

Insider Outside: Freedoms and Limitations in the Twitter Communications of the United Kingdom's All Party Parliamentary Group on Refugees

Abstract

The All Party Parliamentary Group on Refugees occupies a position outside the official legislative system of the United Kingdom, but inside a lobbying network. This gives it a unique place in terms of communicating on behalf of refugees and refugee causes. The Group's Twitter feed shows that its language is different to that of campaigning organisations outside Parliament and is constrained by procedure, parliamentary practice and the political reality of a party-based environment. Aimed at Parliamentarians, the feed is used to support and promote causes and specific policy proposals. It plays a role in reporting what is going on in Parliament and supports and builds alliances with other organisations inside and outside the system. The feed's content follows the primary information-providing objective. It could however make that information of more use to recipients, by changing the way in which some of that information is presented.

Key words: Twitter, Parliament, Refugees, Lobbying, United Kingdom, MPs

Introduction

This article focuses on the Twitter communication activities of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Refugees in the United Kingdom Parliament, which aims to inform and to persuade, often within an unfriendly media and political environment.

The APPG on Refugees brings together Members of Parliament (MPs sitting in the House of Commons) and Peers (members of the House of Lords), who represent a range of parties. It works with external bodies and with those within Parliament to provide information on refugee-related issues and to advocate for positive change in legislation on behalf of refugees. Among its recent initiatives is getting MPs from all parties to call for a change in the "move on" policy'. This controversial policy gives those granted refugee status only 28 days to find alternative support, including new housing arrangements, to that provided during the asylum-seeking stage.

All-Party Parliamentary Groups (APPGs) serve a range of functions in national legislatures (Thomas 2016), but what they have in common is the ability to communicate both externally and internally on a chosen issue. They thus span the boundary between media and legislators, between legislators and policy makers, between external organizations and Parliament. This 'insider outside' position gives APPGs a privileged role in communications which could be used to great effect.

There has been little written about the work of APPGs and almost nothing on the one on Refugees, despite their unique position in the network of parliamentary and campaigning relationships. The only exception to this is Thomas' recent work (2016), which looks at similar groups operating in four legislative environments and in which he contends that APPGs are

one of the least studied, and so least well-known, aspects of the UK Parliament. This article will therefore start to fill a gap in existing knowledge by enhancing our empirically based understanding of the Group's social media communications. This article focuses on the APPG on Refugees' Twitter feed, looking in particular at the choice of language and content, but also at the limiting factors in the Group's approach to Twitter communications during part of 2018. The author has also interviewed the Group's Secretariat, provided by the Refugee Council (earlier known as the British Refugee Council), a registered charity which is 'the leading charity working with refugee and asylum seekers in the UK' (Refugee Council website 2018) and which was formed by the merger of two refugee support organisations founded in the 1950s.

APPGs

What makes APPGs interesting in the highly partisan atmosphere of the Parliamentary chambers, is the ability of MPs from different parties to collaborate on issues of importance to them. Co-operation across party lines is as old as Parliament itself and APPGs themselves are not new. The established group with the longest history is the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee, founded in the 1930s. There has however been a recent growth in the number of Groups. Thomas found that the number of groups 'rose sharply in the 1950s, and then again in the 1990s and 2000s' (Thomas 2016: 32). Between 1996 and 2014 the number 'more than doubled' (Thomas 2016: 3). The UK Parliament also appears comparatively more prone to such groups being set up. In 2010 there were nearly 600 in Westminster, while at the same time the United States Congress only had around 380 congressional member organisations (House of Commons Speaker's Working Group on All-Party Groups, 2012).

APPGs fall into two categories. There are those concerned with relations with other countries such as the All-Party Group on France. These make up about one fifth of the UK total. The rest are subject-based dealing with 'virtually every conceivable policy issue, from the steel industry and cancer to mountaineering and classical music' (Thomas and Frier 2018: 112).

APPGs therefore can be useful to MPs and Peers, as they enable members to focus on particular areas of interest or expertise. They can help develop knowledge and collect case-studies. They can also enable members to position themselves as caring or being knowledgeable about a particular topic. The APPG on Refugees has among its members several Parliamentarians who are individually active in asking parliamentary questions, initiating debates, supporting bills and writing articles on the topic. The current Chair, Thangam Debbonaire MP recently used the Labour List website (a site for and about the Labour Party and its supporters) to promote family reunion rights for refugees in 2018. Consequently, APPGs allow Parliamentarians to acquire political and knowledge capital while engaging with issues of interest to them.

