a significant part of political partisanship and may have evolved as an evolutionary adaptive strategy. Neuroscience may not resolve political division, but can contribute to a better understanding of its biological foundations (Haase & Starling-Alves 2017).

A landmark study using twin data showed genetics have a strong link to political attitudes and ideology but a weaker role in forming party identification, suggesting political scientists should consider genetic factors such as interactions between heritability and environment to develop models of attitude formation (Alford et al. 2005). Such ideas faced resistance as an explanation of the aetiology of political belief, in part owing to methodological issues and lack of molecular genetic studies. However, based on analysis of 12,000 twins pairs from nine studies in five countries over four decades, researchers found evidence that genetic factors affect belief development under nearly all measures. Their evidence suggests that political belief is part of people's genetically informed psychological disposition, but genetic influence on complex characteristics will comprise thousands of gene markers of very small effects and vast samples would be needed to identify specific polymorphisms related to complex social characteristics (Hatemi et al. 2014).

## 2.6 Behavioural patterns and inclinations

Some well observed and well-documented behavioural patterns occur in online political discussion and were anticipated to feature either overtly or implicitly in fieldwork.

### Homophily

*'...people's personal networks are homogeneous with regard to many sociodemographic, behavioural, and intrapersonal characteristics. Homophily limits people's social worlds in a way that has powerful implications for the information they receive, the attitudes they form, and the interactions they experience.'* (McPherson et al. 2001)

It is understood that people tend anyway to mix with others like themselves, a well-documented phenomenon which might underlie much observed online behaviour, and through which there are occasional contradictions of expressed belief and action. Homophily can now be quantified much more easily thanks to digital storage of data. People are similar to those nearby in a social networks for two reasons, one they come to be like their friends through to social influence and two they tend to make links with similar others in a process called 'selection' (Crandall et al. 2008). Indeed, and unsurprisingly, many online communities are built around groups of people who are similar socially.



A study on Twitter, where people are potentially exposed to a wide range of views showed exchanges amongst like-minded individuals can strengthen group identity, whereas those between different-minded people reinforce in- out-group affiliation. Further, results show that while people are exposed to broader viewpoints than they were before, they are limited in their capacity to engage in meaningful exchange (Yardi & Boyd 2010). A US study of Democrat and Republican supporters indicated higher levels of homophily amongst Democrats except where Republicans were following official Republican accounts (Colleoni et al. 2014). Homophily is so strong a predictor that entire communities on Facebook can be modelled by extrapolating from a fifth of a population (Mislove et al. 2010). Researchers looking at data from a music channel could predict real friendships by comparing interaction, shared interests and location online (Bischoff 2012). There is a high level of similarity among users close to each other in a social network suggesting that users with similar interests are more likely to be friends, so metadata should predict social links. Social networks constructed from topical similarity do capture real friendship accurately (Aiello et al. 2012). Different types of homophily apply to different types of users on Twitter, for example, users with similar number of followers and followed tend to live and work near each other, and show similar views (De Choudhury 2011). Nonetheless, studies show that superficial or negative exposure to out-group members can worsen division and increase hostility. Just putting different groups in the same place is insufficient and can aggravate tribalism (Chua 2018).

Homophily exerts significant effects on social media meaning participants often hear similar views and mix with like-minded others, so this phenomenon relates to the conceptualisation of 'echo chambers' discussed further on.

## Polarisation

Political polarisation is not unique to social media and there are mixed views about any causal relationships. Affordances such as closed groups and an on-tap supply of confirmation bias have been speculated to support polarisation, although this is contested. There is not a universal consensus and indeed one study suggested the opposite effect, most social media users are in ideologically diverse networks, and exposure to this has a positive effect on moderation, potentially reducing mass polarisation (Barberá 2015).

Another study concluded that social media and the internet are not the cause of political fragmentation as people use them to broaden their horizons and consume media widely, and echo chambers may not be such a threat as only a small proportion of the population is influenced by them (Dubois & Blank 2018). A South Korean study using panel data from 2012 to 2016 shows that social media does not directly force polarisation, but encourages participation and engagement *per se*, which itself tends to direct users towards ideological poles, so an indirect effect (Lee et al. 2018).

Group polarisation, the idea from social psychology that refers to the tendencies within groups to develop more extreme ideas than members' prior preferences suggests that a group's attitude toward a situation can become strengthened and intensified after group discussion, so-called attitude polarisation (Myers & Lamm 1975). This can often be observed in political party focused discussion and is evident in the debates around Scottish independence, 'Brexit' and the party leadership of Labour's Jeremy Corbyn. It is in line with May's Law of Curvilinear Disparity which suggests that members of political parties tend to be more ideological than both the party leadership and its ordinary voters (May 1973).

From the perspective of social comparison theory, group polarisation happens owing to an individual wish to be accepted and be seen favourably by their group, so also in line with Goffmann, whose theories of the presentation of self are discussed further in the methodology chapter. This theory suggests people first compare ideas with others in the group and assess their values and preferences. Then to be accepted, they might take a position that is like that of the others but a bit more extreme. This allows the participant to support the group's beliefs while showing leadership. Normative influencing is more likely to be present when discussing contentious topics, where group harmony is considered important, where there is a person-centred ethos in the group and for responses made in public (Isenberg 1986). Linked to polarisation, scholars have identified backfire effects that lead to people reinforcing their earlier positions because of motivated reasoning, different interpretation of identical facts or other reasons (Tucker et al. 2018)

In *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* social psychologist Jonathan Haidt wrestles with the possibility of reaching common ground between political poles. Well ahead of more widespread observation in the wake of the election of Donald Trump as US President, Haidt argued that people are too quick to dismiss the view of others politically, but to the question many people ask about politics — ‘why doesn’t the other side listen to reason?’ - he suggests we are simply not designed to do so. In fact, he argues, neurological research shows that people reach conclusions first and then rationalise them afterwards. People do reason but do so mainly in order to support their own conclusions. So, they will repeatedly marshal arguments to justify a point of view. Haidt maintains that we do this because we compete for social status, and the ability to influence others is central to this. He suggests that if you want to change people’s minds, you should not appeal to their reason but the underlying moral standpoints being defended (Haidt 2012).

In *Moral Tribes* Joshua Greene draws on his own 'dual-process' theory, neuroscience and evolutionary psychology to discuss how our intuitions about ethics are enacted in practice. Greene's dual processing research using MRI scanning showed that people making judgements over personal moral dilemmas use regions of the brain linked to emotion that were not usually activated by less personal choices. They found that for the dilemmas involving 'personal' moral questions, people making an intuitively unappealing choice did so after longer reaction times than those who made less emotionally challenging decisions. He suggests we have a natural inclination to cooperate and predisposed to do what we see as best for a group if pressured by time, to go with gut instinct. However, co-operation can be overridden by rational reflection. Regarding inter-group harmony he suggests that these automatic responses hit a snag. The same loyalty that supports co-operation within communities leads to hostility between them. He incidentally proposes a 'metamorality' upon which we all can agree. He proposes utilitarianism, or 'deep pragmatism' as the way forward for politics (Greene 2014).

What might make people change their minds? Bayesian theories of information processing suggest that people would modify their political positions faced with new information, in line with what they have learned (Tucker et al. 2018). Responses from this field research indicate that participants themselves often resist changing but do acknowledge change over time. This might be triggered by an unexpected insight into an opposing view or candidate, or they may reach a 'tipping point'. Johnston, Lavine, & Woodson considered the factors which might make people switch from a partisan position where they side reflexively, to a more considered one, looking at additional information. They note that earlier work indicates that variation in political reasoning is triggered by anxiety, but they ask whether an overall pattern of emotions confirms or disrupt partisan expectations. They look at anxiety, anger, and enthusiasm as influential factors and suggest that

‘expectancy-violating emotion’ increases deliberative reasoning and suppresses partisan reactions, and vice versa (Johnston et al. 2015).

Echo chambers and filter bubbles

‘...media’s greatest potential lies in its impersonal exposure of audiences to cross-cutting views, an essential form of communication in a highly pluralistic society. In order to sustain this benefit, however, news media must be structured so as to limit the public’s capacity for selective exposure (Mutz & Martin 2001).

The idea of the social media political echo chamber is now well-established and has generated much media and academic discussion. The phenomenon is variously characterised as the product of invisible algorithms (filter bubbles), innate prejudice or media divisiveness. The UK’s *Guardian* newspaper even sought to address the problem with a ‘break out of your bubble’ feature summarising key conservative news links. Studying how Italian and US Facebook users related to two different narratives researchers showed participants’ tendency to promote their preferred versions and thence form polarised groups. They suggest confirmation bias helps explain decisions about whether to spread content, creating informational cascades within communities. Aggregation of preferred information reinforces selective exposure and group polarisation. Users tend to note only confirming information and to ignore rebuttals (Quattrociocchi et al. 2016). Group conflict during political turmoil may encourage selective avoidance and social-informational communities becoming more insular (Zhu et al. 2017). People mostly share content to support their political views. Political posts have more shares than reactions. Evidence suggests the more partisan the content, the more that tribe will share. So, the more someone likes affirming content the less divergent viewpoints they will see (Rayson 2017).

Garimella et al identify the two components in the phenomenon of echo chambers - the opinion that is shared (‘echo’) and the place that allows its exposure (‘chamber’ or the social network) and

examine how these interact. They concluded that Twitter users are, to a large degree, exposed to political opinions that agree with their own and that users who try to breach echo chambers by sharing diverse content suffer in terms of their network centrality and content appreciation. They also study the role of 'gatekeepers,' that is, users who consume diverse content but produce partisan content in the formation of echo chambers. They conclude that partisans are quite easy to identify, but gatekeepers prove to be more challenging (Melo & Paulheim 2017).

Investigating two million retweets collected during 10 days in connection to the EU Referendum and the 2017 UK general election, a study showed that people tend to connect to each other in heterogeneous networks when it comes to online news consumption and that there is a positive relationship between the news exposure of a user and that of their friends. However, the breadth of news exposure within a personal network is in general wide enough to incorporate many different sources. People are more likely to pass on information from ideologically similar contacts and data shows that Labour supporters are rarely engaging with Tory supporters via retweets and vice versa (Johansson 2018).

UK Political groups are reflected in online communities of varying cohesiveness and 'echo chamber' can describe how they engage. Those similar affiliations tend to share news from sites ideologically similar to their affiliation, the extent of this varies by party. People with more polarised views tend to be more inward-facing than the more moderate. Groups are more likely to interact with others who are ideologically aligned. Discussions of issues show that certain topics are much more discussed by some political groups than by others and these topics relate to those parties' main political interests (Krasodonski-Jones 2016).

Pariser argues against the neutrality of the internet, noting that search engines make suggestions determined by page rank algorithms and (at that point) by using 57 different indicators relating to previous search topics, past pages visited and the user's location. When people post, friends who have similar political views show up more in newsfeeds than those with opposing beliefs, and he experienced not seeing posts by conservative friends. Yet at the same time he also challenges the notion of context collapse and having one integrated identity and argues there are differences between the 'work self' and 'play self' and other selves in different online places, and a difference between 'you are what you click' and 'you are what you share'. Also, while one might believe it is possible to know a personality based on evidence found online, even this would be selective, and prone to confirmation bias, he suggests (Pariser 2011).

Facebook's data science team indeed tested the "filter bubble" theory and published the results. The study suggests that using Facebook means readers tend to see significantly more news popular among people who share their beliefs, so there is significant 'filter bubble' effect, but smaller than might be expected (Bakshy et al. 2015). They calculated that a reader is about 6 per cent less likely to see content from opposing political views. Friend choice, in other words, matters more than the algorithm.

#### Normative peer pressures

The urge towards conformity and its effects on choice-forming and decision-making is important to understanding group influence in political behaviour. It is interesting to explore how this might work in a mediated public space like social media. 'Normative social influence' has been defined as 'the influence of other people that leads us to conform in order to be liked and accepted by them' and an urge to fulfil others' expectations through acceptance of evidence about reality provided by others (Aronson et al. 2010). It stems from the fact that people are social beings. Motivations include the

urge to build and maintain relationships, and to manage self-concept (Cialdini & Trost 1998). Peer pressure can however lead to people complying in public but not necessarily privately accepting a group's social norms (Forsyth 2011). This is linked to an idea from social psychology, 'pluralistic ignorance' where most members of a group privately disagree with a norm, but mistakenly believe that most of the others accept it, and therefore go along with it. Effectively, it is bias about a social group held by its own members (Krech & Crutchfield 2011). This can perhaps be seen in the 'shy Tory' phenomenon, those who vote Conservative but feel ashamed to admit so in public.

Informational social influence or 'social proof', is a phenomenon where people mirror the behaviour of others to reflect the accepted style for a situation (Aronson et al. 2010). The effects can be observed in the tendency of large groups to conform to certain beliefs or behaviours irrespective of whether they can be deemed objectively right or wrong – sometimes called 'herd behaviour'. A so-called 'information cascade' happens when an individual observes the actions of others, makes inferences and then – despite possible contradictory information, engages in the same behaviour (Easley & Kleinberg 2010). Social proof is also observable on social media platforms. The number of 'followers', 'views', 'likes', comments etcetera a user has affects positively how others see them. A user with multiple millions of followers is seen as having a better reputation than a similar profile with significantly fewer, resulting in further, faster growth and greater engagement. Success breeds success, and in fact a vast industry of 'ghost followers' exists to increase social proof on social media. This 'rich get richer' idea can be backed up by network modelling (Aparicio et al. 2015).

Studies have shown the power of group influence on persuasion and a low level of awareness of this. One study series looked at the under-acknowledged role of social identity. Even when making a real effort, attitudes toward a policy proposal seemed to depend almost completely on the formal position of a person's party-political allegiance. This overrode both the objective content of a policy



and a participants' ideological beliefs and was seemingly led by a shift in the perceived detail of the policy and its moral connotations. Still, participants denied having been influenced by their political party, although they believed that other individuals, especially their ideological adversaries, would be (Cohen 2003). As will be seen in field research results, self-awareness does not always come easily.

## Partyism

'Partyism' is increasing (Sunstein 2015). Party identification is often an enduring emotional attachment and party identities are a reliable indicator of attitudes and behaviour. Partisans will support their party even in the face of changing personalities and policies. Amongst the complexity of political issues, party lines help direct towards positions to support (Dalton 2016). Hostile feelings for opposing parties are ingrained in many voters' minds, and party-based affective polarisation is as strong as polarisation based on race. Party cues also affect non-political judgments and behaviour. The willingness of side-takers to be openly hostile towards opposing partisans relates to a lack of norms around expressing negative sentiments. Increasing partisan behaviour is a potential incentive for those in power to act confrontationally rather than cooperate. (Iyengar & Westwood 2015). People have stronger attachments to political parties than to the groups those parties represent. Partisans discriminate against opponents in a way that exceeds discrimination based on religion, language, ethnicity or location, even when these are based on intense longstanding conflict. Animosity is affected by ideological proximity, partisans most distrust those furthest from them ideologically and effects of partisanship on trust erode when party and social ties collide (Westwood et al. 2018). This is an interesting idea to consider in relation to in-party conflict.

## 2.7 Belief and choice formation

Where do the beliefs that fuel agonism come from? A wide range of disciplines have turned their attention to understanding how and why we make the choices that we do. Public choice theory has traditionally applied economic tools and models (including game and decision theory). Theories of political behaviour aim to quantify and understand influences that define views, ideologies, and the extent of participation.

Key studies in the psychology of political choice highlight the extent to which the political decision making of ordinary people is more often based on heuristics rather than deep understanding of policy (Sniderman et al. 1991). Many users rely on others to gauge credibility of information. Rather than systematically processing information, participants used cognitive heuristics to assess credibility of online information and sources (Metzger et al. 2010). Studies into belief systems have suggested people's opinions are relatively inconsistent, unstable and arise from low levels of understanding of political abstractions (Converse 2006). More recently, Caplan has claimed voter choices are inherently irrational (Caselli 2010). Huemer identifies some possible sources of preferences over beliefs, including self-interested bias, beliefs as self-image constructors, as tools of social bonding and coherence bias, all of which have application in understanding the online sphere (Huemer 2010).

A key idea in decision-making research is the notion of bounded rationality, that is, people are limited by multiple constraining factors in the real world, and these affect the decision-making process. People are constrained by the difficulty of a decision, the skill they have to make it, and the time they have for it. In a study of decision making generally, researchers identified that the inherent difficulty of decision making is generally a more significant challenge than issues of skill or time (Anderson et al. 2016).

People often cling on to strongly-held beliefs even when presented with evidence that invalidates these and in fact can become more extreme in these beliefs. New information is often processed through a filter of existing beliefs. This assimilation bias is widespread and persistent, but people see it more easily in others than they do in themselves. Beliefs tied to political identity are abandoned very reluctantly. This can make people unwilling to compromise, even when they would benefit from doing so (Cohen 2012). People resist persuasion and pragmatic negotiation because this can compromise their sense of identity (Abelson 1986).

## 2.8 Issues of identity and the presentation of self and others

The development and expression of identity were anticipated to be an influencing factor in online participation. More so, given the idea that social fragmentation and decline of group loyalty have contributed towards more personalised politics in which individual action displaces the collective. Recent decades have seen more diverse mobilisations in which people focus around personal values and engage with multiple causes such as economic justice, environmental protection, and human rights (Bennett 2012).

### Performativity and performative politics

The idea of performativity, or the capacity of speech or communication not simply to communicate but also to fulfil an action, or to construct identity through discourse has been widely applied to understand everyday behaviour in relation to social norms or habits. It provides a useful prism through which to view online political chat. Beginning this study, an expectation has been that some aspects of online political behaviour would be performative, for example around identity and values. People would present themselves in particular ways to demonstrate certain things, such as membership of an in-group, or to present themselves in positive political light.

Performative acts have been understood as types of authoritative speech enforced through law or societal norms, although some theorists, for example Judith Butler, maintain everyday speech acts are performative, as they help define identity. As well as exploring performativity in gender, Butler has applied it to analysis of political speech (Butler 1997). Relevant also is the idea of performativity or the wider group contribution to a speech act (Sedgwick & Frank, 2003; Edwards, 2008). This has relevance to coproduction on social media.

McKinlay discusses how Butler draws on Foucault, including understanding identity as provisional, ambiguous and unstable social process. Performativity from this perspective is not simply performance and the choice involved in identity building makes it appear more 'natural' but also open to reinterpretation, which is where Butler sees political scope. Her idea of performativity offers a way of understanding the ambiguity and paradox of identity (McKinlay 2010).

Social networking sites offer areas in which our selfhood and subjectivity are performed, and this has both risks and benefits for the cultural production of identity, argues Cover. He considers how online social networking can be understood within broader cultural practices of identity. Using Butler's theories of performativity, he argues that social networking participation is performative in itself and looks at the use of online profiles as a tool for performing, developing and stabilising identity in line with social expectations, coherence, intelligibility and recognition; identity performances made through online relationships (Cover 2012).

There are reasons to suppose some aspects of people's political conversation and expression online are indeed performative and are about asserting identity rather more than nuanced thinking about public policy. This can be exercised by types of othering, labelling and name-calling for example. (Viz

in the online debate over the Labour party leadership or 'Brexit' as a mechanism for locating oneself on the spectrum of support).

Challenges to identity: Context collapse

A term possibly coined by social media ethnographer Danah Boyd in the early 2000s, but also developed by cultural anthropologist Michael Wesch in or around 2008, the idea of context collapse refers to the (potential) forced openness of social media given the possible audiences online compared to the more delimited groups we normally engage with face-to-face. (For example, your work manager or your church or mosque-going elderly aunts might get to see in detail what you get up to with your drinking or football friends.) As Goffman suggests, people tend to adjust their behaviour to fit the social context, continually and almost unconsciously noting aspects of our context, company and mood. We note and respond to subtle changes in atmosphere and make judgements about our place and that of others. These are the tacit skills which support social interaction. As he would put it, we set boundaries and present negotiated versions of ourselves, what he calls 'face-work'. As Wesch observes, within the context collapse of social media, this rapid adjusting can become difficult or impossible, with aspects of the self normally kept to a limited audience becoming exposed to a wider one. Face work does not function in the same way, as we cannot often pick up subtle clues about people's responses.

Boyd acknowledges a debt to Joshua Meyrowitz whose book *No Sense of Place* discusses how people navigate multiple audiences arising through media artefacts (1987). Yet based on analysing personal 'vlogs' and responses to these on YouTube, it was observed that new media not only offer new ways for us to express ourselves, but also, potentially new forms of self-awareness—new ways to reflect on and learn about who we are and how we relate to others. Using a symbolic interactionist framework, he argues that online connections which link private spaces creates context to share

profound moments of self-reflection and for creating connections that are experienced at the same time as ‘profoundly deep yet ephemeral and loose’ (Wesch 2009).

When we observe how people are prepared to behave when discussing politics on social media, we can see that the idea of context collapse has profound implications for online debate in the longer term – a fact borne out by field research.

Popular typologies and media conceptions

Conceptualisations of alterity and the building of the ‘other’ as part of the process of defining self-identity are useful in the understanding of issues of identity and polarisation in online political discursive practice. ‘Othering’ is an idea from phenomenology that describes the creation of imagined representations and the often-reductive labelling of a person as someone who belongs to a (supposedly) subordinate social category, in practice this can mean the exclusion of people not fitting a norm (Stallybrass 1977). There is a substantial tradition of philosophical, anthropological and other literature about alterity which is not for detailed discussion here, but the basic idea of ‘othering’ is fundamental to understanding a lot of online political conversation and culture and needs to be borne in mind in relation to phenomena such as polarisation and partyism. Particularly in relation to public figures, the idea of the creation of imagined representations, conceptualisations of others through projection is particularly important to understand, as considerable narrative superstructures can be built upon completely confected representations of real individuals (for example, there are whole arenas where it is a truth universally acknowledged that former UK Prime Minister David Cameron ‘had sexual relations’ with a cooked pig, despite the lack of compelling evidence – see Chapter 4).

The idea of online and social media as ‘learning grounds’, exploratory spaces in which participants must adjust as a community over time emerges in commentary from fieldwork. Social media has spawned its own form of vernacular sociology, or at least terminology which deserves some consideration. Although scholarly literature is currently limited, there is a body of commentary from other sources. For example, the site RationalWiki devotes pages to explaining and exploring techniques of rhetoric and argumentation used in online exchange, insightful and well-observed, if not always traditionally academic.<sup>6</sup> More than just simple labelling and name-calling, Social media political discussion offers a panoply of othering and rich demonstrations of how we manage our own cognitive dissonance through the conceptualisation of others in simplistic terms. Observable phenomena and popular typologies are explored, characterised, challenged and coproduced. Discussed below is just one example, ‘virtue signaling’ but similar accounts can be given of a range of social media neologisms from ‘snowflakes’ to ‘keyboard warriors’.

Without going into great length, ordinary observation shows that online political discussion can be a nest of vipers. This might be down to an almost visceral inability to handle the views of others. Dobson observes that one of the key problems in both democratic theory and practice is dealing with deep rifts constructively. He addresses the question of the resultant political ‘white noise’ alluded to by Dean and argues for the institutionalisation of listening. He proposes a politics that ‘... goes beyond the Aristotelian speaking being towards a Deweyan notion of the ‘event’ around which publics coalesce...’, an aspiration for all users of online political forums, no doubt. His core point is that people are simply not good at listening to each other (Dobson 2014). Indeed true, and an effect seemingly magnified by social media, although scientific analyses of why not (such as those discussed by Haidt) offer some challenges to this being fully rectified. Participants deal with the

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<sup>6</sup> For an example, see this definition of ‘deliberate offence’ [https://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Deliberate\\_offence](https://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Deliberate_offence)

unintelligibility of the other reductively, by labelling, and often abuse. The regular consumer of political discussion online will be familiar with the lexicon: 'Red Tories', 'shy Tories', 'corbots', 'Blairite scum', 'trolls', 'snowflakes', 'keyboard warriors', 'gammon', the 'shill' and the 'sheeple'. It is an exciting environment for the professional linguist as participants create their own rich, redolent vocabulary of insults. This researcher is primarily interested in the factors that might lie behind this vigorous othering, which might include an innate urge to impose pattern, simplify and classify an otherwise complex world.

As field research has gone on to show, individuals tend not to match their allocated stereotypes too directly, and one key learning is around the significance of the devilry in this detail. Nonetheless, these durable and persistent concoctions have a life of their own and form a substructure of symbolism with which participants interreact, sometimes independent of the real-life events and the people on whom they are loosely based. Our politics are often closer than we think (Haidt 2012). Yet as recent political events have indicated, we crave differentiation, in part as an artefact of identity construction, and people seem willing to construct it in its absence. If 'divide and conquer' is an enduring tactic in the exercise of power, it is one in which we all too willingly collude.

A phrase that appears to be completely contemporaneous with the sharp rise of social media, and indeed very much associated with its affordances, 'virtue signalling' has been defined as the sharing of views or material that are likely to gain the approval of peers or make the sharer appear more morally virtuous, so linked to Goffman's ideas of the presentation of self. It is an expression that has taken on a life of its own. Linguist Geoffrey Nunberg notes that it 'describes the vague object of a certain kind of behaviour, which the right believes is exclusive to the left'. Lexicographer Orin Hargraves described it as 'an artefact of the profusion of social media' where there are few barriers to entry so we need terms to characterise quality, content, or intent of messages (Peters 2015).



British journalist James Bartholomew is often reported to have coined the term in *The Spectator* magazine in 2015, but it was used in the context of signalling theory, and in 2013 on *Less Wrong*, a blog and forum offering discussion of topics such as cognitive biases and rationality (Bulbulia & Schjoedt 2009). Other sources have it earlier (Peters 2015).

Amongst other things, signalling theory addresses the notion of honesty in communication. Claiming dislike of the conservative UK newspaper the *Daily Mail* is often given as a standard example of ‘virtue signalling’ for those who lean towards the left politically or wish to be seen that way. It is used pejoratively in the media to belittle what are perceived as superficial platitudes about social issues. An article in political magazine the *New Statesman* even blamed virtue-signalling for the Labour Party's defeat in the 2015 UK general election, suggesting that the urge to be viewed as holding virtuous opinions led people to focus on lofty ethical matters such as nuclear disarmament, creating distance from the daily concerns of the wider electorate and an echo chamber which encouraged Labour planners to underestimate support for Tory policies.

Discrediting the thought of others: System justification theory and ‘false consciousness’

Another common way of online othering is to pull intellectual rank. A basic understanding of this idea helps to unpick some key antagonisms in social media chat and needs to be considered in relation to the structure versus agency debate. System justification theorists suggest ideological motives to justify the status quo, which are partly responsible for the internalisation of inferiority amongst disadvantaged people which is often maintained at a subconscious level and it can be strongest among those most harmed by existing social order (Jost et al. 2004). On a vernacular level, the idea that many people’s thoughts are controlled and directed by media diktat against their own interests is a very well-established trope and weapon of scorn and a cause of a lot of friction and deflection of attempts at persuasion. False consciousness, defined as people maintaining world

views that stop them from seeing the 'real' nature of their socioeconomic circumstances has been characterised as a type of media effect. The term has its roots in Marxist and Neo-Marxist theories about ideology, including the work of Adorno and Horkheimer around the culture industry as a form of escapism from oppression underpinning resistance to social change. Weaknesses in such structuralist interpretations of media power led to a move towards poststructuralist theories highlighting the autonomy and agency of audiences. While that agency seems to have found significant opportunity in social media with user-generated content (prosumption), Marxism and the idea of false consciousness have re-emerged as relevant analytical frameworks with which to interpret them (Rössler et al. 2017). However, as can be observed in online conversation, calling into question people's ability to know their own mind in practice is received as something akin to 'gaslighting'<sup>7</sup> and more often than not can generate a hostile response. It might also be seen to have its populist right-wing counterpoint in the idea of 'red-pilling' (see glossary).

Epistemic injustice?

A common mechanism for dismissing the view of others online is on the grounds of perceived lesser cognitive skill, deficits in educational achievement and style of expression not meeting prevailing hegemonic standards. References might helpfully be made here to Fricker's concept of epistemic injustice. She argues that there is an epistemic genus of injustice, in which someone is wronged in their capacity as a knower, and thus diminished in human value. Fricker identifies two strands. Testimonial injustice happens when an individual's credibility is belittled or discounted because there exists an identity prejudice against them. Hermeneutical injustice occurs when someone's ability to articulate their experiences or concerns does not meet the prevailing or hegemonic standards of others. This results in the person being discounted as a contributor to collective

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<sup>7</sup> A psychological tactic in which, in order to gain power over another, someone makes their target question their own reality (Sarkis 2017).

production and knowledge dissemination (Fricker 2007). Where there are marked social class differences in demographic trends in a polarised dispute, dismissing the perspectives of those seen as socially or educationally disadvantaged and often making value judgements about these characteristics is commonplace. Popular framing and articulation of the EU Referendum debate is a case in point.

## 2.9 'Lived experience'

'...a viable democracy must have an anchoring at the level of citizens' lived experiences, personal resources, and subjective dispositions...such dimensions as meaning, identity, and subjectivity are important elements of political communication.' (Dahlgren 2005).

A review of scientific literature around online participation suggests there are still many questions we need to answer, for example, how common informal political discussions are on social media, how often these cut across partisan boundaries and if so, if this happens mainly through existing relationships or through weak ties such as friends of friends (Tucker et al. 2018). Dahlgren talks about civic culture which can have non-or pre-political features but may move towards formal politics, so context and process are important. Politics are constructed by word and deed. Everyday political practices, particularly online, are messy and merged with the social and cultural. They may settle into transient periods and patches of equilibrium, but they are essentially chaotic and dynamic. Observational and interpretive study may therefore offer insights where quantification struggles to do so.

Social media not surprisingly has attracted significant attention from anthropologists and ethnographers. A key work in progress, although not focused primarily on political activity, is the '*Why We Post*' project, a global anthropological research project on the uses and behavioural consequences of social media. Miller notes a common claim that social media has supported new

forms of political practice in tune with the habits of young people and refers to Henry Jenkins's *By Any Media Necessary*. This records how young people use social media to become politically involved, asserting that this activism is real politics not just 'slacktivism'. Yet Miller refers to seeing young people advancing a petition to revoke 'Brexit', in contrast to a (possibly complacent) lack of engagement with this before the referendum. He notes that the lack of a concerted campaign to get young people to vote in the referendum is reflected in data. 18-24-year-olds were the biggest supporters of 'remain', yet only 36 per cent voted. He sees this as a failure of social media. Miller suggests the absence of politics in some ordinary people's social media should be a subject of study as much as that which we do see, and a key point is because while social media can support young people's political involvement it does not guarantee that it will. This is an interesting assertion in relation to actual percentages and ages of people involved in online discussion referred to in the Hansard Society audit.

Research by Stromer-Galley suggests that people appreciate and enjoy the diversity of opinions online, despite some being uncomfortable with unpleasantness such as racism (Stromer-Galley 2006). Yet more than a third of users felt worn out by the amount of political content they see, and more than half characterise online interactions with others they clash with over politics as 'stressful and frustrating' (Duggan & Smith 2016).

Observing that online political debate is becoming increasingly significant, both as a real-world phenomenon and as an object of research, Norwegian researchers undertook a study exploring people's motivations for joining in and how this might affect their general engagement. They found four motivational factors: engaging topics, desire to contribute, frustration, and reciprocal learning. Around two thirds of participants said that the online environment for debate could make them more politically engaged due to a feeling of influence, access to discussion, a way for getting

updated, a lower threshold for participation, motivating local engagement, and awareness about political events (Følstad & Lüders 2013).

Political conversations, on- and offline, happen most often between people with close personal ties. The degree to which they are regularly exposed to challenge is still in question. Definitional and methodological issues, alongside a focus on questions related to normative ideals of deliberative democracy have affected this, and led to studies on the quality of discussion and its effects on formal outcomes (Tucker et al. 2018) .

It has been argued that informal and ‘nonpurposive’ everyday political talk is a practical form of dialogic deliberation and a ‘fundamental underpinning of deliberative democracy’. Through everyday political talk, citizens develop their identities, build common understanding, develop public reason, construct opinions, and develop protocols and resources to support deliberative democracy (Kim & Kim 2008).

#### Managing behaviours

Everyday political talk is recognised to be a significant aspect of democratic activity. Yet politics is considered by many as an unsafe topic in many social situations. A study looking at how young people talk about politics with peers, families, and on social media took a social interactional perspective, viewing such conversation as a social achievement. This showed that political talk is influenced by social settings and norms shape engagement or avoidance of political chat. Family and peers can support friendly talk, argument and the development of self-identity and opinions. Participants were often loathe to share opinions social media for fear of comeback (Ekström 2016).

Participants who see more political differences with friends engage less on Facebook than those who see more similarity. Weak ties are more prone to disagreement, despite offering diversity. This might be improved by designing-in exposure to weak ties and making common ground clearer during conversations (Grevet et al. 2014). Social connectedness predicts more political talk on Facebook. Popular people with more connections discuss politics more often but in safer ways, preferring discussion with like-minded others and managing privacy settings to hide commentary. 'Gatekeepers' who make connections also discuss politics more frequently, but are more likely to engage in risk-tolerant behaviour such as posting political updates or trying to persuade (Miller et al. 2015).

Fear of social isolation indirectly discourages disagreeing with others' opinion expression and encourages withdrawal behaviour by increasing propensity to self-censor online, the so-called 'spiral of silence'. This depends on levels of disagreement and the publicness of the network. Higher levels of disagreement and publicness promote a spiral of silence (Chen 2018). Online observation suggested that some women might have particular concerns about discussing politics online. Yet exposure to discussion and disagreement does not discourage women from political participation any more than men, according to research. While women can be less politically active if exposed to disagreement, this effect is not consistent over time (Djupe et al. 2016).

## 2.10 Perceptions of efficacy

Opinion dynamics is a significant field of interest for statistics and social science. Models such as the Sznajd model, the voter model, the majority rule model, and the bounded confidence model suggest that consensus is eventually reached, yet in face-to-face and online exchanges, consensus is not commonly found. The models do not easily explain this observed fact (Del Vicario et al. 2017).

Efficacy has been described as the feeling that individual political action is worthwhile and can have an impact upon the political process (Campbell, Gurin & Miller, 1954). Internal efficacy relates to a person's perceived ability to influence political outcomes without which, it is argued, people would have little incentive to participate. External efficacy is defined as people's perceptions of government willingness to respond, collective efficacy relates to the perceptions of the group of which a person is a member (Halpern et al. 2017). Nonetheless there have been many attempts to develop an effective measure of this (Morrell 2003). An assumption of this study has been that perceptions of efficacy might be contingent, or situational and interpretation of commentary would clarify this.

'Clicktivism' and 'slacktivism'.

Participants in this research recognised a difference between immediate efficacy and achieving change over time. Pariser observed in an interview that what is disparagingly called 'clicktivism', he views as a step towards changing real-world behaviour. He dismissed the notion of an 'action budget' spent either on, for example, posting to social media or going to a march. He argues that people want to live up to the identity they present to the outside world, so if they share an article about a topic, they will be more likely to take a related action offline (Jasper 2017). Tufekci suggests that 'slacktivism' should be seen as the encroachment of politics by everyday worlds dominated by mundane concerns or consumerism and a step in reversing the professionalisation of cause advocacy (Tufekci 2012). In *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology and Politics* Papacharissi argues that social movements in digital environments should not be defined by their political traction or efficacy but more by their affective intensity or how they help publics 'feel their way into' an event or issue (Papacharissi 2016).

## 2.11 Significance of media consumption to participation

Media consumption affects both propensity to participate and the nature of participation, the perceived use of media by others is used as a weapon of challenge, fieldwork shows. Social media news consumption is linked to pro-democratic behaviours according to one data-led study which also showed that news-seeking social interaction supported greater diversity of networks, exposure to a wider range of political opinion and thus the possibility of changing views. Social media affordances shape contact with political information and the deliberative space for persuasion to happen can be created by networks. News can encourage political persuasion, the study shows, but more interestingly, apolitical, but social interactive use can also do this (Diehl et al. 2015).

### News consumption dynamics and literacy– legacy versus digital media

‘Online sources of information – websites, online forums and social media – were considered most useful and trustworthy by only one in 10 of the population. Although the campaigns, particularly the ‘leave’ campaign, focused a lot of effort on digital targeting of their messages, the position of such media in this list compared to TV and radio and newspapers would suggest that their role as a conduit for information in this and future campaigns should not be overstated.’ (Hansard Society 2018)

There are many questions over the interrelationship dynamics between tradition and online news media, boundaries between which are anyway often blurred for the consumer who will frequently consult traditional outlets via social media platforms. For example, a 2012 study looked at cross media agenda-setting effects among Twitter feeds of US presidential primary candidates and found a symbiotic relationship between agendas in Twitter posts and traditional news, with different degrees of intensity and time lags by issue. The study showed that while traditional media follow candidates on certain topics, on others they were able to predict the agenda (Conway et al. 2015).



An international comparative analysis of news sharing based on data from the Reuters Institute found that people who use social media for news and use multiple social media platforms are more likely to engage more actively with news outside of social media, for example by commenting on news sites and sharing news by other means. People with partisan beliefs are more likely to engage in sharing and commenting on news stories in social media, and people very interested in news are more likely to comment and share stories on both news sites and social media and via other means. The study suggests that the online environment reinforces some inequalities in participation while countering others, and shows a positive feedback loop where the already motivated are more likely to use social media to engage and a negative one where those less engaged participate less (Kalogeropoulos et al. 2017).

Shehata & Strömbäck suggest that as people move from legacy to online news media, how they learn about politics from each source is important. They investigated whether using social media as a source of political news compensates for not using traditional news in terms of learning. Results show positive learning effects from using traditional news media and online news websites, but not from using social media alone (Shehata & Strömbäck 2018). Another study which looked the relationship between cross-cutting news exposure and political participation found that exposure to news considered disagreeable on Facebook was associated with increased participation both on and offline (Min & Wohn 2018). A third found a relationship between social media use and exposure to challenging viewpoints, suggesting use contributes to greater exposure to differing political views. The association was stronger when exposure came from weak ties, acquaintances and strangers, and when participants were highly engaged with the news story. Exposure from strong ties showed no significant relationship with participation. This suggests that news exposure and political participation involving social media are different from the offline environment owing to factors of

self-expression in potentially anonymous environments where participants feel comfortable (Kim 2011).

The 'fake news' phenomenon

Over the course of fieldwork, participants grew increasingly familiar with the role of misinformation on social media.

Several related issues have been identified by researchers, disinformation, intentionally shared false information; misinformation, false information that may be inadvertently shared; or online propaganda, which may be factually correct, but is presented in order to discredit opposing viewpoints (Born & Edgington 2017). Online propaganda put out by automated accounts known as 'bots' is often intended to make sure that some wider media news stories are seen more than others (Sanovich 2017).

False news spreads more than the truth because humans, not robots, are more likely to spread it, a study investigating stories shared on Twitter from 2006 to 2017 concluded. It showed that false stories diffused much further and faster than factual ones regardless of type of information. This was more pronounced for false political news than for news than a range of other high-profile news topics. Researchers found that false news was more novel than fact, suggesting that people were predisposed to share novel information. Also, false stories made an impact through disgust, surprise or fear in comments, while true stories inspired anticipation, trust, joy or sadness. Perhaps counterintuitively, robots propagated the spread of true and false news at the same speed (Vosoughi et al. 2018).

A study on the dynamics of political misinformation on social media looked at temporal patterns, content mutation, and sources. Tracing the lifecycle of 17 major political rumours circulating on Twitter during the 2012 US presidential election, researchers found that these tended to resurface many times, but factual stories did not. Rumour resurgence continues, often with text changes, until preoccupation with the subject dissipates. Rumours can resurface in partisan pages, repackaged into news, and be shared by Twitter influencers. They suggest mutability of diffusing information, recurrence over time, and ways in which these stories evolve might be better explored (Shin et al. 2018).

A US study examining what kinds of social media users read fake news found that the distribution of such content is unevenly spread across the ideological spectrum with conservative and right-leaning sources sharing more false content (Narayanan et al. 2018).

## 2.12 Useful literature on the contextual case studies – a note

This study uses key political events to set context and prompt discussion. Being focused on participant experience, this does not extend to an in-depth analysis of the events themselves except where directly pertinent to the discussion. All of the events have happened recently, and the academic literature analysing them is still emerging. However, key texts, a mixture of academic, journalistic and popular accounts, have provided a spread of analysis of the political, sociological and demographic factors involved. Below is a short overview of just some of those consulted.

Rob Ford, Matthew Goodwin and Caitlin Milazzo's accounts of the rise of the UK populist right have offered invaluable insights into the growth of UKIP and the many factors, including crucial demographic ones, that underlie this (Goodwin & Milazzo, 2015; Ford & Goodwin, 2014). Douglas

Carswell's *The End of Politics and the Birth of iDemocracy* on the other hand offers a UKIP insider's more subjective account of the changing political landscape and the effects of digitisation (Carswell 2012). Iain MacWhirter's *Disunited Kingdom* has offered an insightful journalistic account of the events surrounding the Scottish independence referendum (Macwhirter 2015).

Useful accounts of the circumstances of the EU referendum, include Tim Shipman's comprehensive *All Out War*, and Craig Oliver's entertaining *Unleashing Demons: The Inside Story of Brexit* (Shipman 2016)(Oliver 2016). David Goodhart's *Road to Somewhere* offers an account of possible factors behind the rise of populist movements (Goodhart 2017).

Accounts of the ongoing Labour Party leadership debate have generated a number of accounts, including Richard Seymour's *Corbyn: The Strange Rebirth of Radical Politics* (Seymour 2016). Useful also for a personal perspective is Jess Phillips's *Everywoman: One Woman's Truth About Speaking the Truth* (Phillips 2018).

### 2.13 Literature Review conclusion

A wide-ranging review of the literature has demonstrated that there are multiple perspectives from which to understand and consider online participation, the relationship of this to formal political outcomes and the changing face of political conversation brought about by online media. However, apart from a few key studies this researcher notes that fewer focus on the agency and experience of participants. Less attention overall has been focused on the factors affecting interplay between participants that at very fundamental, perhaps visceral level might support or fight against orderly conceptions of the public sphere. Margetts et al address this in terms of big data, and did look at the role of the 'big five' personality factors (Margetts et al. 2015), but less so from the

phenomenological perspective of participants' lived experience. There have been user-centred approaches to participation generally, such as the Eliasoph study, and there is scope to mirror these in relation to social media participation.

This researcher suggests that some innate and hard-wired habits of mind and conceptualisations of identity evidenced by users themselves might be key to begin to understand some of the more surprising democratic trends, that online media might be exposing and perhaps magnifying these. It is this researcher's view, based on the review of the literature, that the relationship between contemporary ideas about belief formation and cognition and the practice of everyday politics, and the effects this practice has, could still be more comprehensively conceptualised.

Overall, much existing analysis appears to focus on locating direct relationships between online behaviour and real-world political outcomes and does not tend to look at the complexity of pre- and para-political activities of learning, belief formation, meaning development, ideas exchange and testing observable in online political commentary from the point of view of participants, that is to say, what the 'white noise' might be about. This study has aimed to address some of these gaps.