APPGs however face limits to their supposed freedom of communication. Their all-party nature, which is enforced by the rules of the system (Parliamentary Commission for Standards 2017), means that dramatic anti-government or pro-opposition policy statements cannot realistically be made. Office-holders have other roles in their own party and constituency, which again are likely to act as a brake on any highly radical statements. That said, the boundary-spanning role of these groups gives them an ability to speak to many audiences and

can add credibility to what they say. Groups which follow the rules as laid down by Parliament are able, for example, to use the famous and recognisable portcullis logo (the emblem of both Houses of Parliament) on publications and to take priority in the use of parliamentary facilities, such as rooms for meetings and launches (Parliamentary Commission for Standards 2017).

Freedoms come with certain constraints, which do not take away from the significance of APPGs. On the contrary, APPGs provide a bridge over the boundary between the inside work of the Parliament and the outside work of the Secretariat, which contains groups which have the role of bringing in as well as sending out thoughts and ideas, in a less politically formalized way. This ability is particularly important when it comes to highly contended and politically loaded issues as those provided by refugees (see McLaren, Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart 2018). In this case, it is interesting to look at how the APPG on Refugees manages to conduct its boundary spanning role with an eye on the issues, but also on the public relations effect of its activities, while also watching for the inherent limitations of political affiliation and widespread negativity concerning refugees. To this aim, the article focuses on social media and more specifically Twitter, as social media is one area of communicative engagement that tends to be less limited by institutional constraints and where the APPG on Refugees has more freedom in selecting and designing its public interactions.

The purpose of the APPG Group on Refugees, as described in its registration, is to 'provide a forum for the discussion of issues relating to refugees, both in the UK and abroad, and to promote the welfare of refugees' (Houses of Parliament, Register of APPGs 2018). In the interview, with the Secretariat, it was described as 'a mechanism to bring together Parliamentarians from all parties who have an interest in refugee and asylum issues. It provides a forum for discussing these issues through public and private events, with external speakers, experts and refugees or those seeking asylum' (interview with the Secretariat).

Groups are obliged under the rules to have office holders from different parties, which must include representation from the government party and the main opposition party. The Register (as of October 2018) lists Labour MP Thangam Debbonaire as Chair with Nicky Morgan (Conservative), Caroline Lucas (Green) and David Linden (Scottish National Party) as Vice Chairs. A separate listing on the Refugee Council website (2018) shows more than 50 Parliamentarians as members.

The current focus (Autumn 2018) is work around a forthcoming Immigration Bill. Previous policy recommendations by the Group have 'shifted government policy on a number of issues (interview with the Secretariat). These include 'getting refugees quicker access to a National Insurance Number' and 'leading the debate on reforming immigration detention', which led to Government now looking at alternatives to detention (interview with the Secretariat).

Support for the APPG on Refugees is provided by the Secretariat, currently, as already mentioned, the Refugee Council. More specifically, support is provided by a member of staff specialising in public affairs. This work takes up approximately twenty per cent of the staff member's time, with the rest of work being focused on the Refugee Council's own activities. Who provides the Secretariat is important. As Thomas (2016) points out, APPGs vary considerably in their level of activity. This is likely to be a feature of time and resources, as

well as of opportunity. A well-organized, well-funded Secretariat is therefore likely to be able to assist Parliamentarians initiate a wealth of communications.

Lobbying and ethical concerns

Despite the rising number of APPGs, the academic literature devotes little space to them, with the exception of Thomas (2016). They are briefly covered in some works on lobbying and public affairs (Zetter 2014, Grant 2018, Thomson 2016) but other similarly focused texts omit to mention them altogether (Colvin 2011). They receive a brief mention in some works about Parliament (Searing 1994, Rogers and Walters 2015, Leston-Bandeira and Thompson 2018), but some of these mentions are so brief as to be restricted to a list of terms. Dale (2015) devotes a little more space to them in support of would-be parliamentary researchers, but this is limited to instructions for any staff member who finds they have to work on a Group.

This paper argues that APPGs warrant considerably more attention, since the purpose of a subject based APPG's communications is to win support either for a cause or for a particular course of action. However, as briefly mentioned before, the difficulty for APPGs is that their status is guaranteed by their membership and strict parliamentary rules, which will limit the freedom to be outspoken, particularly when it comes to controversial issues. An APPG's communications will be more restrained than those on the same topic by, for example, an external campaign group, yet despite this, it would have to still enter public debate and present a certain stance and support certain initiatives. These Groups have to seek media coverage for their activities and proposals and therefore communications will be designed with this aim in mind. In addition to a positive public profile, a Group's communications will equally be aimed at reinforcing links and making (appropriate) alliances, because many external organisations will seek to work with the APPG and vice-versa.