## Chapter 3: Theoretical approach, methodology and methods

### 3.1 Introduction and context

Chapter 2 highlighted knowledge gaps and research opportunities around people's own complex perceptions of their experience of talking about politics online. In attempting to address these, this study has followed a pluralist, phenomenographic approach combined with hermeneutic analysis of data to explore critically the accounts and experiences of a range of UK participants.

This chapter describes in more detail the researcher's thought processes, choices and actions, covering:

- critical understanding of the philosophical and wider theoretical approach to the study
- the methodology chosen and why
- research design processes and methods, data collection procedures, sampling strategies, and measures undertaken to manage bias
- ethical and axiological issues arising, including measures to mitigate concerns and comply with research governance requirements
- a critical overview of the perceived strengths and limitations of the overall approach

### 3.2 Philosophical underpinnings, ontological and epistemological position

<b>Research paradigm taxonomy</b>				
<b>• Strand</b>	<b>Primary</b>	<b>Secondary</b>	<b>Tertiary</b>	<b>Supporting</b>
<b>Ontology</b>	Realist	Subjectivist	Pragmatist	
<b>Epistemology</b>	Interpretivist	Subjectivist	Pragmatist	
<b>Axiology</b>	Realist	Interpretivist	Pragmatic	
<b>Perspective</b>	Interpretivist	Subjectivist		
<b>Methodology</b>	Phenomenology			
<b>Approach</b>	Phenomenography	Hermeneutic		
<b>Methods</b>	Qualitative			
<b>Sources</b>	Participant interview			Observation

Within the social sciences and related disciplines there remain fundamental differences in assumptions about what is there to be investigated and what should be the subject of study (Gomm 2008). Lying behind this are different epistemological and ontological perspectives about the objectives of academic research, the way we make sense of reality, the role of empirical research and what sorts of evidence can be considered the most useful. Defined within the Western philosophical tradition, the ontological assumption of this study is primarily realist-interpretivist. It looks at the world as interpreted by people and social reality as being constructed by individuals interacting to create social structures and meaning. Epistemologically, the approach is primarily interpretivist.

The main paradigmatic perspectives within which this work is situated, interpretivism and subjectivism, acknowledge that people make meaning based on subjective experience and interacting with the world and others, and that this can be interpreted. The aim behind these

approaches is to understand phenomena (for example, through phenomenology) and people's perceptions of their lived experience of this (phenomenography). The core methodology of this study is phenomenological, but it uses an interpretivist-subjectivist phenomenographic perspective and a pluralist phenomenographic/phenomenological method set.

How things appear to us: Husserl and phenomenology

The philosophical roots of the chosen approach lie in the phenomenological tradition. The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy (SEP) helpfully defines phenomenology as:

'...the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view.' 'Literally, phenomenology is the study of "phenomena": appearances of things, or things as they appear in our experience, or the ways we experience things, thus the meanings things have in our experience. Phenomenology studies conscious experience as experienced from the subjective or first-person point of view.'

Phenomenology grew in prominence through the work of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and others, and phenomenological concerns around intentionality, consciousness and qualia (individual instances of subjective, conscious experience). As the SEP notes, phenomenology 'studies structures of conscious experience from the first-person point of view, along with relevant conditions of experience.' It thus forms the philosophical underpinning of much interpretive, qualitative research, including this. Phenomenography is a distinct research practice, not developed directly from phenomenological philosophy, however there are fundamental similarities (Tight 2016). The meaning and practical implications of using this are discussed further down in the research design section.



### 3.3 Wider theoretical framework – influencing perspectives

Theories of social action: A Weberian legacy

‘There is no absolutely “objective “scientific analysis of culture... All knowledge of cultural reality... is always knowledge from particular points of view... And “objective “analysis of cultural events, which proceeds according to the thesis that the ideal of science is the reduction of empirical reality to “laws “, is meaningless... because... the knowledge of social laws is not knowledge of social reality but is rather one of the various aids used by our minds for retaining this end.’ (from Weber & Heydebrand 1994)

This work looks at the social and personal experience of a phenomenon and as such has drawn on a well of social theory. Key notions from Weber’s theories of social action underpin both the justification for the study and the methodology.

Weber’s early theoretical focus was on how people apply subjective meaning to their actions and interactions in particular social contexts. For example, suggestive of more recent ideas about fast and slow thinking, his ideas about rationality propose that people can act either before reasoning or after. A distinction was made between actions believed to be by efficient means or ‘instrumentally rational’ and those that were ‘value-rational.’ He observed that people acted for a mix of reasons but would give subjective justifications. His identification of four main types of social action are, as will be seen, pertinent to how people engage politically on social media, viz:

- *instrumentally rational (zweckrational)* - determined by expectations
- *value-rational (wertrational)* - determined by values, such as ethical, aesthetic, religious, regardless of the prospects of success;
- *affectual* (especially emotional) - determined by a person’s feelings;
- *traditional* - inculcated or by ingrained habit (Weber & Matthews 1978)

When conceived, this typology was intended to be a complete list of the sorts of meaning people apply to their actions in social and cultural systems, however, on the face of it, it is a canny reflection of behavioural drivers of online political discussion. Weber was interested by the idea that action had come to be increasingly dominated by goal-oriented rationality (zweckrational) rather than

coming from emotion, tradition or values, an interesting perspective through which to think about online political discussion and which can be considered in relation to ideas about the public sphere and, as noted, to Kahneman's ideas about thinking discussed briefly in Chapter 2 (Kahneman 2011). As also noted in the literature review, contemporary research in the fields of cognition and neuroscience offers perspectives on understanding these typologies that the interpretive researcher can usefully acknowledge.

Schroeder et al suggest that Weber and also Durkheim have made a significant contribution to our understanding of information and communication technologies (ICTs) generally in that they offer conceptual tools to help us understand their use. They suggest that Weber's 'iron cage' (*stahlhartes Gehäuse*) and Durkheim's 'mechanical solidarity' and 'ritual' offer an account of how ICTs maintain social cohesion and support mediated interactions in complex social situations, and the implications of increasingly mediated relationships (Schroeder & Ling 2014). Relevant also to social media is Durkheim's conceptualisation of *anomie* where social bonds between the individual and community break down, fragmenting social identity and weakening self-regulation. This is often translated as 'normlessness'. For Durkheim, *anomie* is the result of mismatched personal, group and wider social standards, or from a lack of a social ethic, leading to moral deregulation. It has a recognised relationship to profound social change. Rapid socio-political change at the macro level produces a higher level of *anomie* (Zhao & Cao 2010).

While environments like Facebook house vigorous political agonism verging on dysfunction, at the same time they are clearly, in some respects, bringing people together. Perhaps these factors are interrelated, conflict borne of proximity and greater opportunities to mix.

While Weber is associated with the idea that beliefs inform social structures, he believed changes in motivation come from an iterative system of cause and effect, interacting with changes in society. He suggested that a characteristic feature of contemporary (to then) Western society was a change in motivation rooted within bureaucracy and industrialisation (Elwell 2005). It is interesting therefore to speculate on what he might have made of the mass conversation on social media where affective action and '*wertrational*' have made a distinctive reappearance.

Action theory, being a micro theory about small-scale interactions and their effects, leans towards the interpretivist approaches applied here and discussed further on.

Consideration has been given to the positioning of this study in relation to the concept, largely associated with Weber, of *verstehen*, defined here as empathic interpretive or participatory analysis of social activity by an external observer (Harvey 2013). This 19th century German concept relates to the idea that social phenomena should be understood from the perspectives of social agents. This notion was essentially a challenge to positivist thought which focused on *Erklären*, that is experimental, and quantitative (by insinuation more 'objective') knowledge. In its pure form *verstehen* involves trying to capture the subjective experience or thoughts of social actors or, at a more superficial level, reconstructing their rationales (Martin 1999). Martin's discussion puts forward the benefits of pragmatic pluralism in methodology, where *verstehen* is justified in terms of the aim and contexts of specific research.

While *Verstehen* has often been seen as being in opposition to positivist approaches, this was not the position of Weber who suggested these might be unified as *verstehen des erklären* (understanding-explanation) suggestive of the mixed-methods approach. It is about attempting to

see phenomena from the point of view of the other, essentially treating the social actor as a subject, not an object of study. Implicit is the idea that human actors are not simply subject to external forces but create the world by building upon understanding to create meaning. By implication, to undertake research on social participants without studying meaning they themselves attach to their choices positions them as objects. *Verstehen* has been interpreted as 'a solution to the problem of other minds'. That is, through what epistemic principles can we show our justification for attributing particular thoughts and feelings to others? (Chisholm, 1979)

Phenomenological and later, phenomenographic theory underscores the validity of the contribution to knowledge of people's own subjective account of their experiences.

Regarding longstanding sociological debates over the relative significance of structure over agency which have enduring relevance to the intersection of media and politics and the power relationships operating therein, and to an extent understood by participants themselves, a starting assumption of this study has been that social actors do have significant agency, if not always conscious control of their actions. Further, their own subjective perspectives of their actions can offer valuable information. So, to exclude these would mean dismissing a significant and valuable evidence set. That the small actions of many individuals, over time and in aggregate, effected through networks, can and do amount to a significant societal force has also been a key assumption. Seen from this perspective, institutions and designated roles, including those of political establishments, are ultimately the results of patterns of human interaction established through habit and usage. That is not to deny that society is part-shaped by macro forces as functionalist and conflict theories would maintain, but to support the idea that these superstructures *per se* grew from the discrete interactions of past individuals. The logical consequence of following this perspective is to accept that, in principle, all political actions and utterances, however small, hold potential significance.

(That is not to suggest outcomes are predictable. Network and systems theory show how tiny actions can have very significant effects but also make it clear that we cannot readily track connections in complex and chaotic environments.)

Sociological and other theory informing the study

This study has drawn intentionally on elements from a range of social and cultural theory as these have been helpful to begin to understand and interpret the lived experience of participants, which is social and personal, as well as political.

Symbolic Interactionism

The internet has brought new conditions of micro-social communication and new rules of interpersonal communication. Symbolic interactionism (SI) has a contribution to make to theorising the complex structures of interactive digital media. By widening its scope from microanalysis of interpersonal interaction to mass communication, SI can also provide a theoretical perspective for microanalysis (Alver & Caglar 2015).

A key framework of social action theory, one superseded in popularity in recent decades but enjoying re-emergence in relation to social media practice, SI, with its focus on subjective meaning and individual meaning-making has evident relevance. It has its roots in the philosophical tradition of American Pragmatism. Like much sociological theory, it attempts to answer three questions - what is action; what is social order; and what determines social change? Lying within the micro-interactionist tradition, SI maintains that our social world is a continually developing, reforming

product of everyday interactions - moreover, people come to understand themselves through engaging with each other (Carter and Fuller, 2015, Blumer, 1986).

SI theory suggests people have significant agency, therefore are not just the pawns of conflict or macro forces but can shape society through co-operative action. This again supports the idea that micro- or pre-political actions, for example small conversations that begin on social media, can have macro-political 'butterfly' effects, like policy change, in the longer term, (or faster if they become 'viral').

A central tenet of SI is that people do not react to the reality of events *per se*, but rather to their own social interpretation of them (West & Turner 2010). They respond via prisms consisting of individuals' different perspectives developed over time. So, for instance, people will have individual, vernacular understandings of political labelling, for example 'Tory' or 'radical', based on exposure to the multiple inculcations, concoctions, perspectives and conceptualisations of others. To give a prosaic example, when someone professes to 'hate' a given politician, much of what they profess to 'hate' can often be picked apart as reiterations, constructions, even willful fabrications. Yet thriving, enduring and motivating political narratives can be built around these manufactured phenomena – which are, essentially, creative accomplishments.

Three basic premises of SI are that people act towards things based on the meanings they attach to them; such meaning arises through social interactions; and, meanings are developed through an interpretive, iterative process (Blumer 1994). This can be applied to popular political discourse online. Developing conversations can consist of contest, abreactions, assertions of identity, tribal

chanting, heel-digging or occasional epiphanies of persuasion, but together these activities give birth to memes, trends and, just sometimes, more profound change.

Moreover, we begin to define our own selves politically because of others' interactions. This has been declared explicitly by many participants in fieldwork.

Cooley maintained that society is an interweaving, iterative expression of our mental selves (Yeung & Martin 2003). This is the so-called 'looking glass self'<sup>8</sup> - would that he had been able to observe the growth of social media. Much online political behaviour does indeed appear to be about identity development and adapting one's public persona positively or negatively to others' expectations. The relationship of this process of self-definition to formal political choices and actions is not always clear cut and sometimes very counterintuitive, but fieldwork shows that there is a relationship.

The assumption in SI thinking that people, or 'social actors', take on distinct roles and constructions of meaning in different situations and thus have varying rationalising frameworks (cf. Weber's notion of multiple rationalities), raises many interesting questions in the 'context collapse' world of social media. Wider ideas from SI that have relevance to understanding this topic include:

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<sup>8</sup> The concept of the looking-glass self is based on a threefold process. First, the self imagines how it appears to others. Second, the self then imagines the other's judgment. Finally, the self develops an emotional response to that judgment. In Cooley's own words, the looking-glass self consists of: 'The imagination of our appearance to the other person, the imagination of his judgment of that appearance, and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification'. In this way, the looking-glass self is the fruit of interaction; it is not static but a continual process of self-evaluation through the imagined eye of the other.' (Robinson, 2007).

Goffman's ideas of self-presentation

Goffman's ideas have enjoyed recent revival amongst social media researchers given their pertinence to behaviour (Hogan 2010). The *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, the classic early sociological examination of face-to-face interaction, characterises this process as dramaturgical (Goffman 1959). Goffman asserted that people guide the impression they make on others by modifying aspects of their context, appearance and manner. Conceptualised before the arrival of social media, its application as an idea in this arena is clear. In some situations, the nuance with which one presents oneself politically can be a matter of avoiding actual harm, as will be shown from fieldwork. The development of 'personas' in online situations has been well studied, and SI theory has been used to explain how people develop a sense of self through a process of interaction with others via online media (Robinson, 2007).

Hogan notes that presentation of self is useful to help explain variations in experience in online participation and suggests the way people self-present can be divided into performance, in synchronous situations, and artefacts, in asynchronous exhibitions. While Goffman's dramaturgical approach uses situation-based ideas about front and back stage, social media, Hogan asserts, uses 'exhibitions', for instance, status updates and photos, alongside situational activity like commenting. Distinct to exhibitions is the virtual curator, mediating, managing and distributing content (Hogan 2010). An analysis of online identity creation shows people re-create their offline self online but edited. This supports Goffman's dramaturgical approach. Researchers conclude that Goffman's insights remain useful for understanding identity through interaction and the presentation of self online. The greater potential for self-editing in turn offers opportunities to develop Goffman's framework further (Bullingham & Vasconcelos 2013).



Definition of the situation

Also pertinent to the idea of experience and behaviour on social media is the idea of 'definition of the situation' (DoS), a concept first put forward by W. I. Thomas, and about common understandings of a given social situation - norms, values, authority, roles which support cohesion and action and how these shape outcomes (Thomas 1923). He stated: 'If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences' (Rousseau 2002).

We broadly know how we should behave at a wedding, or a courtroom, for example. Yet conflicts can arise from disagreements over definitions of the situation in question which thus become contested. DoS is related to the idea of framing.

When an accepted definition of a situation has been breached, participants may attempt to maintain nothing has changed, if that serves them or avoids conflict. Goffman believed this type of collusive credulity happens throughout society. The development and sustaining of frames of interaction (social contexts, 'norms' and expectations), and individual and group identities, are fundamental to micro-level social interaction and applicable to the online social environment. It is easy to find examples and parallels for these ideas in online political discussion and in fact research has shown that people will maintain party loyalty over policy detail as party identification is an enduring emotional attachment (Dalton 2016).

As social media is a historically recent environment, within a multicultural global medium, there remain wildly differing notions of how one ought to behave – as noted, it is in many respects a behavioural frontier where extremes of behaviour, including 'trolling', 'flaming' and copious amounts of ordinary abuse are frequently exhibited.

Confrontation and interaction in online media results in safety issues that do not exist in face-to-face communication, as it is not always possible to get accurate information about others (Alver & Caglar 2015). Social media may be changing the ethical implications of our social and political practices, but while central to many major public debates, the role they play in human behaviour is far from settled (Nelson 2018).

Goffman writes of the significance of having a common, cohesive DoS in a given interaction. For instance, people usually try to nurture positive impressions of themselves according to norms and encourage others to accept these (cf. the popular idea of 'virtue signalling' discussed in Chapter 2).

It might be argued that the vastness and cultural complexity of social media, compounded by practical issues around missing social cues, language pragmatics and widely different social norms effectively deny the possibility of widespread and commonly-held definitions of the situation beyond the imposed structures of the channel or a particular group. There is considerable scope, for example, for theorising around the idea of the 'differend' as defined by Lyotard (McLennan 2018). Overall it is a very nurturing environment for boundary-testing and offence-giving and taking.

Contrasted with SI are ideas around Social Constructionism (SC). SC looks at power relationships and meaning, and meaning is not held to be a property of objects and events *per se*, but a construction, and a product of cultural frames of social and linguistic practice. It therefore aims to show the ways in which phenomena are constructed socially into representations, such as perceptions, thoughts, language, beliefs and desires, as well as objects, and includes all aspects of our experience. From this perspective, meaning spans the relationship between language and cognition, and because meanings are in dispute, they form the basis of political and ideological struggle.

Every individual is born into an objective social structure within which he encounters the significant others who are in charge of his socialisation... These significant others are imposed on him. ... The significant others who mediate this world to him modify it in the course of mediating it (Berger & Luckmann 1966).

While this is clearly relevant to the study of online political activity, and indeed the possibility of mass movement or manipulation of opinion via online mechanisms, the outputs of which might fruitfully be approached through critical discourse analysis, discussed further on, it may be less helpful in understanding and interpreting the relative significance of the actions of individuals. This is core to the approach of this work, which asserts the importance of considering individual complexity of action and thought. Also, SC essentially takes the side of nurture in the ongoing nature versus nurture debate and thus sidelines physiological influences on behaviour and culture.

As Barbour notes, in contrast to more recent methodological approaches, Symbolic Interactionism never, even at its peak, offered detailed guidance on undertaking analysis, which she believes may partly explain why it became unfashionable, rather than just falling out of favour for perceived limitations. These issues can be addressed without necessarily undermining the theoretical framework as a whole (Barbour 2013).

Ethnomethodology and social media

Social media is, on many levels, a learning environment. For instance, it works as a knowledge repository, a behavioural observatory, and a practice ground. Participants in online political discussion learn social practice through trial and error. They develop an ethnomethodology. A later offshoot of SI thinking, ethnomethodology draws in elements from phenomenology (Schütz) and sociology (Talcott Parsons) and from Goffman. Garfinkel coined the term in 1967. It has been defined as the study of the processes by which people make meaning and sense of the world using heuristics rather than formal logic (Bogdan & Taylor 1975). It questions how people's interactions

can create the illusion of a shared social order despite misunderstandings and differences. It suggests the key to interpreting people's understanding of events lies in examining their routine activities. Therefore, its potential application to understanding the heuristic, 'rational irrationality' world of online political discussion and belief formation would seem self-evident. From an ethnomethodological perspective, it is important to interpret the ways people apply heuristics and 'common sense' to make actions seem explicable and less ambiguous. This makes social and political meaning a thing people *accomplish* through action and learning. It might be argued that social media are in an early stage of ethnomethodological development.

### 3.4 Rationale and approach to identifying methodology

'In recent years, the connection between online and in particular social media and politics has become one of the central ones in contemporary societies and has been explored very widely in political research and media and communication studies. (There is a) need for a broader, problem-driven look at how political practices and ideologies are articulated on social and online media. It illustrates the value of a cross-disciplinary take that allows overcoming both the classic (e.g. qualitative vs. quantitative) and the more recent (e.g. small vs. big data) divides in explorations of the language of online and politics.'

(Krzyżanowski & Tucker 2018)

As noted, the core methodology of this study is phenomenological, it uses a phenomenographic perspective and a pluralist phenomenographic-phenomenological method set. This is because the research questions address participants' own perceptions of their actions, but also benefit from addressing critically the wider, often complex contextual factors that might be shaping these. Also, understanding a multifaceted, fast-moving or novel set of issues can often benefit from taking a pragmatic or hybrid approach.

## Approaching complexity

‘Social life is messy, uncertain, and emotional. If our desire is to research social life, then we must embrace a research method that, to the best of its/our ability, acknowledges and accommodates mess and chaos, uncertainty and emotion.’ (Adams, 2015).

Attempting a more holistic view of this topic is important, if potentially ambitious. Social media form a notably chaotic, organic system where social and political phenomena have multiple causes, often hidden political, technological and visceral drivers, and people’s perceptions and explanations of the causes of political events become part of an iterative, symbolic-interactivist cycle of cause and effect themselves.

That such social phenomena are intrinsically meaningful and there is justification for the study of meaning and meaning-making within them are established philosophical positions (Hughes & Sharrock 1997). Nonetheless the specificity of ‘meaning’ being sought is difficult to pin down in this context – are we seeking to understand just the participants’ subjective view of meaning or what wider society sees as meaningful in their actions? For purposes of perspective, surely something of both, but here with a specific focus on the former.

Theory-building and testing remain challenging in the social sciences and related disciplines, given the imprecise nature of many such concepts, the huge number of variables in complex social systems, and at best only partially adequate tools to measure these with precision.

Human political behaviour and indeed people’s own interpretation of this is particularly intricate and unpredictable – one of the joys of the topic in hand. Attempting to understand political participation

in interactive media invites yet more layers of complexity. Such challenges have applied to this study.

In the face of such human intricacy, social science and humanities studies have often retreated towards the one-dimensional (Thomas 2015). Yet as Thomas also notes, in these instances, we might ideally choose to look at our subject from 'many and varied angles' to develop what Foucault called 'a polyhedron of intelligibility' (Foucault, M. in Baynes and Bohman, 1987). That is, a 'richer, rounder more balanced picture of our subject', and perhaps, circumvent somewhat artificial border lines between disciplines and established methodologies. In other words perhaps, take a pragmatic or pluralist approach that rejects having to choose between traditionally positivist or interpretive positions and advocates the use of mixed methods, focusing on what will work practically for the questions under study (Creswell 2014).

A pragmatic or pluralist approach has been indicated for this study for several reasons, including the fact that it has considered people's experience in a relatively new arena, playing host to distinct behavioural patterns with distinctive knock-on effects. The internet itself has helped push the bounds of knowledge through the study of phenomena such as networked systems, and neurological responses to the online environment. It is indeed a behavioural frontier to which our brains are tentatively beginning to adapt, and a surprising, reflexive and iterative communal learning environment.

Arguably, the uniqueness of the problem, rather than methodological tradition, should dictate research design, and any urges towards 'methodolatry' – that is, privileging the purity of method execution above the need to answer a set of questions, suppressed. Over-adherence to models can

lead to a situation characterised by Reicher thus, that ‘the very reasons that make an adequate understanding of the human subject dependent on methodological breadth and creativity lead, in practice, to the adoption of methodological narrowness and dogmatism...’ (Reicher 2000). It is acknowledged also that there is not always a firm consensus amongst scholars over the distinction, demarcation or hierarchy of methodology and method in relation to individual approaches. The approach therefore has not been to follow ‘pure’ methodological techniques and protocols, for example in relation to phenomenography, but to call on the insights from several flexible and interdisciplinary approaches. The intention has not been willful negation of the body of scholarship, but an acknowledgement of their limitations in relation to these particular research questions.

So how should we explore this arena? As Highfield observes, social media are ‘messy and confusing, - data can be easy to obtain but their significance can be unclear’ (Highfield 2016). Some aspects of online behaviour are measurable (such as the tendency to form echo-chambers data-mapped effectively by Polonski and others), others must be interpreted qualitatively, with all the challenges to reliability, validity and generalisability this implies. So where to start, and from what benchmark?

While this study has aimed to be interdisciplinary in its foundations, and pluralist in its methodology, nonetheless, it is addressing people’s reflexive relationship with, or experience of acting within particular media. At heart, it is a media-based piece of research. So, the range of established methodologies and methods used within this field were a consideration from the outset. Media research already encompasses a variety of perspectives, approaches, theoretical frameworks and methods from established social science disciplines such as anthropology, linguistics, sociology, psychology and political science (Jensen, 2002). Perspectives from many of these have been considered in the review of the literature. There have been many potential precedents to call upon.

## Exploratory phase – using approaches from grounded theory

‘Creativity is ... a vital component of the grounded theory method. Its procedures force the researcher to break through assumptions and to create new order out of the old. Creativity manifests itself in the ability of the researcher to aptly name categories; and also to let the mind wander and make the free associations that are necessary for generating stimulating questions and for coming up with a comparison that leads to discovery.’ (Strauss & Corbin, 1990)

How does the researcher proceed when the objectives of a study are only partially clear at the outset? The exploratory stage of this study, which ran from Autumn 2014 to the Spring of 2016, began by pursuing a what has been characterised as a ‘grounded theory -lite’ approach (Braun & Clarke 2006). As such it focused on developing early categories, themes and theories based on repeated observation and notation, the underlying research principle being abductive. There are many variations of grounded theory available to the researcher (Ralph et al. 2015). In this case, a utilitarian approach has been taken. Helpful, as it is iterative and starts with generative questions which are not too prescriptive. Glaser refers to ‘the interrelationship between meaning in the perception of the subjects and their action’ (Aldiabat & Le Navenec 2011). This is an idea very pertinent to analysing online discussion. ‘All is data’ is a key concept of grounded theory – this means everything crossing the researcher's path, when studying a specific topic, is data. Not just interviews or observations but anything that helps the researcher to develop emerging theory, including media items and anecdotal accounts. This researcher accepted this as a guiding principle.

As data was collected, theories and categories began to be identified and these informed the framing of both the research questions and then the discussion topic guide, the latter being divided into seven core domains for exploration and analysis. These were identified broadly as:

1. General levels and understanding of political participation amongst participants (‘participation’)
2. Subjective and interpersonal experience of online political discussion (‘subjective experience’)
3. Major event-specific experience



4. Issues of identity
5. Perceived efficacy of participation
6. Media consumption and literacy
7. Open observations and emerging themes

This moved towards verification and the development of supporting themes, calling on insights from the review of literature and theory.

It is noted that more recent versions of grounded theory, called 'constructivist' and related to pragmatism and relativist epistemology, work on the principle, or perhaps insight, that neither data nor theories are discovered, but are 'constructed' by the researcher because of her interactions with the field and participants (Arthur 2012). This is accepted as a likelihood. There is an inevitable risk of seeing what one is looking for. Observations on how data collection might have constructed outcomes are noted further on.

In fact, as Jensen points out, most researchers agree an initial conceptualisation of the object of enquiry is needed, even if the specific aim of research is theory building or reconceptualising. No knowledge can be arrived at without some pre-knowledge or 'prejudice' (in the epistemological sense), but then all qualitative studies will learn something new from the field. This has applied to this study where the researcher has an existing subjective understanding of the topic, and an overarching focus on the subjective understanding of others has guided the approach, the development of which has been fully immersive. It has been immersive owing to the need to develop a deep understanding of social media *mores* and quotidian political practice from within and in line with the principles of prolonged engagement and persistent observation (see Lincoln and Guba 1985). This has been a commitment from the outset, so as to achieve *verstehen* - tacit understanding both as a participant and an observer. A range of political discussion groups have been joined as a participating member, or where this was not appropriate, following or joining

openly under the researcher's real identity. Prior to the EU Referendum vote, and as part of the development phase, a snapshot study was undertaken of several groups across the divide to gauge both opinion and behaviour. While the results of this small study are not included in this thesis, they were presented to a conference (University of Bedfordshire, Britain in Europe 2016<sup>9</sup>) and have informed developing thinking and the progression of fieldwork since. Ethical considerations around this and ongoing observation are discussed in the 'Ethics' section.

#### Development of research questions

Fieldwork has been designed to provide data with the potential to address the research questions outlined in the introduction. As discussed, the key domains for research questions and guided discussion topics were identified through the literature review and observation of online political behaviour in the early phases of research.

The precise articulation of the research questions has been an iterative process taking place alongside this and precision has sometimes proved challenging. While the overall focus on people's experience of talking about politics online has remained, the researcher has come to understand over time that the core focus of interest is on the subjective experience of individuals and the potential implications of this. The questions therefore address factors that might influence behaviour (with or without conscious awareness) self-awareness and self-evaluation and self-perceptions around their own relationship to wider political processes.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.beds.ac.uk/bie/programme>

## Considerations of quantitative data collection for triangulation

Early in the process, perhaps owing to some internalised anxiety about the validity of qualitative research practice to address the questions, the potential for using mixed qualitative and quantitative methods was considered. The potential of quantitative methods, most often applied in these fields to show causal relationships, was reviewed for purposes of triangulation, and some closed questions were asked of emerging data. However, collecting and collating sufficiently large quantitative data sets is often beyond the means of individual researchers. There is a growing corpus of robust secondary data giving quantified evidence of people's online political behaviour, ranging from the following and membership of political social media pages, to behavioural trends such as echo-chamber formation, polling data showing voting intention trends and wider psephological data. Other potential data sources include think tanks, quangos and official government data (including open electoral data from data.gov.uk), party membership data, further social media data from Google, Twitter and Facebook and wider academic data sets. There are several online tools for searching sites and locations of interest. Data thus located can be analysed in diverse ways to detect influencers, hashtags, terms and themes and some demographic information. However, consideration needs to be given not only to the limitations of the individual researcher looking at large data sets, but also the inherent limitations of the data sets themselves in addressing questions. Tufekci considered the methodological and conceptual challenges for the emergent field of large social media data set analysis. She identifies a number of issues, including an over-emphasis on Twitter, sampling biases caused by selection by hashtags, and vague or unrepresentative sampling criteria. The sociocultural complexity of behaviour, for example, users gaming the algorithms through practices such as sub-tweeting, false retweeting, and use of screen grabs for sections of texts further confound quantitative analysis of social media output. Other challenges she identified include accounting for field effects, events that diffuse not only through the network but other media and the whole of a society. The application of network methods from other fields to the study of human social activity may not therefore always be appropriate, she concludes (Tufekci 2014).

It is acknowledged that much ground-breaking 21<sup>st</sup> century research into social media has been data-led, relying on insights from information science and network theory. In contrast, 20<sup>th</sup> century social science research methodologies can at times seem less versatile and encompassing in their approach. Yet the need to understand the human factors involved in this environment, on human terms, remains if we are to build a holistic picture of the significant social and political developments taking place, and so these approaches are often still among our best options. In the event, the collection of a large additional quantitative data set, or the cross-analysis of larger secondary data sets was rejected not just on the grounds of scope and feasibility which was an issue, but the likely contribution to be made to answering the question. A decision was therefore made to focus on qualitative data, a substantial corpus of which was collected.

#### Use of qualitative data

Given the focus on lived experiences, qualitative, interpretive methods were identified as most appropriate, as these typically allow the researcher to:

- gain an understanding of the perceptions, feelings and values underlying and influencing behaviour
- understand better what sort of needs this behaviour fulfils
- understand the language and imagery people use to conceptualise their experience
- understand how they receive and react to the communication of others
- better understand some patterns in larger quantitative data sets
- reflect on ways to improve people's experience
- develop hypotheses for future research and parameters for quantitative work

Researchers using qualitative techniques are concerned with how those they study experience and make sense of the world for themselves. This is the approach of phenomenology, interpretivism, symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology as have been discussed. Contemporary qualitative research draws many of its key concepts from disciplines like sociology and anthropology, but several authorities have recently brought these trends together in consolidated reference works (Jensen, 2002). Jensen identifies three common denominators in these approaches.

First, there is a focus on meaning. Humans tend to interpret their experiences and communications as meaningful, this helps them to make sense of their lives and develop perspectives which in turn inform action. Researchers have wanted to understand and interpret these phenomena.

Secondly, qualitative research tends to assume communication should be studied, so far as is possible, in naturalistic contexts. This has implications for things like sampling. We would want to observe the naturalistic online conversation of participants as it happens, as well as seeking *post hoc* interpretation of the experience.

The third feature is the notion of the researcher as interpretive subject, engaged in continuous interpretive activity through which she gradually learns more. Fieldwork has thrown forth many insights small and large, and understanding of these has also been modified by external political events and reflective practice as discussed in the autoethnography section.

The three elements together mean qualitative research is often identifying insights in the 'middle ground' between focused analyses of the coding of specific texts on one hand and grand metanarrative theories about wider society on the other (Merton in Jensen 2002). This has been borne out by the experience of fieldwork.

Using interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

'...qualitative phenomenological approaches, such as interpretive phenomenological analysis, can illuminate the importance of situating embodied personal experience in the context of meaning, relationships, and the lived world.' (Larkin et al. 2006)

IPA was the initial qualitative approach considered for the main phase of the study. This is an integrative, hermeneutic phenomenology (Finlay 2011). Having a hermeneutic rather than

descriptive approach, it can be 'suffused with philosophical, theoretical, literary and interpretive lenses resulting in an aspect of human experience grounded on unrestricted imagination and metaphorical sensibility' (Tuffour 2017). It is pertinent as an idiographic approach which considers how people, in each context, make subjective sense of a phenomenon of personal significance, based on a detailed hermeneutical analysis of their commentary. It is in line with Symbolic Interactionist approaches.

IPA in practice tends to involve scrutiny of the experiences of small numbers of people (groups of 3-15 are typical) chosen for their ability to offer specific insights into an experience. Or it can gather data over a period, for longitudinal analysis. Data collection typically includes interviews, focus groups or autonomously collected and collated material like diaries, and follows an approach of flexible and open inquiry. IPA does not usually set out to test specific hypotheses or theories, but results are often relevant to the development of existing theory. The researcher can identify codes and themes from the data, rather than apply pre-existing theory. This is what makes IPA essentially hermeneutic, making sense of the participant's efforts to make sense of their own experiences, the 'double hermeneutic' (Giddens 1987). This can lead to unexpected insights owing to its open-ended nature, a useful approach for interpreting online dialogue. The distinctive features of IPA are a concern with personal lived experience, theoretical grounding but emphasis on praxis and detailed idiographic analysis (Smith et al. 2009). It therefore lends itself well to understanding people's perceptions of their own political activity.

It is important to recognise the limitations of IPA, which has enjoyed considerable recent popularity as a method. These include a lack of appreciation that it is mainly an interpretive approach and used loosely can result in descriptive analyses much like simple thematic analysis (Smith, 2011, Hefferon and Gil-Rodriguez, 2011).<sup>10</sup> It has also faced criticism on the grounds of ambiguity and lack of standardisation (Giorgi 2010). Tuffour summarises four major criticisms, that it gives insufficient recognition to the role of language, that it might capture opinions as much as experience and meaning, that it focuses on perceptions not underlying causes, and that it is unclear about the role of cognition (Tuffour 2017). As with perceived weaknesses in other methodological approaches,

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<sup>10</sup> For a critique of some of its limitations see: <https://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/volume-24/edition-10/methods-interpretive-phenomenological-analysis>

pluralist or hybrid use offers the potential to overcome these in support of specific research objectives.

Phenomenology to phenomenography

In terms of this particular piece of research, as work in the planning stage developed, the importance of the differing, subjective experiences of participants in online discussion grew in significance and a move towards a more phenomenographic approach began to take shape.

Why phenomenography

‘... a descriptive recording of immediate subjective experience as reported’  
(Sonnemann, quoted in Patton and Patton, 2002)

This methodology was considered the ‘best fit’ to answer the research questions in terms of approach. However, given the purposefully large size of the sample and the range of issues being considered it was decided to deviate from traditional data analysis practices with which it is associated and adopt a more expansive, hermeneutic approach more typically associated with IPA.

Practised typically, phenomenography tends to use very specific approaches to data collection, analysis and reporting, most often using interviews involving dialogic exchange with the researcher, although other material can be used. Sample sizes again tend to be small. All data is then treated collectively for analytical purposes, with the focus being on the variations in understanding across the whole sample (Tight 2016). Most often, analysis uses an iterative process of close reading, manual or machine coding, note-taking and categorisation. The phenomenological approach of ‘bracketing’ or putting to one side the researcher’s own assumptions and instead focusing on what interviewees themselves say should be applied. Following this, it is typical to develop an ‘outcome

space' which identifies key conceptual categories across the whole sample, relating these to each other structurally, very often in a hierarchy. Phenomenography is useful for characterising key shared elements of experience of a group of individuals engaged in the same experience (Costello 2014).

Phenomenographers characterise phenomenography in a wide range of ways (Collier-Reed & Ingerman 2013). It has often been used pedagogically and given that one way of looking at the locus under study is as a learning ground for new behaviour, that is applicable here.

This work has been characterised as specifically phenomenographic because it takes as its starting point the differences in individual interpretation of the experience of a phenomenon. This does not mean that standard phenomenographic approaches to data analysis have followed, so it is acknowledged this can be seen as a hybrid or plural usage.

### 3.5 Research design, options and choices

Drawing on the theoretical and methodological frameworks and other considerations outlined above, this section describes the thought processes through which working approaches to fieldwork and practical methods for investigation and analysis were ultimately chosen.

Description of the development of the research design and application

Development of the study format, research questions and final method choices took place over several phases, a function of both the insights emerging from early observation of data and advances in related areas of scholarship during the study.



Whatever the focus of research, in what is still a relatively new field, the researcher has a range of potential options for study design, data collection and analysis. The challenge has been whether to call upon established practices, many of which were developed before the advent of social media or attempt a new or pluralist approach in recognition of the novel aspects of the topic and indeed more recent methodological research.

Much on offer will amount to translational approaches from traditional research practice and there is much scope to 'play safe' and adhere to these, but in addition to this there are new methods and opportunities afforded by the distinctive features of the medium or indeed scope, and often, need for hybridity to achieve holistic understanding (Hooley et al. 2012).

Comparable studies

Observation, with varying degrees of participation through individual or group interview, for instance, has often been the practical method of choice for studies of media use in context (Jensen, 2002).

How other researchers in the developing field of social media specifically are taking on the questions that emerge have been an initial point of reference. This has been in varying ways.

An early study of diversity of political conversation on the internet involved in-depth interviews with 69 users, however this was before significant take up of social media and focused on Usenet groups and real time messaging (Stromer-Galley 2006).

An overview of trends in qualitative and mixed methods social media research literature published from 2007 through to 2013 found that the most frequently used research approaches collected data through transcribed interview, focus group, and survey methods. Content analysis of social media came next. Researchers noted that mixed methods studies tended to follow Creswell and Plano Clark's basic mixed methods typology, that is convergent parallel, explanatory sequential, and exploratory sequential (Snelson 2016).

Specific examples include a large 2013/14 study, with researchers developing an account over time of users of online political and civic 'self-help' sites and their involvement in wider community and political activities, where the aim was to develop and apply an innovative and replicable mixed methodology, integrating qualitative and quantitative evidence about users, thus to allow for a richer and more detailed insight into their experiences (Gibson et al. 2014).

Another relevant and recent study, *New Radicals: Digital Political Engagement in Post Referendum Scotland* uses a combination of analysis of Twitter feeds, a targeted survey and in-depth one-to-one interviews (McClaverty et al. 2015). Each of these approaches has been used to inform the developing model.

It is clear that pluralist and mixed methods approaches are generally proving useful in exploring the issues emerging from social media use.

## Places and platforms: The internet as a field of study

### A note about platforms

This study looks at mainstream patterns of political social media use. Based on the understanding that the ‘big two’ platforms, Facebook and Twitter, remain overall the most used (Smith & Anderson 2018, Statista 2018), and given that in these environments, participants situate their political talk amongst a much wider social and political context, a working assumption has been that most interviewees would focus on these two main channels, which indeed they most often did, but talk about other platforms has not been excluded. Twitter is based on weaker social ties than Facebook (Harrison 2017). Facebook has been, almost by default, the primary focus of study because of its size and reach, its discursive nature, and the fact it is the overwhelmingly most popular medium of choice for people to talk to each other about politics.<sup>11</sup> Facebook is the most-widely used platform, and is most representative (Pew Research Center 2015). The importance of Twitter as a broadcast medium favoured by the political establishment is also considered. This situates Facebook and Twitter as locales of study rather than case studies themselves.

### Use of ‘contextual case studies’

*‘A rich picture, with boundaries.’* (Thomas 2015).

At the development stage, a decision was made to focus on set-piece UK political events as demarcating or delimiting contextual case studies. These have not been applied and explored as a unit of analysis in the traditional sense, but as a mechanism for scoping and focusing. They were eventually narrowed down to the Scottish independence referendum of 2015, the EU referendum and associated UKIP surge, and the ongoing Labour Party leadership debate. Later in fieldwork, a

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<sup>11</sup> Over the 2015 UK General Election campaign, there were around 21 million political comments on Facebook, and ten million tweets about politicians. Source: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/social-media/12061333/In-2015-social-media-companies-strengthened-their-rule.-In-2016-they-will-face-rebellion.html>

decision was made to ask some participants about their experience during the unexpected General Election of 2017. So, participants and groups were recruited and spoken to primarily with reference to these key events. This has been in line with wishing to study the characteristics of online political conversation within a settled democracy. As outlined in the 'rationale' section, these events were chosen for their high levels of participation and engagement, their association with larger political trends and the richness of available evidence in comparison with other possible examples. This proved useful in focusing on specificities, providing a timeframe, shaping questions, identifying key trends, recruiting people and in practice helping them to articulate their thoughts. It is clear, however, that people's interest in these events overlapped to varying degrees. This has in fact proved helpful in allowing participants to compare events and to observe changes in participation practice. Comparative references may also be made from outside the case study events where examples have been provided by interviewees and these are relevant to key themes.

#### Topic discussion guide

Complementary discussion frameworks were developed for both group and individual interviews and a version is included in the appendices along with a sample of a tailored individual interview guide used for discussions with serving politicians. All these guides were developed as a result of group observation exercises during scoping work, when key themes and trends were identified. As noted, these were levels and understanding of participation; subjective and interpersonal experience of online political discussion; event-specific experience; issues of identity; perceived efficacy; media consumption and literacy plus open observations and emerging findings.

The rationale behind the choices of topic area was to develop a holistic picture of the main inputs, influences and considerations informing the world view of participants. So first, there was a need to get a sense of their general level of political participation, plus how, where and when they

commonly practised this online. The second question set was designed to get an understanding of the subjective, interpersonal and affective elements of their experience. Their lived experience during the case study events was explored and given the nature of these events and the role identity played in them, ideas around identity expression were discussed. Questioning then moved on to subjective perceptions of impact and efficacy. As it is such a key part of the online political experience, media consumption and attitudes towards and understanding of media are explored. Lastly, participants were given space to offer their own thoughts about the effects of online media on the political experience.

As indicated by Krueger, the topic guide was kept open to allow for participants to identify their own emerging themes (1994).

Data collection and analytical approaches are outlined later in the chapter.