Existing literature on lobbying communications might shed some light on this ethically tight rope. For organizations outside Parliament, APPGs can be a valuable target or aid in lobbying. According to Zetter, lobbyists 'can actually sponsor an APPG – although this has to be declared' and organizations 'can provide the secretariat for an APPG – although again this has to be declared'. In addition, lobbyists 'can arrange for speakers to address an APPG meeting' or can 'suggest topics for APPG reports and assist in their compilation and distribution' (Zetter 2014: 202-3). Consequently, interested organizations can ally themselves very closely with APPGs in their attempt to influence the Parliamentary agenda, such as the Refugee Council in relation to the APPG on Refugees. Examples of work done by the APPG on Refugees have included pressing the Government to speed up the issue of National Insurance numbers for refugees and producing the Refugees Welcome? report (2017) which made recommendations based on the experiences of new refugees in the UK. The report emphasises that the inquiries leading to its findings and recommendations have been conducted by a group of Parliamentarians on behalf of the APPG on Refugees, with support provided by the charity The Refugee Council, but that the report is not an official publication and has not been approved by either House.

The mention of the involvement of Parliamentarians from both the House of Lords and the Commons in producing reports and recommendations such as these, points towards another useful feature of APPGs. As Thomson (2016) explains, APPGs are an ideal device for lobbyists

aiming to impact on policy, because these groups are one of the few examples of MPs and Peers working side by side. Consequently, working with an APPG gives organizations access to both Parliamentary Chambers and their representatives.

However, APPGs are also a valuable device for Parliamentarians as well, because of their boundary spanning role and the ability to engage with topical and difficult issues. Zetter quotes Mark Field MP (at the time a Government minister and Conservative MP for a London constituency) who said:

‘APPGs are extremely valuable for MPs, peers and outside bodies [...] All Party Groups will never replace the work of select committees, and nor should they. What they can do is to zone in on particular subjects, industries and countries in a way that no other official, or quasi-official bodies are able to do.’ (Zetter 2014: 203)

However, the mere existence of APPGs is questioned both by the academic literature and by journalists and politicians involved with their work. The biggest concern seems to be that of ethics and transparency. While APPGs are not, strictly speaking, part of the official system, they are part of a system of interlocking groups, processes and interests associated with Parliamentary work. For some APPGs, as well as lobbyists, this vagueness could be an advantage. It is easier to go past boundaries if there is some doubt about how strong those boundaries are. However, to keep credibility with journalists and public, it is clearly important to have a defined status. An awareness of existing concerns is likely to affect decisions made about communications, because achieving positive media coverage and being able to influence the agenda is important to the Groups and their members.

So far concerns have been raised about the way transparency and fairness may be affected by lobbying interests, funding and press reporting, leading to a number of reviews, most recently by the House of Commons Standards Committee in the 2013-14 session.

The lobbying role of some organizations who provide the Secretariat or other assistance to the Groups has led to attention from the Office of the Register of Consultant Lobbyists (in 2014 the UK Government passed the Transparency of Lobbying, Non-Party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Act, which introduced the need for some lobbyists to register and list their clients). A recent stakeholder letter (undated) from the Registrar (White 2018) sought to clarify the line between secretariat work and declarable lobbying by stating: ‘The important issue is that if ministerial communications are made by the provider of support service [...] on behalf of the APPG (in their own name or that of the APPG [...] then those communications may be registrable.’ This is significant, because the Register was set up partly to deal with ethical concerns about lobbying and this letter puts some APPG work into that category.

In one of the most recent works on lobbying, Grant explains that Policy Connect, an organisation providing the Secretariat to several APPGs, had to register as a lobbyist. The organisation’s work included charging organisations to become members of APPGs (Grant 2018: 74). Grant goes on to say that the operations of UK APPGs remain a matter of concern.