## 3.6 Ethics

### General

This work has included measures to meet general principles of research ethics as outlined by Miles and Huberman in respect of project worthiness; competence to deliver; informed consent; benefits, costs and reciprocity; harm and risk; honesty and trust; privacy, confidentiality and anonymity; and integrity and quality (Miles & Huberman 1994). In addition, there are specific issues relating to the social media environment.

‘...researchers of digital media [...] are never very far away from interesting, if sometimes fraught, ethical debates concerning anonymity, expectations about uses of data, the nebulous nature of mediated research settings and what counts as public or private.’ (Kinsley 2018)

Research ethics for social media is a field in development. There is a need to be clear about access, permissions and copyright. This has been the subject of a separate ethics statement cleared by the University of Bedfordshire RIMAP board, attached at the appendices.

To protect the privacy of contributors, throughout the document, the addition of an asterisk after a given name indicates use of a pseudonym. In cases where contributors agreed to be openly identified, their own given names are used.

Participants could choose a location in which they felt comfortable. Care was taken with the wellbeing and safeguarding of participants during interview, especially where recollection of online conflict risked emotional stress, or any type of disability or condition affected ability to participate. No incentives or expenses were offered to participants, but face-to-face interviewees and focus group members were offered light refreshments, bearing in mind interview length.

Clarifying sampling procedures and ethical considerations vis-à-vis group access on social media has been a significant issue. Facebook has many 'closed' groups which nonetheless are in practice open to anyone keeping within a range of behavioural parameters.

Arguably, for journalistic purposes the contents of such pages and the identity of contributors are effectively in the public domain. Nonetheless, academic research ethics might suggest more observance of the 'closed' status.

Langer and Beckmann (2005) suggest that covert 'netnographic' approaches are suitable for the study of sensitive research topics, allowing the researcher to gain deeper insights into people's opinions, motives, and concerns in an unobtrusive and covert way. Considering netnography's position in between discourse analysis, content analysis and ethnography, they make a case for legitimate and ethical covert research, proposing revised guidelines for research ethics around informed consent.

The decision in practice therefore has been to observe some closed groups where the researcher has been admitted and to ensure any examples taken from these are highly generalised and anonymised. In the developmental stages of the study, and indeed as a 'sense check' throughout, participatory membership of several political discussion groups on Facebook was maintained. This was done under the researcher's own name and fellow group members were free to 'click' through and note the researchers self-declared status as a PhD researcher. This status was also mentioned occasionally in discussions. Observations made from this immersive participation have been reported in an abstracted manner, and no fellow participants identified. To avoid closed groups entirely would mean cutting off access to key groups (some of whom prefer to talk in 'safe' spaces for example) so this was not considered viable.

A note on covert and semi-covert research: Benefits, limitations and ethics

As part of the ongoing observation informing the study has been of a semi-covert nature, with any findings used or reported ethically, the role of covert and semi-covert observation in the study of social media merits brief discussion here as it is a key concern for researchers. Covert research is often discouraged by research departments which consider it wise to err on the side of caution in respect of the subject's right to privacy, although most will also accept that such an approach may be necessary in some instances. One such instance might be observations undertaken in public

places, including online environments, where the researcher declaring her activity to those present would distort behaviour unacceptably. Other instances might involve non-harmful deception, where the researcher does not declare her true aim or does so after completion.

Calvey discusses the management of ethics in fieldwork and suggests that theoretical discourse about ethics can be too divorced from practice and too focused on 'informed consent' with covert methodology being viewed negatively. However, he sets out a case for being less risk-averse (Calvey 2008).

The benefits of using a limited amount of covert observation were considered for this study, and to judge whether this was indicated and justifiable, reference was made to The Economic & Social Research Council (ESRC) guidance in the Framework for Research Ethics which states:

'Covert research may be undertaken when it may provide unique forms of evidence or where overt observation might alter the phenomenon being studied. The broad principle should be that covert research must not be undertaken lightly or routinely. It is only justified if important issues are being addressed and if matters of social significance which cannot be uncovered in other ways are likely to be discovered.' (ESRC 2015)

However, others argue that with online media, researchers should go beyond legal permissions and put users' privacy and expectations first in a more nuanced ethical approach. Two projects which used qualitative and quantitative data on social media users' views on use of their data showed more than 80 per cent surveyed expected a request for consent to use posts, and ninety percent expect anonymity for post use. Researchers thus suggest conducting a risk assessment (Woodfield & Iphofen 2017).



There have also been ethical considerations relating to whether groups observed are 'open' or 'closed' and if the latter, what degree of closure operates in actuality, and in early research, only open groups were observed. However, subsequent reading drew the researcher's attention to offline ethnographic research where researchers specifically do not reveal their identity and role (such as while posing undercover as a member of a criminal gang). This is both to avoid influencing group behaviour and for self-protection. The researcher has argued that this is a precedent for participating in closed online groups and using anonymised material for reasons of understanding.

Most current researchers focus their research ethics around harm minimisation and making sure that participants are not subject to any negative effects. Which means making sure the data are stored securely and anonymised and only aggregate level results are reported (Bright et al. 2014). Given that trends in group behaviour have in practice only been used for research development, background information, and trend and theme identification, and that no material has been used which risked identifying participants in any way, it is argued that there is not a significant ethical issue in this instance. It is noted, however, that research ethics around social media is a field very much in development and currently quite contested (Townsend & Wallace 2016).

### 3.7 Data collection

Original data has been collected via observation, individual interviews, focus groups and webinars, numbers and details of which are included in the Data Status section.

Decisions have had to be made throughout the process about the most effective combination of field methods to answer the research. An early proposal was that initial fieldwork would most likely take the form of a pilot survey to ascertain key issues for further exploration by other methods but

given the learnings from observation, this method was held in reserve for areas needing more in-depth clarification and, in the event, not undertaken.

The main options considered have been:

- Focus groups on- or offline (IPA type approach)
- One-to-one interviews
- Ethnographic observation of online behaviour ('netnography')
- Gathering of online commentary

The second two options were used in the development stage and as a 'sense check' during fieldwork. In the main phase, regular observation of four political discussion groups and feeds on Facebook (two general and two related to one of the contextual case studies) has been undertaken on an ongoing basis to monitor trends to help shape the research. The first two options fall broadly under interviewing techniques.

One gap in understanding being addressed was how participants perceive the efficacy of their online political behaviour versus objectively-measured real-world effects, for example. This meant getting an understanding of their own perceptions. Interviewing is one of the most frequently used methods of data collection for this purpose, based on the common-sense idea that 'the best way to find out what people think about something is to ask them' (Bower, 1973). Jensen divides these into three broad categories, respondent interviews, naturalistic group interviews and constituted (formal) group interviews (Jensen 2002).

## Individual interviews

In this context, this has meant a guided discussion, but without the moderating factor of other interviewees present. This has included everyday participants in online political conversation, those with a more formal involvement in co-ordinating political action, and professionals such as political writers or politicians. The benefits of one-to-one interviews include authentic and often rich qualitative data, unmediated commentary and often more open or 'confessional' accounts. Interviews were recorded, securely transcribed and reviewed by the researcher in close detail for any transcription errors. Bearing in mind the principle that every transcription is an interpretive act, public figures were automatically offered transcripts to review and these were also supplied to any other participants who specifically requested them. All participants were invited to make additional comments by correspondence if they wished to, and a small number did.

## Use of focus groups and webinars.

Three focus groups were undertaken for the study. Focus groups remain widely used in academic and commercial qualitative research, including political and communication work, precisely because they are effective in drawing out individuals' subjective perceptions compared to other metrics, so they had clear applicability to this study. Focus group participants were asked about their perceptions, opinions and beliefs in an interactive setting alongside others, so the data is discursive, and the nature of interactions has yielded information. The topic guide helped group members to relax, open up and work synergistically. The two one-hour webinars were organised in conjunction with political discussion organisation GlobalNet 21 and comprised a 15-20-minute presentation by the researcher followed by a general discussion at which participants were free to raise any related issue that they considered important.

Interviews and focus group sessions were audio taped and securely transcribed.

## Sampling and recruitment for interview and focus groups

In respect of collecting original data, much consideration was given to what effective sampling might mean in this context. Qualitative sampling is a different process from probability sampling in quantitative research, as the driving factor is purpose rather than probability (Jensen, 2002).

Recruitment for this study has therefore been based on purposive sampling, that is, non-probability sampling focused on particular behavioural characteristics and the specific objectives of the research. In this case, people who use the internet and social media for political discussion or who have a strong, invested view on this topic for other reasons. The diverse methods used to recruit this cohort, described below, also led to an element of serendipitous snowball sampling as participants volunteered introductions to others. The risks associated with this last – recruiting within like-minded groups, for example, were observed in early recruitment. (A notice put out via a middle-aged, metropolitan identifying-gay man resulted in the recruitment of several others of a very similar demographic, resulting in several expressions of the importance of gay identity in response to the ‘identity’ questions. Likewise, with SNP members.)

## Recruitment methods

Potential interviewees were initially approached through existing personal, professional, political and academic contacts as the researcher had the benefit of an existing, strong UK-wide set of networks. These contacts in many instances offered further contacts and four of them were able to recruit and indeed help with the practical organisation of focus groups and webinars.

## Recruitment tactics included:

- asking existing personal, professional, political and academic contacts to share a Facebook recruitment notice, targeting those who had large contact lists in the first instance, inviting their contacts to take part

- posting notices or informal requests opportunistically on appropriate Facebook groups and via own Twitter account
- printing a credit-card sized introduction card to be handed out at events, conferences and opportunistically
- using social, professional and political networks to 'spread the word'
- appearing on a local community radio show (Valda James, AUK Radio<sup>12</sup>) to talk about the research
- proactively targeting harder-to-reach individuals through membership organisations, e.g. UKIP members through local parties or asking personal and professional contacts

All potential participants were approached initially with the broad question of whether they ever took part at all in political discussion or commentary in online or social media.

#### Sample size

In respect of overall recruitment numbers, it has been noted that researchers using IPA- type approaches often tend towards too many participants, effectively a nod to the academic primacy of quantitative work in many institutions. This can risk IPA's focus on ideography and exploration in greater depth. This also applies to phenomenographical studies where smaller numbers are generally recommended. In this study, the numbers required to offer both robustness in terms of transferability and variation did present challenges in making best use of the sheer amount of useful data gathered. However, Smith et al note sample size should be considered on a case by case basis (2009). A study undertaken some time ago used in-depth interviews with 69 participants (Stromer-Galley 2006). A decision was therefore made in this instance that given an overall pragmatic approach and in order to see trends and variations relatively effectively, larger numbers of participants would be helpful.

The National Centre for Research Methods' (NCRM's) *'How Many Qualitative Interviews is Enough'* survey proved a useful guide for setting a target. In early fieldwork it was not difficult to attract

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.aukradio.co.uk/iventure/>

participants for individual interviews on this topic, with which there has been a high degree of interest and engagement, although setting up the focus groups required a little more persistence. Given the relative ease of availability of subjects in this instance, a target of 50-60 either individual or group interviewees was assessed as providing a good balance of robustness, coverage and achievability, although no upper cap was set and in the event participants who expressed an interest in joining the study were not turned away until after the cessation of general fieldwork. There were 84 participants in total, including four serving politicians, included for their perspectives on one of the contextual debates, and as a form of qualitative triangulation of the views of other participants.

#### Representation and diversity

In respect of asking whether the sample is 'representative', arguably it is representative of the cohort under study (people who participate in online political discussion), and while efforts were made to achieve a reasonable demographic balance and address gaps, there was no attempt to impose quotas in recruitment. While this type of research does not necessarily demand full representation, demographic factors are relevant to the topic, owing to issues of identity, and because some groups are disproportionately represented in particular online activities (Smith & Anderson 2018). This has the potential to skew perceptions of relevance and effectiveness. This indicated that compensatory efforts should be made to ensure some more marginalised perspectives were at least considered, acknowledging that there were likely to be some limitations to recruiting and collecting fully representative samples. Maximum variation purposive sampling was therefore used to include a diversity of subjects in order to hear from as many different types of people as could be reasonably achieved within the constraints of the project and resources so as to work towards a rounded view of online participation from participants' perspectives.

Work was undertaken to address any incipient lack of range by targeting ongoing recruitment amongst diverse groups. This included approaching existing contacts with diverse identities, individuals and groups somewhat outside the researcher's usual fields of contact – UKIP members, older members of a BAME community for example, directly via local organisations, and taking part in a community radio interview about the research. The Luton focus group was undertaken because it was an opportunity to speak to a group of people considered on two grounds to have less representation on social media, older people and minority ethnic groups, (although it should be noted that the discussion took place at a social club where older men went to learn computer skills, so they were proactively seeking to be less digitally excluded).

Demographic data being collected from recruits has been carefully monitored and issues of representativeness taken into consideration. It is acknowledged that, contrasted with data that has sought to be comprehensively representative, such as the Hansard data reported in the introduction, the sample interviewed for this study were in many respects not typical of the general population. Nonetheless, diversity was sought in recruitment and to a degree achieved.

Politically, participants did tend towards centre-left and left on the political spectrum, if members or supporters of the Labour Party, the Green Party, the SNP<sup>13</sup> and Plaid Cymru are now included within this range, but right-leaning views were represented by Conservative and UKIP party members and by interviewees expressing traditionally right-of-centre views, such as supporting foxhunting. Several interviewees claimed no firm affiliation.

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<sup>13</sup> Historically, a party more to the right of the spectrum than the current social democratic iteration, and formerly known vernacularly as the 'Tartan Tories'.

## Location and format of fieldwork

While studying online behaviour, this study has used both online and offline data collection methods. There are various issues to be considered when deciding whether to use either, and this applies to focus groups and other proposed methods.

Online research methods (ORMs) are the various ways in which researchers can collect data via the internet. Many resemble existing research methodologies with adaptations afforded by technology. The field is still evolving, and social media has offered new layers of complexity and opportunity. Social media research is widely applied to give insights into people's behaviour and attitudes. Methods include, cyber-ethnography or 'netnography', online content analysis, online focus groups and interviews, online qualitative research, online questionnaires, social network analysis and web-based experiments. Cyber, virtual, or online ethnography, is an online research method that adapts ethnographic practices to the study of communities and cultures on the internet.

On the face of it, conducting a study of online behaviour and choosing not to use online methods might seem to be a missed opportunity to reach people in a 'natural' setting as is favoured in qualitative research. However, while internet use in the UK is now widespread and mainstream, there are pockets of exclusion and non-participation (Prescott 2018). These need to be addressed, not least to highlight any differences with an online majority. There are also practical issues which affect any online interaction – for example, the relative paucity of sensual clues, such as facial reactions, gestures and body language, which can have a direct bearing on the manner of interaction and have needed to be considered. There is also the level of ease group participants feel with each other. Making use of pre-established discussion groups can be a helpful approach in this respect and was used in the GlobalNet 21 webinars.



In the same way that the internet has had a marked effect on political practice, it has also influenced the practice of academic research in several aspects. Coulson suggests it is likely to fall broadly into three categories, translational, phenomenological and novel (Coulson 2015). Translational research employs well-established offline methods using the tools available online. So, a tick box survey becomes a click-box replica, or a human coded text analysis is undertaken by bespoke software such as NVivo. Coulson suggests nearly two thirds of current online research in his field (psychology) are automated versions of existing methods.

Phenomenological (or phenomenographic) online research is where online behaviour and lived experience are the specific interest of the researcher – the focus is on how internet-based activities and interactions shape thoughts, feelings and behaviour. For instance, the scope the internet offers to play with personal identity has been explored.

Lastly, Coulson discusses novel approaches unique to online research. This might include, for example, the analysis of metadata to triangulate, for instance to compare expressed beliefs and preferences with real-life behaviours evidenced by data. Research into the expression and perception of identity using online data would also fall into this category.

As Coulson also indicates, there are benefits to conducting research online and many of these relate to ease of access to subjects, cost and efficiency, as well as the many analytical tools available. Further, he suggests there are aspects of the internet that allow novel approaches to understanding complex behaviour.

A comprehensive overview of online research options is also given by Gosling & Mason, (2015) who provide an overview of the literature. They also consider three broad domains of online research - translational, phenomenological and novel and discuss issues around sampling and ethics that might arise. They also point to the potential of online research to reach large, diverse samples and collect data on observed behaviour.

Recruiting and retaining participants in a variety of geographical locations offers some potential challenges for the individual (and unfunded) academic researcher which might be circumvented by developing an online, web focus group or social media-based option, as was used in the Manchester study (Gibson et al. 2014).

Given the demographics of UK internet use, the most efficient and effective qualitative methods in this instance were identified as being a combination of methods with qualitative material collected from individual and group interviews both on and offline. These were conducted either face-to-face or via online VOIP services including Skype, Facebook Messenger and Face Time and via an existing online political discussion group, the GlobalNet21 webinars. Online methods, including social media networks were also used extensively for recruitment.

Scoping, feasibility and logistical considerations

Planning a range of interviews required a degree of co-ordination while remaining flexible about ongoing opportunities. For instance, in recruiting for the Scottish Referendum focus group in Alloa, some potential participants expressed a preference or need for individual interviews, so these were arranged. Individual participants were offered the opportunity to be interviewed face-to-face if

within reasonable travelling distance of the London area or in the case of the Scottish fieldwork, Alloa/Stirling, or by VOIP at a time convenient for them.

### 3.8 Data status and security

Summary of original data collected

In total, 84 people contributed via:

- a 90-minute focus group of seven people conducted in the Scottish town of Alloa in late September 2016
- a 45-minute focus group of six people conducted in the Shri Guru Ravidass Bhawan 50-plus (seniors) social club IT class, Luton, Bedfordshire, UK in September 2017
- a two-hour focus group of six people conducted in Plumstead, South London in January 2018
- two one-hour webinars<sup>14</sup> of 10 participants in total hosted by the political discussion group GlobalNet21 and presented by this researcher in September 2017 and June 2018
- A series of 55 in-depth individual interviews undertaken between September 2016 and March 2018. These were mainly conducted amongst members of the public, although there were in addition interviews with two serving UK Members of Parliament, two local councillors, two party political officers and several former political candidates and political officials. Interviews varied in length but were typically between 30-60 minutes in duration.

Together this amounted to just over 43 hours of audio. Focus group and individual interview data were collected up to Easter 2018.

As the main case study political events, the EU Referendum, the Scottish Independence Referendum and the Labour Party leadership continue to be topics for debate, material was observed and

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<sup>14</sup> To view information and/or video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ju46gBVzkQo&t=1441s> (Webinar 1) and <https://www.meetup.com/GlobalNet21/events/251913387/> (Webinar 2).

collected up to April 2018, with additional questions being asked in relation to the unexpected general election of 2017. A distinction is made at relevant points between material collected in the initial period of study and that collected afterwards where this has had a bearing on the nature of the data.

#### Data propriety and security

Informed consent was sought and gained from all participants. A majority of respondents returned written consent forms and a small minority who did not, confirmed by other recordable, written electronic means such as by email and online messaging. All interviewees were asked again verbally for their agreement on the recordings, which all gave. All group and individual interviewees were politically mature adults (meaning they could and in most cases had voted in local and national elections and/or engaged in varying levels of political practice) and in the event, all were over the age of 21.

After the introduction of the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in the UK, all paper and electronic records of participants and their contributions were revisited and data either destroyed or further anonymised or secured to achieve compliance. Field recordings as well as transcripts have been securely preserved and where possible anonymised pending the completion of research outputs in recognition of accounts as polysemous texts where nonverbal information can also be of relevance to interpretation.

#### Documentation

- Consent forms

As noted, all participants were asked to complete a written consent form, which the majority returned. Of the minority who did not return the forms, all gave consent on record by other means to their data being used.

- Demographics forms

All participants were asked to complete a demographic data questionnaire based on a standard ONS/HR-type models. They were reassured that this was not compulsory, nor did they have to answer all questions, but the majority complied.

- Information sheet and summary for participants

All participants were offered a summary and information sheet and contact details of the researcher and the Director of Studies.

- Transcripts

The majority of the interviews, focus groups and webinars were all securely transcribed using a third-party service where audio is fragmented for processing by different transcribers and reassembled electronically. The Alloa focus group was transcribed by a specialist Scottish service. A small number of comments made in Punjabi during the Luton focus group were simultaneously interpreted by the bilingual English-Punjabi volunteer facilitator. As noted, copies of the transcript were given to public figures, but while all other participants were given the opportunity to add to or amend comments by later contact, transcripts or MP3 files were only supplied on specific request to avoid any implied administrative burden on participants who had already given generously of their time.

- University documentation

University ethics forms and copies of the documentation described above can be found at the appendices.

### 3.9 Data analysis approach and procedures

The aims of data analysis were to:

- arrive at key domains, or categories of understanding and thence related sub-themes through which research questions could be usefully explored and accounts interpreted
- allow for further interpretive exploration of the data and potential identification of unanticipated and 'emerging' themes
- relate data found to findings, hypotheses and theoretical perspectives discussed in the literature review and methodology chapters

This has been achieved through an iterative process or 'hermeneutic circle' of close reading, categorisation, machine and manual coding and interpretation.

This section outlines theoretical underpinnings and practical procedures in more detail.

#### Methodological approach

The analysis of data collected for this study takes an overall hermeneutic phenomenological approach but one which also calls upon some key principles of critical discourse analysis discussed further on. This is because the research questions address not just personal experience and perceptions, but the self-perceived political significance of people's actions and their own evaluation of their participatory role.

#### Critical discourse analysis and social media

Power relationships have a bearing on all three RQs and in particular RQ3. Group discussions about politics lend themselves particularly well to exploration through a lens of Critical Discourse Analysis, (CDA, or more recently called 'studies', CDS), not least as relationships of power and questions of intent and efficacy are implicit to the subject of discussion. Albert and Salam discuss how social

media can be conceptualised as a frontier and a discursive system with some institutional characteristics where new forms of social relations can generate power differences and social practices which are not universally acceptable, and how CDA can provide a framework for studying social phenomena through discourse (Albert & Salam 2013). It can be used to identify and analyse covert and transparent power structures as manifested through language (Wodak & Meyer 2001). The pertinence of the internet as one of the main sites for the discussion of social issues makes it an obvious destination for critical discourse analysis with a political focus, not least because its dynamism, flexibility and accessibility make it inherently more democratic than print media (Mautner 2005).

CDA as developed by Fairclough is not so much a method as an interdisciplinary approach to the analysis of discourse. So wide ranging methods are permissible and in practice used for CDA, the standpoint of which is explicitly socio-political. Its starting point is that language is a form of social practice. From the CDA perspective, social practice and linguistic practice are essentially part and parcel. CDA has a strong focus on investigating how power relations in society are established and embedded through our use of language. Calling on linguistic and social theory and insights from Marx, Gramsci, Althusser, Habermas, Foucault and Bourdieu, language is seen as the main location of ideology, thus central to the understanding of power dynamics. The key point is the capacity of any given ethos to yield insights into how discourse reinforces or challenges power inequalities.

Fairclough developed a three-level framework for analysing discourse; texts, discursive practice and sociocultural practice, all three of which can be mapped against each other. Following his example, texts would be analysed at micro, meso and macro-levels of interpretation. At the micro-level, syntactic analysis, use of metaphor and rhetorical devices might be used. The meso-level looks at matters of production and consumption. The macro-level considers intertextual and interdiscursive

aspects and societal context (Fairclough & Holes 1995). These are all of course relevant to the social media environment and their effects are interweaving. CDA elements can effectively complement an IPA/phenomenographic approach by addressing the power relationship aspects of discourse alongside lived experience and self-perception. From a critical realist perspective they pose different but complementary questions that can offer a dual lens with which to explore qualitative data, interpreting this as both lived experience and discursive practice (Hood 2016). This is the intent behind this analytical approach.

#### Hermeneutics and hermeneutic content analysis

Hermeneutic content analysis allows for the systematic description of qualitative data used in qualitative content analysis but also allows for deeper reflection on meaning of data, so it is about sense and deeper sense (Vieira and De Queiroz, 2017). It also suggests that the meaning of a text is to be found within its cultural context. The 'hermeneutic circle' is the process through which, the researcher analyses something holistically through its various parts. This will involve moving iteratively between aspects of the phenomenon and the whole, aiming to develop a growing understanding of a phenomenon (Paterson et al. 2005).

#### Practical analytical processes used in the study

Close observation and thematic and hermeneutic analysis of social media commentary were used during the development phase of the study in order to hone the research questions and identify the main domains discussed earlier in the chapter based on observed trends and themes, and thence to develop categorised topic discussion guides for interviews. In practice this meant sampling a targeted selection of online discussion groups, observing exchanges, scraping some data from open groups using NVivo and coding and analysing output for thematic trends and other emerging characteristics using iterative methods. This included repeat close reading, machine coding to



categorise data, interpreting these categories, moving from open to more selective coding and ‘memoing’, recording thoughts and conceptualising ways of integrating findings.

Early analysis contributed to a snapshot study of online political discussion undertaken by the researcher in the weeks running up to the EU Referendum, the result of which (that hinted strongly at the surprising outcome of the vote) have not been included in this thesis, but were presented as a conference paper.<sup>15</sup> It has also generated insights in addition to ongoing group observations which are included in generalised and anonymised form.

Interviews, focus groups and webinars

Each transcript was checked word by word against the audio by the researcher and any errors corrected, for example, misinterpretations of the various subtypes of British English collected.

First stage analysis focused on relistening to recorded interviews and close reading of transcriptions supported by coding manually and using Nvivo.

Tabulation of results

Data were first sorted and tabulated under the main domains. Given the discursive nature of discussion, not all relevant data was given in direct response to the questions asked (for example, a respondent might give information about media consumption as part of their response to a question about general participation), these were recategorised to support analysis by search-term except where they sat most rationally in their original context.

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<sup>15</sup> Britain in Europe Conference 2016 <https://www.beds.ac.uk/bie/programme>

A domain and theme map was then developed that is included in the results chapter which mapped specific topic areas, supported application of the theoretical frameworks and thus helped to generate insights.

Use of supporting software

Nvivo software has been used throughout the research development process to:

- provide fast, neutral coding using auto-coding or queries
- identify themes using queries
- query data
- develop theme maps

Further observations on data collection and analysis

Reflexivity questions further down ask how the data collection and analysis methods ‘construct’ the outcome. There are several likely effects in this respect. The limits of the representativeness of the sample have been acknowledged. The nature of the topic discussion guide, while aiming to be open, nonetheless will have a framing effect on the way questions are answered, for example in terms of major events, or affective factors. It was anticipated generally that respondents would attempt to portray themselves in a reasonably positive light and in group interview situations especially, modify their behaviour. While gathered according to a format, data gathered from individuals was anecdotal and narrative and potentially contains inaccurate recollections.

### 3.10 Autoethnography and reflective practice

‘Reflexivity requires the researcher to be aware of themselves as the instrument of research. This is a particularly important issue for action researchers who are intimately involved with the subject of the research, the context in which it takes place, and others who may be stakeholders in that context.’ (Hardy et al. 2009)

This study has looked to interpret multifaceted behaviours with multifactorial causes and a range of potential effects, so has required a degree of flexibility and openness, and a strong awareness of reflexivity and the perspectives of the researcher - a 'double hermeneutic' in effect, or as Smith puts it 'the participants were trying to make sense of their world; the researcher was trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world' (Smith et al. 2009).

This work has been described as immersive, and it is clear to the researcher that many insights into the behaviour of people engaging politically online would not have emerged without engaging often and self-critically in the same environments with the same practices. Part of this process has involved developing a self-understanding of the likely consequences of some choices and the effects and relative efficacy of particular behaviour. In this the process has had a clear autoethnographic or perhaps autophenomenographic element, in other words using the researcher's own experience to think critically about others' experiences or show what has been described as 'people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles' (Adams, 2015).

The following questions have been used to reflect on this piece of research and some responses are given in the conclusion:

- how do the researcher's own values, experiences and interests shape this research?
- how is the project in development affecting the perspectives of the researcher?
- epistemological - how do the research questions define and limit what can be found?
- how do the methods of collection and analysis 'construct' the outcome?
- can the same questions be investigated differently?

Attia and Edge suggest that reflexivity is an ongoing process of 'mutual shaping between researcher and research' involving a developing understanding of the process of interaction. They suggest that the development of the researcher is treated as central, using reflexivity instrumentally. They stress

the need for the researcher to step back from the process in order to theorise about what is taking place and accepting a proactive role in contextualised action (Attia & Edge 2017).

The regular insights given have continued to shape the way this particularly engaging topic has been explored and have exemplified the contention that social media can offer an adaptive learning ground. Articulating the research questions with precision has proved challenging, which is a reflection of the complexity of the topic as much as the (admitted) limitations of the researcher, and one reason why this study began, essentially, in grounded-type research.

### 3.11 Approach to writing up

The final phase of the study has been devoted to bringing together the analytical narrative and data extracts, and situating analysis in relation to reviewed literature and theoretical frameworks. The literature review refers to the need to be agile in response to a rapidly developing field, and indeed pertinent new literature, insights and approaches to methodology have continued to emerge as the project neared the end of its timescale for completion. This means that writing up has been an iterative process which began during the course of fieldwork, and has undergone many revisions and with them, some changes of focus.

### 3.12 Strengths and limitations of the approach

#### Criteria for self-evaluation

For qualitative social research, trustworthiness is a key measure, based on credibility, transferability, applicability and confirmability according to Lincoln and Guba (1985). In line with their framework, this study has followed recommended techniques, for:

- credibility, through prolonged engagement with the field over four years, persistent observation to identify elements that are most relevant to the topic, triangulation by using different data sources and collection methods and member checks with key individuals
- transferability, through detailed, thick description.
- dependability and confirmability through a careful audit trail
- Reflexivity through regular revisiting of the 'reflexivity' questions established in the methodology

How do the research questions define and limit what can be found?

The research questions focus on the behavioural and the phenomenographical, that is participants' own differing perceptions of their lived experience, with a nod to objective measures of real-life effects. They do not address fully the – almost certainly impossible – task of attribution of effects, that is the end results of people's action and choices, although they do ask about what participants themselves consider these might be.

#### Methodology and methods

The usual cautions around self-reported data apply in this case, including behavioural tendencies such as the desire to present oneself in a good light, group peer pressure and an inability to remember precise details. Comments will likely have been affected by people's disposition at the time of being interviewed. For instance, a small number of respondents interviewed around the time of a number of concerning international news stories reported higher levels of general anxiety about the political mood generally.

#### Measures to manage bias

As part of the recruitment process, all potential focus group participants and individual interviewees were approached initially with the broad question of whether they ever took part at all in political discussion or commentary in online or social media. This informal filtering process meant that most

interviewees were online participants by default and, as it transpired, also recorded a higher overall level of both online and offline political activity than evidence suggests exists amongst the general public (Hansard Society 2018). Nonetheless, a small number of non-participants were interviewed, both individually and as part of the small Luton focus group, partly to explore some of their various reasons for avoidance.

### Analysis

In attempting a pluralistic approach to methodology and analysis it is accepted that a lot of ground is covered. However, this also offers the opportunity to consider these phenomena in a much more holistic way.

### 3.13 Methodology conclusion

The methodology and chosen methods have sought to address the research questions in a manner that is:

- pragmatic
- flexible
- pluralistic
- problem-focused; and
- person-focused

In doing so it has called upon the scholarship underlying the various approaches with careful attention while seeking practical ways to address any limitations these might exert in the very particular environment under study. The researcher makes no apology for some adaptation being made mid-project or indeed *post hoc*, and hopes the reader shares the view that this has led to an overall richer picture of the lived experience of participants.

## Chapter 4: Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Introduction

This study has looked at the lived experiences, from their own perspectives, of people based in the United Kingdom who engaged in political discussion on social media over a five-year period from 2013-18. Chapter 2 concluded that much existing analysis of the effect of the internet on political participation focuses on direct relationships between online behaviour and formal political outcomes, and that fewer studies to date have looked at the complexity of the experience of online political talk from the point of view of participants. The methodology chapter thus proposed ways of helping to address this gap using an interpretive, phenomenographic approach with a sample group of interviewees. Focusing on everyday behaviour in mainstream political events, fieldwork addressed the following research questions:

- RQ1: What factors influence the way UK users of social media engage in online political discussion?
- RQ2: How do participants themselves understand and evaluate their participatory role, particularly in relation to key political events in the period studied?
- RQ3: How do they see the relationship between their online activity and real-life political outcomes?

Based on ongoing observations of online political talk during the development phase, key topic domains were identified pertinent to the evolving research questions and which it was anticipated might feature significantly in interviews and focus group feedback. These were therefore addressed in the interview topic discussion guide (TDG) as *a priori* 'umbrella' themes. The last of these domains allowed for the probability of unanticipated and emergent themes which might or might not fall under the previous headings.

This chapter therefore responds to the research questions by exploring the main domains, sub-themes and emergent issues through analysis of interview material.

<b>Domain and theme map</b>				
<b>Domains</b>	<b>RQ</b>	<b>Themes</b>	<b>Sub themes</b>	<b>Links to theory and literature</b>
1. Participation	<b>1</b>	Normal and everyday Personal Being active Convenience	Propriety Choice and control	Public sphere Critical discourse analysis
2. Subjective experience	<b>1</b>	Emotional Authentic Managing and learning Enthusiasm Freedom of expression Individual and collective	Choice and control Strong feelings Challenge and difficulty 'Hate' Provocation Offence-taking Making friends and getting together Negotiating friends and family	Symbolic interactionism Psychological and physiological factors
3. Issues of identity and the self	<b>1</b>	Values Origins		Symbolic interactionism Performativity Alterity
4. Media consumption and literacy	<b>1</b>	Balance Power Confirmation Identity		Structure versus agency Cognitive bias



<b>Domain and theme map</b>				
<b>Domains</b>	<b>RQ</b>	<b>Themes</b>	<b>Sub themes</b>	<b>Links to theory and literature</b>
5. Event-specific experience	<b>2</b>	Opportunity Destiny Groundswell Everyday resistance	Identity Struggle	Ethnomethodology Critical discourse analysis
6. Perceived efficacy	<b>3</b>	Changing minds Realisation and learning	Self-awareness	Critical discourse analysis Ethnomethodology Theories on the effects of internet and participation Structure versus agency Cognitive bias
7. Open observations and emerging themes	<b>1</b>	Opportunity	Being different	Ethnomethodology
	<b>2</b>	Authenticity Difficulty	Disability Gender	Definition of the situation
	<b>3</b>	We're learning	Politician's viewpoint	

## RQ1: What factors might influence the way UK users of social media engage in online political discussion?

- **Topic discussion guide (TDG) domains:** Participation, subjective experience, issues of identity and the self, media consumption and literacy

Participants' levels and understanding of political participation

People's existing levels of political knowledge and participation might have a bearing on their willingness to engage politically online. So, this question set sought to explore participants' general political engagement, both online and off, to build a holistic picture. An assumption was made that a higher level of engagement is a likely indicator of overall commitment to achieving formal political outcomes, while acknowledging that in some instances people's participation will be limited by choice, or by their circumstances.

Responses – Question Group 1 – online participation

- **Themes:** Personal, normal and everyday, being active, convenience, choice and control

Participants did not talk about their involvement in an abstracted public sphere, or as Mouffe might put it, as supporting democratic design, they spoke about something more personal, something that served their own needs, sometimes but not always with a specific political end in mind. In general, responses supported the idea that for political chat, social media has become understood, as Benkler suggested, as an amenity, and a very normalised part of many people's lives. Many respondents used these channels as part of their everyday political and social practice, integral to and integrated with other elements of their daily experience, in line with observations by Diehl et al (2015). Platforms were used as space to develop and test ideas and define one's position and identity in relation to others. Three women participants in Alloa, Scotland gave a typical account of their online involvement becoming political via the social.

‘So, I mean, I’ve been on Facebook for years, and probably posted more photographs of my kids and what I ate for dinner and, oh, I’m very tired, the usual, and probably through I would say pre-(Scottish) referendum, I’ve always been a little bit involved in politics [...] but I got a lot of information, and then when I was looking and researching what way I wanted to go in terms of the Independence Referendum, a lot of that information [...] was sourced and researched online.’ **Woman 1, Alloa**

‘Yeah, mine’s a really, really similar story to (her). I was very politically active, considered myself socialist when I was much younger and then I kind of got disillusioned a lot with the Labour party and politics in general with the Iraq war [...] I just got older and life took over and things, but I’ve been on Facebook for quite a while, [...] but similarly it was all jokes and photographs of cats and dogs and children and things like that, and just a way of staying in touch [...] then when the (Scottish) Referendum was coming up, it started off, I really didn’t know what way to go, and I didn’t know where to find out the information [...] I do share [...] and post an awful lot about politics.’ **Woman 2, Alloa**

Social media appear to fulfil a need for political expression and the expression of identity and do so in a way that is convenient and enticing, pushing at an open door. While platforms can and do support the work of political lobbies, by allowing advertising and so on, and their owners might have an interest in political outcomes, their business model is focused around the social. It is people themselves who have brought politics into this sphere, *en masse*. One woman interviewed hinted at the deep-rooted, inculcated nature of the political development which drove her involvement and how this fell naturally into social media.

‘My dad was very political, me and my brother, [...] and whenever we got around the table it was always discussing politics. My husband was very political as well, he was a Scottish nationalist for many years before I was, I was a Labour supporter until I felt as though Labour abandoned me, and so using social media has just been a natural extension of our kitchen table discussion, and I’ve met a lot of friends through it.’ **Woman 3, Alloa**

It was often seen as a natural extension of existing activity, and a diversion. Political talk as enjoyment, as well as a means to an end. One man claimed to have been active on various chat boards and sites continuously since the 1980s, including for a while on 4Chan, a community once describe in The *Guardian* as ‘a message-board whose lunatic, juvenile community is at once brilliant,

ridiculous and alarming'<sup>16</sup> and more recently has been associated with 'alt-right' type activity (Nagle 2017a).

For another, he had grown up with social media as part and parcel of his life and a way of making his mark and asserting his values as a part of a dialogue with his circumstances. It helped him negotiate the system in which he found himself.

'I'd say ever since I got Facebook when I was about 14 years old, I always tried to stir the pot as much as possible. I went to an independent fee-paying school and was one of the only lefties, almost like the token lefty, so I enjoyed that side of antagonising, you could say, on Facebook. At the moment, primarily, my political vocalizing on social media is kept to Twitter, which I've been using for a number of years now. **Alex**<sup>17</sup>

A small number had embraced a deeper commitment, using affordances to carry forward personal visions, including one man, Mick\*, who was 'admin' to three Facebook groups, a woman, Joanne\*, who did the same for an EU-supporting page with a large reach and membership, another, Mariam\*, who communicated nationally for a religious body on a specific issue and who managed seven social and professional Twitter accounts, a fourth, Jean\*, who had a very niche pro-EU campaign, and a man, Patrick\*, who had founded a UK-based global political discussion network. Such activity requires motivation, dedication, commitment and some sense of public duty and can often equate to a job.

Of those who did not engage in online political talk, most either used social media platforms for other reasons or were still in some way affected or influenced by its presence, most commonly for expanding their opportunities for news and information gathering. Of the small number who avoided using it regularly or at all, issues included lack of interest, not feeling comfortable using or

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<sup>16</sup> By Sean Michaels <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2008/mar/19/news>

<sup>17</sup> Throughout, the addition of an asterisk after a given name after quotes indicates use of a pseudonym.

talking in the medium, not believing it to be the most suitable environment to debate politics, or sometimes a dislike of or professed inability to tolerate the way others presented or debated. Yet amongst these, usage by friends or family members in some ways still impacted on their lives. A refuser explained her perspective thus:

‘I know it sounds silly, but it genuinely wouldn't occur to me to broadcast my thoughts. I'm interested and obviously I vote. I voted in the (EU) referendum. I voted in the Labour leader elections. I'm engaged, and I'll sit in a pub and talk about those issues endlessly [...] I'm a bit squeamish about venting my opinion online really, not because I don't think I can back up an argument, (or) I'm not interested in what other people have to say. I've certainly read and sought out a whole range of topics on all of those issues.’ **Orla\***

She acknowledged nonetheless the influence such online debate was having in the background, and how arguing about arguing often became a directing factor in itself.

‘... you could argue that it influences the facts in a way. People's reaction to a debate almost becomes a debate in itself...’ **Orla\***

Hinting at the wider, often defensive response to this new phenomenon, some participants imposed or had imposed upon them restrictions in relation to their work or other circumstances, including a need not to alienate business customers, or the stipulations of employers. For instance, **Mariam\*** who works amongst very senior members of the Church of England and is a keen user of social media in her role, was mindful of the reputation of her organisation, a sometimes frustrating position given that she worked on a politically divisive portfolio related to refugees that attracted online vitriol. Another man bound by a code of neutrality noted:

‘I have to anonymise myself because I'm bound by the Civil Service Code, I'm a civil servant so I can't comment openly on things that would mean that I would be in violation of (this).’ **William\***

It is commonplace for large UK organisations to have policies which place restrictions on personal social media use on the grounds of reputational protection, contravention of which can lead to

disciplinary proceedings, as indeed happened to one interviewee. UK arbitration service ACAS reports that unacceptable use of the internet and social media by employees costs billions of pounds through 'time theft', defamation, bullying, inappropriate use of freedom of speech and invasion of privacy.<sup>18</sup> Awareness of this will likely tend to restrict free expression amongst the risk-averse and act as a nudge towards more civil engagement for those who stand to lose professional or other status, just one of many normative peer-pressure factors inhibiting online behaviour.

There were some concerns expressed also about information quality, 'fake news', inaccurate fact sharing and dishonest memes, and the possibility of undue influence or covert power mechanisms warned of by Morozov and others, with Russia being mentioned both positively and negatively by several respondents, perhaps influenced by wider media claims. There was at this point little evidence from these participants of the concerns about data security that came to dominate headlines in early 2018, fuelled by extensive media coverage, particularly by *The Guardian* newspaper, of the relationship between Facebook and a company called Cambridge Analytica, and more general heightened awareness around the EU-wide introduction of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) implemented in May of that year. Apart, that is from one man who operated under several variations of his own name, as he put it, specifically to confound data collection.

Respondents who did engage reported a range of perceived benefits around information gathering, fact clarification, sharing information and third-party analysis, posting personal opinions and discussing or arguing points of contention. Other factors included the ability to learn about, understand and perhaps challenge opinions seen as wrong, to make one's voice heard, to assert

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<sup>18</sup> See: <http://www.acas.org.uk/index.aspx?articleid=3375>

aspects of self-identity and to stand by one's principles or make a point. The opportunity to 'nail my colours to the mast', that is, publicly 'download' or record heartfelt opinions about issues and to support various causes were also factors. Some cited the convenience of the platforms for news and information management. One woman reported that she now did almost all her news gathering through Facebook, a habit to which others too alluded. In line with Weber's characterisation of social action, across the piece respondents gave evidence of participating as a means to an expected end (*zweckrational*) because of deep-seated values (*wertrational*); motivated by strong passions (affectual) and because they had long-inculcated positions on political matters (traditional). The question of whether they did it to make a difference is addressed in the section on perceived efficacy further down in this chapter

Nonetheless, many viewed their experience critically. Frustrations and turn-offs included the quality of argument put forward by others, intransigence, rudeness and aggression and, where it was recognised, troll-type activity. These are all explored in more detail further on.