‘... people may be misled into thinking that their [APPGs] pronouncements and reports are as objective as those of Select Committees, when in fact they have close links with particular interests whose claims they advance.’ (Grant 2018: 78)

Concern over external funding of APPGs has led to calls for tighter restrictions. In 2014, then Labour MP Graham Allen, a frequent writer on Parliamentary issues, called for a ban on funding from out-with Parliament, calling corporate funding ‘the next big scandal’ (Gallagher 2014), in a direct reference to David Cameron’s statement in 2010 that lobbying was ‘the next big scandal’. There have already been some well documented scandals. In 2013 the BBC Panorama programme exposed an MP who had taken money from a company with interests in Fiji and set up an All-Party Group on Fiji. Consequently, a recent House of Commons report expressed concern, noting that ‘APPGs pose a reputational risk to the House in several ways.’ (House of Commons Committee on Standards 2013)

In his evidence to the Standards Committee enquiry in 2013, BBC Parliamentary Correspondent Mark D’Arcy pointed to the work of some APPGs in moving issues up the political agenda, giving cycling as an example, and also raised the issue of how the groups are reported:

‘When you see a report that says – a group of MPs have said x – it may well refer to a full-dress Select Committee or the Parliamentary Banking Commission, or some truly august body that has a status... Or it might just as easily be an All Party Group, and that All Party Group may be a very authoritative one that has gone through a full process of taking evidence and has cross examined many witnesses or it may have been two sides of A4 drawn up by an intern that everyone signed up to in the bar.’ (House of Commons Standards Committee 2013)

Concern about the title used by some Groups has also been expressed. As the BBC’s correspondent Mark D’Arcy put it in his evidence:

‘There is an All Party Group on Beer, which has fairly close connections to the big pub companies, and there is an All Party Group on Pub Companies which is the provisional wing of the beer movement that is very worried about the way those pub companies run the pubs. You have rival groups with different perspectives out there.’ (House of Commons Standards Committee 2013)

While APPGs are able to take advantage of some grey areas allowing them to navigate with more ease various interests and tackle diverse issues, they also need to remain aware of the criticism expressed from within and from outside the parliamentary system. Their communications, particularly on social media, would therefore need to be guided by a concern with transparency, verified and verifiable information, as well as ethical standards. This is particularly relevant for the work of the APPG on Refugees, which could potentially also confront hostility due to its stance, this being a pro-refugee group. Potential hostility about the Group’s cause was heralded by the same 2013 inquiry, during which Christchurch MP Sir Christopher Chope (Conservative), told the committee that:

'...yesterday this migration report was produced...and it was produced by what was described as the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Migration, but it is an organisation promoting the welfare of immigrants. It had nothing to do with Migration Watch UK or with people who want to reduce the amount of immigration. Do you think there is some need to tighten up the titles of these groups?' (House of Commons Standards Committee 2013)

Although an APPG on Refugees might be a more palatable enterprise, seeing that refugees have a recognised need for protection, in the current climate of media hostility concerning any form of migration (McLaren, Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart 2018), the Group needs to tread carefully in order to remain a credible source of information, be reported positively by the mainstream media and forge necessary alliances with key stakeholders.

The research questions that have guided the content analysis of the APPG on Refugees Twitter feed emerge from the above considerations, as well as from the recognition that social media is increasingly preferred for putting political issues into the public domain, although this often means that interactivity is eschewed in favour of a unidirectional communication model. For example, in recent Canadian municipal elections, social media were used mainly for advertising and to attract media attention (Wagner 2016: 86). In the 2013 Italian elections, Twitter was used to announce policy, providing a predominantly referential, unidirectional and top-down approach (Di Fraia and Missaglia 2016: 34). This finding was also confirmed by Einspänner-Pflock et al. who studied the use of Twitter in the 2013 German national elections. In the German case, Twitter was used to influence mainstream media agenda (Einspänner-Pflock, Anastasiadis and Thimm 2016). In recent Spanish national elections, Twitter was again used as an advertising and mobilising tool (Cebrián Guinovart, Vásquez Barrio and Rodríguez 2016). Consequently, the research questions and the methodology aim to investigate whether the APPG on Refugees Twitter feed follows the same model driven by the aim to inform, rather than enter a debate, which in our case could also be reinforced by the peculiar status and Parliamentary rules guiding APPGs.

Awareness of the ethical dimension of being associated with Parliament but not being strictly an official body has determined a key question around whether the purpose of a subject based APPG, such as the one on Refugees, and its communications, is to win support either for a cause or for a particular course of action.

The insider-outside perspective and a recognition that the status of an APPG is enhanced by its membership and by parliamentary rules, prompts the question whether these rules will themselves limit the freedom of the APPG on Refugees to be outspoken on certain issues. It is likely that communications will be more restrained than those on the same topic by, for example, an external campaign group.