Regarding the focus groups specifically, the Alloa group consisted entirely of people with a high degree of political engagement overall, mainly SNP supporters, some going back many years, but there was also a supporter of the Labour Party and the (UK) Union. Alloa participants were interviewed at the beginning of fieldwork, towards the end of 2016. It should be noted that this was after the shake-up of the EU Referendum but before the US Presidential election that returned Donald Trump. The idea of mainstream media being a force for destructive manipulation was front of mind for online participants, but there seemed less consciousness of social media reliability, propriety and vulnerability in this respect. At this point, enthusiasm for the opportunities on offer appeared high.

‘You’ll never get me off. Spend too much time online, yeah. I mean, post under my own name online, very much an SNP guy, obviously, very much pro- ‘Yes’, for independence. I think in the last two years I’ve clocked up about eight thousand tweets or something like that, 800 followers, so that’s not a huge amount by some standards, [...] I mean, a lot of the time... **Man 1, Alloa**

In the event, 45 per cent of Scottish people voted ‘yes’ to the idea of independence, and many nationalists, including those interviewed, were hugely energised by the momentum and wave of affective sentiment built up for their cause on social media. Like the EU ‘remainers’ they openly grieved the perceived injustice of their near miss. ‘Performative grief’,<sup>19</sup> much in evidence on social media in personal contexts has a political expression too, and many Facebook profile pictures were adorned with ‘45’ frames, or simply became ‘45’. Much of the surrounding online debate, emotional, highly polarised and *in extremis* highly combative in tone, was a foretaste of what was to come with the EU Referendum.

The Luton group participants were quite vocal about their interest in aspects of local, national and international politics, but had a strong focus on issues germane to their specific communities. The group, made up of six older men who happened to be of British South Asian heritage, were just occasional users of social media, although might be described as aspiring to be digitally included, because they were taking part voluntarily in the computer lessons laid on for elders of their religious community. They mostly conformed to views about social media common amongst older men (across cultures) consulted – that the ‘oversharing’ of personal information on these platforms horrified them.

‘I do the Facebook, not too much. I don’t put myself (on), I don’t send messages, I just watch it.’ **Luton man 1**

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<sup>19</sup> For a useful exploration: <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/23/fashion/an-online-generation-redefines-mourning.html>



Nonetheless, offline the same men had a keen, lifelong interest in local, national and international politics, enjoyed discussing issues and had insight to the mechanisms and deleterious effects of polarising issues, having lived throughout their lives with the after-effects of the partition of India, the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of which was marked in 2017.

‘We talk about (it) between ourselves, we read papers and we know what's going on around the world.’ **Luton man 2**

The South London group were all politically engaged to varying degrees and mostly claimed to hold left of centre views, although there was also a Conservative Party supporter present. All confirmed that they always vote, and several were involved in issue-based activism, but only one was a current member of a political party and one of a trade union. All the London participants nonetheless used social media for political engagement, some very enthusiastically, mostly Facebook, some Twitter. Participants in the GlobalNet 21 (GN21) webinars were people who already take a proactive interest in online political discussion, hence their membership of the group, which although it has offline meet-ups, has a significant and active online presence. Part of the ethos of GN21 is a voluntary commitment to respectful debate, the aspiration being a rational deliberative public sphere, (although Habermas is not explicitly mentioned on their pages).<sup>20</sup> Metacognitive understanding of the experience of online political debate was strong. Given the nature of the setting, GN21 participants were not questioned in line with the topic guide about their overall participation but offered general commentary across the issues which is included throughout the rest of the chapter.

Responses – Question Group 2 – environments

- **Themes:** being comfortable, choice and control

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<sup>20</sup> See: <http://www.globalnet21.org/>

It was anticipated that feelings of safety, comfort and self-confidence might influence participation and also moves towards formation of echo-chambers, so this line of questioning explored platform preferences, and people's willingness to go outside comfort zones. In practice, users' choice of platforms could be quite varied, but tended to be in line with overall social media usage trends. It was important that they chose location and set boundaries themselves.

'Sure, well I use primarily social media, including Facebook, Google Plus, Twitter, and my own blog. When I say use, this is all when I contribute to discussion, when I post something. I write something. I also consume political information through all those sources, plus a few others. I've listened to some political podcasts, I get some information from YouTube videos, but I don't make any political comment in those areas.' **Aidan\***

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Facebook and Twitter scored most highly as the online locations of choice for political debate for participants, with Facebook recording around three times as many mentions in this section as media and political establishment-favoured Twitter. There were suggestions that many felt that Twitter was a harder, more focused environment, with its fully public exchanges, and the constraints it imposed, such as character counts, to some extent shaping the nature of exchanges – short and sharp, unnuanced and dependent on precision.

'...it's an educational tool, there is an ideological ping-pong that goes on, (...) I was thinking about Twitter earlier and how I would describe it, it's very much a platform for punch politics. And, I don't mean that in the sense of Punch and Judy, but you've got 140 characters to get your message across.'  
<sup>21</sup> **Ethan\***

This usage is interesting and again suggests an interest in politics as a social phenomenon, not just directed towards establishment ends. There was a tendency to view Facebook as a more hybrid channel with more typically social elements. Many were happy to mix these two strands and could live with the context collapse, others were not. As noted, some made clear site choices for their political activity, and the fuzzy boundary between the social and the political was one consideration.

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<sup>21</sup> This increased to 280 in November 2017. See <https://techcrunch.com/2017/11/07/twitter-officially-expands-its-character-count-to-280-starting-today/?guccounter=1>

A respondent from Alloa who had stood against the tide locally by campaigning for a 'No' vote in the independence referendum recounted how he had always been politically active and had run the 'No' campaign locally. He used Facebook for personal communication only and Twitter for politics and did not cross over. This seemed a useful tactic for avoiding the damage to relationships explored further on in the chapter.

In addition, some participants also went to newspaper and broadcast media organisations' online comment sections (*The Guardian* being a popular choice given the left-centre bias of the cohort), other media messages boards, which were quite wide-ranging, including general, audience-specific sites such as Mumsnet, and the focused online political discussion group GN21, with its several online locations, that was used for recruitment and the webinars.

With respect to individual groups or pages, and levels of confidence or willingness to go outside their comfort zone, there was considerable variation. On sites like Facebook, there is always the option to create one's own page or group and this was chosen by some, including one man who felt he had been made politically homeless by divisions around the Labour Party leadership.

'I thought it would be good just to create a group like that so that people can come on there and basically debate the future of the Labour Party. It just grew from there really. I just had ideas to form other groups.' **Mick\***

'Admins' can and do call the shots on their pages, and offer a local point of reference, and occasional 'Aunt Sally' to which others can react, debating principles of power, control and 'free speech'

Some participants sought safe or at least comfortable spaces, one woman admitting to a 'bizarre, random' closed Facebook group of 30 people happy to discuss political matters together. They did not all agree but felt within their comfort zone. People handled disagreement acceptably there. This

concern seemed not so much about the achievement of a rational, deliberative public sphere but a 'safe space' to think about wider ideas without being threatened. The same woman also engaged on MumsNet and Twitter but felt that Facebook had 'taken over'.

#### Focus group members' usage

Interviewed early in fieldwork and still very energised by the Scottish Referendum debate, all the participants in the Alloa group seemed relatively bullish about venturing out with their opinions and saw strong links to political outcomes. Three of the men in the group referred to backgrounds that had exposed them to tough debate (one a trades union official, another in robust online spaces like 4Chan) and suggested that they were not cowed by this, but the women too expressed confidence, even though one expressed squeamishness at others' opinions she viewed as bigoted.

The Luton group claimed not to enter online political debate on the main social media platforms, preferring to discuss matters within their own community. This may be in part a reflection on their relative age, less familiarity with IT and a cultural context that emphasised certain social proprieties around talking about one's life publicly. However, several said that they did enjoy using WhatsApp, seen as a more private environment for group conversations.

In the South London group, two of the men said they followed debates but were disinclined to comment, especially in the social environment of Facebook, one saying he preferred to debate in a pub with a good friend of opposite leanings. Intimacy seemed important. Twitter was viewed as a space for reactive, sometimes aggressive debate by more than one, with Facebook a more discursive arena for longer points to be made.

Amongst the GN21 webinar participants, all in this instance mature and well-educated adults, most respondents expressed a willingness, at least in principle, to go into environments where they would be challenged or see views different to their own, although genuine shock at the occasional behaviour of others was evident.

Responses – Question Group 3 – Offline participation

This question set was asked to get insights into people's political engagement more generally as this was anticipated to have a relationship to their online engagement. A breakdown and topline analysis of responses to this question can be found at Appendix 1.

#### 4.2 Subjective and interpersonal aspects of online political discussion.

**Themes:** Emotional, authentic, managing and learning, enthusiasm, freedom of expression, individual and collective, friends and family

Affective factors, whatever their cause, were anticipated as having a strong bearing on the motivations for and nature of respondents' participation. As noted in the literature review, while commentators hold mixed views on the role of emotion in online political discussion, the ways this plays out in the social media environment was a topic that fascinated participants. The personal reports from people engaging in online political discussion yielded rich insights and evidence of the strong emotions and subjective factors that can shape debate and have significant knock-on effects. If it were not clear that political discussion can be a visceral, charged experience within which people struggle with powerful drivers like cognitive dissonance and hardwired biases, then the transcripts supply convincing evidence.

Questions were asked in a discursive way, with participants allowed to lead the discussion in directions that interested or concerned them, and they were encouraged to expand on the detail of

their experience where they felt comfortable. This meant again that in practice participants often strayed into the political substance of the contextual events rather than confining themselves to metacognitive observations of the experience of discussing them on social media. This still offered some interesting circumstantial evidence of the absorbing nature of such engagement. The last of the sub-questions yielded some of the most evocative and remarkable responses from the body of fieldwork, but all responses to this section were very suggestive of the human factors pushing online exchange.

The positives

**Themes:** Enthusiasm, freedom of expression, interaction, making friends and getting together, authenticity, individual and collective

‘Yeah, I make no apologies for the amount of political stuff that I post, because I think it’s important, and I’d rather post political information than post about my cats. Not that I’ve got a cat.’ **Woman 1, Alloa**

‘It’s positive because you don’t have the only input that you have on TV or traditional media which is a one-way thing.’ **Nic\***

Many participants commented favourably on the opportunities social media had to offer, some of which their responses indicated they took entirely for granted. An example of this is the repeated mentioning of reading news items from multiple, even multinational publications. Assuming few if any were going to the corner shop and buying substantial piles of paper copies, nor looking up multiple web sites one after the other, these multiples were almost certainly brought in via algorithmic newsfeeds and social media ‘follows’ and ‘likes’.

Opportunities to discuss matters of importance to people were mentioned by most participants. The positive mental rewards of agreement and affirmation were positively sought out both as social stimulus and helping to consolidate self-identity. People sought things that ‘felt right.’ Overall, a

majority reported either making new relationships or deepening existing ones online. There were instances of friends-of-friends or longstanding/long-lost acquaintances re-emerging through a political lens, at times to the delight or occasional horror of participants. One man reported his surprise on discovering that a colleague he had known for two decades had shared his left-leaning sympathies all along. A woman was horrified to discover the racist views of another she had long regarded as a friend. There were acknowledgements, in several instances, that not all new relationships formed were 'real' friendships, and were either politically or socially contingent, or not people one would care to meet in real life. Yet many respondents reported making some very real, deep and enduring connections through online political chat, and not always with the likeminded. Bryn\* valued the chance to talk with the Eurosceptics with whom he disagreed, as he really wanted to make sense of their points of view. Gerald\* worked through his own views by testing them against unlikeminded others.

More generally, people sought likeminded others online, another facet of homophily, confirmation bias and reassurance that they were not alone in thinking a certain way. To ask, to borrow a well-known 'Mumsnet' term, 'AIBU', or, 'am I being unreasonable?'. 'AIBU' is an interesting coinage, suggesting as it does a rhetorical questioning of one's own beliefs while actually seeking confirmation of them.

Despite growing awareness of bots and trolls, many participants had a strong sense of the environment being an 'authentic' one where they and others could 'be themselves'

It's great that [...] it's really unwashed that it's not ties, and a lot of the music we get on TV, (where) it's very packaged, [...] there's an editorial line taken [...] with Twitter it's messy news, but it feels a little bit more authentic and in that sense a lot more engaging for the political dialogue that I like ... **Ethan\***

‘You’re energised because you’re debating, and actually there is much that people agree on.’ **Man 4, Alloa**

‘I’ve met some amazing people, absolutely fantastic people. I am not remotely sorry to have lost anyone who doesn’t like either me posting political stuff or doesn’t like my specific politics. I’m not sorry, I don’t mind, if they don’t want it, I’m not going to change who I am for anyone else.’ **Woman 1, Alloa**

Opportunities to make individual choices or express views as an individual tended to appeal to people as much as, if not more than, being part of a collective, and perhaps one whipped into line. This in itself is interesting. In some instances, the freedom of expression hailed by Jenkins and the freedom to be an individual and perhaps voice atypical views aloud was seen as a positive asset, for example by two UKIP supporters interviewed who took pride in the fact that their party was unwhipped. Nonetheless, there was perceived reward and excitement in joining a groundswell of like-minded others. Ethan\* described the loose temporary alliances that can form quickly online around key issues that he suggested were not political movements as such but fleeting and pragmatic affairs, murmurations perhaps, or to borrow a management term, ‘task and finish’ groupings. This echoes Bimber’s observations about informal affiliation superseding formal membership and Flichy’s point about transforming networks (Bimber 2003, Flichy 2007). The word ‘momentum’ was used by participants with a degree of frequency that suggests the Corbyn-supporting group made an apposite choice of name. Camaraderie, being part of a movement or popular groundswell and taking control in the face of a perceived challenge such as ‘unhelpful’ legacy media coverage was a motivating factor.

‘I think it just felt that [...] things weren’t really getting reported as they should [...] in that way the media helped as well with one of the other kind of triggers [...] what I felt I suppose is that in terms of mainstream media I think they only had the support of one paper [...] in Scotland. So, again, it was [...] we’re never going to win the argument on traditional media, let’s look at what’s going on. I don’t think it was any strategy or wider game play there in terms of people working together.’ **Ethan\***



The negatives

- **Themes:** Strong feelings, encountering others, challenge and difficulty, enervation, surprise, negotiating friends and family

The potential difficulties of online political engagement are widely written about, nonetheless, exploring people's own accounts of their experience still yields a range of valuable information.

Neville\* spoke of his attempts to enter challenging environments where polite attempts to convince were met with 'disturbing' crude language and dismissal, brought on, he believed, by the physical distance between debaters. Christine\* bemoaned what she called the 'thick' and 'scary' people unable to string thoughts together. She did not speculate about the possible roots of their incompetence. A woman participant in Alloa spoke of her distress at reading 'car crash' racist commentary about refugees but sought reassurance from friends who advised her not to expose herself to such opinion as she was unlikely to change minds. Michael\* expressed frustration at the banalities he encountered in newspaper comments sections, while Josh\*, a young professional, a Europhile and a supporter of Jeremy Corbyn, initially driven by great enthusiasm for the opportunity, found the stubbornness of others 'enervating'. He feared causing annoyance with his repeated attempts to get his own political point across, suggesting a degree of self-awareness, if not an outright admission that others might find him stubborn too.

Responses overall were suggestive of an environment which was difficult to read, and in which empathy and self-awareness did not come quickly or easily. If not saying so directly, participants gave much circumstantial evidence of the difficulty of seeing another point of view and the possibility that they themselves might be difficult to engage. A woman participant in Alloa conceded pragmatically that she knew from work that opinions were very divided on the Scottish Referendum and that she might have been blocked by some contacts, and likely some would scroll past her comments.

Beliefs linked to long standing identities are very resistant to challenge and stand in the way of effective processing of new information (Cohen 2012). Challenges to belief can cause cognitive dissonance and real physical discomfort, visible in brain scanning, as noted in Chapter 2. People stand their ground, and as observed, when challenged can become entrenched, and their experience online can reinforce this where debates are contested, divisive and polarised. Many openly acknowledged this, as did MP Jess, and speak of finding themselves almost forced into an entrenched position. One can speculate about the macropolitical effects of this, if it is, as seems likely, replicated generally. Challenge can be heartfelt, based on genuine, hard-to-shake core beliefs, or it can be playful, or even malevolent mischief-making, but when one person receives a barrage they are unlikely to differentiate too much. Mick\* chose to speak openly in a number of forums about his discontent with the current Labour Party leadership, and thus opened himself up to what sometimes appeared to be organised, concerted, full-on verbal assault but in reality, was just as likely an aggregate mix of the part-organised, the heartfelt, the mischievous and the random. Still, for him, it consolidated his position.

#### Participants' experience of aggression and trolling

Much has already been written about the phenomena of aggression, trolling and uncivil behaviour online, and the experience of respondents to this study followed patterns observed elsewhere, however, the researcher was surprised by the intensity experienced by low-profile, private individuals. It can be observed that *responses* vary from professional or pragmatic acceptance to a degree of trauma. This variation emphasises the importance in considering subjective judgement and individual and group experience in assessing online media's effects. People's experience fell on a spectrum, with some meeting very little of this type of behaviour, or some reporting odd incidents, such as Denise\* being 'creeped out' by a short-lived stalker, Joanne\* threatened with being reported to her employer (she is self-employed) and others mainly witnessing third-parties being affected by

it. Where it was observed by individual interviewees, it was regarded with some distaste. The words 'nasty' and 'vile' and 'appalling' to describe abusive and trolling comments appeared frequently in transcripts. They spoke clearly of something new, unaccustomed, disturbing, a breach of social *mores*. For Ethan\* the definition of a troll is that they made things personal. Catriona\* noted how easy it was to provoke 'stupid', 'nasty' and 'ridiculous' comment. There was a feeling that some did it 'for the sake of it' and to provoke a response deliberately.

'In the heat of the moment, a lot of the time politics [...] being nasty can cross that line where people do start to engage in just being nasty for the sake of it'.  
**Christopher\***

Keith\* and Alex\* felt frustrated that their genuine attempts to put their points across were frustrated by provocateurs, perceived trolls and people using false identities.

'... there will be someone with a loose reference to a Nazi flag in a profile pic, that will pick up on something. It doesn't upset me. It just makes me reflect on how sad it is when such a brilliant tool as social media has been put to this awful use.' **Alex\***

Caroline\* felt that human nature, human failings and common cognitive biases lay behind the responses of many. She felt many sought confirmation and were deliberately uninformed (shades of Kaplan's rational irrationality). Her position on the EU Referendum gained attention from both sides, including material she regarded as offensive from each. In fact, at one point she began to have real fears for her personal safety, especially as she lives with debilitating health challenges. This fear is not without foundation, as other interviewees Liz\* and Mike\* found out. Aggression can sometimes spiral out of control even for everyday participants, as Josh\* and Mariam\* discovered.

Normlessness. *Anomie*. Or perhaps another indicator of Crouch's 'post-bureaucratic behaviour'.

'This woman that I had an argument with, I can't remember where it went but it kept boiling down to like, "out means out and you're a cunt". Yes. "He's a cunt, James, ignore him." Having started off a bit sarcastically. I'm like, okay, it's pure Brexit rage. She didn't know what sort of society she was trying to build. She didn't know what she's aiming for. She kept falling back on: "out means out and you're a cunt." I'm like, "My god. Stop insulting me and tell me what you want. What you think you can achieve?" If you ask me, I can tell you right now. I can tell

you a society I want to see. I can do that right now if you want. What do you want? "Don't listen to him, James." Again, sort of why am I bothering? There's no fucking (point) you know?' **Josh\***

'There was one that sticks in my mind and it related to Archbishop Justin's 2015-2016 New Year message. When he pointed out that Jesus as a baby being a refugee, and on his page some woman said, "How can you be so ridiculous and call yourself a Christian? Jesus was never a refugee." In all innocence, I just put in that you might want to take a look at Matthew 3 and all hell broke loose. It went on for months. I mean, she still contacts me quite regularly. I've tried blocking her. I've got on to Facebook. And I was at Lambeth Palace the other day and I was talking to the Chief of Staff there. And I was laughing at this because I had got another one of these, "Don't worry, we'll get them." She sets up so many different accounts just to-- because you've dared to challenge her and tell her she's wrong. There's horrible people out there.' **Mariam\***

One man, Roy\* complained of the frustration of not being able to tell if comment-makers on newspaper threads were being mischievous or genuine. Despite a professional background requiring a very high level of cognitive skill, thrown into contact with others of less academic ability, he felt unsure if many with whom he exchanged were simply engaged in mischief.

'...they are entertaining themselves at your expense [...] they are not interested in rational argument, discussion. They might have their view and they just want to try and convince you that they are right, and you are wrong. Well there are ways of going about that but being offensive, rude, obstructive... belligerent, and even refusing to see an argument when it is put in words of one syllable is all very sad.

'People are stubborn [...] it's all very well having your own opinion which is good but if you aren't able to defend it in a rational way then it becomes faith, not an opinion, then, well then you shouldn't be there'. **Roy\***

Those who had received considerable abuse dealt with it in varying ways. Mick\* claimed it did not affect him much, but it did upset his wife.

'Now, they can abuse me, and believe me, as you know I've had quite a lot of abuse against me [...] people who abuse me [...] I think well, you know what, you can't even debate the point you have to resort to personal abuse. I never abuse anybody online. I always try to be respectful no matter if they are raving Corbynite or what. I put my point across, it's up to them how they take it, as far as I'm concerned. I just battle on through it all. I never changed my political opinions.' **Mick\***

Others seemed genuinely startled by the lack of inhibition shown by other participants in this environment. The sense of sheer surprise and disbelief at the behaviour of some others, and how things can escalate came across strongly.

(on abuse received by Diane Abbot MP) 'I'm amazed that people do this. [...] I've also been in receipt of comment and stuff. It's unbelievable that people do this. And this is something again where I believe, ultimately, we've got to start teaching people that this is an essentially, unacceptable behaviour [...] I think we must start really thinking about these sorts of things. I agree it's appalling. Why, when people get in front of a keyboard, they feel that they are sort of anonymous but not always, they just say what the hell they like. It staggers me.'

**Participant, GlobalNet21**

Sometimes they felt that abuse entered the realms of the fantastical, horrible but oddly far-fetched, transgression as Grand Guignol, as one-upmanship.

'I've had horrible abuse on Twitter. One of my close friends very recently went viral, because of a tweet. She tweeted about breakfast, and a guy replied, calling her a feminist c-word, and saying how she'd ruined Star Wars. She's like, "this is very weird" so, she tweeted it, being like, "this guy really doesn't like cornflakes."

'It went viral, and she got death threats [...] a guy direct-messaged her on Twitter, and knew her address...

'It was like, "I'm going to bomb your house," [...] "I'm going to go tell everyone your address, and we're going to stalk you." She had to go to the police, because she tweeted about breakfast. That's just mad. Who thinks that's okay? And when she posted, saying, "Okay, so I've just had to go to the police, guys", so many people, so many women were like, "Yeah, Yeah, this happened to me... I got threatened with rape" or whatever.

'Maybe it's getting nicer for some people, but particularly, for women and minorities. I think it's getting worse, because people seem to think they can say anything. [...] I wouldn't say anything on social media that I wouldn't say in real life (but) some people seem to see it as some world, where they are at liberty to say anything.'

**Woman 2, South London**

Many participants remarked on the speed at which an exchange could become unpleasant as people acted immediately on their initial understanding of a comment, setting off reactions like a pinball machine. The phrase 'well, that escalated quickly' is a well-established internet meme which acknowledges the speed and intensity with which conflict can develop. It originates from a line made

by actor Will Farrell in a scene from the 2004 comedy film *Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy*.

In online discussions and comments, the expression can be used in response to a conversation that has rapidly got out of hand, a situation well-recognised by participants.

‘When it's been bad or being unpleasant then I found that people who don't share my views go from nought to 60 of polite to aggressive in mood in about two seconds. They can get extremely condescending or just rude or -- I try to continue the conversation, you are being rude and that sounds rude to me. You are being quite aggressive, and we are having a conversation and you continue just like being rude. Twitter, yes. A little bit on Facebook, as well. It's less on Facebook. I think Twitter is more immediate, then it disappears rather than on someone's timeline and in its comments from possibly weeks ago that you can tap into. I'm a little bit more wary on Facebook 'cause there is going to be a connection with a friend, and I'm having a conversation with a friend, or have joined in somebody's conversation that a friend has led or something. Always a little bit wary of offending people.’ **Gary\***

Gary\* had a weather-eye on the context collapse.

‘So, as soon as you disagree with something, you get called a Blairite, you get told you have no opinion, you get told you shouldn't be a member of a party. I've had, "I hope your relationship breaks down. I hope your mum gets raped." Yes. It gets quite extreme.’ **Noel\***

Roy\* made an interesting observation about the medium amplifying, or perhaps owing to its constraints, essentialising people's characteristics.

‘Yes, it's always there under the surface as I say people are more [...] people become [...] brittle personalities become brittle, if you see what I mean. And so, what if you were talking to somebody in a public house and having a discussion about, whatever, some political point, you wouldn't necessarily get to the point of storming off and slamming down books and so on or slamming down your beer glass on the table. You might do but it would take an awful lot more than it seems to do on Facebook where it's very easy to offend somebody.’ **Roy\***

Perhaps there is something around reductiveness and essentialism as platforms force people to strip down to the essence of their personalities, the usual social buffers of the presentation of the self severely compromised.

While abuse happens across social media, there is a natural tendency to be more alert to it when it happens to your 'side', possibly related to confirmation bias and partyism. Also, there is the idea that in some situations, the gloves come off and that is fine. Identifying himself as on the left, Alex\* had spotted abuse directed to Labour, mostly women, MPs.

'I think that the first time I really came across it was actually following the Labour MP Stella Creasy. You could see she deals with it in a very particular way, in this sense of quote-tweeting her trolls and [...] I believe she has then contacted the police a number of times about her trolls [...] the other great example is Diane Abbott [...] How do I respond to it personally? I don't engage with these people because I think there's a classic line about the trolls that feed off these interactions. Obviously, I think it's pretty repulsive stuff.' **Alex\***

It is hard not to feel shocked at the appalling treatment of Diane Abbot MP, whose characteristics, gender, ethnicity and class origin have made her an apparently easy target for 'fast thinking' and extreme othering. Yet Alex\* believed that in certain circumstances, the 'other side' could be fair game, and took a sideswipe at tone policing and the tyranny of decency.

'Part of me thinks that the particular political settlement we have [...], and the particular people who hold political power, and particular victory, haven't done it through any civility, aren't particularly civil themselves. I think this call to civility, to me maintains the right-wing hegemony, if that makes sense.

'I think that challenging it, in uncivil terms, isn't necessarily a problem, really. Obviously, as I said, I would distinguish between that and trolling.

'I think, if someone who is in particular political power, says something vile and horrible, and someone who has a particularly large base, Katie Hopkins<sup>22</sup> is a great example, using the platform to produce the most awful bile against poor people, against racial minorities, etcetera. I think saying to someone like that, "Fuck off" [...] it's not particularly constructive, I'll give you that, but I don't think it would count as trolling. However, finding someone's address, and post, calling for someone to have bad things done to them, is a bit different. I think being uncivil when challenging uncivil politics, isn't necessarily a bad thing to sum it up. Does that make sense?' **Alex\***

Others felt much the same way:

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<sup>22</sup> English media personality see: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Katie\\_Hopkins](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Katie_Hopkins)

‘If they’re Britain First supporters, then I’m not exactly going to feel particularly bad if they feel offended and may prove to them that they’re essentially Nazis but that I’m never going to feel particularly bad about that, they can suck it up.’

**William\***

This links in with findings of double standards within moral tribalism (Valdesolo & Desteno 2007).

Maybe this trait lay behind the ‘gammon’ phenomenon of 2018, the compensatory othering of older white men seen as angry and conservative in their views, where participants normally alert to identity slurs, pitched in with enthusiasm and no apology (Sommerlad 2018).

It’s visceral

A significant number of participants reported the physical and mental discomfort they felt after online spats, a sort of somatising that many may recognise.

‘It did make me feel upset, absolutely. It made me feel upset [...] I felt really tense, very tense and that carried over into my everyday life, just this feeling of tension.’ **Liz\***

‘When I highlighted the fact that I felt that jobs were at risk by us leaving the EU. You get (challenge). That very much made me feel incredibly anxious and depressed about the whole thing. In fact, we went on holiday while the campaign was on and I still had my phone and the internet where we were staying and really to be honest with you, it pretty much ruined my holiday. I felt really stressed and wound up about it. Yes, discussed it on various forums and with my good friends. I wouldn't say I have been trolled particularly but certainly, people have expressed opinions where they know they are doing it for the sake of it, they know it's opposite to my own. People being mischievous just people being very antagonistic in trying to get across their point of view and very unwilling to move on that.’ **Colin\***

Sometimes when people resist challenge, it is in an earnest attempt to resist physical discomfort and pain.

It is worth noting here that included in the field research were: one person who disclosed an autistic spectrum disorder, another who had been recently bereaved, a third who disclosed a serious mental health problem (since the diagnosis of which he now ‘avoided all confrontation’), a fourth who had



suffered serious brain injury, and another who disclosed multiple cognitive disabilities. There are reasons why these and other people in a variety of circumstances might find difficulty reacting and responding to things in ways some would think were 'reasoned' or nuanced. Clearly, at times people express themselves with less precision, or perhaps atypically, because of things they can not necessarily control easily. This is a parallel point to that about education, literacy and epistemic injustice made earlier.

#### Targets of hate

Campaigns of significant abuse and hate have been experienced both by private individuals and those who might be putting themselves willingly into the line of fire by engaging directly with conflict. The sources of this incivility appear to be a very complex mix which may include disgruntled individuals, the mischievous, hardened campaigners and sponsored trolls amongst other things.

Journalist and independent campaigner Mike developed an insight into some of the more sinister-seeming and disruptive forces swilling around social media, having been engaged in verbal combat with extreme right-wing elements for several years. He has been targeted for abuse and 'doxing' by the far right after he helped to get some social media accounts shut down. First, he found himself signed up to email bots, effectively putting him on 'millions and millions' of mailing lists for 'spam' and blocking his business account, then his personal address was obtained, despite not being in the phone book, then Google maps to and pictures of his house were posted online. This was followed by non-stop telephone calls. Nonetheless he observed:

'I never feel in danger [...] I highly doubt that any of these people are going to leave their house. But it does wear you down. There's been a couple of times when I've just walked away for a couple of days, because I didn't want to deal with it at all. It's just too much. At one stage I was getting hundreds of direct messages each day, some of them saying, 'Kill yourself,' and things like that. Now

I just block. I wasn't talking to these people, but now I just block without even looking, unless it's somebody who follows me. Pretty hardcore.'

Despite somewhat alarming actions, some of the abuse and name calling has had an almost childlike quality. Mike referred to an often-used term of abuse, 'soyboy', based on a belief that men who drink soya milk lower their own testosterone levels, a claim at which it is hard not to laugh, despite its connotations of toxic masculinity. After being accused of desiring 'white genocide' a sarcastic riposte saying that was exactly what he wanted resulted in his own, week-long ban from Twitter.

Mike's work is at the intersection where extremist ideas make tentative inroads into the mainstream. His interest was piqued by an observation that British online debate was becoming a lot more polarised after 2014, and he proactively began to follow so-called 'alt-right' sources and soon started to notice recurring patterns and figures. He observed how many were essentially making a modest living out of sharing extreme perspectives on places like YouTube through attracting advertising revenue, and how some of this was finding a willing audience, often amongst the naïve but sensation-craving mostly-male teen audiences of sites like 4Chan which thrive on shock, outrage, subversion and so-called 'red pilling'. This material Mike dismissed as 'garbage' and in some instances, possibly boundary-testing against prevailing messages on liberal tolerance. His feeling from observation, not quantified, is that many of them were likely to be white and relatively affluent middle-class, not least given the time they had to devote to these activities. His assessment is not out of line with that of Nagle, who suggests perception around race identity is a key issue (Nagle 2017a; 2017b) He felt generally that young people lacked political literacy, echoing an observation made by MP Kelvin Hopkins. Mike also observed that he felt (at the point of interview) that this phenomenon had peaked in the US, but the UK was lagging behind somewhat. In some senses the output of assemblies such as Generation Identity were becoming slicker, with branding and so on. Such groups regarded more local UK output, such as Britain First as 'complete jokes'. 'Socialism as a bad thing has become a meme amongst these people,' he noted. Mike expressed a

belief that 'white nationalism' was a key motivator, and that in his opinion, similar sources were retweeting material from Russia Today (RT), both positive and negative stories, about Jeremy Corbyn. He suggested this might principally be about promoting division and polarisation – a hint of 'divide and conquer' which echoes arguments by Iyengar and Westwood that elites can benefit from affective polarisation so go along with it (2015).

Mike felt that a lot of the spreading of extreme material was about giving the impression of a debate where there was not one, it had already been settled. He gave as another example eminent astrophysicists getting drawn into debates with so-called 'flat-earthers'.

'We've had these discussions, we've had these debates, we've decided that this is not in our best interest to do this thing. With all this interference, it's making it appear as if there's much more of a support for these extreme beliefs than there (is). Which, in turn, provides fertile ground for a lot of them to pop out. The thing is, it's creating an atmosphere of questioning all this stuff they shouldn't believe, really.'

At the time of interview, Mike was still getting notifications through his two-step process that people were trying to access his email account.

Most respondents overall were quite clear that they themselves did not indulge in what they saw as 'proper' bad behaviour, deception or trolling, although there was some admission of mischief and provocation and occasional combative and somewhat aggressive interventions. Sometimes 'devil's advocate' type approaches were used with the intention of experimenting and learning. Aidan\* claimed to post partisan statements sometime knowing that people would disagree, a process he found useful for clarifying his own views. Gerald\* thought the same way and saw it as a way of refining his own counterarguments. He claimed a 'voyeuristic' fascination with the way those who disagreed with him thought. He expressed no ethical concern around this. William\* noted that things could get aggressive, then.

‘...I’ll be irritated by something, so I’ll go out of my way to try and antagonise others, and they’ll try to antagonise me. That’s fine. If you’re spoiling for a fight, that’s generally what you’re looking for and that’s okay. Sometimes there’s been instances I can think of in which I have taken a political view point on things and then people who I am [...] friends with, I do actually know, have taken a contrary position and (have) actually been quite negative towards that, and that can be slightly difficult.’ **William\***

Midlands-based truck driver ‘Mick’\* has established himself as something of a social media ‘voice’ on current Labour Party issues and is an ‘admin’ of three well-subscribed Facebook groups and has found himself caught in often rough, hyperpartisan debate. His online persona speaks strongly for one side of the highly-polarised debate over the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn. After being interviewed, as noted, he was the subject of more than one targeted attack by a Corbyn-supporting blog. His self-perceived reality, of being a solidly working-class long time Labour-voting man, now with significant caring responsibilities, that is either not known or not acknowledged by many of his critics, is a situation which he interprets with a degree of irony. Nonetheless, he is consistent and persistent in his opinions, attracting a lot of often vitriolic attack:

‘I get everything. It’s Facebook, it’s not real. It’s a virtual world. They are not my everyday friends [...] I have literally adopted one person from Facebook as a friend, but I laugh it off, because I look at it and I think, you what, I didn’t really think that anybody could be so idealistic. I think a lot of the flak I get, the people are just living in a dream world, to be honest.

I’m not (into) vicious keyboard warrior stuff you know?

‘... the thing about me, is I’m passionate, I’m outspoken. If I don’t agree with something I will say. It doesn’t matter if it’s a populist (sic) view, it doesn’t matter if it is populist. I’ll just say that I don’t agree with it, and it’s up to other people and they can argue that, look, I’m just angry at the end of the day. They either take me on board or they don’t, either way it doesn’t really matter to me.’

Mick reported that his wife often felt driven to defend him from his online assailants, but he has discouraged her from doing so. He felt confidence in his own position and considers that he represents something authentic, and perhaps therefore that many of his challengers do not. His

personal life is clearly one that demands hard work and also a degree of resilience, and on the face of it his responses appear robust.

Misbehaving, falling out and fallout

Clearly, it is easier to give out one's view than take those of another. On what some saw as profound matters of principle, and a number saw continued membership of the EU as this, they were quite content to 'defriend' even family and longstanding friends who disagreed with them.

'I've been asked by my mum not to bring up politics when the person's in the room because it will always end up with us fighting. Always.' **Denise\***

'You find on Facebook that you might end up arguing with your friends and then you might realise your friends may take fairly strong positions and that's undermining your friendship a little bit which you then have to wonder, well, is it worth it? Is my friendship worth it or is this conversation worth losing it for?'  
**Gary\***

Amongst the most interesting findings were the extents to which interviewees' engagement with politics and especially polarised debates had caused real and significant disruption to personal relationships. This did not apply in every case, but where it did, issues could be somewhat profound.

Noteworthy examples given included a woman who had a 'massive' and enduring public fallout with one of her closest friends through discussing the EU Referendum, and another, who was adopted at birth and who in recent years had found and built a good relationship with her birth mother, only to fall out with her over 'Brexit' – an issue that caused ongoing conflict with the birth family with whom she had otherwise established good relations. One challenge appeared to be a very different definition of situation.

'...it's caused some quite big problems within the family and I hope I'm not responsible for it, but it has been mentioned that I might be. Which I feel a bit awkward about because I don't want to alienate anybody, though I don't know if

my mum has hidden me off her Facebook feed or not, she likes a lot of things I post, I don't think she has but she doesn't post anything on any of the Pro-EU things that I've had. I haven't stopped doing it. I'm sure the subject will arise again but my mum's one of these people that thinks (it's) no place for politics [...] (it) should just be for showing pictures of your dinner, your current project, your grandchildren and your kids or your dog, whereas I think it's for absolutely anything and everything that's important to somebody.' **Joanne\***

Another woman spoke of profound family disharmony and a recurrence of depression being provoked by the referendum debate:

'My parents and my sister on one side and myself, my husband, my daughter on the other. We were on opposing sides of the political spectrum and it has caused an awful lot of upset and ill feeling especially for my daughter. [...] At 18 years old, we have always instilled in her [...] Just go and exercise your vote. [...] for her to wake up in the morning after and to find that her -- what she had voted for had been taken from under her. She was in tears [...] we heard the scream from the bedroom when the radio went on and she heard the seven o'clock news. She was absolutely beside herself just couldn't understand how this thing, how the country had voted to leave the EU and with it so many changes in what she wanted for her future. {...}

'Basically, my mum was the most strident person [...] saying "Well you've just got to suck it up. You have no right of reply. This is what the country decided. You've just got to get over it". She had a go at her cousin, who is Head of Research for a Government department, who works with the EU. My mum [...] told her that she didn't have a right to an opinion because her opinion was out of favour [...] this was on Facebook [chuckles] and it just sent it into this complete meltdown. My mum was on the phone, she was on Facebook, basically saying, "How dare you? How dare you say to us that we voted the wrong way? How dare you say that?" and there was no acknowledgment that around close members of her family so many of us were in profound shock [...] it precipitated the most awful, awful six months, where I barely spoke to my parents between June and Christmas. Barely, barely, barely. I sank into depression [...] I'm still struggling. My mum still refuses to allow me to talk about anything political in the house. **Liz\***

Another interviewee, 'Meg'\* with an established psychotherapy practice in an affluent urban area told a remarkable story of the few days after the EU Referendum when every single one of her patients brought the EU vote up as a cause of distress. She also noted her surprise when an Italian client claimed to agree with the 'leave' vote, alluding to the false consensus syndrome that led many people, in the echo chambers of social media, to make assumptions about the result. In the less

likely event of her visiting local discussion pages from towns along the East coast observed by this researcher in the referendum run-up, she might have formed a very different picture.

It can also come as a surprise to users that values they hold can simply not be shared by others. For some, the very act of choosing to talk about political matters at all in what they regard as a social forum is an affront. Comments to this effect can often be seen online and may be met with symbolically-interactive defensive responses in the form of memes.

Participants wrestled with the challenge of managing context collapse and the exposure of parts of their life and personality they had in the past compartmentalised.

‘I've realised that on Facebook, you're going into someone's living room, where they're sitting and just shouting. [...] Twitter's different, I don't really use Twitter, but people are going to Speaker's Corner aren't they to listen to people shout. With Facebook, it's your aunts and uncles, and I've modified what I say myself. But you know, drunken emails at midnight is never a good thing. **Robert\***

Robert\* had at least provided a salutary lesson to others, as a woman friend of his, also interviewed, said she now purposefully avoided late night post-alcohol posting.

One woman, whose leftist politics clashed with her in-law's conservatism kept her online friendship with them, noting that they ignored her political messaging. Another could no longer be a Facebook friend to her Brexit-supporting niece after some family unpleasantness:

‘I know that it's growing as more family members joined and to be honest, friends you choose, family you don't. It can be toxic but a lot of conversation I steer away from. For example, the (EU) referendum, I'll never bring it up with certain members of the family. I'm not ever going to talk about it except that they have an opinion which they find very hard to justify and I'll just leave it at that. That's very unpleasant.’ **Christine\***

Shut down and control

Not everyone who spoke out met with abuse. A woman very much involved in the Scottish independence debate claimed to have seen very little aggression herself, and a man, facets of whose characteristics, identity and approach might have been expected to attract bullies in certain circumstances, nonetheless reported: 'I don't actually have much experience of trolling or bullying to be honest.' Others viewed themselves as managing to avoid conflict.

'For the reasons linked to what I've said previously ..., I've not really experienced personal trolling. Partly probably because of the way I engage. I'm not coming out with a strong position but asking open questions that tend to get ignored...'  
**Robert\***

Others just noted it going on with a degree of resignation.

'Somebody is saying twice in two consecutive messages, "F-off" and then the person's name which I was quite shocked by. That's an extreme example, but people are pretty horrible to each other.'  
**Gerald\***

Many participants exerted control by blocking without reflecting on the longer-term consequences of this.

(On supporters of Donald Trump) 'I didn't want to hear what they had to say because often it was quite offensive. It was quite trolling and I just said, "Well I can control that, I can block that." When I do engage I try and make it on my terms. A part of that is navigating through what's going on. But, I certainly wouldn't like my feed to become a battlefield....'  
**Ethan\***

Ethan\* did see a connection between wanting the debate to be on his own terms and generating cocoons. There was an understanding of the tension between the desire to control and minimise dissonance and a related risk of the echo chambers warned of by Sunstein.

'I put a bit of control on it because I'm very conscious that Twitter in particular is an echo-chamber, you choose who to follow and you decide that. By nature, you're going to have people that share similar views with you.'  
**Ethan\***

John believed this could be exploited mischievously.



'I suppose there is an element of the echo chamber because most of my friends are all middle class, liberal, lefty people, however, there are some people that I know that have different views and some people's views I just disagree with quite strongly, and a couple of people that I think are contrarians and say things that are controversial or difficult because they like the reaction that gets (not) because it necessarily supports their political view.' **John\***

Roy\* had lines that others could not cross, and a tipping point.