Thirdly, the content analysis aims to assess whether media coverage of the APPG on Refugees and its activities is positively sought and communications is designed with this aim in mind.

Finally, there is a question around whether external organisations will seek to work with the APPG on Refugees and vice versa, meaning that communications will be aimed at reinforcing links and making (appropriate) alliances.

Methodology

The author of this article is a former Communications Officer for the Refugee Council (which now provides the Secretariat for the Group). She has wide ranging experience of politics and media relations work. She therefore has a unique insight into the work of APPG for Refugees and was provided with an interview with the Secretariat. The methodological approach is therefore practitioner led and aiming to provide some useful recommendations for possible improvement of Twitter communication strategies, that would not only help the Group achieve a more prominent public role, but also allow it to highlight refugee issues in a fairer manner than the overwhelmingly negative approach to migration and asylum provided by the mainstream tabloid press.

Sampling, data collection and analysis was inspired by existing research, outlined above, but were tweaked to suit the aims of this research project. The APPG on Refugees' Twitter feed was monitored for part of 2018. The time period chosen was January 1st to July 24th. The end date was chosen because it marked the beginning of the Parliamentary recess (when Parliament does not sit). Existing research on Twitter (Cebrián Guinovart, Vázquez Barrio and Rodríguez 2016, Einspänner-Pflock, Anastasiadis and Thimm 2016) used content analysis, and this is also the approach taken here. Small (2012) examined Tweets about Canadian politics categorising them in six ways: informing, commentary, conversations, not relevant, reporting, status updates (Small 2012: 116). The category of informing was significantly larger, at 71 per cent, than any of the others and therefore in line with similar research conducted in Europe. This approach has the value of being able to separate types of Tweet (although the line between informing and reporting might be vague) but on its own cannot tell us about tone. Consequently, in this study Tweets were categorised to examine the proportion between being an initiated Tweet, a re-Tweet or a response. They were also categorised to examine whether they were proactive or reactive. Finally, language was examined to explore any potential limits that the group was imposing, given its nature and status.

An example of an initiated Tweet is: 'Today in @UKHouseofLords at 14:30: oral question from Lord Roberts of Llandudno re improving performance on immigration matters in the @ukhomeoffice. Watch here: <http://bit.ly/2HYmfRO>' (18 June 2018). An example of a re-Tweet is: 'APPG on Refugees Retweeted @Paulscriven Watch my debate live on making the system more human and help give more opportunities here in the UK to refugees fleeing Syria. <https://parliamentlive.tv/Lords>' (7 June 2018). A response would be an answer to a question.

A subject matter that suddenly becomes newsworthy is likely to provide an opportunity for proactivity. An example of a proactive Tweet is the following one, which uses a session of a House of Lords Committee: 'Important to hear an update on the strategy, including the welcome focus in the paper on refugee integration. The aim should be to end the two-tier system and to ensure refugees coming through the asylum process receive equal support to refugees on resettlement programmes.' (16 July 2018) Proactivity in communications can

indicate the relative strength of a Group. The Group takes ownership of an issue, remarks on the situation and makes a statement of its own. In public relations terms, this would be referred to as 'piggybacking' and is quite common in communications around issues. An example of a reactive Tweet would be a question being answered or a 'we agree' type of remark. However, it can be difficult to make a clear divide between proactive and reactive statements.

Some conclusions can be drawn by focusing on who is using the Twitter feed. It is possible for Twitter users to see exactly who follows each account and to see who that account follows. This gives an idea of audience and reach. Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind that followers who have added themselves for a variety of reasons may outnumber the organisation's intended audience. It is also the case, from the author's own experience, that in the political arena opponents or those likely to take issue with a case will automatically follow each other. An example of this is the UK Independence Party account following the APPG on Refugees Twitter feed. However, the existence and nature of the followers can at least give a sense of what the feed is seen to be providing. Consequently, the 'following' and 'followers' lists will also be briefly examined. This article will finally suggest some ways in which the Group could maximise its communications to boost its effectiveness.

Information and neutral communication

It would seem obvious that the purpose of the APPG on Refugees Twitter feed is to win support either for a cause or for a particular course of action, but this is not as simple as it would seem, an issue that was already flagged up by the 2013 Standards Committee enquiry. Subject based APPGs could well be established to pursue a course of action, such as the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Votes at 16. However, the name alone of the APPG on Refugees does not by itself make it clear that this is the case. Neither does the name necessarily clarify which particular line is likely to be taken on refugee related issues. Examining communications from the Group gives us a much better idea of whether there is a particular 'angle' and this taken together with information about the Group's Secretariat, helps us see whether there is campaigning for a cause going on.