'Oh ... I'm happy to venture into the wilderness and try ... I've given up ... I don't have a proselytising attitude I don't try and convince people of my point of view but if somebody sends me a message which is contrary to what I believe I would be perfectly happy to say to them. Well I think that's wrong because A, B, C, D, E and F. If they then come back and say I think you're talking absolute rubbish. Full stop. And then break off the conversation, well I normally come back with a sarcastic response such as 'well thank you for that in-depth analysis'. This probably is the final nail in the coffin lid of the conversation but (I have) better things to do with my time than entertain people [...] I always make it a point [...] if I realise that somebody is unpleasant, racist, homophobic, they are cut off, deleted, expunged, sent to virtual Neverland. I just block all communication with them. It's happened on several occasions. Most recently [...] last weekend there was somebody whose comments were becoming increasingly bigoted and he accused me of being a fascist. Well I didn't even bother to reply I just went into the mechanism for blocking him and he is blocked.' **Roy\***

To avoid conflict, others simply avoided too much engagement themselves:

'I think discussion (for) me is at a minimum [...] I do sharing (or) a lengthy diatribe about some things. Sometimes, I can get into a bit of a rant occasionally when I feel particularly strongly about something, but I've actually quite deliberately tempered that want to respond in that way, because I don't feel that there's much point to that actually.

'For me, I don't think it's a very constructive thing [...] going into a massive rant about it, I think is quite destructive sometimes. I do it sometimes but --yes, it does tend to close off more than I think open up.' **Denise\***

## Complaining

Sometimes participants were motivated to complain about posts they saw, especially public figures.

Social media sites such as Facebook are built on user-generated content. While the structure of

interactions is defined by the medium, in terms of 'statuses' and comment boxes, for example, the ethos of the main platforms, perhaps influenced by their Silicon Valley provenance is, as MP Jess commented, somewhat libertarian. What is on there is decided by its users, within relatively loose boundaries. While there are community standards, users can find that posts they report as offensive are not removed as expected, although this is possibly down also to subjective variations in the 'contracted out' monitoring services, which have faced accusations of poor training and low wages (Solon 2017) .

On handling very difficult subjects

While not amongst the contextual case studies addressed in the topic guide, several interviewees spontaneously brought up wider political topics that were recognised as being particularly thorny, divisive and inflammatory even in the most general environment, amongst them, foxhunting, immigration and the Israel/Palestine question. Without making any kind of judgements about how people perceived their relationship to these particular highly-polarising 'wedge' topics, it is interesting to observe how people actually engaged with them on social media, where issues can ignite quickly and endure considerably, as throwaway remarks can continue to provoke murmurations for some time. They were recognised as reliable emotional triggers over which participants found themselves unusually unable or unwilling to cede to or even see the other viewpoint or talk for long about them in entirely dispassionate terms – although some could and did. It was clear that, for others, declaring a standpoint on them was part of a statement of identity and even moral probity. It is barely surprising to see, therefore, the effectiveness with which a row over 'antisemitism' was able to derail online public discussion around the Labour Party and its leadership ahead of the 2018 May local elections and beyond.<sup>23</sup> It is interesting, as it became a subsequent online discussion point in observed groups, the various parties that might have an interest in sowing

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<sup>23</sup> For an overview: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-45030552>

this sort of division, again, echoes of Iyengar and Westwood's argument (2015). If there is a desire to divide and conquer, then some blue touch-paper topics can be relied upon to divide, spread misinformation and divisiveness very quickly on social media by calling on people's 'fast thinking' impulses and leading them to commit to comments that are not only often difficult to fully retract, but have a long, interactive life.

#### Self-control

By 2018, there was much more media discussion of the designed-in levers and triggers social media platform designers use to encourage continued engagement, feed reward/response mechanisms and generate a 'dopamine hit'. Throughout fieldwork, inherent in many responses was an – at least partial – acknowledgement that people didn't always feel 100 per cent in control of their own actions or that their 'fast thinking' responses were possibly overriding their better judgement at times.

'When your foot's on the pedal like that there's very little time for reflection. That's when you can [...] even be seen as a troll yourself. Because one of the things on Twitter that you rarely do is try and see the world through the eyes of others [...] there's no need for that real-world reflexivity [...] There's a thrill to that, but there's also [difficulty]. [...] Twitter allows you to do that. [...] I certainly wouldn't go up to someone and [...] shout in their face about politics, but on Twitter that's pretty much what you're doing, and similarly on Facebook ...'

**Ethan\***

Participants alluded to a common situation of locking horns.

'...arguments tend to escalate [...] I'm like many people on the internet. You go in just to...before you know it, you're in a massive argument with somebody. Both of you, because it usually, it comes down to just two people. Both of you seem to want to have the last words, [...] you get a notification that someone's commented, and it's impossible not to go and look and then respond to that. I'm quite bad for that. Even if it's just telling someone to fuck off at the end of it. But I try not to do that when ... you see you've lost the argument often, but yes, I have been quite rude I suppose but only in response to people being rude. I usually start off being nice and then, if necessary, I'll be quite rude.' [laughs]

**Joanne\***

‘One thing, I try not to get involved with [...] is a situation that I call online ping pong, and that is when two people start just sending each other rather antagonistic messages [...] if that happens I just opt out. This awful human tendency to want to get the last word and to want to be cleverer than the last remark. That's a bit destructive really. I just leave it go to be honest because otherwise then it just gets worse and worse. What I find difficult to leave is if somebody is in my perception not engaging rationally with the material; with what I've said.’ **Gerald\***

Others spoke about how affective personal circumstances coloured their online participation.

Robert spoke about sublimating the anger and grief he felt at the death of his mother through arguing online, sometimes after drinking, with the combination of strong emotions and reduced inhibitions bringing on a volatile mix of aggression and vulnerability.

‘The only really negative time was way back. What stopped it is that it was just not long after mama died, and it was -- I sort of blamed the NHS to a degree about what happened ... It was about the mansion tax as well. We were going to be really stunned by that. I wrote something I shouldn't have done really late at night, and that had -- a lot of people got involved in that, and I'm not so incendiary now.’ **Robert\***

This could be compounded by simple objectification of the other.

‘I think it is sad. I think it comes to human behaviour because, you know [...] you're sitting in your front room in Luton or whatever, there's a disconnect, you're not sitting on my sofa, you're not in front of me, people feel they can behave differently, it's a little bit like crowd behaviour as well, people behave differently in a crowd than they do individually, I think there's something there. Yes, I'm fortunate that I do understand the difference between social media and real life [...] it's an aspect, not unreal. But having a conversation when you're writing in one dimension isn't the same as having a three-dimensional conversation.’ **Gary\***

Gary went on to observe that he felt it was often a lack of nuance in a ‘one-dimensional’ space that caused problems. This was echoed by Liz\*:

‘Obviously, I've been online for a long time but the nature of responses has definitely hardened. There isn't that nuance. People are extremely black and white, people are extremely graphic in some cases. I would say that because of that culture, that even just following a thread on Twitter, just reading down the

responses to, say, one major political figure of any party, what you get is the sense that these are a lot of angry people. As a result of that and a result of personal circumstances, I now find myself just gathering information, reading and retweeting rather than engaging in political discussions with other people because I might as well bang my head against a brick wall.' **Liz\***

Handling it positively

Participants spoke of a learning curve.

'Some people get a bit scared about how to handle things. I think the first time [...] I was trolled by someone, God, you take it straight to heart and you realize that actually they're just being- as if they have just been a bit (assertive) face to face or heckled at a meeting, I just think move on [...] you've got to have that mindset.' **Rachel**

'The approach that I used to have in the early days of blogging was that you would get into an argument that wouldn't end for hours. And it was a total waste of everyone's time. So, nowadays I think everyone's learnt, you might leave a little pithy sardonic comment, then goodbye... I think it's really poor form to say something in a Facebook comment to someone that you wouldn't say to their face, that's a simple rule that I try and follow now.' **Lee\***

Some participants chose to deal with the conflict using humour and self-deprecation.

'The phrase *élite* gets bandied around an awful lot. They seem to think that we're all privately educated, university educated, middle class, quinoa eating, kale loving liberals. Most of that does apply to me.' [laughter] **Joanne\***

'Maybe I want to prove to myself that I'm superior to these people, although I'm never rude, I can be a bit condescending I think. I mean I was accused recently of being 'hypocritical', 'arrogant', 'childish', 'naïve', 'sanctimonious', and 'holier-than-thou'---the 'arrogance' and 'sanctimonious', there's probably an element of truth there and I like being very extremely logical and rather cold and detached but making a point. [laughs] I think I'm being terribly honest there.' **Gerald\***

Patrick\*, who set up a discussion network and witnesses online spats daily felt that pragmatism, tolerance and maybe a degree of forgiveness was in order:

'You've got to understand that, I think, when you use social media (you've) got to take what you read, and what you see, and what you hear and you've got to learn to be not too judgmental about people and realise people are going to put things (that are) sometimes a mistake, and be tolerant towards that but because (they) often are emotional on social networks, they pull the trigger before they think. It's very difficult, some people find that very difficult and it can get

acrimonious. As a result of that, much of that abuse is not meant and if you talk to a many people who've been abusive, very often they apologise or you come to a reasonable conclusion. There are a very small minority (who are) there to abuse, they (don't) know any other way of engaging with people but you just have to be a little patient and non-judgmental, I think, if going to use social media constructively.' **Patrick\***

Differing perspectives were acknowledged.

'Some have changed, someone wrote me a very long apology [...] (after the Scottish Referendum) saying I was actually right and they were in fact wrong, which was quite good. [...] I found you had to be quite careful what you said, I quite often got messages from the admin people saying, we appreciate your support of the site, but you can't say that and that's offensive, and I said, well, okay, but it's not offensive to me, ' **Man 3 , Alloa**

Meg\* drew on her psychotherapy skills to rationalise political conversation and was very careful to avoid making assumptions about what people thought. John\* was pragmatic, as was Calum.

'I suppose, ultimately, I think we're all grownups and aware that using social media has its pitfalls. I suppose it's one of those things you enter at your peril, if you're someone who's easily upset or offended by that level of aggression, then social media may not be the right place for you to debate. I'm not saying that that type of aggression is right, it's not, it's wrong but it's a reality of trying to have social media discussions.' **John\***

'It's great you can debate with each other and then there are people who just want an argument and they are not just really interested in having a debate. They just want to have an online slanging match. I think you need to be adult about that and not rise to it or if you do respond to it, you have to make light of it. That's the way I approach it. I don't go around for example in real life, dwelling on the hard side of it. It is nice to engage people online, it is nice to see how the people are thinking [...] even if you have people trolling you, I don't think there is too much point dwelling on it.' **Calum\***

#### 4.3 Issues of identity and the presentation of self

- **Themes:** Values, origins, creating the identity of self and others

The opportunity to articulate aspects of self-identity was a key factor affecting interviewees'

participation. This question set did not attempt to cover all potential issues of identity (or even those covered by UK equalities law as protected characteristics) but respondents were free to bring these

up and a number did, relating, for example, to sexual orientation, cultural origin and disability.<sup>24</sup>

Responses given indicate that users see a clear role for online political discussion in articulating, expressing and even shaping identity, in the respect that adversarial or polarised debate offered an opportunity to define oneself in relation to others, explore the meaning of labels, assert the right to define and apply labels to others, and also in the sense of being ‘pushed’ into a particular position by normative and combative peer pressure, in essence a sort of group polarisation as discussed in Chapter 2. In the focus groups, identity was pinpointed as a key part of people’s expression in this environment. As one Alloan woman remarked: ‘That’s all I express.’

Identity politics has found a nurturing host on social media and in many respects affords different and richer expressions of it from the offline world. The features supporting discursive debate and position taking, such as group membership, personal profile descriptors and features such as profile picture ‘filters’ add a complex new layer to what Goffman characterised as the presentation of self. As Hogan notes it is an environment in which to make an exhibition of oneself (Hogan 2010). Also, a person can present different shades of self on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or LinkedIn. Normative social pressures can be somewhat harsher, too. A 23-year-old respondent and self-identifying Marxist recalled his discomfort at being, while at university, a lone ‘leave’ voter in the EU Referendum. So-called ‘Lexiteers’ (used loosely, Labour/socialist-identifying people who support leaving the EU, for reasons which include a belief that it is a capitalist institution), three of which were knowingly interviewed, and others spoken to informally, all spoke of the difficulty of being stereotyped on social media as ignorant right-wing racists, having an identity thrust upon them by the public framing of the debate around immigration and race.

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<sup>24</sup> See: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/section/4>

## Values

‘I think my beliefs and my thoughts are part of me.’ **Christine\***

An appeal to ‘values’ the nature of which could be nebulous or precise, was cited by a number of respondents as being an important part of their identity expression. Sometimes this was characterised simply as just being a ‘decent human being’, who, by the definition of those asked, would likely be non-racist, non-sexist, indeed not -ist at all, and would broadly believe in a degree of social fairness and redistribution. As characterised by one participant:

‘I don't like cruelty. I don't like any unfairness. I don't like -isms, whether it's sexism, it's people who are homophobic. I don't like any bullying. [...] we're all people.’ **Christine\***

Another respondent thought it important to act in line with one's identity, self-defining as a ‘peace head’ but nonetheless who has ‘recognized over the years that I've got quite a lot of anger in me’ she felt that to engage aggressively in online conversation would be out of kilter with those values, as well as, she believed, being ineffective. She felt that she read anger well owing to her own feelings and was sensitive to the tendency of some to act atypically in the online environment.

Family and expectations – what one ‘should’ be

‘It's in the DNA, it's very personal.’ **Christopher\***

The research of Alford and others indicate that Christopher has a point, although the line between nature and nurture would be hard to draw. Nonetheless, that political affiliation can have innate, possibly genetic or perhaps epigenetic elements, further inculcated over decades within a family environment appeared to be supported by the comments of some. Several respondents referred to their identity and values having been instilled in them through upbringing, often around the kitchen table.



‘My father was very political. My father was forever articulating on the politics of the day. We had as our constituency MP, Margaret Hilda Thatcher. She would be at the park behind the house opening the local fête. “It’s so nice to be back in Finchley” ... and my father would be with his *Guardian*: “That bloody woman.”  
**Malcolm\***

This could be contradictory, as some had taken a familiar route of rebelling against their parents’ political allegiance, while simultaneously claiming to share their basic values, usually pitched around ‘fairness’ and ‘decency’. ‘You’ll take on the values of your parents, your family and your upbringing’ noted one woman, Christine\*, who then revealed she has reacted to her Conservative-voting mother by becoming ‘very lefty’. So where did these values differ? The inference was, not values, but approach, around the economic mechanisms needed to improve people’s lot. This resonates with findings that genetics influence attitudes but less so party allegiance (Alford et al. 2005).

The default identity

While some respondents demonstrated awareness of the language of identity politics, and more had a working understanding of what might be called ONS<sup>25</sup>-style demographic terminology, not all did, and many spoke about their identity in much more personal terms.

With one notable exception, several respondents who identified as middle-class male (all of whom were white British) talked in terms almost of not having an identity – as if theirs was the default identity and therefore, perhaps, not likely an online campaigning matter. This was observed with insight, although not necessarily self-criticism:

‘Fat middle-class middle-aged men don’t get much [...] identity politics, do they?’ **Keith\***

And another:

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<sup>25</sup> Office for National Statistics <https://www.ons.gov.uk/> .

'I certainly don't think of myself in terms of identity as a white male. Well, sometimes you do think about that. I suppose you do think that, "Is it acceptable for me to comment on something or someone when it seems like somebody else's fight" I suppose. But not really a thing.' **Colin\***

Perhaps since the 'gammon' phenomenon, some have had cause to reflect.

### Creating the identity of others

One respondent wanted to stress his multiple, overlapping identities online, and felt his core values were what underpinned them all in the way he expressed himself politically, and one woman with what might be regarded as quite a distinctive mixed Asian/European cultural heritage spoke of not thinking about her identity much and was not of a mind to go online to assert her specific heritage or make any associated demands. She was a successful professional working in a very male dominated sector of a very male dominated profession and identified with that.

'I'm not thinking about my identity I'm just a woman and I live in England. I do whatever English people are doing because it is adopted, like part of me.' **May\***

Jess, the MP who had been on the receiving end of a considerable amount of violent online abuse spoke about how public identities were often confections build up especially on social media, and essentially took on a life of their own as commenters interacted symbolically with this confection. People fabricate monsters and then tilt at them, the resultant memes overlaid palimpsests of opinion and satire, bearing hints of an original persona. Another example of this surrounds the story of former UK Prime Minister David Cameron and the pig referred to in Chapter 2. In 2015, a story began to be circulated about Mr Cameron suggesting that as part of a raucous student night out being initiated into a drinking society, he had simulated a sexual act with the head of a pig (Kirkup 2015). This story is uncorroborated and likely a confection, but online, in a parallel universe, Mr Cameron continues to subject the pig to a range of indecencies and is dismissed and berated accordingly. In fact, there are several meme-generating Facebook pages with variations on 'Pig-Gate' in their title. The behaviour is, as things stand, effectively beyond adequate control, and public

figures must live a Jekyll and Hyde existence not of their own making. A male MP interviewed said that as a non-user of social media himself, he tended to rely on others to tell him about his online persona and reputation, with which he seemed content. However, after interview, he himself was subject to a very negative national news story, carried along by a much bigger trending narrative, which resulted in polarised online comment. Much mental resilience is required of public figures in this sphere.

Mick's\* uncomfortable dilemma raises interesting questions about how self-described political identity relates to commonly-held associations with labels. Certainly, amongst respondents, people holding very similar sets of values could be members or supporters of quite a range of political parties. Perhaps acknowledging that one is not always in control of one's allocated identity, one respondent remarked pragmatically:

'I would consider myself for example, anti-racist, anti-sexist and broadly socialist without getting into a definition of what socialism is.' **Ian\***

One respondent felt he might be out of line with others' expectations: '... being a white male of 50 plus, demographically, I should be pro Brexit and all the rest of it.' **Luke\***

Given that from one perspective of thought about identity, how a person self-identifies is considered their 'true' identity, where does that put someone whose political self-identification is contested by others? Who owns the definition of identity, or indeed the definition of situation, and who can police it?

This conundrum threads through several divisive political debates that thrive online, including around the leadership of the Labour Party and a debate that very much has its home in social media space, the ‘trans/TERF’ debate around gender identity.<sup>26</sup>

Availability heuristics seemed to affect self-identification. People are reacting to what they see a lot and what they can most easily recall to mind. As social media algorithms are personalised, this won’t be quite the same as what other people see a lot, which might give a confusing impression. ‘Filter bubbles’ that develop where people tend through confirmation bias to expose themselves to material in line with their own views exacerbate this. A woman of working-class origin now living in affluent circumstances in a largely white neighbourhood where she reported regularly encountering online and on the street views she regarded as bigoted indicated that she did react to this. If others watching her expression on social media with no knowledge of her origins might wonder about the relationship between her current circumstances and her views, this was not something she brought up herself.

Pretending to be someone else

‘Alan Smith who’s the European Member of Parliament for us, one of his bits was actually, always post under your own name because you’ll think more about what you’re actually posting. Try not to be insulting to people...’ **Man 1, Alloa**

One of the great affordances of online media is, of course, the ability to hide behind anonymity or a false identity. Few respondents admitted to anything more than mild mischief in this respect, and most saw it as an ethical no-go, although one focus group participant admitted to historical 4Chan

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<sup>26</sup> See: <https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2018/07/25/what-is-terf-transgender-gender-recognition-act/>

mischief and another confessed, while at college, to having several different 'sock puppet' identities on discussion boards.

Nonetheless, and in a return to Goffman's idea about presentation of self, the natural urge to present oneself in a favourable light can create distortions. In previous chapters, mention has been made of the phenomena, 'shy Tories' and 'virtue signalling'. In some polarised debates, adopting a 'pure' stance can be to position oneself in a place of safety, but words can be contradicted by choices and behaviour.

On the presentation of self, performativity and dramaturgy

Outside of direct questions about identity, throughout the data there are many nuanced revelations about how people saw themselves and how they wanted to be seen. These might be personal, political or indeed related to the specific culture of the internet, anticipating and rebutting the easy jibes. Contributions could be described as performative in that they were often intended to perform a role of furthering a political cause, recording support for a cause or party, or sharing information on which others could take action, for example, but there seemed less concern about performing identity in the dramaturgical sense, on the whole people seemed to prefer the idea of authenticity and being themselves, even if that deviated from the norm to an uncomfortable degree. An exception to this was the collective online mourning of participants who fell on the losing side of the vote in the Scottish or EU referendums, many of whom took part in mass expressions of performative grief.

#### 4.4 Media Consumption and literacy

- **Themes:** Balance, power, confirmation, identity, understanding media

Engaging with a wide range of other media in one place is one of the main reasons people give for using social media. Social platforms are not just media in themselves but an increasingly important conduit for other outlets, with which they have a reflexive and mutually serving relationship.

Consumers of each are a key part of this complex system of supply and demand. Participants were asked this question set to give a broad understanding of their online media experience as part of their political engagement, their relative media literacy, breadth of consumption, propensity to expose themselves to challenging beliefs, and any correlations there might be between media choices and self-identity. Also, their propensity to think critically about sources and check facts was interrogated. These factors were considered key to answering the first research question.

Levels of social media literacy and familiarity with the affordances of these media were also inferred from questioning throughout the interview. Sometimes participants did not always refer to social media explicitly, but their behaviours or use of terminology were clearly suggestive of social media use. The fact that participants did not always attribute sources specifically is in itself interesting and hints at the taken-for-granted-ness ubiquity of the media.

Propensity to read widely across the political spectrum, rather than actual title choice was considered suggestive of critical thinking. Social media allows access to an unprecedented and curatable range of titles at little or no cost, which is a draw factor. Media consumption by participants was overall quite broadly spread, with ample direct or indirect evidence that outlets were often accessed on line, not always, but sometimes explicitly acknowledged, through a variety of managed feeds including RSS and very often, Facebook 'liked' outlets.

'Facebook has been the gateway to a lot of those apps. Facebook has tended to throw up things that I've then followed. That has introduced me to other outlets or whatever. I regularly look on my phone at BBC News, CNN, *The Guardian*, and it tends to vary a bit as to what other things I have access to.' **Meg\***

Participants also reported being exposed to different material and outlets via friends' postings. The fact that these sources, traditional or otherwise are largely viewed in a social media context does make a considerable difference, to how easily they are shared, compared and challenged, for instance. Ordinary consumers can potentially have the experience of being in a press office or newsroom where all titles are on offer to peruse, although in practice, choices will often be mediated by the subjective choices of the people and organisations with whom one interacts – there is no institutional directive towards balance. A post emanating from the BBC from one person might be addended by a list of contrary views from *The Guardian* and *The Canary*, for instance, making an instant difference to the way it is framed and received, perhaps generating polarised discussion, creating what has been characterised as co-production, or multi-layered diegesis (Lilleker 2014).

As anticipated, there was a division between those who like to read material which broadly followed their own opinions and those willing to be exposed to contrary and challenging opinions. While one might speculate that this could be linked to social and educational status, the evidence for this was mixed. It was also anticipated that there might be some identity signalling through declared media choices. A professed dislike of midmarket tabloid newspapers such as the *Daily Mail* was quite widely expressed alongside disillusionment with, or defence of the BBC. Both featured so highly they are deserving of comment as a divisive topic in their own right, so are explored further on.

Filter bubbles and echo-chambers

There was a growing awareness of these phenomena throughout the course of fieldwork and to a degree, participants did self-examine.

'Actually, I think you do live within a bubble [...] some family members don't think the way I think but majority of my friends have a similar outlook to myself. I started going along with this plugging the remain thing (to) everybody as all my friends were doing it to me so it felt safe and secure.' **Christine\***

'I'm really aware of that and I try not to, but it is quite difficult. I want to be well-informed, I don't want to just have my own views mirrored back to me. Part of the reason for that is, because although my immediate family, and by and large, my friendship group have the same sort of views that I have, my family don't. My birth family, my brother, in particular. So, I feel it is quite important to make sure that I'm properly educated about things and not just receiving the same regurgitated information the whole time. In order to do that, I have to make a specific effort. **Meg\***

'I knew enough to know that the mainstream media were biased, but I didn't know enough to know, should I...why should I be 'Yes' or why should I be 'No', and a couple of people at work were active in the SNP and one guy in particular, who's now an SNP councillor in Falkirk, he pointed me in the direction of a couple of sites that he felt were quite balanced [...] and the more and more I kept researching, the more I started sharing and the more I started posting things about, this sounds right to me, this sounds like the right way to go to me, and the more and more people were commenting on it and things like that, and that helped me make up my mind what way I wanted to go...' **Woman 2, Alloa**

'Obviously there's something about social media that means that you receive things that are sympathetic to you and I understand that it's more comforting to read things that are sympathetic to your own views. I try to read more widely but I think there is a tendency to be reading the things that reinforce your own views, I think it's inevitable.' **Denise\***

It is understood that one effective persuasion technique is to meet your adversary part way and acknowledge areas where they might be right (Halperin 2014). Given the evidence that participants are often motivated to persuade others this apparent lack of insight and an occasional inclination to bombard challengers with third-party evidence which support one's own case is suggestive of difficulty in reading a situation, and perhaps (for some hard-wired reasons) unconsciously prioritising the need to be right above making progress, and not purely poor listening habits.

National institutions?

'I think, how about looking at The *Daily Mail* [...]I know that would back up my view (of) *Daily Mail* readers. (I was) immediately told off by my wife for having done so. At one point, I worked on immigration policy. It was my job to keep an eye on what the *Daily Mail* was saying [...] That was the only other time I looked at it [...] other than my own twisted desire to get angry.' **William\***



An overriding point is that social media has both facilitated and observably magnified the public debate about media generally, not only are items from media used to sustain exchange, but discourse and indeed metadiscourse about their role and how participants understand them has filtered through to a popular audience. Already ubiquitous media like the BBC have become even more so, and thus more in the firing line. Scepticism, sometimes naïve in its expression, has paved the way for a flourishing of alternatives.

Unsurprisingly, especially given that most respondents were British, the BBC featured highly across the responses on media consumption, with respondents engaging with the Corporation's output generally through a mixture of broadcast and online output. Participants had a lot to say about the BBC, limited here for the sake of brevity. It was considered the default source for many respondents, even if they felt motivated to question its probity. Generally, there was a vernacular grasp of the potential for news to be manipulated, not least by editorial choices. No-one used the term 'agenda-setting', but many alluded to the phenomenon it describes.

'My beef about the BBC is not what they print, broadcast, it's what they don't print and don't broadcast' **Gary\***

Regular observers of online political discussion will be familiar with many of the confections arising from perceptions about key BBC political commentators, for example correspondents Laura Kuenssberg and Nick Robinson, whose online characterisations have evolved as almost Jungian, or perhaps more prosaically, pantomime archetypes of evil or righteousness, depending on one's perspective.

The BBC generated a polarising topic in its own right and a meta-conversation about how other people perceived and spoke about it in relation to the multiplicity of other media, not only easily accessible but positively thrust upon one. This revealed tendencies in how people reject attempts to

be moved to another point of view as they go through a process of picking and choosing sources that reduce cognitive dissonance. A notable number of interviewees expressed strong views about the BBC, perceived figurehead of the so-called 'MSM' (or mainstream media) whose output drew special ire from participants in the Scottish Independence debate. Many nationalists felt profoundly betrayed. In the minds of a majority of those supporting independence, what was perceived as a calamitous partiality on behalf of the corporation was simply not in question. Nonetheless, what was viewed as atypical positive coverage could be happily accepted, even if not as proof of impartiality.

'The BBC [...] I'm sure you've heard it already that before the referendum, the bastards [...] I wouldn't say we're really that terribly gullible. I did believe in general that the BBC to a degree was an objective medium. Then, during that referendum campaign and then afterwards, not just to do with Scotland, but to do with other things. [...] It was horrifying, and it opened our eyes to the fact that [...] it distorted, it lied. Although having said that it does make me slightly uncomfortable to know that [...] if the BBC comes up with something [...] that actually supports our point of view [...] then we're quite happy with that. That's something I sometimes worry about a little bit as well.' **Catriona\***

'...it'd be lovely to have a proper BBC channel in Scotland that does-- Scotland through the prism of Scottish opinion.' **Cathy\***

They were not alone.

'Generally, I long ago despaired at BBC journalism. It is pretty appalling. When I first moved to England I binged on Channel 4 news. [...] with the growth of online media [...] I have a lot of friends from all across the perspectives, although less so on the right. They share stuff.' **Owen\***

A Corbyn supporter felt conflicted.

'I suppose I always think that BBC should be trustworthy, but I'm not sure that it is. Trust me but there is something about the BBC that it's a national institution in all ways. My assumption is it should be trustworthy, but I must admit more recently I think I've become very cautious. I've never thought the news is always as exactly as it seems, but I suppose I have always felt that the BBC could perhaps be trusted more than other news.' **Valerie\***

Another was just resigned.

‘I’m becoming increasingly disillusioned with the BBC, but I still watch it and listen to it.’ **Mariam\***

This sort of commentary will be familiar to BBC watchers. People mostly did not question if they were seeing certain types of story because algorithms might be amplifying the confirmation bias consumption of their social media friends. Trends in criticism are observable, and one such meme was the notion that the BBC deliberately failed to cover large political demonstrations (Foxton 2014). Any large demonstration at one point was often likely to be followed by viral complaint streams, often swilling with hoax images from entirely different events, a prompt for either righteous rage or mockery at the poster’s gullibility. The BBC itself has suggested that it simply does not regard many of these demos as especially newsworthy, but not all were convinced. Bryn\* felt that BBC editorial was selective and thus by definition propagandist. He was not alone.

‘In my pre-2000 days, I always thought the BBC was telling the truth. I’m now aware that [...] the BBC is just a collection of people who want to manipulate you. And just because it’s on BBC, it doesn’t mean it’s true. **Caroline\***

‘I stopped really trusting the BBC around the time of (the) Labour leadership... (and) lead up to the general election because all that I saw was a continuous onslaught on Jeremy Corbyn.’ **Tariq\***

Within social media, disappointed respondents felt they had a lever on power, a means of tackling this, seeking ‘truth’ elsewhere, sometimes in forums rather strong on confirmation bias, or indeed, openly hyperpartisan. The facility to publish and share in this way is an affordance of the internet, to marshal it in campaigning mode, to appeal to people’s inclinations and reinforce them, ones of social media specifically. Indeed, what came to be known informally as the ‘alt-left’ outlets, *The Canary*, *Another Angry Voice*, *Skwawkbox*, *Novara Media*, *Evolve Politics* and others were becoming vastly shared on social media by the time of the 2017 general election, and positioning themselves in opposition to the ‘MSM’ and the BBC as much as any ‘alt-right’ outlets. Amongst followers, certain truths were held to be self-evident, the fatal bias of BBC political correspondents amongst them. These alt-left sites could lead an onslaught on a resistant individual, as Mick\* found out.

The conclusion of others, meanwhile, was that this ‘white noise’ of competing but not mutually-acknowledging BBC-bias accusations effectively cancelled each other out and stood as proof of the Corporation’s workaday objectivity, and it remained a go-to online source.

One insight is that social media allows people to debate and evaluate media to an unprecedented degree, and question, over time, the sources they find most valuable.

Titles stand for something, although this may be subjective for the reader. To declare readership of *The Guardian* is, fairly or unfairly, to suggest a way of looking at the world, or at least a willingness to consider this. Consequently, ‘*Guardian* reader’ can be a badge of pride or part of the arsenal of abuse. The *Daily Mail* has a very distinctive symbolic role in popular political discourse, and like the concocted online personas of politicians, its role as a cipher has some differences from its role as an off- and online newspaper. In fact, like other titles, the *Mail* effectively markets a different product online (Thurman & Fletcher 2017). This focuses on celebrity and entertainment and attracts a large readership in this form from under-35s and in the US. Nonetheless, its role as a political bogeyman is firmly established in the minds of many and a number of participants were very keen to distance themselves.

‘I won’t ever look at the *Daily Mail* [...] I do realise if you click on the *Daily Mail*, you’re helping them in their advertising revenue which is why I avoid that.’ **Colin\***

Others just get irritated, or at least profess to do so.

‘...there are papers that I tend to avoid because they leave me frustrated. That will be the *Mail*.’ **Josh\***

‘You can read *The Daily Mail* because it annoys you.’ **Keith\***

‘I don’t read the *Daily Mail*. That just makes me cross’. **John\***

‘I’ll even occasionally, dip into the *Daily Mail*, but need a good shower.’ **Lee\***

Some read it to know their enemy and, in the face of peer pressure, acknowledged their transgression.

‘I read a lot of the *Mail* online-which I know you're not really supposed to do. Because I just find it interesting to see [...] because their bias is just so against what I believe in. (I) see it more of a kind of barometer of what right-wing opinions are. It's interesting to check out something even if you don't believe it’.  
**Helen\***

Others concede it has some redeeming features. However, should you express an interest in the *Mail* on social media, you are likely to attract polarising pressures.

The rise of alternative media

Social media has played host to a flurry of hyperpartisan outlets of all political persuasions. These were often welcomed by participants, *Bella Caledonia* and *Wings over Scotland* proving a hit with many nationalists. Left-partisan pages such as *Another Angry Voice (AAV)*, *Skwawkbox*, *The Canary*, *Novara Media* amongst others are vastly shared on social media and their most popular memes re-emerge with regularity often long after production. Many such outlets started domestically by motivated enthusiasts but have developed a large audience. They have played a substantial role in buoying up the party leadership of Jeremy Corbyn in the face of a challenging reception by mainstream outlets, and as such have often been referred to by supporters as ‘our media’. Using viral-friendly imagery and emotive headlines with claims about the political system being ‘rigged’, these sites led the agenda amongst many on the left during the last election (Waterson 2017).

Participants were divided in their opinions about these outlets, some found their alternative viewpoint revitalising, others were exasperated at what were perceived as more extreme stances.

‘People talk about the BBC as fake news, for God's sake. The (alt-) left are putting out this version that the BBC had staged the gassing in Syria’. **Louisa\***

## Checking facts

'I don't think generally there's enough fact checking going on across social media. I think people just see something they may agree with and they'll share it regardless of what they think.' **Daniel\***

Whether people were prepared to cross-check the accuracy of information they found online varied a great deal, with some doing so assiduously, others admitting to half-hearted efforts, to others having little interest. Except in relation to a few key topics, where people genuinely sat on the fence, it was clearly something one felt one should do, and certainly that others should do more of, but the aspiration was not often fulfilled. Certainly, the admission of several respondents that they shared articles that they felt represented their own views well, indicated that this is what people often sought, rather than clarifying facts.

## On awareness of troll factories and other manipulators

Given a general anxiety, and occasional paranoia about people being manipulated, for example by the 'MSM', one might expect a degree of awareness or suspicion of more industrial scale manipulation operations. In the spring of 2018, a scandal hit Facebook and the headlines when it transpired that data from one of its quiz 'apps' had been sold to a third party, a company called Cambridge Analytica, and had been used for personality profiling and political targeting. In the following August, Facebook and Twitter reported having suspended hundreds of accounts linked to Iran and Russia over 'inauthentic' or 'manipulating' behaviour (BBC Online 2018). Few outside of the intelligence services will have any real sense of the full extent to which states, political parties and their contracted agencies attempt to manipulate social media for political ends. Our interest here is in how users themselves understand, interpret and make a narrative of such possibilities. For some it was an assumption.

'I studied media when I was still at university, I just knew right away what they were up to, and I said, this is government control, this is GCHQ. I mean, it was so obvious, because I was involved with them away back in the seventies, Special Branch and all that, and I know what they got up to and what they do, and I thought even more so now, and as [...] said, there's people who were on my pages as friends who have vanished into oblivion, and conspiracy theory, but I think they've probably got ten thousand of them sitting in GCHQ making up names and doing this and doing that, and my daughter got attacked because she's a school teacher, by somebody who's cancelled their page the next day and stuff.' **Man 1, Alloa**

Depending from whence they came, such assertions might be interpreted as insights from experience or a sort of protection mechanism, to explain away perceived failures in terms of covert unfairness. There may be elements of truth and some of suspicion. The difficulty can be pinning down where truth ends, and conspiracy theory begins on social media, many people's relative lack of literacy of the form makes the medium very vulnerable to exploitation by the unscrupulous.

As it is, there is ample evidence of real-life attempts to game the system, and over the period of study, the idea that this was happening gradually came to be understood. The idea that Russia might be behind media trolling activity aimed at causing division was an issue understood by a minority of respondents mostly with a specialist academic or professional interest in media or politics, although greater media coverage over 2017/18 is likely to have affected general perceptions.

Journalist and online campaigner Mike noted that it is 'quite easy' to identify trolls, bots and questionable sources, and Jean, the pro-EU campaigner, was confident that she had them sussed, although the observation of general social media chat pages suggests this is not the same for everyone. It should also be noted that views on Russian interference differed.

'My personal take on the Russia stuff is, I think it's just a very easy escape route for liberals who feel that they've lost their hegemony over politics and political

discourse. Even in the UK now, we're hearing rumours of Russian interference in Brexit and targeted ads from Russia about Brexit. I didn't see anything. They may have existed, but I didn't see any of them obviously linked back [...] I guess I would've known if they'd link back to the Kremlin or not. It seems to me a bit of a way of covering oneself after things aren't going too well. I'm sceptical of the Russian interference stuff. Yes, I am. **Alex\***

Alex did not explain his confidence in why he might know.

## General observations on media

'...a lot of the news we get on TV, it's very packaged, it's editorial, there's an editorial line taken. [...] Whereas with Twitter it's messy news, but it feels a little bit more authentic and in that sense a lot more engaging for the political dialogue that I like to engage in.' **Ethan\***

Overall, participants valued the opportunities offered to them by social media to read more widely.

However, as might be anticipated, learning to evaluate these critically could involve a learning curve.

**RQ2: How do participants themselves understand and evaluate their participatory role, particularly in relation to key political events in the period studied?**

- **Topic discussion guide (TDG) domains:** Event-specific experience

### 4.5 Event-specific experiences

● **Themes:** Destiny, opportunity, groundswells, everyday resistance, identity, Participants were asked to give accounts of their own experience of participating in online debates around the contextual political events and how they had experienced these on social media. The purpose of this question set was to gain insights into people's behaviours and perceptions about their role 'in action' during involving and polarising debates of national significance, when they might be dealing with more traffic, more challenges and more contention. That the events were broadly consecutive also allowed participants who had engaged with more than one debate to



comment on any perceived differences in experience or learning. Many of the facets of this experience, the affective, the motivating and so on are addressed in the previous sections. This section looks further at people's perceived roles in relation to the events specifically. For those who had participated in more than one online debate, they were asked what comparisons they might make. The events were the:

- Scottish Referendum 2014;
- UK Labour Party Leadership debate; and the
- EU Referendum 2016 (and associated UKIP surge)

As an unexpected UK general election (GE17) was called during fieldwork, subsequent participants were invited to make comments on it, also owing to its direct relevance to the other events, particularly the UK EU Referendum. In the event, GE17 attracted less commentary from participants. It is unclear whether this was owing to debate or major event fatigue, or it was not single-issue focused or other factors, however it is interesting to note.

From this researcher's own observations, characteristics that have come to be associated with online political debate, such as confirmation bias, polarisation of views and a tendency for some to slide into abusive behaviours to name a few became noticeable during the Scottish Referendum, with phenomena such as the so-called 'cybernat'<sup>27</sup> and their unionist opposite numbers in some ways setting a precedent of hyperpartisan practice for the fervent 'Brexiters', 'Corbynistas' and other keen side-takers that were to follow. Participants' accounts of their experiences in these major debates gave some useful insights into how these phenomena occur, beginning at an individual level, and perhaps circumstantial evidence to back up insights from behavioural science, psychology and neuroscience that show the mechanisms underlying people's impulsive reactions. This

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<sup>27</sup> The term 'cybernat' was apparently coined by Labour peer and former MSP Lord George Foulkes (McCafferty 2017).

impulsivity, even on a small scale when exercised in certain conditions on social media or reported via it, can send polarising ripples around the globe in a matter of hours. Many public figures have found this to their cost, but these scale-free effects are happening in less famous circles all around them.

As interviews were discursive, and participants could lead into areas significant to them, sometimes conversations drifted into the substance of the debate on these topics. This is unsurprising given their political and emotional resonance, and it gave clues as to how positions had been taken and maintained. For example, participants exercised by what they saw as ‘lies’ around Brexit would refer to themes and memes, such as the ‘Brexit Bus’, a polarising motif whose principal vehicle (no pun intended) was social media.<sup>28</sup> Iconic images appear and are shared frequently, boosting their appearance in search results, thus further encouraging their sharing. Participants did not always explicitly acknowledge the presence of social media in their thinking and sharing, but often gave clues and circumstantial evidence, for example, referring to multiple or harder-to-access sources, or sources mostly or only available in that medium, pages being ‘chosen’ for them (presumably by the algorithms) or referring to specific forms or behaviours such as ‘memes’, ‘liking’ or ‘sharing’. This again highlights the ‘taken-for-granted’-ness of the environment.

### The Scottish Independence Referendum

‘I was always political and always opinionated and I mean, it used to happen round the dinner table or elsewhere or through the union, so it just seemed to be a natural extension to start discussing ideas on Facebook as regards independence.’ **Woman 3, Alloa**

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<sup>28</sup> It even inspired a game. See: <https://advisa.se/en/research/brexit-bus/>

Before conducting the first focus group in the Autumn of 2016, the researcher had spent some time following and occasionally engaging with debate on the topic in various online forums. It was easy to get a particular perspective on it while watching often aggressive exchanges between ‘cybernats’ and hardcore unionists, whose heated battles were noted widely by the media. The picture amongst participants was somewhat different.

The Scottish Referendum for many was a first taste of the stimulus and rigours of online exchange, and the experience of the algorithms delivering just what they wanted, politically. Seeking behaviours to confirm beliefs backed by strong emotion are very evident.

‘I got involved in Facebook, I think it was about 2010, 2009, wasn’t very active on it then. When the referendum was announced, [...] maybe about 18 months before it [...] two or three ‘Yes’ sites and things popped up [...] you get offered sites you might like [...] they were good, just reading some of the (stuff), forwarding memes and reports and just kind of building confidence and just getting people talking about it. [...] Obviously as time got nearer and nearer things got more and more active. It was good for organising [...] good for information being shared. It was nice to get the real information, it became very apparent that our mainstream media was biased and unfair and poor quality and controlled, which I got quite vocal about in many times, [...] you would look at the BBC website and it was just...that’s inaccurate, that’s wrong, this is incorrect, so I would quite often share that with my opinion on it [...] whatever, you get a bit of abuse, but that’s fine, an opinion’s an opinion and things can be taken depending on what side of the fence you’re on [...] I’ve certainly got fewer friends on Facebook...’ **Man 3, Alloa**

Scotland did seem lit up by the debate, and the engagement, buoyed by portable media, interest appeared universal.