A content analysis of the APPG on Refugees Twitter feed shows a series of messages promoting both positive views of refugees (mainly in the UK) as well as support for initiatives which would benefit, in legislation or in practice, refugees and their families. Two examples of this kind of Tweets are: 'The British public saved my life. Now we have a chance to save Europe's child refugees', @AlfDubs writes for the @NewStatesman (2 February 2018); 'The Museum Without a Home, which celebrates acts of kindness to refugees, arrived in Cambridge yesterday. We're delighted to be co-hosting an event where the exhibition will come to Parliament in late February' (9 February 2018).

According to the Secretariat, the existence of an APPG on Refugees makes it easier to advocate on the refugees' behalf:

'It immediately provides us with a group of Parliamentarians who have an interest in issues relating to refugees, and who can then be persuaded to raise these issues in different ways,

whether that is through parliamentary questions, debates, letters to ministers, comment to the media' (Interview with the Secretariat).

Analysing whether the use of language in the Group's Twitter communication is limited due to the status of the group is a difficult task. Writers may already have their own habits or may take guidance from organisations unaware of any rules existing, although the semi-official environment is likely to have some effect. One way to explore language in this case is to compare it to language being used by other organisations commenting on similar issues. The most obvious comparator would be the Refugee Council. However, as this organisation provides the Secretariat, it may be too close to be used as a measure. Instead, the Twitter feed of UK organisation the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants (JCWI), might provide a better comparison. JCWI is 'an independent national charity which exists to campaign for justice in immigration, nationality and refugee law and policy' (JCWI website). The contrast between the type of language used by JCWI and by the APPG on Refugees is marked. The Tweet below from JCWI is welcoming a UK Home Office decision:

'Wonderful news for this family, but yet again the Home Office only corrects its consistently inhuman and frankly moronic decisions when there's public pressure. We need better decision making, legal aid, and a fast, fair appeals system. @ukhomeoffice is completely broken.' (7 September 2018)

The following Tweet is commenting on a report about immigration appeals:

'A 75% success rate in appeals against the @ukhomeoffice is suggestive of nothing less than a systemic culture of refusal at all costs. Making decisions this reckless, that are only overturned after considerable cost and distress, is an abuse of process.' (3 September 2018)

It is obvious the language is very critical of governmental organizations and powerful language is being used. A similar approach is taken by the JCWI when it comes to commenting on the 'Windrush scandal', which involved individuals, usually from the West Indies, who had settled legally in Britain with the right to do so based on their being born in a British colony. This meant that some had no need to seek other papers. Recent changes in immigration law removed this protection and some then found themselves denied services and removed from the country because they did not have documentation. This generated a huge outcry and the ensuing political fall-out led to the resignation of the Home Secretary. A Home Office letter in June 2018 referred to more than 800 people possibly being affected.

'More evidence emerges that @theresa_may repeatedly ignored the plight of the Windrush generation during her time at the Home Office. What will it take to get a fully independent inquiry into her atrocious tenure as Home Secretary?' (19 July 2018).

The adjectives 'inhuman', 'moronic', 'reckless', 'atrocious' in the JCWI's Tweets are words carrying strong emotional meanings. They are also strong attacks against the UK Government. It is easy to see these being used by campaigners in articles and interviews.

Analysis of the APPG on Refugees Twitter feed, however, shows much more reticence over the use of adjectives or an open attack strategy.

In January the Group tweeted about the issue of child refugees. Following considerable media coverage of the plight of unaccompanied child refugees in Europe, Lord Dubs had managed to get agreement for some children to be brought to the UK. Divergences followed about numbers and there were accusations that the Government was not implementing the scheme properly. A charity, Help Refugees, challenged the Government and after one legal setback, was given the right to appeal.

This is an issue of clear interest to the APPG on Refugees, as well as of clear interest to the media. The APPG reported the decision on the right to appeal in a neutral way and linking to a newspaper story: 'Campaigners given go-ahead to challenge court ruling on Government plans to cap the number of child refugees allowed into the UK under Dubs scheme.' (26 Jan 2018) In contrast to the JCWI Tweets, this one uses no adjectives and is as nonaligned as it could possibly be. The Group is performing a role in providing information, but it is interesting to see the lack of emotional or other campaign-type words being used here.