‘...my grandson tells me [...] they were standing out in the playground in the school with their phones getting...oh, it says here that, what about that?’ **Man 1, Alloa**

Pivotal to the take-up of social media was a widespread view that mainstream media were unreliable to the point of perniciousness, a perspective perpetuated, consolidated and entrenched by repetition and amplification in the new channels until it became an unassailable truth. Pro-independence activists were early adopters of social media (McCafferty 2017). What was different now was a set of channels that seemed to offer reassurance, confirmation and opportunity for individuals to feel they had some power. They felt part of a groundswell.

‘I think to go back to what (we) were saying about the mainstream media though, I think it had to all happen online, there was no other way of having that conversation.’ **Woman 1, Alloa**

Perhaps understandably, the Alloa group and other interviewees who identified as Scottish focused strongly on their experiences of the Scottish Independence debate, although they had a marked interest in issues around the EU as well. Amongst non-Scots, interpretation of the independence debate online was interesting, often either assuming a (false) consensus amongst others that a union must always be the most positive option or in some cases seeing support for independence as a proxy indicator of solidarity with other identity groups perceived as marginalised or oppressed. For instance, an interviewee with Irish Republican beliefs was also a strong supporter of both Scottish Independence, and as he offered, Palestine solidarity. An interviewee based in Wales saw herself as a kindred spirit, or ally.

‘I was quite pro the idea of Scotland getting its independence. I really hoped they’d go for it. I’ve got a few Scottish friends and they were all pro-independence. There wasn’t really much argument to be heard there. I’m aware that my personal Facebook feed is a little bit of a lefty, liberal, élite bubble. Everybody agreed with me on the Scottish referendum [...] There’d be a few anti-comments in their comment thread. I didn’t feel I knew them well enough to start wading in and arguing with somebody else’s friends. [laughter]’ **Joanne\***

There was some suggestion that the Scottish Referendum was the first major UK expression of polarised and combative online debate for many, but not all participants.

Scots and the independence debate.

For some participants, it offered the possibility of correction of an overdue injustice, for which social media provided a nurturing place.

‘I always knew, for me it was a no brainer, I didn’t have to figure out the pros and cons of independence. I just think any nation that does not govern itself is a joke, [...] I’ve grown up in a house where we were always quite political. [...] so it was natural to join up on Facebook ...’ **Woman 3, Alloa**

For others there was a sense of destiny being fulfilled, an opportunity to ‘take up arms’ and while social media carried this affective wave, it also led to some over-optimism, perhaps borne of a false feeling of consensus.

‘It was exciting because since about 14, I’ve been waiting for it. A lot of anti-Scottish stuff on Facebook and in the pubs. I just felt cheated in the end.’  
**Caroline\***

They were, by the way, not alone. There is a suggestion that SNP leader Alex Salmond was writing a victory speech based on social media analysis showing a ‘Yes’ win when it became clear that the ‘No’ campaign had actually won (Greenwood 2015).

Social media drew people in to the Scottish independence debate by playing on some fundamental and visceral needs. The experience could be emotional, with intense engagement. Also, with social media, the opportunity was there day and night, fulfilling needs and allowing a role.

‘The Scottish (debate) was very heated. It was a very different from the EU one in that all the issues were discussed avidly and at great length amongst people in advance of the vote. Maybe that might be an interesting aspect. Maybe that was more, I suppose, therapeutic in a way ...’ **Jean\***

Access to new sources of information more reflective of strongly held views, and the ability to share it with fewer restraints was an asset, giving the perceived opportunity of real influence and power.

'I started getting information from things like *Wings* (over Scotland) and *Bella Caledonia*, things like that, and I was kind of gratified to hear from people, especially after the result, I had quite a few people who I knew, and I didn't know what way they were going or anything, but they came on right after the result and they were like, oh [...], you must be broken hearted because the stuff you had convinced me to vote 'Yes' [...] I just found it really quite invigorating, and I'm involved just now in the thing that's going on across in America with the pipeline,<sup>29</sup> [...] the thing is, social media scares the shit out of the establishment, and to me that's the big strength of it.' **Man 1, Alloa**

Independence campaigners came very close to achieving their goal, so this feeling of power was more than an illusion, however, assembling in pockets of like-minded others, some misleading assumptions might have been made.

The experience in the other UK nations

Perceptions of the quality and nature of the Scottish debate, however, seemed to depend on where people were sitting and what they chose or crucially, were directed to look at. As with the EU debate, the cocooning of people in echo chambers led to widely different takes.

'The quality of the Scottish (debate) is, I would say ...high [...] and very limited because all I do is read basically mainstream articles. I've not seen any streams or [...] Scottish Nationalist rants or English Defence League rants about Scotland. I've not really engaged or seen much of that at all.' **Ian\***

The reference to 'mainstream articles' means as consumed on social media, without which the possibility of being exposed to extreme nationalist rants, especially those of another nation, would be far more limited. Rants emanating from all sides were there if one chose to look.

Some participants in other nations were alert to the intensity of the online debate but chose to keep a distance.

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<sup>29</sup> A reference to the Dakota Access pipeline protest which focused on the rights of indigenous people. See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/magazine-37171280/rediscovering-native-american-roots-at-pipeline-protest>

‘... the thing that I noticed was that emotions ran very high (on the) Scottish Referendum online- I noticed a lot people who (changed) their banners. [...] they were very heated. I could see discussions [...] somehow for me, being a British person and all, I've lived in Scotland for several years, I just don't feel it's particularly in my case to get involved.’ **Helen\***

Others felt driven to intervene, using material found online that reflected their own views to help assert their case.

‘I did get very active about #IndyRef. I had visited Scotland just after it and I was back down in London and I remember [...] somebody who was saying, they thought that it was great that Scotland was going independent, and I said, "Well, you know it's not good at all because actually, how will that get financed?" I felt really angry [...] we couldn't vote even though we were from Scotland in exile.

‘... I shared that on Facebook. That's my main outlet really [...] usually, what I do, is I re-post an article that chimes with my viewpoint [...] saying, "...actually, this is a good argument that speaks to what I'm talking about." Then you would get a whole load of comments underneath it and people would chip in and I suppose it's been *Guardian*, *Independent*, those were the kind of articles I was sharing ... the English press was pretty unionist. I think it was mainly some of the Scottish-- actually, it was the [...] Daily Mirror or was it, you know the Scottish tabloids, or the one in England being a bit unionist but then turning the other face in Scotland...’ **Bryn\***

Again, the ability to compare media outlets regularly was facilitated by social media. One Englishwoman, spotting the lines of attack being used, felt motivated to intervene and defend the opinions of Scottish friends and colleagues.

‘(I was) more on the fringes--I would say in the Scottish Referendum, it was more responsive rather than **generating**--I wasn't generating comment, but I was getting involved in other people's threads.

‘So, for example, the provost of Saint Mary's Cathedral in Glasgow is a friend and he was a vote-remain person and of course, Glasgow was definitely for severance. Because he is gay as well and he is quite a public figure in Glasgow. He was getting a lot of social media trolling. He called the police on more than one occasion. And he also had his windows put in, so I was commenting on that.

‘And again, that was as much as, "This is democracy. Since when did we attack people just because we didn't agree with them?" Which I thought was a bit naïve of me. I think he came in for a lot of attention because of his high profile on equal marriage and that merged into the referendum.’ **Mariam\***

The participant here notes how information gathered online about other issues is used to conflate topics and inform *ad hominem* attacks. She also demonstrates how to get drawn into a fierce public exchange taking place several hundred miles away.

Had the Scottish Referendum taken place before the existence of social media, it is likely that levels of passion from some quarters might have been similarly high. The sense, however, of being part of a self-mobilising army, a groundswell, getting into formation in real time was distinctive, and different.

The Labour Party Leadership debate

‘I think, a lot of cynicism, a lot of antagonism, and especially from the Facebook friends, a lot of them say he's unelectable. [...] jokes and “not in a million years, he's unelectable”. A lot of that, when it first started, the leadership election, [...] and this constant responding to them. [...] within the local Labour Party, kind of like quite polarised views which (one man) took a particular view, and he was very vocal on social media, and pretty antagonistic actually. People were antagonistic back against him. I sat watching this from afar. Within the supporters, the Labour supporters, in (our town), there was a lot of antagonism going on. It's died down a bit, because I think, because of the general election result [...] Everyone is trying to get on in the spirit of unity and go forward. But every now and again it flares up on social media. Not face-to-face. Certainly, social media is the biggest ground for debate, and intellectual debate, and positions, establishing positions and challenging positions. [...] We don't get that face-to-face. Our face-to-face meetings, party meetings, are quite mundane invariably. We don't have that level of debate in the meetings. Whereas in the old days, you would have had that debate.’ **Tariq\***

This suggestion of displacement also echoes observations made by Flichy about the transformation of organisations. It is difficult to do justice to all the facets of this debate which at the time of writing remained fiercely contested, with renewed rumours of a party split. It has taken effort on the part of participants. Work, in fact. All political parties are prone to internal division, and the UK Labour Party is no exception. It has a history of intra-party democratic struggles; however this is conceptualised. Contemporary manifestations of this have been thrown into sharp relief by very public wrangles



over the Corbyn leadership and media preoccupation with and fuelling of these, including insinuations of external forces feeding division online. Several respondents spoke about the effects.

‘With respect to the two recent Labour leadership elections there obviously has been a lot of heated debate within the Labour party and that hasn't always been cordial.’ **Calum\***

Calum was one of several interviewees from one specific local Labour party, and from which two serving politicians were also drawn. In the case of these respondents, the personal effects of internal division were quite exposed although members were clearly trying hard to limit damage at an individual level. Online rage was generally not followed by face-to-face aggression. It is worth noting that in relation to this topic the researcher was particularly subject to false consensus effect, an implied assumption by the interviewee that the interviewer must also share the expressed ‘common sense’ view on the topic. This was demonstrated by participants from both sides of the divide despite the interviewer being very careful not to suggest a personal preference, (although the friendly manner needed to secure participants’ engagement might have encouraged such an assumption).

Support for or paid membership of the Labour Party was in fact the most common affiliation of all those interviewed, and the four serving politicians interviewed were Labour representatives who had engaged in the debate over the leadership of their party. Strong extremes of opinions were expressed over the leadership and direction of the party and the tenor of the surrounding debate online. The refrain doing the rounds, ‘battle for the heart and soul of the Labour Party’ quite accurately captures the affective nature of this. Several respondents showed metacognition of their own polarisation and accepted that they had become more entrenched because of taking a firm stance to challenges and attacks during online debates. This included one of the MPs. Debaters spoke of heel-digging, intransigence and ultimately ‘hate’. Participants had been defriended or had defriended others. Observing two key Facebook groups representing either side of the debate,

common patterns of echo-chambers, confirmation bias and cherry picking of information are in evidence on either side and attempts to bridge gaps and seek pragmatic positions routinely dismissed as capitulation. Closed Facebook pages are places where people go to rant. It is interesting to note the difference in approach where people knew each other personally offline to when there was no such personal knowledge, and the gloves came off far more quickly. Tariq\*, Valerie\*, Calum\*, Daniel\* and Karen\* to varying degrees knew each other and spoke of respectful difference offline. Within groups there could be considerable aggression expressed.

More widely, some questioned what social media had created in respect of the leadership, a craving for immediate rewards on small investment, echoing Gladwell's warning about activity requiring no real sacrifice.

'...with Jeremy Corbyn, traditional media has treated him badly [...] and it's always concentrated on his personality. Corbyn and Momentum have used social media as a way of redressing this but [...] it's created an echo chamber, Corbynites who have talked to each other and tried to create some reassurance, change is happening because so many people came on board [...] It created a generation of activists. [...] The trouble with social media is it's very superficial and it's very ephemeral and people sometimes get involved but [...] they go to one or two meetings or they go to a demonstration and they think that's being active. What they don't understand is that [...] being active is there for the long term. It means patience, it means a lot of boredom and plumbing [...] and they don't want (that), they want change, they want their enthusiasm to be reflected immediately and they can see that change reflected on social media [...] they don't know how to translate that grassroots (work) but it's like a political activity.  
**Patrick\***

The contests might be over but the debate over the future of the Labour Party is ongoing and a risky one to enter online. In the middle of 2018, interviewee Mick,<sup>\*30</sup> who has a very active online presence, most notably attracting social media attention as a critic of Jeremy Corbyn, again found himself at the receiving end of attention from one of the main alt-left blogs when a rumour emerged that he had been suspended from his party owing to remarks made online which expressed

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<sup>30</sup> Who as a result of further exchanges kindly gave permission for this story to be shared.

favourable views towards some Tory policy, on a Conservative-supporting page, a double-transgression considered beyond the pale. Mick is in one respect part of a directional trend which showed increased support for the Conservatives amongst less affluent working class voters at the last election (Dorey 2017). Meanwhile the membership of the Labour Party has become socioeconomically middle-class in some respects (Bale et al. 2016).<sup>31</sup> Mick\* who for most of the course of study continued to identify as a Labour Party member and, given his job and circumstances, might be described as a traditional, blue-collar working-class supporter, as admin of (three) groups likes to pose 'devil's advocate'-type questions to members challenging current Labour party positions and the leadership. At the time of first interview (there were subsequent exchanges), he spoke of being '...stuck in a party I don't believe in' and because of this questioning admitted 'a lot of people think I'm a Tory. I'm not a Tory.' He gave an account of himself as a working man and a carer, and suggested he wanted a pragmatic not ideological political offer reflecting his circumstances. From one perspective, Mick\* might be viewed as part of the declining classes described by Crouch.

It is clear that many participants talking about this particular debate saw themselves as standing firm over matters of fundamental principle, either defending the leader or striving to point out the difficulties of the situation. They saw their role as saving a party, or perhaps saving an ideology. The outcome of this existential struggle had yet to play out at the time of writing.

The EU Referendum and UKIP surge

'I had it on Facebook. I voted to leave, and I got a lot of abuse for that after the results came in. I had a big argument with a lady in the village because they've got a house in Italy. I hadn't thought about that. I wasn't thinking about them when I voted. I was guilty of taking a lot of the information off the internet. There

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<sup>31</sup> Source <https://esrcpartymembersproject.org/>

was quite a lot of information on the internet that just simply wasn't true. And it took a little while until the penny dropped that we'd just all been manipulated through social media. And I haven't been as aware of that before this 300 (million) and whatever it is for the NHS. And after that I thought, "Right, that's my fault. I need to think about it." [...] But the European referendum, no one really expected the country to leave, which is possibly why I was so open about what way I was voting. I never really thought about that before. This is what I believe, like it or lump it. If you don't like it, get out of my way. Until the European referendum, I've never really felt the need to keep my political opinions private.

**Caroline\***

Caroline, a woman with a professional background in politics, whose career was curbed by ill health is unusual in her level of self-reflection around the events surrounding the EU Referendum over which the online nation remains polarised. Few interviewees were ambivalent about this topic and several became especially active online over the referendum campaign. Joanne\* became admin of a large pro-EU Facebook group. Jean\* began her own very niche pro-EU campaign and started her own blog. She was on a mission.

'Although, it sounds biased I was trying to stay open-minded. If I particularly found information was coming down on one side of the argument that would be fine. Then I think there's so much to it that I decided to focus on the one thing which was closest to my heart, which was if potentially we were to lose our EU citizenship or our right to live and work across Europe. I thought I'll focus on that because nobody was talking about it and they still aren't. I made a big passport and got people to sign that. I don't really know what on earth made me start - why I did that in particular. I can't quite remember but, yes.' **Jean\***

The UK EU Referendum result continues to send shockwaves through public debate online. As writing-up was undertaken, the risk of a no-deal Brexit loomed on the horizon, generating much cathartic broadcasting of sentiment on the observed groups and across social media.

Interviewees were asked the simple question of whether they were surprised by the result. Often, they suggested shock. There was ample self-questioning.

'I did feel that I was guilty on my personal social media feeds of getting trapped into the Remain bubble, as much as I suppose a lot of us did.' **Mariam\***

The division caused was the subject of grim fascination, itself a surprise.

'The most passionate I thought was the EU Referendum. And that's the most divisive, that really did split people right down the middle. [...] I understand a lot of people are bitter about it, but I just think that it is over, and it's done. [...] What was very interesting about the whole EU debate and very sad, I think, you have good friends on opposite side of the fences literally turning against each other [...] That's not just on Facebook, that's what I found outside in normal everyday life. Where I work there was, again, it was split down the middle and you would have very, very passionate arguments, and you'd have people that wouldn't speak to each other because of it. Like I say, opposite sides of the fence. I just couldn't believe how emotionally charged the whole debate was.' **Mick\***

Participants began to get a sense of the limits of their own power.

'I know there'd be no point in going on to the say, Leave.EU page and starting a fight because you're not going to win it there. But certainly, before the EU Referendum, I spent quite a lot of time in the Labour Leave page. That was a page that's funded by three Conservative donors but masquerading as a Labour page. There's lots of people on there. I felt I was getting very concerned for the referendum, that it was going to go the wrong way.' **Colin\***

For those using the opportunities offered by social media to scrutinise the opinions of the wider world, including this researcher and interviewee Colin\*, the warning signs were there, online media a barometer for the growing pressures.

'It got to about May and I started thinking, this is looking quite as though we're going to lose this, simply because of the fact that [...] the simple arguments (were) much easier to be conveyed on social media. I felt that rather than trying to convert people on [...] UKIP- friendly pages, the Labour pages I felt [...] there might be more chance of being able to persuade people to change their vote. I can't say I did at all. I found the whole experience incredibly depressing. Absolutely in fact, I blocked it in the end before the referendum about a week before, because it was actually so upsetting me and getting me very anxious and wound up.' **Colin\***

Where they expressed an opinion, participants were for the most part in favour of remaining within the EU, which was likely a function of the recruiting networks of the researcher, so effort was made to invite and include those who felt otherwise. There have been a number of studies which have attempted to quantify or characterise the 'leave' EU vote, including the NatCen British Social

Attitudes survey (2016) . Within this particular group, 'leave' supporters and the ambivalent fell within a number of subgroups, those with a 'Bennite/Socialist left 'leave' perspective, those with a non-European cultural heritage (for example, South Asian) who did not feel quite the same cultural allegiance, they felt definitely British, but not definitely European, and members of overt 'leave' campaigning groups like UKIP. None of those interviewed quite fitted the stereotypical media image of the 'left behind' voter,<sup>32</sup> although preparatory work for this study involved observation of 'leave' supporting focus groups, and it is clear this cohort very much exists. The left-leaning leavers who included two of the politicians and a (at the time) recent graduate, reported a very interesting social media experience of some discomfort and alienation. In the case of the former student, who self-described as a Marxist, he expressed one point about the treatment by the EU of Greece that was made almost identically by one of the UKIP members, although it is very unlikely for a host of reasons they would find themselves debating in the same social media spaces often.

The location of one of the focus groups and several individual interviews of both members of the public and politicians, Luton, returned a strong 'leave' vote in the EU Referendum, and commentary has suggested that this was influenced by both the white working class vote and the ethnically South Asian vote.<sup>33</sup> One interviewee, Tariq\* suggested that he did not have a great interest in the EU referendum and was frustrated by the way the online debate had been framed and oversimplified, and how this had, in effect, driven him in one direction.

'I'm really quite ambivalent about the EU in or out. I don't care either way really. I don't think things will fall apart once we leave the EU. I think, but equally, there will be an impact [...]. For me, it's a left and right thing.

'I think [...] the only reason why I voted to remain, in the election, (is) because the xenophobes really had hijacked the leave group. There were pertinent

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<sup>32</sup> Based on analyses by Goodwin et al (Goodwin & Heath 2016).

<sup>33</sup> See <https://www.politico.eu/article/immigrants-who-voted-for-brexit-luton-migration/> and [https://www.vice.com/en\\_uk/article/wdabxb/why-did-south-asians-vote-for-brexit](https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/wdabxb/why-did-south-asians-vote-for-brexit)

reasons why we could [...] or we should leave the EU, basically because it's not leaving Europe, it's the institution of the European Union and what they've done [...] to other countries like Greece and other less developed countries. [...] It came across online, it came across in the media, that was all to do with the fear of foreigners. [...] I had to side against that. Although I went to listen to Kelvin Hopkins MP, who was part of Labour Leave and he gave some fantastic reasons why we should be in control as a United Kingdom, of our own destiny, and political reasons, political reasons, for nationalisation, and that. That all got clouded by the fact, the whole debate was about foreigners and immigrants and very racist really [...]

‘For me, I haven't really been active in the EU, remain or leave debate whatsoever. I think part of my mental block is because it's been dominated mainly by arguments that have been based around the fear of foreigners. Controlling borders etcetera. We already control our own borders.

‘I was very surprised by the result, quite shocked by the result.’ **Tariq\***

In his mind, Tariq\* saw the social media expressions and accusations of racism but did not conflate these with a general position on Europe. He also professed little interest in the earlier Scottish referendum, ‘because it didn't really concern me’, suggesting that if personal identification drew people into online debate, the opposite also applied. In observed online commentary, this was also echoed by a remark from a person of West African birth living in the UK, who as a Commonwealth citizen, could vote in the referendum, but nonetheless felt – ‘it's their *wahala*.’<sup>34</sup>

In the Luton focus group, where participants were older men from the Punjabi British community, the EU debate was less followed online and more in mainstream media, although they reported some use of WhatsApp for news and comment sharing amongst family members. They had mixed feelings about the EU and questioned its role in supporting recent waves of migration from Eastern Europe. This was not equated with the migration experience of their own families.

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<sup>34</sup> Hausa/Nigerian Pidgin meaning in this instance, ‘mess’.

‘Ukippers’ speak

Two longstanding UKIP members were interviewed, one, Carl, \* himself a national of another EU state who had until recently been a regional party official and a second, Simon,\* who could claim to be a founder member of the party (i.e. one of the first 50 to join).

Both men had a wry awareness of public perceptions of their party on social and other media and both were keen to explain it in more nuanced terms, to confirm some of the stereotypes and refute others. It is fair to say that neither appeared to match the less savoury media stereotypes associated with the party, but as they both pointed out, UKIP is an ‘unwhipped’ party rather proud to be comprised of individuals. They acknowledged that as a considerable proportion of UKIP’s members were older people ‘with a few years under their belt’, this had a bearing on the way the party used social media. Former UKIP leader Nigel Farage himself has acknowledged in interviews that the party might not have existed without social media, such has been the paucity of funds for mounting a major campaign (see Cooper 2018). Yet neither UKIP interviewees here believed social media to be the cause of UKIP’s show of strength. Carl\* was very much of the opinion that the party had not relied on social media to garner support. This was based on his perceptions of campaigning on the ground, often with older voters who were not always online, but were represented strongly in the supporter base.

The 2017 UK General Election

‘The 2017 UK General Election, in terms of engagement and practice, I think [...] has shown just how monumental a good social media campaign can be. I personally don't think that Corbyn's Labour would have gotten quite the support he had without a good strategy, a good social media campaign.

‘And the Tories recognize that themselves, actually, and they're trying to respond to that as best they can from things that I look out on Instagram etcetera. I think



2017 has been the one that's shown really how social media could be used in a British context. **Alex\***

Perhaps overshadowed by what most participants seemed to view as the enormity of the EU Referendum, GE2017 overall attracted less commentary. This might be a reflection of the fact that it was an election few expected, and fewer appeared to want. Nonetheless, the idea of politics starting to mature into social media came through in Alex's comment and others. Also, the fact that elections might not necessarily now be won from the centre, and smaller parties, such as the Women's Equality Party, for which one participant stood, had a chance of making a policy impact, if not winning a seat.

#### Comparisons

'...putting aside the Labour leadership debate because that was a while ago and that was probably the one I was least involved in. But certainly, for those two massive ... the Scottish referendum on one side, and Brexit on the other, two really big, national things that I have to say, I was a little bit disappointed by the quality of the debate really. I felt like sometimes each side weren't engaging with each other really. They were just kind of shouting across each other.' **Orla\***

Where they had engaged in more than one of the contextual debates, participants were asked to make comparisons between them. In the event, subjective opinions varied considerably, indicating very different experiences and exposure to debate. In interviews from late 2017 onwards, where the international situation generally had generated some reasons for concern, the level of increased anxiety amongst some interviewees was palpable, and if this was not directly attributed to social media, then the latter was part and parcel of perceived threats to international goodwill and stability.

### RQ3: How do they see the relationship between their online activity and real-life political outcomes?

- **Topic discussion guide** (TDG) domains: Efficacy

#### 4.6 Perceived efficacy

- **Themes:** Changing minds, realisation and learning, self-awareness.

‘I never changed my political opinions.’ **Mick\***

‘There's a few people talk common sense. Me. Me and three others.’ **Keith\***

The question of perceived efficacy hinges around relationships of power, not just around the power of the individual to effect wider change to a social or political system, with or without the assistance of media, but also about the basic power we have to move other similar individuals, themselves subject to visceral, political and environmental drivers, and the often unpredictable or counterintuitive effects of our attempts to do this. This was a core frustration of participants who rationalised this in a range of ways – the malign influence of media, or the incompetence of the other for example, plausible but not always easy to prove. A key aspect of this study lies in understanding, given what is known about how difficult it can be to change the mind of another, whether participants in online political discussion themselves believed that what they did made a difference politically or in any other way. This is a natural subject of critical discourse analysis. This set of questions helped to gauge their levels of self-awareness, openness to challenge and learning and effective reading of the novel environment in which they found themselves.

Evidence was also sought, in support of, or otherwise, related cognitive biases, such as the idea shown by some studies that people ‘pick a side’ first and search for evidence to back this up later, so called ‘confirmation bias’ or phenomena like ‘false consensus effect, where participants might enter into exchanges assuming greater agreement than was the case.

Interviewees had very mixed perceptions about whether their contribution to online political discussion was likely to have any immediate real-life effects, for example, changing someone else's mind about a topic, or affecting any kind of general outcome. For some, they suggested this simply did not matter, the process was about recording a viewpoint, or perhaps about personal enrichment and learning:

'I'm just one person. I just got my own views. I'm not (into) stats. I haven't got any delusions of grandeur. I just rest my opinions. And I don't think it goes any further than social media. After a couple of days, it just disappears into the ether, to be honest with you' **Mick\***

'It would be nice, I would love it if my views on politics would change policy, would change the debate. I suppose you are being really optimistic. You could argue that if enough people are discussing it in a certain way that might lead to a cultural change which might lead to a change in policy eventually. But that's certainly not why I engage in it. I engage in it because I'm interested.' **Orla\***

Aidan\* suggested that equilibrium might be achieved over time.

'I think that setting up conversation spaces for people where we could have discussions, even contentious ones, that is a good thing. I think that contributes to the common, you know, and ... is especially needed since we have such an over-heated, hyperpartisan atmosphere at the present.' **Aidan\***

Some were driven by sheer frustration:

'I don't think that my comments would [...] change (the) views of anyone else, to be honest with you. I think it's more the fact that sometimes I'd be posting things out of frustration really. When you see something and it's like, "Oh, for God's sake.'" **Luke\***

Others felt you had to try, even in the face of frustrated efforts, and that this could be part of a journey, a process of gradual transition or suffusion:

'I think you have to, otherwise there's absolutely no point in doing it. Although, it has felt to an awful lot that, no, you're just talking to the same people. I feel it's helped-- I feel by outing myself, I have helped galvanize some other people and I have made very, very small inroads into not necessarily changing people's opinion but certainly supporting them in their own change of opinion, in their own journey, absolutely.' **Colin\***

His remark echoed the comment by a Conservative supporter interviewed that his openness about supporting the 'unfashionable' Tories had given permission to others amongst his family and friends to do so. This supports the idea of social media as a mechanism for breaking spirals of silence, as well as giving rise to them.

Some had modest expectations and saw it as part of a multifaceted approach.

'...in a very limited way I think it makes a difference in two ways. One I think is posting a very informative article. I know at least five or six people will read the article and if they find it as useful as me, that moves things forwards. [...] Two, I think it makes people realise that, if you go and comment, people then argue "look we introduced this and no one complained therefore most people must agree with it". Or at least believe that it's fine. By signing petitions and by forwarding things and commenting, you're making it clear that you do not necessarily agree with something. Or you do want something to happen. Or whether signing a petition reaches that 100,000 and [...] has to be discussed in Parliament, [...] whether that is effective ultimately, I think it's very limited. Is it effective in making sure that people are aware that there are different opinions held [...] about something? I think it is equally as effective as writing a letter to your MP. Or in any other way of getting active like going on a march.' **Ian\***

Ethan believed that it was possible to influence 'one or two' people but felt it was more about the collective messaging, the groundswell

'When there's political campaigns, and you're like animals in a herd, if you're all running in the same direction, then the bigger that group, that's where the influence lies ... you pick your herd and you run with it, and you try and get your voice as part of that.' **Ethan\***

Others noted the obvious challenges, and how one could equip oneself, courtesy of online affordances.

'That's a tough one. I don't think you are able to change people's minds online as an individual, but I certainly think that by giving information from reliable sources you can at least counter some of the stuff that's actually on there. I never get into an argument, unless I've got everything safely Googled to pull up. You know people getting into arguments online, are they really ever going to be the kind of people that you can actually change their mind? I'm not really sure how you change people's minds.' **Helen\***

'... I don't expect it's going to change anything. But that doesn't make me disillusioned. I don't worry about that. I don't feel resentful. I feel sad when I look at the impact of the policies, but [...] I don't feel let down in that sense. Because

some people who do feel like they should be able to change things then feel as if that change is going to happen. [...] I am interested in the arguments, but I never expected my views on it to change a thing.' **Orla\***

The trap of the echo chamber was, more so as fieldwork progressed, increasingly acknowledged.

'I think sometimes when we're just talking among ourselves, it's like we're all preaching to the converted, so I think that's why it's quite a good thing to be part of different groups like British Politics and Wider World Politics, [...] I think what we have to do on social media is convince people who are not of our mindset. I think you can do that partly on social media, but also [...] you have to actually get out and talk to people face to face. (There are) more hard facts and information that you can actually give to people when you're discussing with them.'

**Catriona\***

'You can surround yourself with people that think the same as you and have your own opinion reinforced.' **Orla\***

'Especially on Facebook I like to meet people for example on my friends' (feeds)...or talk to people in forums. I don't know, otherwise it's just an echo chamber and I see plenty of evidence of that, but I don't want to ensconce myself in one of them.' **Calum\***

One Labour activist was taken aback by the difference between his online and offline experience.

'I think Facebook has a habit of putting you in touch with similar thinking people [...] I noticed everyone thinks the same as me on Facebook. That builds a false sense of security, how everyone in the world is thinking the same as me. Someone pointed out, no, it's the algorithms or whatever [...] That really worried me. Certainly, leading up to the last general election because there's loads of people agreeing with my way of thinking, and I thought, "Oh my God." [...] I was very, very worried that I was getting (into) a microcosm, I was getting a very distorted view of people who thought the same as me, and I didn't know what the reality would be because of Facebook, but then obviously the reality came in to its own the night of the general election. The reality check to a certain extent, was when we went campaigning door to door. Because we got mixed messages on the door step. That was pretty worrying.' **Tariq\***

Two likeminded women who even finished each other's' sentences were surprised by the differences of others.

'That's right, and to go back to your point though, I think it's quite dangerous as well to just stay around people and just talk to people on Facebook who have the same opinion, or Twitter or wherever, because everybody I know on my Facebook page voted to remain in the EU, and they were absolutely horrified and

shocked, because they thought the whole of the UK were going to resoundingly vote remain apart from two or three people, because that's who they spoke to on Facebook, and if you don't speak to people who have different opinions, you're never going to change their mind, or you're going to think it's fine, and I think that part of the low turnout at Brexit was because we all thought...because everybody [thought] ...' **Woman 2**, Alloa

'...it was a foregone conclusion.' **Woman 3**, Alloa

On the experience of going to a forum echoing one's own views, and group polarisation, and avoiding that, one woman reflected:

'...you do obviously get other points of view on these particular fora, so yes and they tend to be a little extreme, some of them. Sometimes you can be bothered and sometimes you just can't because you just think, why would you even bother posting something like that? It's just deliberately provocative. [...] But as I say, I'm interested in all these slightly different viewpoints as well.' **Catriona\***

Yet these experiences were also challenged by others as being nothing new:

'For me I see social media as an evolution of the system that we already had. People were in echo-chambers with the newspapers they bought, people were in echo-chambers with the programs they watched on television. If you go back and research newspapers and identities and local papers a hundred years ago, people were in echo-chambers, and they were presented with establishment reviews, with information that didn't bear reality with the facts.

'We have the same symptom now with the internet, it's just the same system. The fault is not necessarily with social media, the fault is, as I see it, with our ability to discuss right from being small at school, our ability to engage in information that is from many different walks of life and be presented with that, rather than just learning facts, and that's something that we need to do quite quickly.' **Participant, GlobalNet21**

One difference is that one can view a much wider range of titles freely and easily, and yet many choose not to.

One or two were close to giving, or had given up:

'Increasingly, I'm thinking [...] it can be a bit of waste of time and because I don't post publicly so actually maybe I don't have the resilience and mental capacity, mental health (to deal) with publicly posting and dealing with trolls and people I

know. I suspect maybe because I'm not too (keen) about speaking in public. Probably, I would be better actually being a constituency-active member of a party, I would have far more effect. I could stand up on such and such but actually, I lose interest, I get bored.' **Bryn\***

Noteworthy, however, were those who were relatively confident that their own contribution was likely to have an impact, but when asked if they themselves had ever had their minds changed about a political matter as a result of something they had seen on social media, responded with a firm 'no'.

I can change minds, but you can't change mine...

'We came to an impasse where he wasn't interested in any of the evidence I put forward and he wasn't interested in my own personal experience. That's one of the things that just made me think, "What can you do?" You can't reason with them. You can't emotionally – it was just really strange.' **Josh\***

An occasional joy of field research is witnessing an interviewee having a moment of epiphany. A striking feature from the data was the number of people who believed it was possible to change the mind of another by sharing one's opinions but who could not offer a single instance of that happening to themselves. The implications of this striking home are caught on recordings as a thoughtful pause or dry laugh. Even those who believed that they were open to having their mind changed struggled in practice to offer examples. Several offered to come back later with an example, but in the event none of these was forthcoming.

If self-awareness sometimes seemed flawed, nonetheless, there was a tacit understanding in many of the responses that the individual contributions they made over time were part of bigger movements and incremental changes.

For others, publicly registering their support for or dissent towards an issue was anyway a matter of principle, they wanted the world to know where they stood, or register a 'not in my name' protest, for example. The EU Referendum generated this sort of response strongly.

Polarisation and political positioning

A concern that was recognised by participants as an unintended consequence of efforts to convince was the tendency to polarise opinion, often by triggering extremity of feeling.

'I find that things are very polarized. Any discussion [...] everybody is very on that side, on that side and [...] very few people in the middle. [...] Sometimes they get very heated and very emotional about it [...] it is so immediate [...] (There) should be always be delay before you send something off straight away. I think people get too emotional and get too heated [...] but they are emotional subjects.'

**Keith\***

'It's really hard to define, isn't it? What's happened is that people are polarised. It's probably not that much different from people repeating stuff that they heard some bloke down the pub saying but because ... I don't know ... somehow because it's written down, it's been in their social media feed, people seem to think it's true and the confirmation bias that we all have -- I don't know. I can't explain it.' **Louisa\***

Keith also raised interesting questions about how we assess ourselves as having the 'common sense' view – which indeed many of us believe, perhaps assuming a false consensus. He also shows an awareness of fast and slow thinking processes in others.

While this environment might offer an opportunity to challenge our self-perception, nonetheless a number of respondents acknowledged the role of social media in forcing them to clarify or consolidate their position and confirm part of their identity to themselves or others.

'I think what it does do is it solidifies your feeling of having identity ... definitely being part of these groups does cement your feeling of identity if you like. It gets reinforced absolutely, yes. Not in a bad way, in a good way, in a positive way.'

**Ian\***



Without using the term ‘backfire effect’, several respondents suggested that the adversarial discussion of politics on social media had effectively driven them in one direction precisely because of the positions of others.

‘I think my identity has been changed, my political identity certainly has been moved by this discourse. I never thought of myself as a centre-left person before, but I think having engaged with hard-left people who are very much stuck in old ways won't change their own opinion. I feel that I have been pushed towards being more of a centrist person and I never thought that beforehand.’ **Colin\***

Tribalism, partyism and hypermorality

Many participants identified with one organised party specifically and saw this in varying terms built around identity and values. In some cases, this was seen as a ‘commitment’ and something from which they were unlikely to be moved. So, loyalty endured even in the face of ambivalent or questionable actions by their party and took on a greater element of performativity. As noted, by Haidt, research has shown people often pick a tribe, seemingly at a visceral level, but very often after inculcation amongst family and friends, then seek *post hoc* justification for their choices. This can lead to a predisposition to self-deception, distortions in understanding, thinking and expression, or projection. An example of this has been conversation around the Labour Party’s position on the EU. Party policy has remained to a degree ambiguous for some time (Daley & Maclean 2015). However, online, supporters of both ‘remain’ and ‘leave’ positions could be seen to be quite clear in claiming the leadership’s position to be the same as their own, a phenomenon which might come under Caplan’s ‘rational irrationality’. Or perhaps they were just too busy, or focused, to pore over the detail. These contradictions were highlighted by online exposure, and widely challenged.

One tactic used by participants in observed groups a lot and to some extent reported by interviewees was a tendency to characterise the political choices through a moral lens. Coupled

with polarisation and tribalism, this can result in extreme characterisations of those seen as adversarial. Like Mick\* you can find yourself under very heavy fire if you ever suggest that the other side might have a point. This is significant as there are observable instances where the barrage has resulted in the hapless commenter being pushed to the other side, surely the law of unintended effects and some basic psychology at work. David Brooks argued in the New York Times that as personal life is being de-moralised, political life is being hyper-moralised.<sup>35</sup> People are less judgmental about different lifestyles, but they are more judgmental about party affiliations and policy preferences. To a degree this is reflected in participants' responses and is highly visible in situations like Facebook groups where people are not particularly well known to each other.

Mick\* found out to his cost how even mild expressions of positivity to Tory policy for a Labour member was considered tantamount to moral depravity and met with a wall of reinforcing commentary using key themes and memes. These are easy to find, stocked on private Twitter and Facebook messaging accounts, suggests Rachel Cousins, a highly popular pro-Corbyn tweeter who goes under the name of @Rachael\_Swindon and who has noted that there are several private Twitter direct messaging groups where discussion is more or less continuous, with new pro-Corbyn material and anti-Tory memes reused across the two main platforms (Di Stefano 2018).

It can be seen that participants view the relationship between their activity and real-life political outcomes as frustratingly complex, perhaps more accurately, that they have *learned* that it is very complex, their leverage has limits, and offline ethnomethodologies do not always transfer well. This supports the idea of social media as a learning ground.

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<sup>35</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/28/opinion/david-brooks-why-partyism-is-wrong.html>

## 4.7 Open and other observations

- **Themes:** Opportunity, authenticity, difficulty, we're learning, being different

'I think I've got to stay optimistic, otherwise there's no point, I mean, it's not going away.' **Mike**, online campaigner.

At the end of each interview and focus group, participants were invited to make any other comment they felt especially important about the effects social media have had on political debate, or to address any topics that had not been fully covered off by the questions. In the event, all had additional points they wanted to make, some quite substantial. Some pertained to the main topic domains and have been applied accordingly, others covered new topics. Perhaps in validation of the phenomenographic approach taken towards field research, issues began to emerge that were of clear importance to participants but had not been identified or prioritised earlier by the researcher. In addition to this specific question set, material in this section also draws on more general comments made by participants under the main discussion domains.

### On being different

'Well, one of the things that is quite bothersome is the way that Facebook actually works [...] One of the things it's designed to do, is to put you in an echo chamber with people that believe the same things that you do, of similar interest to you [...] But I'm a more complicated person than that and I'm sure you are too. Where some of my interests you might not discover or discern that I do on Facebook, because I have a very wide circle of friends internationally. Because of that, we're able to debate contentious issues as a debate, where actually we can learn from each other, by discussing things with people from a different tribe or whatever it might be. **Participant, GN21**

Several respondents remarked on their experience of 'being different' in a polarised world, alluding perhaps to the challenges and occasional threats of breaching the norms of a peer group, for example, Labour-supporting EU 'leave' voters, an (apparently rare) gay Tory, a Tory disability campaigner and almost all the respondents who identified as Liberal Democrat. The opprobrium this 'deviance' could sometimes elicit was dealt with in individual ways. The underlying point is that

social media often essentialises and works with stereotypes, so exceptions are often difficult for others to take on board. This has considerable implications for understanding the complexity, nuance and pragmatism involved in public administration in practice. The difficulty had with difference extends more widely.

Disability, wellbeing and the online public sphere

In the event, while this was not identified as an issue in the topic discussion guide, nor asked about on the demographics questionnaire, several interviewees volunteered the fact they were living with a disability, temporary or ongoing mental health challenges or a chronic health condition which impacted their day-to-day lives, and about which a number of them chose to campaign online and otherwise. The issue of disability and the accessibility of the public sphere therefore was a notable emerging issue from the research findings. It was clear that social media could offer opportunities for access and discussion that were denied elsewhere, yet the characteristics of the environment could make it especially challenging for some. If you are sight-impaired, like one respondent for example, software in online media can make your debating life practically easier. If you live with a disabling chronic condition, which several respondents did, online media make it easier to participate on your own terms at your own pace. Mason,\* a disabilities campaigner spoke not only about how his multiple disabilities affected him, but led, he believed, to some people excluding him in certain circumstances. Online opportunities therefore gave him much greater scope. This also raised interesting practical questions about the 'rational' public sphere. If someone, as some respondents did, live with brain injury, learning disabilities or mental ill health, it is possible that they might express themselves in atypical ways, or have atypical perspectives, and yet ethically, it is assumed that few would argue the right of people to represent themselves through their own voice and that possibly marginalised voices should be heard. Given our current understanding of the neuroscience, the possibility that differences in the physical functioning of the brain in some

individuals can have very significant effects on the nature of online interactions should be taken into consideration.

Sex and gender

'I found it mainly men who haven't tempered the way they will put something across that can then feel very, wow, I want to debate an issue here, but you'll bring it personal and that's because it's social media and our faces are right next to what we're saying...' **Rachel**

There are several overriding reasons to talk (albeit briefly, here) about sex and gender specifically as part of online political discussion. One is that your experience online can be vastly different if you are a woman, a man or identify otherwise. Another is that gender identification *per se* and its implications form an enduring and polarising online discussion topic. A third is that sex and gender are part of core general debates around identity.<sup>36</sup> The primary reason for introducing it here is as a topic raised by participants and how their own status has generated particular responses from others. Five respondents in this study had experienced what might be described as unusually high levels of online threat and harassment, Mick\*, Jess, Liz\*, Mairead\* and Mike - three of these being women, and the nature of the abuse experience by women tended to be more of a particular gendered type (although Mike reported that his masculinity had been called into question in a roundabout way).

The experiences of women approaching politics online were mixed. Valerie,\* who had been involved for many years in the Labour Party reported low confidence in engaging in debate generally after years of standing in the political shadow somewhat of a husband who was a serving local

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<sup>36</sup> (It should be noted here that as the field study was purposive for participation it did not recruit for total demographic representation, and in the event all participants in this study self-identified as either female or male).

politician. Amongst participants, a few reported experiences of serious stalking-type harassment, others more minor instances.

Rachel, who referred to aggression from men, went on in her interview to note that on the thorny topic of immigration, some of the most hostile comments she had received had been from women.

It is also worth noting that one of the most combative of current online debates includes by definition a high percentage of people who self-identify as non-binary.

Being a woman candidate

‘...so many female candidates had been selected, and I had said a couple of things, various people had piled in, but the nastiness that came up against Tasmina (Ahmed-Sheikh, MP) at that time was horrendous, absolutely disgraceful, and I gave my point and quite strongly, and these other two women backed me up on that.’ **Woman 1, Alloa.**

Máiréad\* is a career academic with longstanding political interests, and often acts as a media spokesperson on feminist and social welfare issues. She has also had experience as standing as a parliamentary candidate for the Women’s Equality Party in the 2017 General Election.

Academics are increasingly using social media for teaching and research, but many academic women worry that if they engage in some types of discussion, for example, feminist issues, they will meet with harassment. This often leads to self-censorship and a ‘Spiral of Silence’ (Carter Olson & LaPoe 2018). A socially confident speaker, Máiréad has on occasions felt challenged by the tensions of being a professional and wanting to speak out about matters about which she feels passionately and has run into challenges with her employer.

The somewhat extreme experience of Labour MP Jess Phillips is discussed under 'What Politicians Think', but it is clear that a substantial element of the abuse she has received has been very gendered, including comments on her appearance and rape threats.

Male respondents often felt more comfortable taking on a fight, women respondents were more inclined to block or avoid confrontation, although there were exceptions. The gender divide might be a reflection of the fact that online aggression directed at women can sometimes take on a very nasty tone, with violent and sexual overtones.

Grammar, hierarchy and dog-whistle hegemony

'I do try not to get shirty about bad spelling and all that kind of thing. I used to but it's not a very nice thing to do so I've stopped doing it.' **Joanne\***

The conflation of strong conformity to standard language use and entitlement to argue a political point is one of the great cultural hegemonic tropes of social media. 'Good' grammarians congratulate each other on their cultural capital, organisations like Grammarly offer sage advice to the novice while Facebook groups like 'Spellcheck a Nazi' (now removed) waged a war of scorn on an archetypal semi-literate bigot. The extremes of this trend, which can slip quite readily from fair concern for clear communication into open classism or even racism, have been challenged by intersectional political pages such as Everyday Feminism and social media influencers such as Francesca 'Chescaleigh' Ramsey (Fabello 2014, Ramsey 2018). Nonetheless, grammar policing both as a concern for language standards and as a lever of social stratification and division continues to thrive. This may be a function of the way social media can allow people to cross social divides that they might not normally in offline life. The differences can be a surprise and are not always rationalised thoughtfully.

Respondents made several interesting observations on this phenomenon. One woman, not British by birth, but a language professional, showed evident glee in using her advanced skills to pull up those she felt had done her considerable wrong by voting for Brexit.

‘The only naughty thing I do is correct people's grammar, [...] I say, “know your history,” or things like that. I tend to do things more (as) jokes using humour rather than aggression.’ **Carla\***

Others employed similar tactics:

‘I tend to use humour which in some circumstances might be considered to be provocative, so I will-- I mean, I'm guilty of jumping on the bandwagon that says that people who don't agree with me are lacking insight or (are) badly educated.’  
**Martin**

Others, including Keith\* felt that crushing people was not fair:

‘Somebody might say something and then (there) will be somebody who can debate really well. They put them down without considering how they feel. I see that as intellectual bullying. Rather than a proper debate. I think you need to speak to someone's level. When you're talking to somebody in the pub, you don't use the same language that you use at an interview at work or in the working environment. You have a different language. It's all English but it's different. You use different phraseology and different things like that. I think some people don't see that online. Online is very-- it's not someone there, so you could (say)—“oh you stupid, sonofa b” -- because they're not a person, they're just an avatar. I don't think people see those people. They don't see that person behind it. They can go over the top.’

What politicians think

Politicians often operate on social media simultaneously as public figures and private individuals.

Where they do, they have a singular insight into the relationship between online activity and establishment outcomes.

‘I feel quite positive about it in lots of ways, that I don't think maybe that I've represented well. I use it all the time. My entire success as a politician is almost exclusively built off the back of my ability to talk to people on social media. I think it has a benefit as well. I think actually that the people who like me and are



nice to me, believe in me because I will talk back to them and I can talk back to them with much more ease than waiting two weeks for an email.' **Jess, MP**

Politicians have a love-hate relationship with social media. For contemporary UK politicians, it is not just a way of sharing views and information and engaging with the public. MPs spend a lot of time in the virtual world, even when sitting in the Houses of Parliament, as can be observed on parliamentary broadcasts. In online space, politicians develop networks that modify over time, influenced by political events and intra-party tensions (Weaver et al. 2018). Yet ways in which politicians talk to each other, especially in-party, often reflect social media discourse amongst the electorate. There is a type of context collapse between their public role and private thinking – in fact this can be read as a sign of greater authenticity. Westminster etiquette can sometimes be sidelined, which carries risks, as it is difficult to edit oneself in the virtual world which is immediate and does not carry the protection of parliamentary privilege. In these senses and in others, the experiences of politicians can offer a useful prism through which to view the experience of online political discussion and its relationship to outcomes in establishment politics.

Linking to the contextual case study of the Labour Party leadership debate, four Labour politicians, including two serving members of parliament and two serving local councillors agreed to be interviewed about the impact of social media on them and the shape of the party as a whole at a time of some considerable change for this and the political scene generally.

MP Kelvin

It should be remembered here that not all serving politicians have embraced social media, although if they have a reasonable public profile, it is likely that they will still have a substantial social media presence despite themselves. As the son of an internationally renowned physicist twice nominated for a Nobel Prize and someone with a childhood interest in electronics himself, Kelvin acknowledged

the irony of the simple mechanical difficulties he experienced using personal computing and smartphones and thus the opportunities such as social media they have generated. Not having learned to touch type, the cultural reasons for which are interesting in themselves, had cast a long shadow. Nonetheless he claimed to rely on office staff to manage most electronic communication beyond simple texting and got reports of his social media coverage from staff, friends and family. Still, as an original supporter of Jeremy Corbyn's leadership bid, he acknowledged the huge role that social media had played in Corbyn's success and related the story of how a visit to Luton by the soon-to-be leader had reached standing room only while 'I was still thinking should we send out a circular.'

In relation to the EU Referendum, Kelvin is a prominent 'Lexiteer' or Labour 'leave' supporter and understood that a pamphlet he had written on the subject had 'gone viral' but had not personally witnessed this.

Kelvin has a strong interest in and deep knowledge of political history and theory and echoing the observations of Conroy et al, expressed frustration at what he saw as generally low levels of interest and understanding of this. While social media had potential to address it, he believed, he was aware of a tendency to evade 'proper' discussion in practice. He expressed an enjoyment of traditional face-to-face meeting, 'holding a room', sharing ideas at a public event and being challenged on them.

MP Jess

Jess is a high-profile public figure and has had an extreme experience of social media, both positive and negative. She remains very active online, and clearly enjoys it. Nonetheless, her experience of the negative side lies at the extreme end of the spectrum.

‘I mean it was horrendous at first. I found it really difficult at first. Not like I was really frightened. I was very, very, very upset the first time I received very graphic...not because of what it said, I've read worse. I've supported women who've suffered terrible things so it's not a squeamishness. It is just... I'm knackered by it, it makes me feel really tired, cynical and hopeless. And I am a hopeful person, I am. I believe things can change. It just knocks you, it's like being punched in the stomach, it's a bit like when you get made redundant, you feel like you've being punched in the stomach. It's a bit like that feeling like somebody has punched you and you've literally fallen backwards and that's why it always feels like a backlash. Literally like back-draft in a fire.

‘It's about silencing you it's about shutting you down. As a woman, it happened to me online just as much as it happened to me in real life actually. The shift's online [laughs]. People try and silence me all the time with all different sorts of mechanisms. To win you do have to be resilient. I have to say, I'm definitely not a snowflake and I do think that-- I think it's all terrible and everything. I do think politics has always been a rough and tumble game. And you have got to have some guts to take part in it.’

Jess is a confident and direct user of social media with, party whip notwithstanding, little apparent fear of expressing her own views on often polarised and contentious matters. That is not to suggest her experience has been at all easy, given that at one point she calculated that she was receiving around 600 online rape threats a day. Since then, an initial sense of shock has moved on to rationalisation and a motivation to campaign to address one of the more extraordinary products of social media – unmitigated hate. She also suspects this sort of abuse will not go away, so it has to be crowded out, managed. She is very aware of how the media confection ‘Jess Phillips’ is a thing not entirely within her control, but it is the Jess Phillips that most people experience, like, hate and react to. They react, in fact, to a puppet, and one with many masters.

Jess expressed the opinion that social media drove division and polarisation and that this view was based on observing her own behaviour. While arguing a contentious point, she witnessed herself taking a more stubborn or extreme position on it, and she noticed others do the same. Further, she made an interesting observation about her relationship with others in the Labour Party with whom, face-to-face, she had civil and reasonable relationships which morphed into hate online. She felt her relationship with and perceptions of Jeremy Corbyn's leadership had been considerably altered by the way she had been spoken to by his online supporters. She said she had felt forced into a position, a phenomenon that other participants faced with polarising issues had also observed. However, she felt that any bile was directed not to her as a real person, but a social media concoction.

'They're reacting to something that they've made up, it's even better - they built something, to hate. They created something to hate. Brilliant, I mean really they should get a hobby.'

Jess began to notice online polarisation at the time of the Scottish Referendum but did not involve herself. She felt the core issues have been about identity and binary choices, and the opportunity for people to act on fast thinking. She has felt frustration being in polarised exchanges with people who essentially held similar views to her about social justice. She is also of the opinion that a lot of division was being provoked by outside forces and that the major social media companies had little interest in containing this, as their ideals were essentially, she maintained, libertarian. At the point of interview, she spoke of what others at the same time expressed, a sense of fear about the openings for tyranny.

Richard and Rachel – local Councillors

Richard and Rachel both had a practical approach toward social media platforms, they saw them as a set of tools. At the time of interview, Richard was both a serving local councillor and a political adviser working in Westminster for a Labour MP. He has extensive experience as a Labour Party

activist. His approach to the medium is business-like and utilitarian and he appeared not to be fazed by instances of abuse and trolling.

‘You can have 20,000 Twitter followers, that doesn't mean to say that you're reaching out to the public and I think that's one of the reasons where it has down sides, because politicians can simply think, well, I'm communicating with people, because I'm doing all this on Twitter. Actually, people out there in the real world, people unlike what I see in my work for (a local MP), who come here with problems, they aren't on Twitter, they aren't on Facebook, they want real help, it's making sure that you discipline yourselves and don't think that talking on Facebook is the same as connecting with people on the doorstep. It can't be the same, by and large it's very different.’

Rachel, also a serving local councillor and a portfolio holder for a busy policy area knows the value of media, and social media for reaching people in her densely-populated urban ward and across the town in which she serves but sees it as an adjunct to the face-to-face contact needed to cover ground. The focus on the local is very important to her and she alluded to chattering-class bubbles. In this she echoed MP Jess's observations that there are whole movements on social media which barely have a presence offline.

‘I think there are real benefits but one of things we all must be careful of is that [...] it's the same people [...] the big political Westminster bubble or people who know this stuff because ordinary people don't even talk about that stuff, you know what I mean? You have to remember that those people are really getting into it and you often see the same people in those circles [...] the same sort of journalists who would talk about some of those issues.

I think they try and recognise and try and draw in ordinary people if that's what this is about, if it's about increasing democracy and wider political engagement but [...] you need to be out there as well, talking to ordinary people.’

Rachel, through her wider background is also familiar with the workings of central government and parliament so made a key point about practical relevance for people she represents locally of some of the prevailing political discussion points and memes that go viral on social media. One concern was that, in a town where there are multiple deprivations, high level squabbling about the phases of EU withdrawal tend to draw people away from more practical politics.

She expressed a degree of pragmatism towards the negative side, believing that people possibly didn't really recognise what they were doing.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

This study has addressed the following research questions:

- What factors influence the way UK users of social media engage in online political discussion?
- How do participants themselves understand and evaluate their participatory role, particularly in relation to key political events in the period studied?
- How do they see the relationship between their online activity and real-life political outcomes?

Preliminary work concluded that analysis of the accounts given by individuals of their own experience would be able to shed light on underlying attitudes, beliefs, practices and other factors shaping bigger trends in behaviour. A pluralist, phenomenographic approach was applied to addressing these questions. The contribution to learning resulting from this is a codification of why and how people discuss politics on social media, not by application of a prescriptive theoretical framework but by interrogating people's own experiences and insights, calling on perspectives from a range of disciplines to make sense of the responses. Further, this work has been novel in its use of:

- context – focusing on four major UK political events over a five-year period
- pluralist qualitative methodology; and
- the identification of social media as a behavioural frontier and learning ground

In respect of each research question, the following general conclusions have been drawn from the data gathered.

### RQ1: What factors might influence the way UK users of social media engage in online political discussion?

- **Topic discussion guide (TDG) domains:** Participation, subjective experience, issues of identity and the self, media consumption and literacy

- **Themes 1:** Emotional, authentic, managing and learning, enthusiasm, freedom of expression, individual and collective, friends and family
- **Themes 2:** Values, origins, creating the identity of self and others
- **Themes 3:** Balance, power, confirmation, identity, understanding media

A personal public sphere and learning ground

Fieldwork suggests that it is unhelpful to compartmentalise online political discussion purely in terms of formal political outcomes. In fact, politics in this arena are more often than not situated within people's broader mindset, world view and social relationships. Many participants saw political discussion on social media as normalised, integral to the social parts of their lives, family or friendships, and saw participation as a way of influencing people they could reach as much as a direct line to the political establishment or contributing to some abstract 'democratic design'. They also saw it as fulfilling specific needs of theirs. These needs were political but also social and emotional, and to do with their own sense of self and values, defining their position and aspects of their identity which were very often perceived to be deep-rooted. The desire to fulfil, define and express oneself as an individual amongst the collective was seen as very important. And social media was seen as a place where people could 'be themselves.' So, politics came via the personal and the social, often an extension of other social activity, and at times a diversion, or enjoyment as a means to an end. This links to the notion of personalised politics, but is, in effect, even more personal, and raises questions around potential relationships between the personal and the collective in this space.

The process of online political talk could be very emotional but was nonetheless seen as authentic. Faced with perceived blandishments from establishment figures, this 'authenticity' was greatly valued. Moreover, social media were viewed as part of life, convenient, enticing and



gratifying. The right buttons were pushed. In these channels, participants could seek affirmation of strongly-held beliefs, and they did this a lot. They sought in principle to convince others but had some scepticism about the likelihood. Tacit understanding of the difficulties involved in achieving this appeared to grow over time. Only modest consideration was given to their own capacity to be persuaded, they did not on the whole set out to be persuaded by someone else. This suggests the better socialisation of 'listening to' suggested by Dobson would be an ambitious idea to implement quickly, certainly when applied to participants in their millions.

For some participants, their involvement was a considerable obligation. By taking on roles such as group admins, they made a significant prosocial commitment, but self-interest in terms of control, was also a factor in this. Yet even those who contributed very little themselves, watched and were affected by the output of others.

There was also an understanding that social media are distinct and novel phenomena where one learns new things and new ways of acting, that the act of political participation online is a learning experience. Further, it was understood that the way people engaged and the outcomes this had, had itself the potential to teach people a lot about themselves and others.

However, many also viewed their experience critically and complained about the quality of argument, frustration, intransigence, rudeness and aggression. Social media offer an unprecedented opportunity to mix with people outside of one's usual social circles, and differences in education, understanding and literacy often took people by complete surprise, so much so that they were less often rationalised. There was genuine shock expressed at perceived 'disturbing' behavioural boundary-crossing. Some had experienced behaviour likely to be

considered odd or extreme from any perspective, and the speed of reactions and escalation was a point of note. It was recognised that in some instances, provocation might come from dedicated mischief-makers, although this was not always clear or readable. For those more politically and media literate, the potential to 'divide and conquer' through exploiting innate tendencies and behavioural responses was acknowledged and presumed a likelihood, although they were a minority. However, a larger number of respondents had noted empirically that there were reliable trigger topics guaranteed to polarise and disrupt.

The emotional experience for many was mixed, but quite often heightened and very visceral. The pleasure of striking up friendships and alliances was marked, the horror of encountering threat or falling out with a loved one, pronounced. These could be big, dramatic, physical feelings. This phenomenon fascinated participants, a degree of essentialising, perhaps, intensified by the constraints of the medium and having quite bodily effects. Some felt almost voyeuristic towards this, an idea that is reflected in group commentary where jokes are made about 'getting in the popcorn'. It was noted that other people's 'essential' characteristics were amplified by the medium. While a 'pile-on' challenge to a post or comment often amounts to a random selection of contributors, the effect is like an advancing army and can be shocking or intimidating, especially as few individuals will face this type of oncoming assault in offline life.

Before widespread discussion of the 'addictive' nature of social media, (in terms of designed-in triggers) there was recognition by users of the compulsive nature of device-checking and responding and the degree to which one could be taken away from face-to-face conversation. Some chose to respond to this with self-regulation, sometimes making moral value judgements about their own usage habits and those of others. Those prone to emotional responses suggested that they found this actually rather hard to control, and the desire to have the last

word in a tit-for-tat spat, when the red notification button beckoned, felt like a decision already made for them by their unconscious brain. Effort was involved in controlling this impulse, and this could be weakened by extraneous factors such as personal distress about other matters, or substance use, such as alcohol and other psychoactives.

Some participants had made peace with their challengers, others sought to remove dissonance by mechanisms such as blocking, with varying degrees of awareness of how this might contribute to echo chambers.

However, participants' experience fell on a spectrum and some experienced little or no aggression themselves.

Positive mental rewards of agreement and affirmation were sought out as a pleasure and to help consolidate views and identity. While enjoying nailing their own colours to the mast, participants were nonetheless frustrated by the increasing polarisation of others. Some, but not all, equated their own heel-digging with that of others but then this was by some seen as part of a process. Self-awareness was mixed, there was a degree of benign hypocrisy and one person's 'passionate' could be another's stubborn.

There were varying levels of confidence around venturing outside places where participants could expect affirmation, suggestive of the genuine anxiety people could feel around challenge and the urge to minimise dissonance. This highlights the importance of affirmation processes in approaches to persuade. Some sought an approximation of a Habermasian, rational public sphere and this was held up as an ideal, but while there was a general aspiration towards civility,

others also were firm about their own right to speak their mind, and in certain circumstances, seek confrontation, or remove their metaphorical gloves. The Habermasian ideal, which has been characterised as hegemonic by Fraser and others, and the idea of rational, reasoned debate did seem to appeal most to older males. When asked about the notion of tone policing, or the right of disadvantaged people to express anger, one such replied: ‘Well for me that’s very sad... it probably heralds back to the way that we’ve been educated, and probably not taught to think reasonably.’

For those at the sharp end of abusive online behaviour, the idea that the social media companies should be doing much more to manage this behavioural frontier is taken as self-evident. That they might be profiting from it very specifically slips somewhat under the radar.

#### Affordances of the media

Participants used a range of outlets for their expression, but Facebook was the most frequently used overall. It might loosely be characterised as the people’s option, in relation to the smaller Twitter, favoured by politicians and national pundits.

Participants valued highly benefits they saw around information gathering, fact checking, information sharing and analysis. They valued the opportunity to discuss points of contention and to talk about their principles. Nonetheless, there was an element of taken-for-grantedness in their appreciation of affordances like being able to scan a whole world of media easily and quickly. The *New York Times* and *El País* were just now there for anyone.

There was a view that the environment was 'authentic', certainly in relation to legacy media. However, this lack of control brought with it potential risks and there were low-level concerns about information quality and the possibility of covert manipulation. To where or whom this last possibility was attributed was in itself often the product of social media narratives.

#### Social factors

Many had made significant friendships through political discussion on social media, but other new relationships were viewed as pragmatic or contingent and not 'real'. There was a natural tendency to seek likeminded others, but some intentionally engaged with those with whom they disagreed, in many cases to hone or reinforce their own beliefs. In other instances, it seemed that participants found others difficult to read and empathy had its limits. Accounts of fall-outs amongst close family and friends could be dramatic. Participants were often very surprised to find that others they expected to agree with them simply did not, and they were very surprised by the turn of political events.

At a time when the pub itself, a social institution recognised the world over as a symbol of Britishness, faces a crisis, and closures mount in the face of the cheap and easy options of supermarket alcohol and online socialising, it still proved the go-to comparison of many respondents when trying to characterise what was good or bad about political discussion on social media. In the pub you have perceived freedom of expression, and a relaxation of some day-to-day social norms. Yet it is relatively easy to read people's body language and judge more easily when someone might take offence, or conversely, hide oneself if the urge to give risky offence becomes too great.

## Identity

Some participants saw social media activity as a place for internal dialogue with their own circumstances, to express and thrash through beliefs, to self-define in relation to others. Belief is strongly tied to identity and cognitive dissonance can cause real physical discomfort, leading to people standing their ground and becoming entrenched if debates become divisive and polarised, even being pushed in the opposite direction intended by their challengers. There were comments to the effect that positions had hardened over time. All those interviewed appeared to hold their beliefs sincerely, suggesting that capitulation to an opposing view would not be achieved easily.

At the beginning of the study, this researcher expected to find a high degree of performativity in relation to identity, also value statements linked to self-presentation and perhaps lower levels of self-awareness about this. These assumptions were based on observation of activity on a range of political chat groups in the early stage where the repetition of images and textual memes as badges of identity often suggests itself as performative. In the event, the results were mixed. Interviewees had strong allegiances, this sometimes expressed itself as performative solidarity ('45' profile picture frames, for instance) but a greater degree of self-reflection was evident in commentary. There was some formulaic expression around media consumption, it was *de rigueur* for many to scorn the *Daily Mail*, in some respects a dog-whistle for attitudes towards certain other social groups. Also, some conceded with good humour that they might match the stereotypes of others.

## Relationship with media

Participants sought confirmation from media and were to varying degrees aware of this relative lack of objectivity. This could be a way of avoiding cognitive dissonance, and at times had a

suggestion of performativity (making a point of professing dislike or dismissal of particular titles, for example.

Where media or titles were seen to be strongly at odds with a person's deeply held belief, the sense of injustice and anger could be very strong, and feelings around the Scottish independence referendum and the party leadership of Jeremy Corbyn exemplified this. Early on in the fieldwork, the idea that social media could offer a recourse and a challenge to the 'MSM' was met with enthusiasm, and hyperpartisan titles were picked up keenly.

Fact-checking and critical analysis were good habits of which people were aware but often did not practice. It is understood that statistics in particular are poorly understood by general audiences in part owing to lack of practical education, and this damages public trust and credibility (von Roten 2006). Apart from one or two participants with a scientific or technical background, it seemed most appeared to either gloss over such evidence or dismiss or accept it on partisan political grounds.

However, a point of interest is social media's offering of an *agora* in which a wide range of other media can be scrutinised, compared and people's wider media literacy developed over time. Flagship media outlets such as the BBC or the *Daily Mail* performed multiple functions for participants, as a point of reference for symbolic interactions, as something to rail against, rationalise over, position their identity against, for example, or as a symbol of or proxy for bigger power mechanisms.

The idea of echo chambers was understood but participants did not always associate this with methods they used to reduce affective discomfort or cognitive dissonance such as blocking or avoiding specific outlets. Similarly, algorithmic filter bubbles were understood as something that over time could skew perceptions, although the facility to have one's deeply held beliefs affirmed, wherever these were felt to come from, was valued. 'Alternative' media made a lot of early progress on the back of this ability to affirm.

Overall, the opportunities social media offers to compare and contrast different media outlets allowed the potential, at least, to think more expansively about media as a whole.

**RQ2: How do participants themselves understand and evaluate their participatory role, particularly in relation to key political events in the period studied?**

**Topic discussion guide (TDG) domains:** Event-specific experience

**Themes:** Destiny, opportunity, groundswells, everyday resistance, identity

In the early stages of fieldwork, many participants indicate that they saw social media as a significant opportunity. This applied especially to supporters of Scottish independence interviewed in Alloa. There was a gratifying sense of momentum, of being part of a groundswell and an authentic grassroots movement. The emotional connection was genuinely deep. Yet debate was very much situated in the local, the social, the familiar, posted up next to pets, shared in the playground and uniting friends geographically distant. Beliefs born of a sense of identity, inculcated or hard-wired, facing unnuanced challenge, provoked emotion, emotion evoked real discomfort and drove people to harden their positions and mingle with similar others, resulting for some in surprise and disappointment at eventual outcomes.



With regard to the EU referendum, an apparently wide assumption that the UK was likely to vote 'Remain' might have led to a degree of complacency in some respects about the outcome but there was widespread engagement with the debate. It was a debate where the difficulty of 'seeing' the other side's point of view was particularly marked. One man gave clear evidence of having considered how the event was being framed (with 'immigration' dominating) but many complained of the absence of clear information. In this instance, circulating and sharing popularly-produced material, such as memes was the first recourse for many.

Overall, social media added to a sense of being a direct part of major, involving motivating events – with a real emotional aspect. Participants saw themselves pitted against powerful forces such as the mainstream media with freedoms from restraints, fighting for the 'little guy'. The environment had brought back passion, emotion. However, this often turned to surprise and astonishment at the unpredictability of events and the idea that some had found themselves in 'information cocoons' began to be understood better.

The ongoing debate around the Labour Party leadership presented some with a situation to manage, as online tensions had to be avoided or defused offline. Participants struggled to convince others of positions they sincerely believed to be right. The substance of the arguments has been well rehearsed in the media, and needs no repeating here, but the nature of the debate is an exemplar of the physical and emotional difficulties people face in reconciling in this environment. The counterintuitive nature of the steps needed to break impasse, a degree of affirmation of the other, appeared to lack credibility for participants – they would only try it up to a point. This vulnerability to division was in some respects, likely to be open to exploitation. So, while people saw their role as championing an identity-led cause, what they saw as intransigence led to frustration, and possibly, actions likely to result in further division.

### RQ3: How do they see the relationship between their online activity and real-life political outcomes?

- **Topic discussion guide (TDG) domains:** Efficacy
- **Themes:** Changing minds, realisation and learning, self-awareness.

This question proved the most difficult to articulate in a meaningful way in that it can be very challenging to draw a direct line between small, local thoughts and actions and bigger political outcomes.

Most respondents were realistic about the likelihood of their own individual contributions and arguments making an immediate difference or radically changing the mind of another. Most failed to cite any cases where their own mind had been significantly changed by online debate, although the potential for long-term, gradual learning of the type that developed ideas by suffusion was seen. Interview questioning made many reflect on this in a moment of realisation.

Some felt they might make an incremental difference over time and felt that the potential to change minds was just one of the motivations behind their participation.

Understanding the significance of confirmation bias in forming echo-chambers, and the possible implications of this (unexpected outcomes) grew over the period of study.

There were practical challenges around empathy and self-awareness in an often rapid-fire environment, where challenge and acrimony was hard to rationalise, more so if empathic understanding was unlikely to be reciprocated.

## 5.1 Further thoughts

‘It is said that if you know your enemies and know yourself, you will not be imperiled in a hundred battles; if you do not know your enemies but do know yourself, you will win one and lose one; if you do not know your enemies nor yourself, you will be imperiled in every single battle.’ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

This study has privileged the accounts and perceptions of users in an academic debate over the role of social media in political participation. The people who took part in this research were interested, engaged, lively and passionate, and their voices have given life to this work. They understood that they were a part of some profound change, the direction of which was not clear, but the journey through which was giving them unprecedented opportunities to learn new things about themselves and others and what, for them, politics might be about. In these respects, this study is not just about politics, nor about social media, but about some very fundamental factors involved in the way people engage with each other. Knowing and understanding some of these factors better might offer considerable opportunities.

Some people’s stories were dramatic, all were rich and informative in the insight they gave, a justification in itself for the approach of the study. It is appropriate that some of their voices should be part of concluding remarks.

Optimism, pessimism and cynicism

‘I’m a great believer in the learning opportunities afforded. (However) social media tends towards a mob rule methodology in general and piling in with the herd is seen to be cool. Resisting the herd can get you trolled up down and sideways, as I have seen in the past, especially on the subject of Trump. [...] The mob rule thing bothers me, the echo-chambers bother me. I don’t see yet the realisation of how productive social media could be, as it has been and how it is at this moment.’ **Participant, GlobalNet21**

At the end of 2017 and in early 2018 the political climate in the UK and worldwide was in itself a cause of cognitive dissonance amongst many, with the counterintuitive and atypical actions of world leaders and surprising turns in international affairs raising levels of anxiety amongst ordinary citizens and professional politicians alike. This showed clearly in interviews held at the time where a number of participants articulated real fear. As one woman, Liz\* noted, she felt there was increasing political volatility in the air to a degree that made her afraid. To what extent did social media contribute to the many surprising turns of events? Without the perspective of history any current view on this is likely to come down to hunch or opinions.

An interviewee of relatively deprived origins who had, with his partner, come into some affluence and had moved from being a supporter of the Labour Party to a Conservative over the years saw his change as 'giving permission' principally to family members, to think otherwise than would normally be expected. This idea of 'giving permission' to have unexpected ideas has great resonance online where pockets of extremism, of thought or habit, politically and in many other areas of life, and people who might have thought themselves outliers find themselves less short of company than they imagined. Given that the processes of debate on social media, as described by interviewees tend through natural, identity-guarding defensive mechanisms, force entrenchment, and given that belief in a pragmatic middle ground is, at the time of writing, very unfashionable in some quarters and itself open to abuse (see for example 'Centrist Dad'), one question must be, are drifts towards extremism an end in themselves or part of a learning process leading to greater equilibrium over time? Tentative ways of thinking and expressing can be pulled apart and undermined by the vernacular sociology of pages like RationalWiki and others.<sup>37</sup> Implicit in many replies given by participants was that while few changed their mind in

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<sup>37</sup> See the interesting and mildly defensive definition of 'concern troll' given here: [https://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Concern\\_troll](https://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Concern_troll)

the heat of debate, by going away and reflecting on their position over time, their ideas could and did change, and it was sometimes about reaching a tipping point, or being 'given permission'. In any case, the inevitability and unavoidability of this new, shared arena was acknowledged in metaphors like 'genie out of the bottle' and 'ratchet'. Despite fears, and general frustration with the stage of development we are at, many still had a degree of cautious optimism.

'I think it's got to be a good thing. Anything that makes things more transparent is on the whole, a good thing. As with everything. There are upsides and downsides. But I think this is where we're going. And I think it is a good thing really, (in) which we've just got to learn to modify our behaviour and be respectful. And I think we are.' **Robert\***

'Well, I think first, online has opened up a way for people that weren't politically involved or politically active at all to hear about politics and to get involved in debates where before they wouldn't have done maybe outside the pub or their own mutual family setups. In that way, I think it's quite a good thing that people are being more exposed to politics through things like Facebook where they can't escape (sic). [...] I get a lot of local politics on my village group...for example [...] although people wouldn't probably think that what they're doing is (being) political, they actually are, and I think that's a really good thing because people are actually getting involved in some way in their local community.' **Helen\***

The emotional toll and frustration nonetheless should not be underestimated.

'I would just say that I have found it a very depressing experience.

'Yes, to the point where I often thought about like just stopping using Facebook altogether. I thought about not using Twitter and if it wasn't for the fact that I have lots of friends I only communicate with on Facebook and for promoting my own things which I do on Twitter. If it wasn't for that I'd quite happily never go on it again. Because you just, for the amount of difference you feel that you're making, posting stuff through politics, you just feel that is it worth the stress. Because it is quite stressful, I find it. Because I don't like to just post something and not have a debate. I don't like posting things just for the sake of upsetting people but equally I don't like just posting things just for the sake of back slapping or reinforcing other people. Social media has become a whole life in itself really. So yes I've just found the whole experience quite depressing. I don't know, I just wish that 2016 had never happened really. [laughter]

'It was a lot easier and it felt a lot easier when it was just putting leaflets through people's doors. Even though you can't rely on leaflets, the stuff you get through the door is just poisonous hatred. Stuff like the UKIP leaflet on swarms of immigrants coming over from Turkey or whatever, it's just that's made up. Any normal person can see that it's made up. [...] I suppose I hold back for a simpler time but it's never going to happen. I just worry about the way things, where things are going. I think the internet was heralded a few years (ago) as we could make real change. We can make real political change and it has made political change. It's very quickly swung back the other way, [...] people feel that they can say, speak their most innate, just things they wouldn't say outside in the real world to other people. They feel they can say it on the internet and I find that completely depressing. I find the fact that on my Twitter, you're only two clicks away from somebody saying something horrible and xenophobic and racist or just downright stupid to be honest with you.' **Colin\***

'...we've got beyond the stage of thinking that the internet is this wonderful democratic medium that's going to make everything fine. It's very complicated. I just don't know how it's going to turn out. What worries me deeply in that whole process, is the hate, because I don't think good can come out of that. Yes, that's the worry of mine.

'And I don't think I've seen the worst of it. These stories now are coming out about MPs and virtually all of them on the receiving end of hate mail. I was listening to LBC in the morning of James O'Brien. I don't agree with him on everything, but I think he's really good I like his show. Apparently, he's just on the receiving end of horrific abuse all the time and he just has to get used to it. That really disturbs me, because I don't think you can have a healthy society if that's going on; except to say that maybe it's only going on in the tiny minority of people.

'I think I'm pretty confused I would say; about how social media and politics are going to go forward together. I don't have any answers.' **Gerald\***

The barrage of opinion drowning out expertise was a frustration.

'Before social media and the internet seemed to me (more people) would say, "Oh, I don't know anything about it". "Really? Tell me more" from people who didn't know but now suddenly everyone is an expert on everything.'

**Louisa\***

Overall judgements about whether social media have been a good or a bad thing so far as political participation is concerned were again mixed, and possibly influenced by availability

heuristics as some of those interviewed later on in the fieldwork and after some significant political surprises seemed more inclined to express anxiety.

From the point of view of critical discourse analysis social media has a fundamental contradiction in that it offers a perceived freedom of expression but people using it, despite recognising their own often strong emotions, have an under developed sense of how the psychological responses and indeed the workings of the brain are being manipulated by the media, sometimes quite intentionally. The owners of social media companies and it seems political agents acting for various causes have a keen sense of how this media can be used to cause instability and to divide and possibly conquer, calling on hard-wired instincts of homophily, cognitive biases and so on. The motivation of social media companies on the face of it is about profit making, what the political intentions are of nation states or other agents who wish to manipulate people's behaviour via mischief making one can in many cases only speculate. That some participants are aware of this is interesting and evidence of wider learning, although it is hard to distinguish when this is simple paranoia or genuine insight. People interviewed have low levels of awareness of how their political understanding and choice making develops within, although they will refer to sitting round the kitchen table in childhood, this is not expressed in terms of inculcation or epigenetics or any of the other more abstract ideas emerging from contemporary psychology and neuroscience. It is possible that social media is a learning ground where in due course people will understand their own vulnerability to manipulation by forces whose intention may not always be clear but are calling on very innate responses to polarise to confuse, to exploit affective factors.

Individuals often become preoccupied with the idea that legacy or traditional print media are manipulating the way people think, most generally other people, because often those asked

believe themselves to be independent of such manipulation. Ironically the high degree of psychological and emotional manipulation to which they are exposed through the simple workings of social media are only partially apparent and only to some participants. So, those entering polarised debates such as the contextual case study events, perceive a new-found freedom to talk openly about their preferences, but only in some cases acknowledging the power of algorithms, notification mechanisms and other social media characteristics and stimuli which manipulate them emotionally and tend to push people towards echo chambers and polarisation and reinforce homophily. In this environment, people do indeed have agency, but this is mediated by factors they cannot always control. The point is, the environment is very complex, chaotic and has many variables. We might wish to impose upon this simplifying models, but in doing so, we must indeed be very circumspect about just how robust these are likely to be.

## 5.2 What can the political establishment learn from this?

Councillor Rachel was quite clear that social media offered a way of bridging local ward concerns and the 'Westminster bubble'. There is a sense in which for many people politics is a thing they want to do and need to do, but as something that must meld with their everyday lives, and social media offered a facility for this. However, the structures and parameters it offers are loose, and the 'social' can blossom or indeed, degrade, into the deeply personal. When it comes to persuasion, exhortation, leading and direction, social media confronts us all with what we are really up against, a level of complexity at which models and polls merely hint. The most perspicacious commentators realise the considerable challenges involved in addressing some of the difficulties involved. It is not simply a matter of telling people that they must listen better. Data and complexity science offer ways to understand and manage opinion better but insights can be exploited by those with the financial means to undertake this work. That is not always the political establishment. Do people have power and agency in this unpredictable environment? Yes, but they also have an unprecedented opportunity to learn and be challenged. Lastly, the



political establishment must recognise and reflect upon the extent to which networks of conversation happen completely out of sight, but unlike domestic conversations, can have a vast reach.

### 5.3 The researcher's journey

- Autoethnography and reflexivity

Social media has been used to share (non-confidential) learnings from the research, ask generic questions of contacts and to act as a retrievable diary.

Engagement with others either online or face-to-face with the topics of debate has led to the acquisition of a much more nuanced understanding of why people might think the way they do, and also of the issues of debate. The researcher's mind has been changed in at least some ways about each of the contextual case study debates, evidence itself of the ability of constant exposure over time to influence thought.

Fully immersive involvement in these media as an observer and participant can at times be an emotionally demanding experience and the reactions of others can sometimes be difficult to rationalise. An internalised acceptance of this fact nonetheless has helped towards a rationalisation process over time.

In the methodology chapter, questions were asked about reflexivity. Below are some responses to those questions not yet fully answered so far, very much in summary:

- How do the researcher's own values, experiences and interests shape this research?

This researcher brought an existing personal understanding of UK government and politics to this study and a pragmatic approach to these matters. The consideration of issues of identity, for example, has been influenced by living and working in a 'superdiverse' environment and a professional involvement in public health has supported reflections on the role wider health determinants and wellbeing play in how people engage politically.

- How is the project affecting the perspectives of the researcher?

This study was initiated to answer questions which, apart from their evident wider application, have been a personal preoccupation for some time. In part it has been provoked by an occasional difficulty in comprehending why people sometimes behave in certain ways in certain situations. The research process has begun to provide some answers. It has also provided a substantial amount of learning and personal development, better self-understanding of the roots of the perspectives of self and others and a degree of greater tolerance. The process of gathering initial data has been a significant learning experience in understanding not only this researcher's own prejudices and cognitive biases, but the very grounded and heartfelt reasons many people hold the beliefs they do. I have been persuaded to think more laterally about my own political opinions. Practically, multiple useful lessons have been learned about the organisation of field research including topic guide development, successful recording and transcription methods and how to conduct interviews fruitfully to an accompaniment of rush hour trains, espresso machines, honky-tonk pianists and weight-trainers.

#### 5.4 Objectives and hypothesis

Research objectives for this project were:

1. To add to the body of knowledge on political participation.

2. To gain a deeper understanding of the meaning and significance of informal, online political expression as seen from the perspective of participants.

Fieldwork has offered a rich narrative of personal experience of an emerging and developing form of participation during a period of very significant political events in the UK. It has shown that the perspectives and concerns of individual participants are often very different from the concerns of analysts. The often complex networks of meaning participants attach to their online participation can be explored effectively through phenomenological and phenomenographic approaches.

Working hypothesis

This was that developing a more nuanced and empirical understanding of why people believe that they act and interact as they do in the relatively novel medium of social media can support a more holistic understanding of current macropolitical change. To open up ways of thinking about online public debate that support constructive agonism.

Fieldwork has demonstrated the very genuine difficulty people can feel dealing with challenging others, regardless of their level of general education and cognitive skill, and their responses often have a very visceral element. Far from moving naturally towards consensus, many factors support moves towards polarisation, and despite awareness of this, it has to be consciously resisted. Some factors related to health and wellbeing can potentially add to these challenges. However, many participants recognize social media as a learning environment to which they find ways to adapt. This is not a straight trajectory, it is an iterative process involving anger and conflict somewhat like what group psychology theory recognises as 'storming, norming, forming and performing' (Tuckman 1965). The scope for relative degrees of equilibrium to be achieved is open to question, social media can help build consensus around perceived injustice but it is not in itself a mechanism of repair.

## 5.5 Areas for future research

This study has suggested a range of issues that might be fruitfully explored further. Remarks by Luton focus group members to the effect that they preferred the privacy of WhatsApp for discussions, and the interview observation by @Rachel\_Swindon that material for attacks on political adversaries were developed and stored in private message groups adds weight to the argument that there is room to develop more robust but supportive research ethics protocols around covert observation if the sociology and culture of online political discussion is to be really well understood. WhatsApp also suggests areas of research around trust, because messages are often coming from a 'trusted source', a friend or relative for example, so they may be more likely to be believed, however inaccurate they may be. This has significant implications for the conduct of political discourse.

The following also offer a number of potential opportunities:

- The extent to which seeking personal affirmation shapes political choices and behaviour
- Learning the ethnomethodology of social media – how people learn and change their ways of thinking over time in this environment
- Mental wellbeing and online political participation
- Further ways and methodologies for bringing human factors and complexity into the study of the public sphere in the online environment.

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## Appendix 1. Offline participation information and demographics<sup>38</sup>

### Responses – Question Group 3 – Offline participation

As noted in the Results chapter, this question set was asked to get working insights into people's political engagement more generally as this was anticipated to have a relationship to their online engagement. To note, only non-professional individual interviewees were asked the full set of questions, discussion groups were asked as a group, several of the specialists and professionals were not asked at all if not relevant to the rest of questioning, however either offered the information in other ways or it was publicly available. Some participants declined to answer some questions or specify some details.