A February Tweet highlights a story in the Guardian newspaper based on comments by Home Office insiders: 'A lottery': asylum system is unjust, say Home Office whistleblowers' (12 Feb 2018). This tweet is linked to the newspaper story, but again lacks any strong commitment or campaign attributes.

The strongest comment found was on 12 January 2018: 'Powerful article which highlights the overwhelming case for improving accommodation for asylum seekers.' The Tweet is linked to another newspaper story, but this time the words 'powerful' and 'overwhelming' give the reader a clear idea of what the Group feels. However, the comment still lacks adjectives which would criticise the actual situation of refugees.

The perceived purpose of the Group's Twitter feed is relevant here. As the Secretariat explains, 'the Twitter feed is mainly an information source'. The primary audience is Parliamentarians, 'as it allows them to know when refugee and asylum issues have been raised in Parliament and when relevant policy and legislation has been taken forward.' (Interview with Secretariat) The feed will not carry anything 'explicitly party political'. Although colourful, emotional language is not of itself party political, there is a risk it could be seen as such. With a main audience of Parliamentarians, neutral informational language avoids the risk of offending potentially useful readers.

The third research question asked whether the APPG on Refugees Twitter communications are designed to seek media coverage. Providing an answer involves using some knowledge of media relations. It would be rare to find a Tweet from any individual or organisation which actually says: 'give me media coverage for this'. Instead, in the author's own experience, the media specifically follows up Tweets which are likely to be newsworthy or which could provide future leads. The APPG on Refugees could gain media coverage via its Twitter feed by making media friendly statements or by being a particularly good source of information on an unfolding story, particular event or debate. Journalists who cannot attend Parliament may find 'live tweeting' of statements and debates of use and benefit from particular questions and answers being highlighted.

Moon and Hadley (2014) explored the use of Twitter as a news source for mainstream media and found that certain feeds were seen as good sources by journalists. These feeds were chosen not because of general popularity but because they were official or semi-official or had become known as providing news. While this research was carried out in the US and in 2010-11, it is clear from the author's own experience that UK journalists continue to make good use of politically related Twitter feeds today.

Analysis of the APPG on Refugees Twitter feed demonstrates that at times taking on the role of reporter is seen as important. APPGs themselves cannot propose legislation or ask questions in either House, but their individual members do have this power. During the researched period, the MP for Na h-Eileanan an Iar, Angus MacNeil, proposed a Private Members Bill, the Refugees (Family Reunion) Bill, which had a Second Reading on 16 March (a Second Reading is the stage at which the principle of a Bill is debated; successful Bills then proceed to a Committee stage for more detailed examination). Mr MacNeil later gained a follow up debate to highlight this work on 22 June (House of Commons Hansard 2018). A Westminster Hall debate on Homelessness Among Refugees initiated by Kate Green MP, provided another opportunity on 17 July 2018.

There were 27 tweets around the second reading debate of the MacNeil Bill and 18 of them originated from the Group. The Group told followers it would provide information as the debate proceeded. 'The Refugees (Family Reunion) Bill is receiving its Second Reading in the Commons shortly. We'll be live tweeting key contributions and you can also watch live here: <http://bit.ly/2HGUPeJ>' Other Tweets provided updates: 'The Bill's sponsor, @AngusMacNeilSNP, is introducing it by talking about the experience of a refugee in his constituency, who travelled from Eritrea without family'; 'Ranil Jayawardena arguing that the UK should support refugees in the region and not create a pull factor for people to send children ahead. Contested by @Anna_Soubry, who says refugees are forced to leave by war, persecution and terror'.

Comparatively, the Twitter activity around the 17 July Westminster Hall debate initiated by Kate Green, MP for Stretford and Urmston, produced 17 Tweets, mostly them originated by the APPG on Refugees. The Group again announced its intention to live tweet and report on the various views expressed: 'Today at 2.30pm: Westminster Hall Debate on Homelessness among Refugees. Led by @KateGreenSU and answered by @nadams for government. Will be tweeting speeches and interventions from MPs throughout the afternoon.' Another Tweet pointed out:

'Our chair @ThangamMP is calling for a number of measures to end refugee homelessness, including:

A refugee integration service

Allow asylum seekers to work after 6 months Restoring legal aid

Expanding refugee family reunion

Fully funding English language classes.'

While journalists may find reports on on-going debates useful, it is likely that some are already aware of these debates. Perhaps a more useful role for the Group's Twitter feed is the highlighting of aspects of Parliamentary activity that a journalist is less likely to seek out or

stumble across. Among these are questions and statements in the House of Lords. The Twitter feed draws attention to these, such as this one mentioned previously from 18 June 2018: 'Today in @UKHouseofLords at 14:30: oral question from Lord Roberts of Llandudno re improving performance on immigration matters in the @ukhomeoffice. Watch here: <http://bit.ly/2HYmfR0>'. However, the usefulness of the feed to journalists will in part depend on whether or not journalists choose to follow it. The feed has more than 6,000 followers but of these only a tiny handful describe themselves as journalists.

Finally, there is a question about whether the Group's Twitter communications focus on creating and sustaining links and building alliances. The APPG on Refugees feed bears this out with a considerable number of re-tweets of initiatives and comments by other relevant organisations. These include the UNHCR (United Nations High Commission for Refugees), but also a range of campaigning and charity organisations such as Waging Peace (a group advocating on behalf of refugees from Sudan), Refugee Week, Refugee Action and Detention Action. An examination of the list of followers and following accounts shows an enthusiasm for each to keep in touch with the other. Organisations such as local forums for refugees and overseas aid charities also appear on the lists. The importance of, and scope for, working with other organisations is highlighted in the way the APPG on Refugees plans its work. Planning takes into account what some other organisations may have suggested, but the Twitter feed also exists for the wider sector: 'It also serves as an information source for the refugee and asylum sector, who are able to see which parliamentarians are involved in this area and the kinds of things they are proposing.' (Interview with Secretariat)

The analysis also looked at how proactive the Group's Twitter feed was and what was the balance between initiated tweets, re-tweets and responses. During the period studied, roughly two fifths of the Tweets were initiated, with the rest being re-Tweets. There were no responses. Given the nature of Twitter this lack of response is at first surprising. However, as the feed is designed as an information source, and followers are likely to see it that way, interaction is likely to take place elsewhere. This lack of response meant that no Tweets were categorised as reactive, which in turn would seem to indicate that the whole feed must be proactive. Given the percentage of re-Tweets, which are often without any comment, this does not seem right and raises a question about how we can class 'reactive'. For example, into which category we should put a re-Tweet with no extra comment? This is clearly an action – the Twitter feed author decides which, of the many tweets seen, deserves to be passed on. Yet it is also an action which involves minimal work. This example shows that such a re-Tweet could be either classed as 'I really want you to see this' or 'here is a bit of information, take it how you like'. Of course, it could be that the proactive-reactive split is simply less easily applied, or not even relevant, to the more fluid world of social media.

Conclusion

The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Refugees has a range of functions. Chief among these is promoting information about refugee issues among Parliamentarians and supporting particular refugee-related causes. In terms of communication, it has a unique place as a body which spans the boundary between the inside and the outside of the system. The language its Twitter feed uses is constrained by the nature of the Group and assumes mainly an

information role. It is however able to speak up for refugees and has the potential to achieve policy change by virtue of the place it holds in the Parliamentary network.

Due to the limited nature of this study, it was not possible to focus on how Members of Parliament, whether members of the Group or not, use the communications from the Group's Twitter feed. It may be that the feed helps them in their own political communications or that it helps them quickly gain information. For future research, it would be useful to interview Parliamentarians to gauge the use and value they place on the social media material originating from the Group. It would also be useful to look at any specific use of the Group's Tweets by journalists. While BBC journalist Mark D'Arcy's comments to the Standards Committee made it clear that some journalists are aware of and use material from APPGs, it is not clear whether material from the APPG on Refugees is used.

This prompts the question, how might the APPG on Refugees make better use of its Twitter feed. If the purpose of the Twitter feed is mainly to provide information, and the main audience for the material is made up of Parliamentarians (as stated by the Secretariat) then key to this objective is ensuring that MPs are following the feed and ensuring that the messages are likely to fulfil the needs of the audience and to attract attention. Fulfilling needs would involve anticipating when information is likely to be needed and of what type this information is. Attracting attention will involve ensuring that messages are those likely to stand out from other demands on Parliamentarian's time. Walgrave and Dejaeghere (2016) in a study of elite politicians found that a combination of procedures and heuristics filters act to limit information coming through. The heuristics include consideration of whether the politician is able to achieve effective action using the information. While this study focused on Government ministers and party leaders, back-bench MPs are also subject to an avalanche of information and communications that need to be filtered speedily. While those following the Group's Twitter feed will already have an interest in refugees, it may help communication if the usefulness of some information is more clearly flagged up. This could be carried out particularly when newspaper articles are being shared so that links to forthcoming events or debates are highlighted.

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