As might be anticipated amongst people who took a proactive part in online political debate, offline engagement at a basic level was high and a high proportion of participants spoke of a history of active political and civic involvement, including in several instances, standing as a political candidate themselves or offering campaigning support, as one respondent colourfully put it, as a 'by-election bitch'. Trades Union membership tended to be low, (although several participants had been union officials and three of these gave this experience as a reason for their relative confidence in dealing with online conflict). Yet even amongst those with less formal involvement, there was a high level of wider civic engagement. Some also interpreted their current political belief system as something that had grown through time and because of specific experiences. In instances where issues became

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<sup>38</sup> Note: The author is not currently a member of any political party but has held past membership of the UK Labour Party, and while being open on social media about voting for the UK to remain within the EU, did not proactively campaign for this or indeed for any of the events discussed in fieldwork.

very polarised or hyperpartisan, sometimes the underlying references and triggers reached back decades. In the interesting case of the (much smaller) proportion of participants who expressed views in favour of leaving the EU, for example, these came from several very different starting points across the political spectrum although each in this cohort called upon some very longstanding political and economic issues as justification. For instance, UKIP-member Simon's\* resentment of the EU was rooted in recollection of the 1980s-imposed milk quotas which he felt had severely damaged the dairy industry in which he used to work. Self-described Marxist Alex\* took a perhaps more Bennite<sup>39</sup> socialist position, as did two of the politicians interviewed. Other interviewees were of non-European heritage and felt it mattered less to them or they were sceptical. Several felt it difficult to put across these nuanced or atypical positions online in a debate framed around other issues such as immigration.

On voting

The idea of civic duty infused responses around participation in the most basic functions of democracy. Many respondents were quite vehement in emphasising the importance of voting. All respondents in both interviews and discussion groups claimed to vote, except in a small number of instances where their circumstances did not permit it, or it came with restrictions, for example for reasons related to citizenship.<sup>40</sup> A small number of interviewees were not UK citizens, but currently

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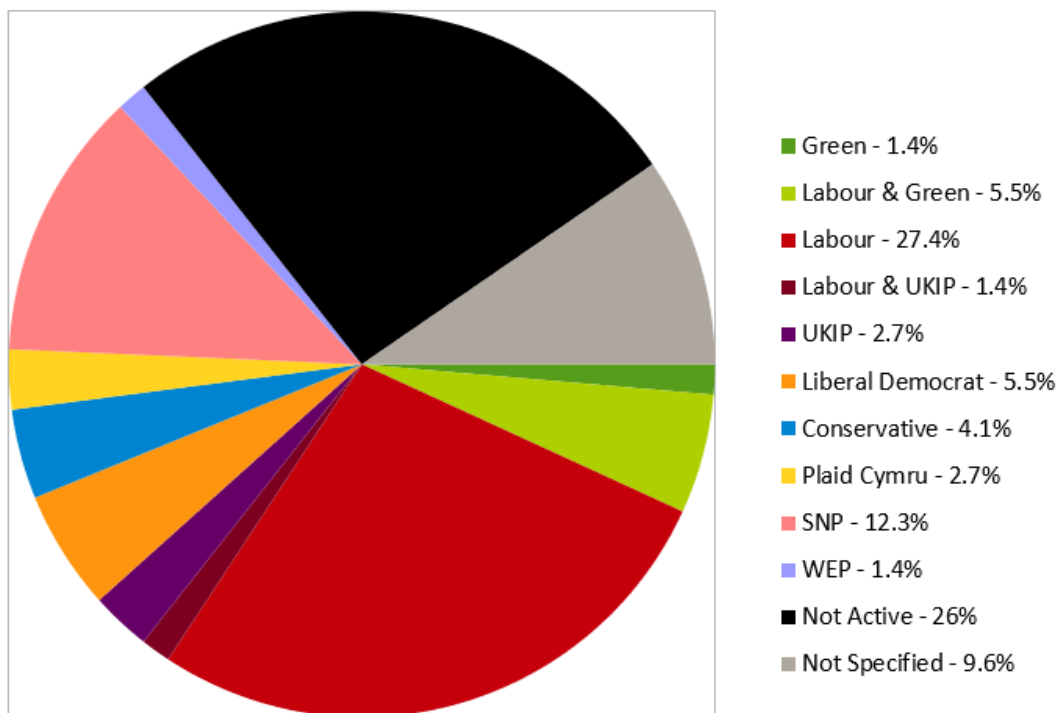
<sup>39</sup> Following the views of former British Labour Party politician Tony Benn.

<sup>40</sup> UK voting rules sometimes can sometimes seem counterintuitive, and many EU citizens living and working in the UK, and directly affected by the EU Referendum found themselves unable to vote on it, while Commonwealth citizens from countries like Nigeria, even in the UK on temporary arrangements such as for study, were able to do so, a fact apparently not widely understood.

full or part-time residents, or in one case, a US citizen with a strong interest in British politics. Three were citizens of other EU states.

### Party membership

Formal membership of political parties, while not comprehensive, appeared considerably higher than for the population as a whole. Amongst individual interviewees who were not professionals (politicians, political journalists and so on), nearly two thirds claimed current or past membership of a political party. Not all those who expressed strong support for a party had committed to actual membership. The reasons for this were not probed but some volunteered. Overall, 63% were currently political party members. Of these, the percentages in each party are given below. Note that some claimed membership of more than one.



In Alloa, all participants were SNP supporters apart from one who was a Labour Party member. In Luton, none of the group claimed membership of a political party and in South London only one person present was currently a paid-up member of a political party, which might be considered surprising given the strength of their political opinions. However, it was in line with opinions expressed by other interviewees about not being able to find a party that completely matched their specific preferences and aspirations.

#### Trades Union membership

Past or current trades union membership was counted, acknowledging that membership might cease for reasons such as retirement. Amongst non-specialist individual interviewees, the percentage of current or past trades union membership was considerably higher than the overall UK rate, at around 52 per cent against a national trend of around 23.5 per cent of employees in 2016.<sup>41</sup> In the focus groups, for Alloa, all but one participant claimed current and past membership, including one who held an official position for a significant time. In Luton, all group members claimed past membership of a trades union through their employment pre-retirement, but in South London only one. The factors behind this may be various, including the nature of employment or the past necessity of joining to practice a trade (the former closed-shop system<sup>42</sup>). While there might be implications around people's propensity to act as a collective, there was insufficient information to explore this. However, the topic of workplace rights was not cited as a motivation for online political discussion by these participants.

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<sup>41</sup> See: [//www.gov.uk/government/statistics/trade-union-statistics-2016](http://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/trade-union-statistics-2016)

<sup>42</sup> All forms of closed shops in the UK are illegal following the introduction of the Employment Act 1990.

## Social activism

There was a greater degree of involvement in various sorts of social activism, which was defined broadly by participants themselves as meaning anything from completing online petitions or attending marches to long-term and involved commitment to a specific cause, and more traditionally civic commitments such as school governorships. A factor seemed to be that their activity was based on preference, another was the opportunity to undertake activity online, at a time convenient to them.

## Local and constituency politics

Even interpreted broadly to encompass activity such as writing to and emailing MPs, offline participation at a local level was overall very low, except where participants were active members of political parties or held an official position. Interview feedback and observation of online discussion on party-focused groups has shown this to be a discussion point. A large influx of members to the Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn's leadership and the actions of campaign group Momentum was not immediately matched by swelling ranks at constituency meetings, if online commentary and some news reports were to be believed. This is not to appear judgmental, there are many reasons why people might not be eager or able to commit to regular constituency-level activity: social confidence, knowhow, work demands and family commitments for example, or ability and accessibility. However, whether the dopamine rewards of online debate spark enthusiasms that do not survive the slog and ordinariness of constituency and ward politics, preoccupied with bins, allotments, parking and other critical but passion-free matters, remains a question. So do people's motives, motivations and depth of reflection at the point of becoming involved.



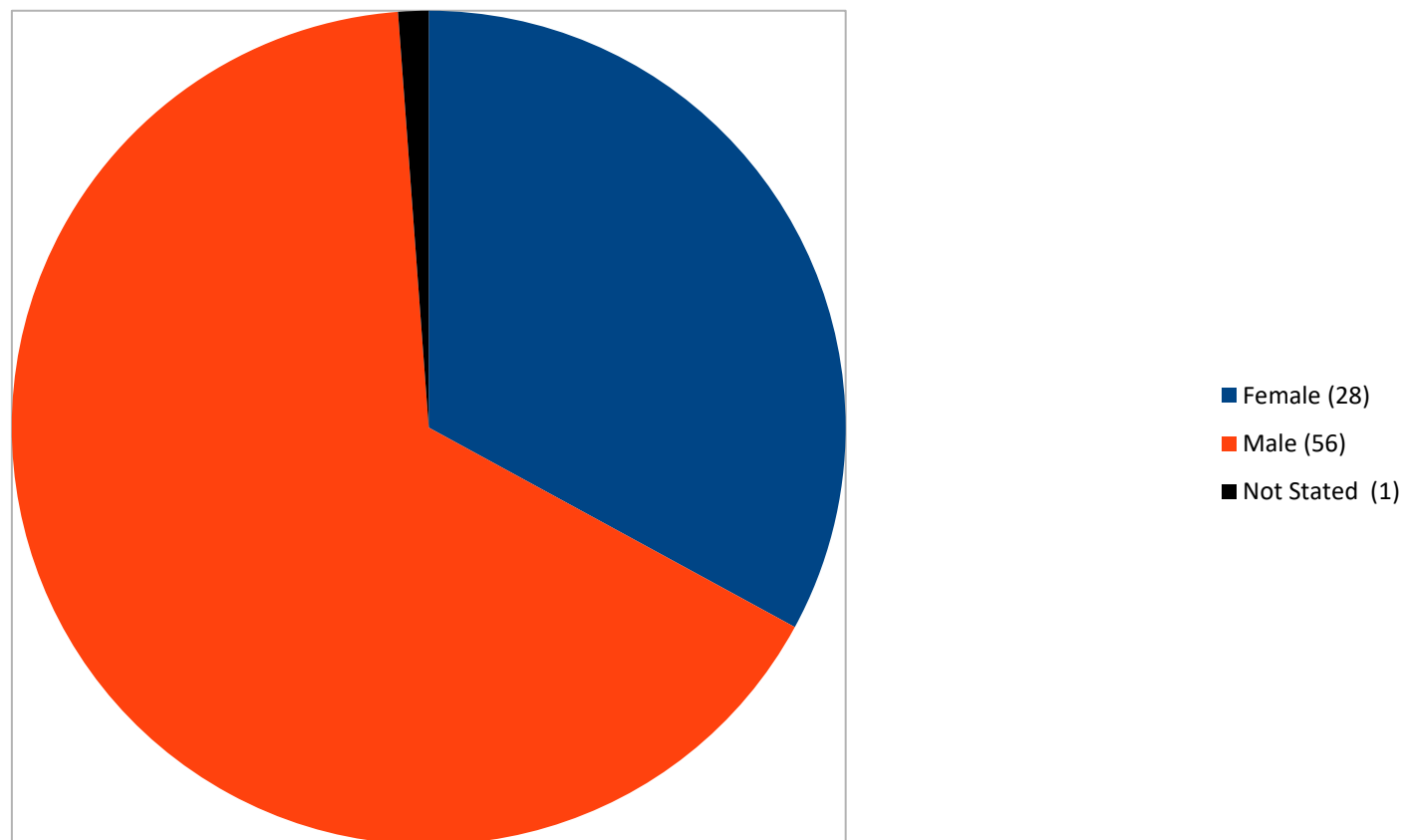
The Alloa group, by contrast, had a very high level of active involvement in constituency politics and suggested the resurgence of the SNP and the independence question was an important factor behind this, whether one was for or against. Comments were made about huge increases in local membership in the referendum run-up and the need for hiring bigger rooms.

The Luton group, all elders, were very politically engaged locally with an interest in community and national British politics and for reasons of their cultural heritage, Indian and South Asian affairs. They made several interesting comments around the long-term polarising effects on their own community of the partition of India. Indeed, the researcher was invited to a commemorative event at the same venue and was able to learn from this example how the effects of polarisation and division can play out on a large scale over time and indeed, across continents. Locally, this group had a strong connection to the local (Labour) MP about whose engagement with their community they spoke very positively.

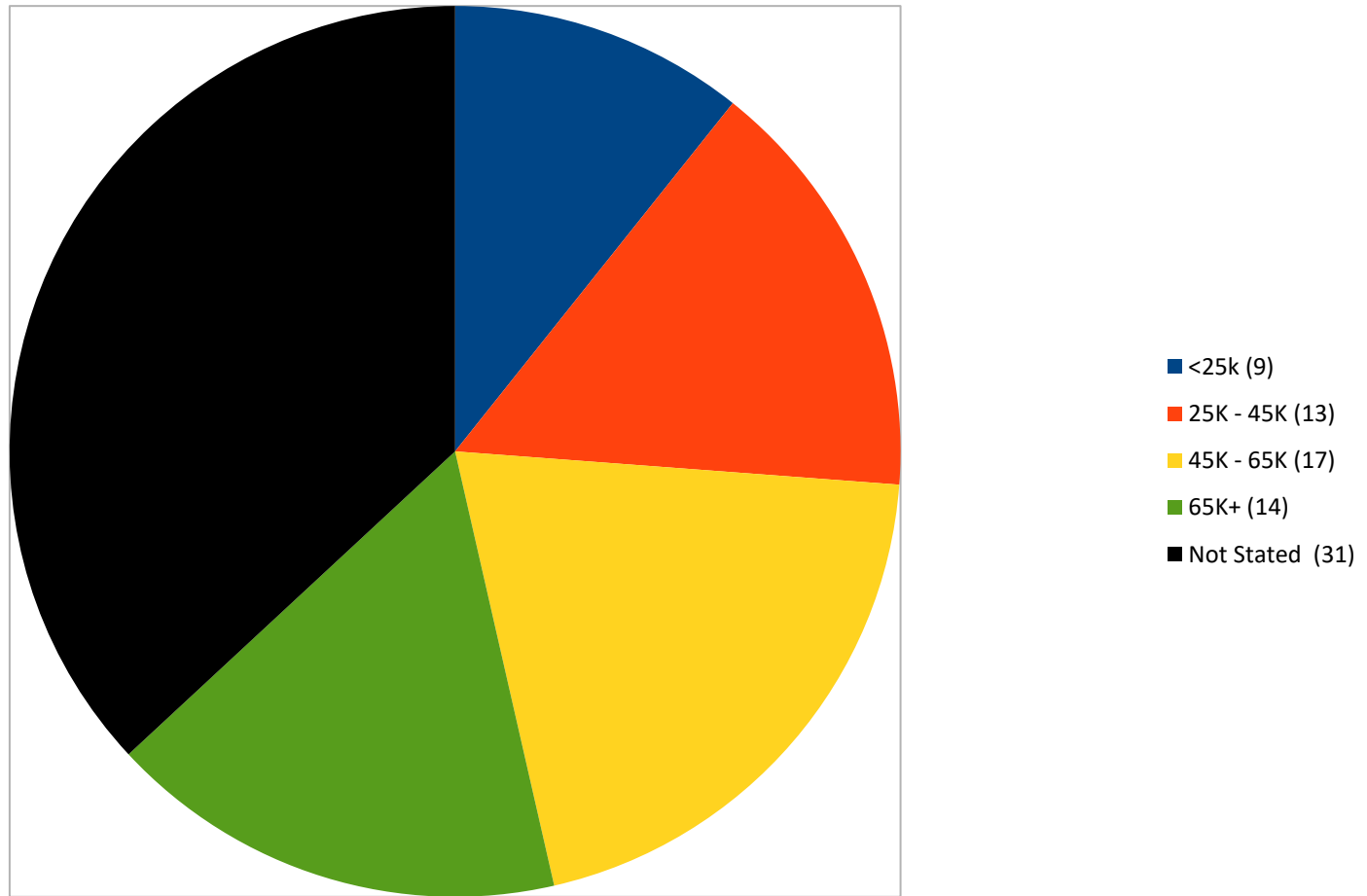
Amongst the South London group there was very little current formal engagement in traditional constituency politics, despite a reasonably high level of engagement in debate overall. GN21 webinar participants were not asked this question.

## Demographic information: Participants

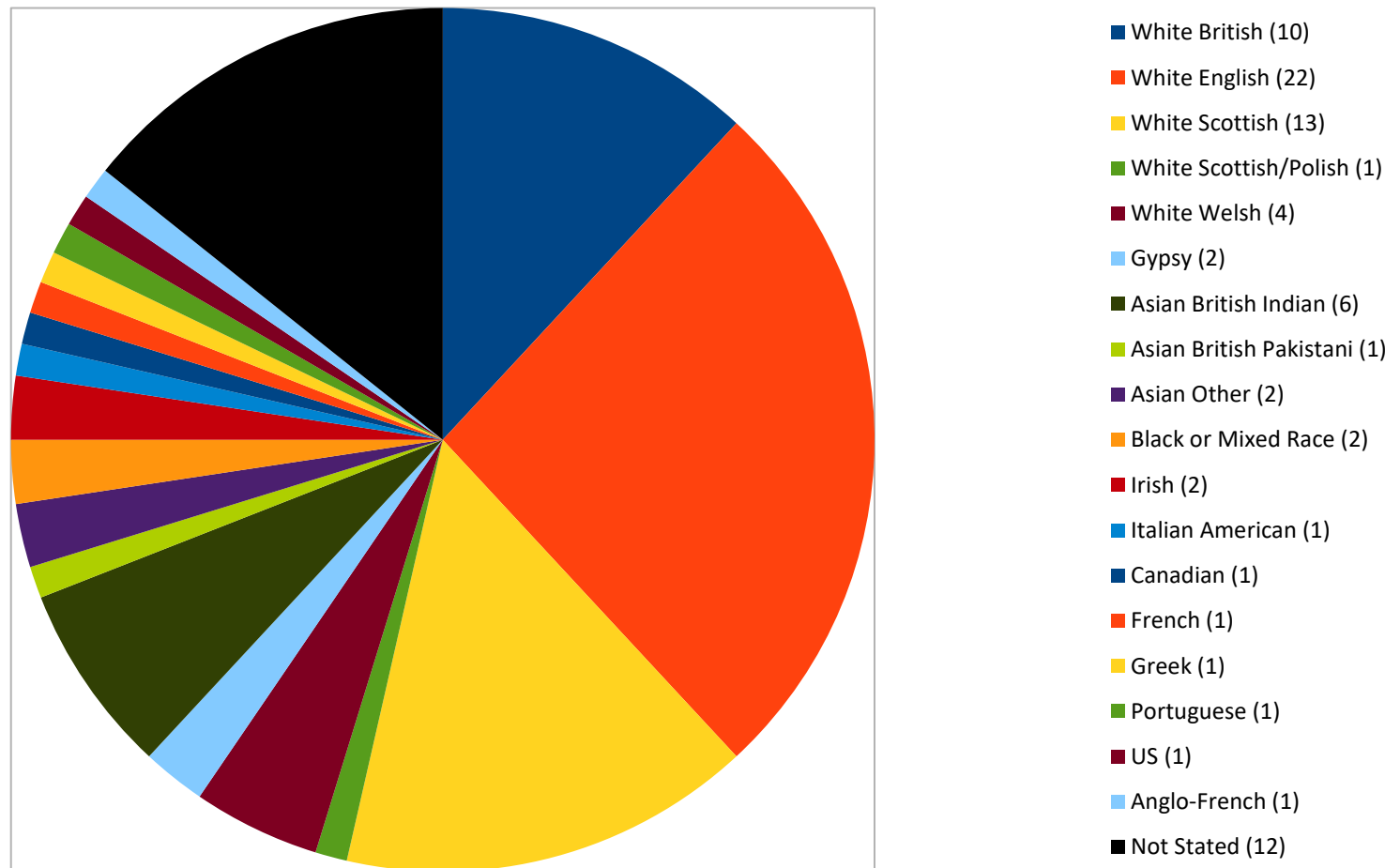
Male / Female / Other



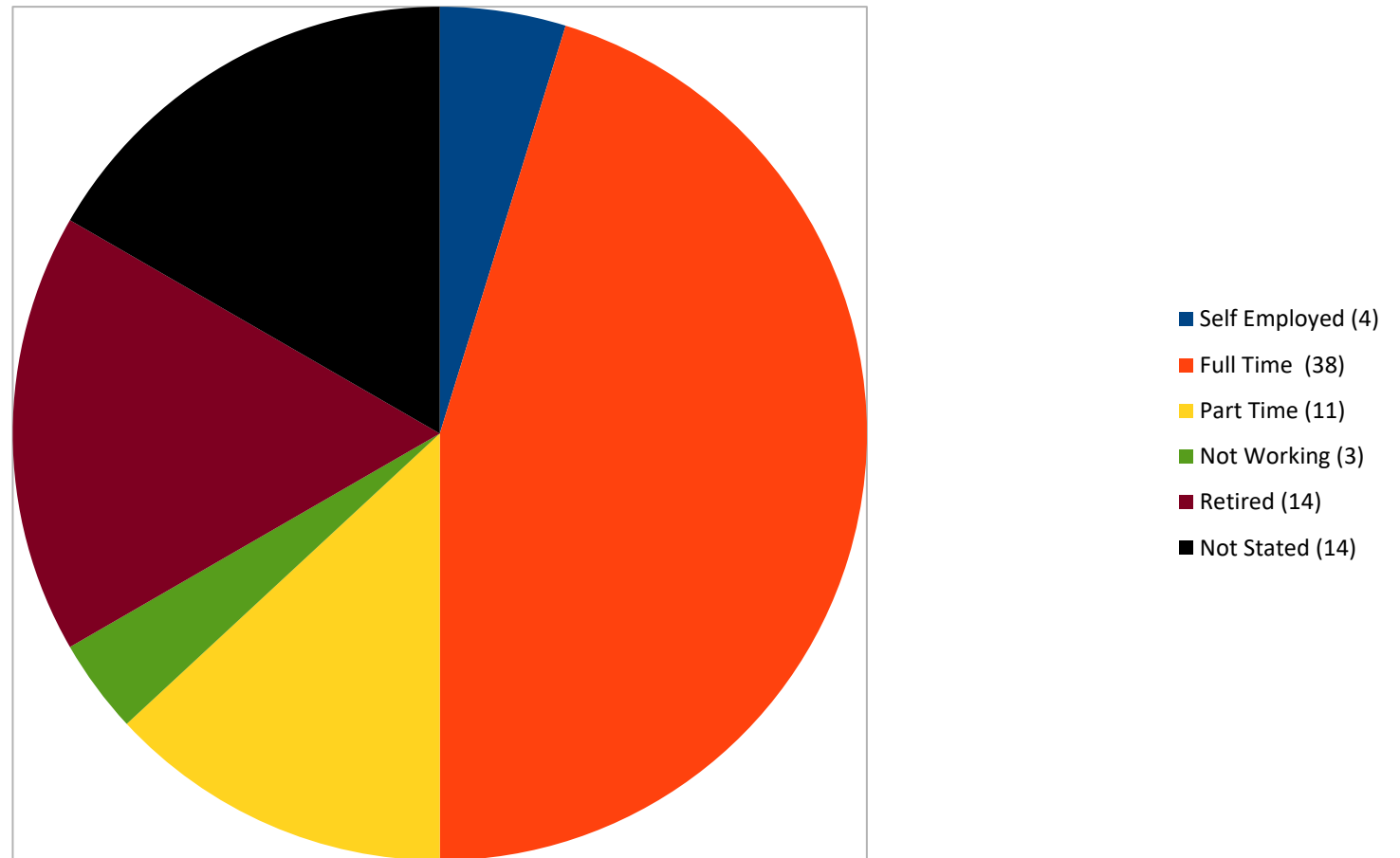
Income Band (GBP / Year)



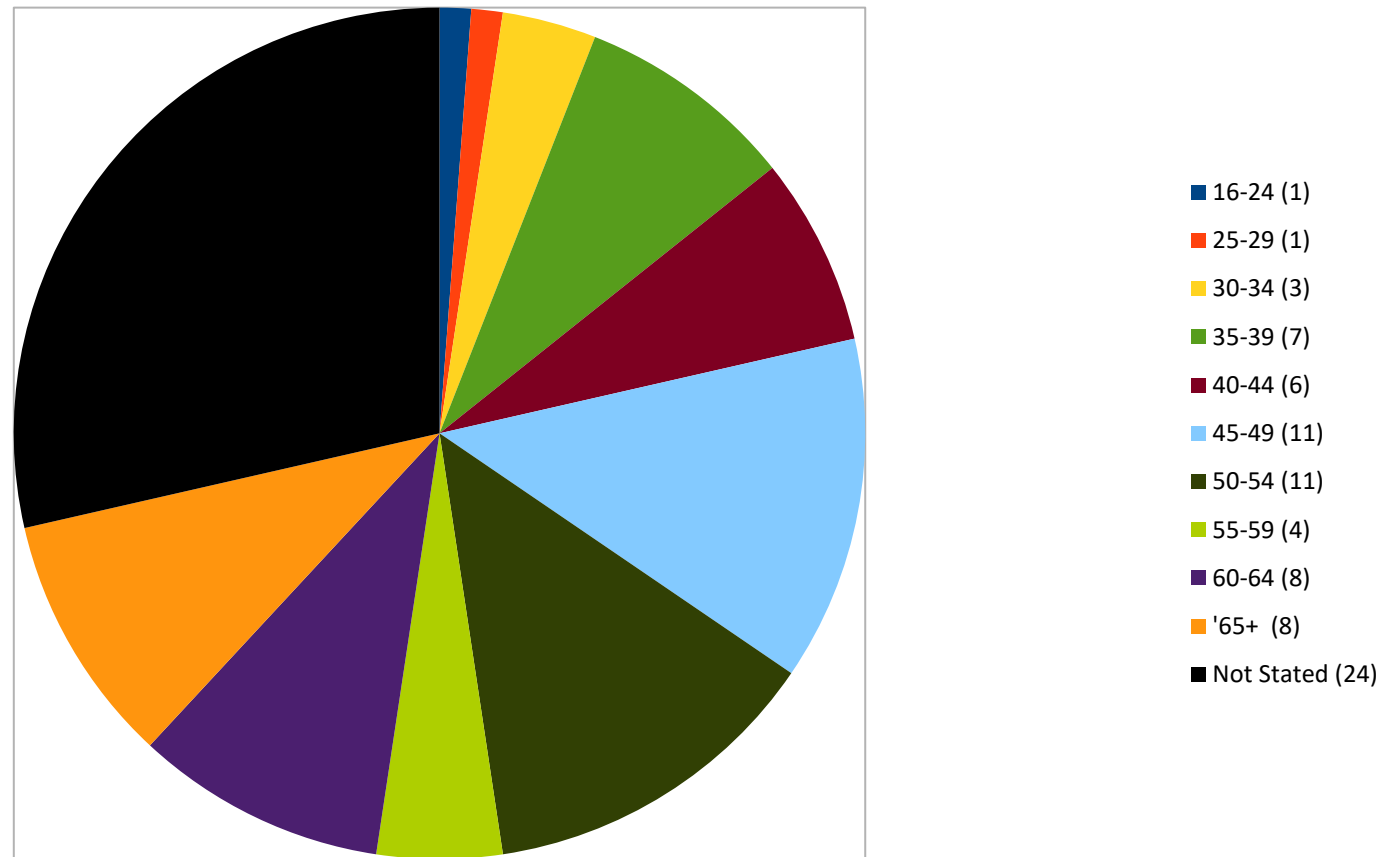
### Ethnicity



### Employment Status



Age Band



## Appendix 2. Documentation for participants and ethics clearance

### Documentation

This section contains

- Consent form template ✓
- Demographics form template ✓
- Information sheet and summary for participants – final ✓
- Discussion topic guide for interviews and focus groups – final version ✓
- Sample topic guide for politician ✓
- Ethics forms ✓

## Consent form template

### A study into the experiences of participants in online political discussion

Issue	Respondent's initial
I have read the information presented in the information letter about the study.	
I have had the opportunity to ask any questions related to this study, and received satisfactory answers to my questions, and any additional details I wanted.	
I am also aware that excerpts from the interview may be included in publications to come from this research. Quotations will be kept anonymous except where express permission is sought.	
I give permission for the interview to be recorded using audio recording equipment.	
I understand that relevant sections of the data collected during the study may be looked at by individuals from the University of Bedfordshire, approved external examiners from other universities and from regulatory authorities. Where it is relevant to my taking part in this research. I give permission for these individuals to have access to my responses.	

With full knowledge of all foregoing, I agree to participate in this study.

I agree to being contacted again by the researchers if my responses give rise to interesting findings

or cross references. Please tick

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>

If yes, my preferred method of being contacted is:

Method	Details		
Phone			
Email			
Other			
Participant Name:		Consent taken by	



Participant Signature:		Signature	
Date		Date	

**Researcher contact details:**

Elizabeth Bailey (phone, email and university address given).

## Demographics form template

The information you provide will stay confidential and be stored securely.

Please return the completed form marked 'Strictly confidential' to (researcher contact details given).

---

**Gender** Male  Female  Prefer not to say  Other

---

**Age** 16-24  25-29  30-34  35-39  40-44  45-49  50-54  55-59  60-64  65+  Prefer not to say

---

### What is your ethnicity?

Ethnic origin is not about nationality, place of birth or citizenship. It is about the group to which you perceive you belong. Please tick the appropriate box

#### **White**

English  Welsh  Scottish  Northern Irish  Irish

British  Gypsy or Irish Traveller  Prefer not to say

Any other white background, please write in:

#### **Mixed/multiple ethnic groups**

White and Black Caribbean  White and Black African  White and Asian  Prefer not to say  Any other mixed background, please write in:

***Asian/Asian British***

Indian  Pakistani  Bangladeshi  Chinese  Prefer not to say

Any other Asian background, please write in:

***Black/ African/ Caribbean/ Black British***

African  Caribbean  Prefer not to say

Any other Black/African/Caribbean background, please write in:

***Other ethnic group***

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Arab  Prefer not to say  Any other ethnic group, please write in:

**What is your current working pattern?**

Full-time  Part-time  Prefer not to say

**Can you give an approximation of your annual household income (all sources)**

Up to £25k  £25-45k  £45-65k

More than £65k  Prefer not to say

---

Information sheet and summary for participants – final version

# Research study: Social media and emergent UK political events 2013-2018

Participant Information Sheet

Dear Participant

I would like to ask you to participate in the data collection for a study into people's involvement in social media and emergent UK political events between 2013-2018.

This study is addressing the following questions:

- What sorts of factors influence the way UK users of social media engage in online political discussion?
- How do participants themselves understand and evaluate their participatory role, particularly in relation to emergent political events in the period of study?
- How do they see the relationship between their online activity and real-life political outcomes?

Research objectives

- To add to the body of knowledge on political participation.
- To gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of informal, online political expression.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. It will involve participation in (a focus group/an interview of approximately 20 - 30 minutes/45-90 or as agreed in advance in length) to take place by arrangement.

I will initially contact you by email or telephone. You may decide not to answer any of the (discussion/interview) questions if you wish.

You may also decide to withdraw from this study at any time by advising the researcher interviewing you or by emailing (researcher details given) or using the other contact details at the end of this document. If you notify us of your withdrawal, all identifiable data will be destroyed. However, once data has been anonymised it may be impossible to identify the origin and if so, it cannot be destroyed.

I may ask for clarification of issues raised in the interview some time after it has taken place, but you will not be obliged in any way to clarify or participate further.

The information you provide is confidential, except that with your permission quotes may be used, anonymised unless further permission is sought. If you request confidentiality beyond anonymised quotes, information you provide will be treated only as a source of background information, alongside literature-based research and interviews with others.

Your name or any other personal identifying information will not appear in any publications resulting from this study.

The information gained from this (focus group/interview) will only be used for the above objectives, will not be used for any other purpose and will not be recorded in excess of what is required for the research. All data will be securely stored in line with the University of Bedfordshire's Policies.

Even though the study findings may potentially be published in conferences, journals and related publications, only the research team will have access to the interview data itself. There are no known or anticipated risks to you as a participant in this study.

If you have any questions regarding this study or would like additional information please ask the researcher before, during, or after the interview.

Contact details of researcher given.

## Core question and discussion topic list – for participants – 2017 supplementary

This is the list of topic areas proposed for group discussion/personal interview with participants in online discussion.

In the introduction I will be covering the following:

- Letting you know that I am recording the session
- Explaining what I am going to use the data from this session for
- How long I am going to keep it for
- How I am going to report your responses; reassuring you about anonymity and/or confidentiality - you won't be identified in any way alongside any of your comments unless express permission is sought afterwards
- That there are no right/wrong answers – I am interested in your honest opinions

Topic area	Question	Comments
1. Context/introduction	<p>I am interested in your general perceptions and experiences of online political debate, but I am also particularly interested in seeking insights into engagement with specific political events if any or all of these apply to you:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scottish Referendum 2014 and/or</li> <li>• Labour Leadership Campaigns and rated ongoing debate</li> <li>• UKIP surge/EU Referendum 2016</li> </ul> <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The 2017 UK general election</li> </ul>	
2. Participation	<p>Do you take, or have you taken part in online political commentary or discussion of any sort?</p> <p>If you do, why?</p> <p>If you don't, why not (refer to question list B or open discussion with reference to topic guide issues).</p>	To gather insight into people's levels of participation and how people understand the reason they do or don't do this.

	<p>(experiences - positive and negative), when, why? etc.)</p> <hr/> <p>In which sort of environments do you participate?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Friends and family only</li> <li>• Only those that reflect your own views</li> <li>• A mixture</li> </ul> <p>Can you give examples of the online spaces in which you debate?</p> <hr/> <p>Do you take part in any offline political activity, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Voting</li> <li>• Membership of a political party</li> <li>• Membership of a trade union</li> <li>• Social activism</li> <li>• Local politics</li> <li>• Have you sought proactively to follow online TV debates?</li> </ul>	
<p>3. Experience</p>	<p>How do you find your experience of talking about politics online? By this I mean in the interpersonal sense, for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have you established friendships through participation in online politics?</li> <li>• What do you think about aggression and trolling?</li> <li>• How do you deal with aggression and trolling?</li> <li>• Would you ever describe your own contributions as challenging, combative or aggressive?</li> <li>• Have you ever engaged in mischievous or trolling behaviour?</li> </ul>	<p>To gather insights into people's subjective experience</p>



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Do you have experience of political expression causing tensions amongst family and friends? (if comfortable, please elaborate).</li> </ul>	
4. Event specific experience	<p>I am seeking qualitative insights into the specific political events under study:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Scottish Referendum 2014</li> <li>Labour Leadership Campaign</li> <li>EU Referendum 2016</li> </ul>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2017 UK general election</li> </ul>	
	Open question, but probe for comparisons over time.	
5. Issues of identity	<p>Do you see the comments you make online as being an expression of your identity, for example, as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A loyal supporter of one political party?</li> <li>A member of a particular demographic or cultural group?</li> <li>A believer in specific values</li> </ul>	
6. Efficacy	<p>Do you think your participation can or does make a difference?</p> <p>Have you changed your mind on any political matter as a result of what you see on social media?</p>	
7. Getting informed	<p>Where do you get the information that informs your political opinions?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mainstream UK media, on or offline</li> <li>Overseas owned media, e.g., US channels such as CNN, Fox, Huffington Post, other from other countries – Al Jazeera, RT (Russia Today), and others?</li> <li>‘Alternative’ media, e.g., The Canary, Bella Caledonia, ‘alt left’ sources such as Another Angry Voice, Evolve Politics etc.</li> </ul>	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bloggers (which sort)</li> <li>• Friends, family</li> <li>• Books</li> <li>• Political meetings</li> </ul> <p>Why do you use those sources? What do you trust or find most credible about these?</p> <p>Do you regularly read from sources other than those that reflect your personal opinions</p> <p>Do you make efforts to cross check the source or accuracy of the material you read and share?</p>	
<p>8. Social media awareness (optional/time allowing)</p>	<p>Are you aware of any of the following expressions, and could you explain to me what they mean?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Echo chamber</li> <li>• Filter bubble</li> <li>• Virtue signalling</li> <li>• Confirmation bias</li> <li>• Backfire effect</li> <li>• Context collapse</li> </ul> <p>If time, explain ideas if needed, and ask what they feel about them.</p>	
<p>9. Any other observations people wish to make of the effects social media have had on political debate.</p>	<p>Open.</p>	
<p>Conclude.</p>		

### **Draft questions for (local politicians, sample)**

1. **Yourself:** How do you use social media politically yourself, as a working local politician and as an individual? Have you expanded your network as a result of using it and has it offered you significant opportunities? If so, what sort?
2. **Others** Do you follow wider public political discussion on Facebook, Twitter or other channels? If so, what sort of things do you follow? What do you feel about the way people conduct political debate on social media – do you feel it is different than in the past and if so, in what ways?
3. **Events:** As a working local politician, political activist and someone working within the Westminster environment, what are your views on how public discussion of politics on social media is affecting the political scene? Do you have any thoughts on the two major referendums, the Scottish Independence and EU referendums – what sort of role do you think social media has played in this?
4. **Labour party:** What are your views on how the debate around the Labour Party Leadership has been conducted on social media? What do you think the effects might have been?
5. **Political climate:** How do you view the current health of the political climate? The Labour Party in particular? Do you believe this has been shaped much by social media? Why?
6. **Influencing factors:** Do you have any views about the factors which might lie behind the way people engage and interact politically on social media?
7. **Open:** Your further thought on political debate on social media that might not have been covered in the questions above or that you would like to add.

## Ethics scrutiny form and departmental approval letter

### UNIVERSITY OF BEDFORDSHIRE

#### Research Ethics Scrutiny (Annex to RS1 form)

##### SECTION A To be completed by the candidate

Registration No: 1228812

Candidate: Elizabeth Anne Bailey

Degree of: PhD

Research Institute: RIMAP

Research Topic: Social media and emergent UK political movements 2010-2016<sup>43</sup>

External Funding:

The candidate is required to summarise in the box below the ethical issues involved in the research proposal and how they will be addressed. In any proposal involving human participants the following should be provided:

- clear explanation of how informed consent will be obtained,
- how will confidentiality and anonymity be observed,
- how will the nature of the research, its purpose and the means of dissemination of the outcomes be communicated to participants,
- how personal data will be stored and secured
- if participants are being placed under any form of stress (physical or mental) identify what steps are being taken to minimise risk

If protocols are being used that have already received University Research Ethics Committee (UREC) ethical approval, then please specify. Roles of any collaborating institutions should be clearly identified. Reference should be made to the appropriate professional body code of practice.

- **How informed consent will be obtained**

All participants in focus groups or interviews will be adults over 18 years.

In the case of focus group participants and individual interviewees, consent forms as attached will be sent to participants for completion in advance of the discussion.

In the case of individual, especially professional, participants (such as MPs) if it is their preference to give their consent with any caveats relating to their professional status then written consent will be sought in their preferred format (e.g. letter or email).

In the case of online focus groups and individual discussions consent forms as attached will be sent to participants for completion in advance of the discussion.

In the case of material obtained from open social media groups where commentary has a clear open-to-all privacy marking this will be considered in the public domain, although individual names will not be used when reproducing commentary unless there is clear justification for doing so (for example, the participant is a public figure, or a high profile/ social media commentator).

There is less clarity around the ethical position of closed groups where practical barriers to entry are to all intents and purposes low or negligible and material can arguably be considered in the public domain (and

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<sup>43</sup> Working title at time of submission. Altered in the light of the unexpected UK General Election on 2017

would be, for example for journalistic purposes). In the event of material from these settings being referred to, it will be used as background information and extra care will be taken to anonymise material.

Owing to the potential anonymity afforded by social media it is not always possible to be sure that public contributors are over the age of 18 or are not in any way vulnerable but as, in the event of contributions being used they will be anonymised, contributors would not be identifiable.

- **How confidentiality and anonymity will be observed**

All contributions will be anonymised for publication with some exceptions where material is in the public domain or the participant has given their express permission for specific details to be shared.

- **How the nature of the research, its purpose and the means of dissemination of the outcomes will be communicated to participants**

A communication outlining the nature and purpose of the research will be sent to all focus group (online and offline) participants and individual MPs as part of the recruitment process – a draft is attached. This will include information about what the research will be used for and has a slip/link which people can complete to receive a summary of the final research plus a link to the whole document.

- **How personal data will be stored and secured**

Further to discussion with the Research Graduate School, all material will be kept in password-protected files on a secure cloud-based storage site (Microsoft OneDrive) in accordance with University guidelines for part-time students.

- **If participants are being placed under any form of stress (physical or mental) identify what steps are being taken to minimise risk**

Participants will not be under any undue stress, but accepting that discussion will cover potentially contentious political areas, participants will be asked to be respectful of the opinions of other group members.

Answer the following question by deleting as appropriate:

1. Does the study involve vulnerable participants or those unable to give informed consent (e.g. children, people with learning disabilities, your own students)?

**No**

If **YES**: Have/will Researchers be DBS checked?

**n/a**

2. Will the study require permission of a gatekeeper for access to participants (e.g. schools, self-help groups, residential homes)?

**No**

3. Will it be necessary for participants to be involved without consent (e.g. covert observation in non-public places)?

**No**

4. Will the study involve sensitive topics (e.g. sexual activity, substance abuse)?

**No, not of this nature, but political issues will be discussed – see above.**

5. Will blood or tissue samples be taken from participants?

**No**

6. Will the research involve intrusive interventions (e.g. drugs, hypnosis, physical exercise)?

**No**

7. Will financial or other inducements be offered to participants (except reasonable expenses)?

**Light refreshments, e.g. tea/coffee will be offered**

8. Will the research investigate any aspect of illegal activity?

**No**

9. Will participants be stressed beyond what is normal for them?

**No**

10. Will the study involve participants from the NHS (e.g. patients) or participants who fall under the requirements of the Mental Capacity Act 2005?

**No**

If you have answered yes to any of the above questions or if you consider that there are other significant ethical issues then details should be included in your summary above. If you have answered yes to Question 1 then a clear justification for the importance of the research must be provided.

\*Please note if the answer to Question 10 is yes then the proposal should be submitted through **NHS research ethics approval procedures** to the appropriate **NRES**. The UREC should be informed of the outcome.

Checklist of documents which should be included:

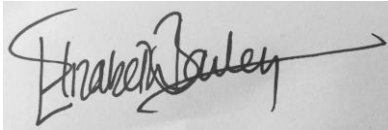
Project proposal (with details of methodology) & source of funding	Attached
Documentation seeking informed consent (if appropriate)	Attached
Information sheet for participants (if appropriate)	Attached
Questionnaire (if appropriate)	Attached

(Tick as appropriate)

**Applicant declaration**

I understand that I cannot collect any data until the application referred to in this form has been approved by all relevant parties. I agree to carry out the research in the manner specified and comply with the statement of ethical requirements on page 1 of this form. If I make any changes to the approved method I will seek further ethical approval for any changes.

Signature of Applicant:

A handwritten signature in black ink on a light grey background. The signature is written in a cursive style and reads "Elizabeth Bailey".



2 August 2016

Elizabeth Bailey  
PhD Student  
RIMAP

Dear Elizabeth,

**RE: Social media and emergent UK political movements 2010-2016**

I am pleased to inform you that The Ethics Committee of the Research Institute for Media, Arts and Performance (RIMAP) has granted ethical approval for the above research project after having examined your proposal and related evidence.

As no objection was made, work on the project can be started as soon as convenient for you. However, RIMAP Ethics Committee would like to receive a brief summary/report upon completion of the project itself.

Please do not hesitate to contact me should you have any query.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "G. Poesio".

Giannandrea Poesio, PhD, MA, Dip CS  
Chair of RIMAP Ethics Committee  
Director of the Research Institute for Media, Arts and Performance  
University of Bedfordshire



