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Contested control? Intra-Party Organisational Dynamics in the Digital Age

Over recent decades scholars have explored the adaption of political parties to digital technology. Tracing successive eras of digital adoption, scholarship has explored the degree to which digital disrupts or embeds traditional power structures – with many studies finding evidence of ‘controlled interactivity’. In this article, we revisit debates around the adoption of digital tools from a bottom-up perspective. Moving beyond attempts to categorise elite strategies for digital adoption, we consider practices on the ground to document how, in practice, digital technology is being taken up and used. Using a case study of the UK Labour Party, we categorise a range of different practices, highlighting and theorising the presence of digital adopters, laggards, entrepreneurs, renegades and refuseniks. Discussing the drivers of these practices we offer new insight into variations in digital adoption and consider the significance of these trends for our understanding of party organisation and elite control.

Key words: Central control; digital campaigning; digital entrepreneurs; grassroots activism; party organisation

Introduction

The adoption of digital technology has long been a focus for analysis by scholars of party politics. Exploring parties’ adaptation to successive eras of communication technology, scholars have mapped and theorised the uptake of different tools (Lusoli and Ward, 2004). Most recently, this has resulted in numerous studies of the way in which social media, databases and intra-party software have been mobilised for electoral and organisational purposes (Jungherr, 2016; Pedersen and Saglie, 2005; Williamson, Miller and Fallon, 2010.). Recurrent within this literature is attention to the question of organisational control. Building on an established literature that has traced successive ‘models’ of party organisation (Duverger, 1959; Kircheimer, 1966; Katz and Mair 1995), scholars have asked whether digital technology disrupts traditional models of party organisation, or embeds the power of elites.

In this article, we engage with debates around digital adoption, party organisation and control, but unlike much existing literature, we do not focus on the ideas and experiences of elites. Instead, we conduct a bottom-up analysis exploring the practices and ideas of the grassroots activists who are adapting to digital technology. This approach recognises that whilst elite strategies have an important impact on parties’ digital activities, elite intentions do not automatically translate into grassroots practices (reflecting an acknowledged structure-agency problem (Enos and Hersh, 2015)). Noting this, we ask: in what ways do grassroots activists adopt digital tools? And what factors explain these trends? Adopting an expansive definition of digital technology, we look at the varied digital systems used for party campaigning, organisation and communication. Adopting this approach we explore the case of the UK Labour Party, looking beyond the official, elite story of digital adoption, to examine ‘the unofficial story about how these parties campaign’ (Kefford, 2018, p.658) and organise on the ground. Distilling five models of digital adoption, we theorise the drivers behind variations and consider what these insights reveal for our understanding of party organisation and control. This article

therefore uses a bottom-up analytical focus to cast new light on our understanding of digital adoption and party organisation

Digital Technology and Party Organisation

Studies of parties (and, indeed political organisations' (Dennis, 2019)) adoption of digital technology have proliferated in recent years. From early studies monitoring adaption to Web 1.0 and 2.0 (Baxter, Marcella and Varfis, 2011; Lee, 2015; Lilleker and Jackson, 2010; Römmele, 2003), more recent studies have traced parties' adaption to platform society (Van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018; Gerbaudo, 2019b, p.192) and data-driven campaigning (Gibson, 2020). This work has explored the patterns and significance of digital adoption trends, with a recurrent focus on organisational control. Building upon an established tradition of organisational modelling, scholars have sought to test the degree to which the tenets of Michel's iron law of oligarchy (1962) (which states that....)are mirrored in contemporary practices, exploring the extent to which digital media facilitates elite domination or allows more decentralised forms of control. Captured by the distinction between theories of 'normalisation' and 'equalisation', a raft of empirical studies have explored the form of digital adoption strategies.

Whilst it is important not to draw simplistic conclusions from a literature that has highlighted diverse practices within political parties, it is notable that numerous studies have concluded that 'democratic intermediaries are mostly interested in the technology as a means to continue performing their existing functions, only to a better level' (Gibson, Römmele and Ward, 2004, p.198). Whilst some evidence exists that parties (Gerbaudo, 2019)(or their activists (Penney, 2017)) have used digital tools in innovative ways, even these examples have revealed a tendency for elite control and limited grassroots power (p.142). Liroy et al. therefore found that whilst 'parties might claim that their online presence makes them closer to the electorate... attempts to disintermediate decision-making often fall short of creating real responsiveness and participation' (Liroy et al, 2019, p.44). Whilst Gerbaudo concludes that within participatory digital parties' 'the reality of online democracy to date paints a rather pessimistic picture' (p.127). Although variation therefore exists, numerous studies have demonstrated a tendency for what Stromer-Galley has called 'controlled-interactivity' in the adoption of digital tools. This idea suggests that whilst digital affordances have given 'a greater role for and visibility of citizens in the daily work of campaigning', it has also enabled elites to control these activities 'to ultimately advance the objectives of the campaign' (2014, p.104). As such, digital technology is not seen to have revolutionised party organisation, but has rather led to new forms of elite dominance and control.

In reacting to this literature, in this article we draw attention to the tendency within much of this scholarship to explore the impact of digital media from an elite perspective. Using studies of national party practices (such as party websites or social media), interviews with central party staff or politicians (Dommett, 2018) or XXXX, scholars have tended to neglect the experiences and practices of activists on the ground (c.f. Nielsen, 2012). As such, we have a good understanding of how elites are intending to adopt (and indeed are adopting) digital technology within their organisation, but we have less understanding of what local activists 'and volunteers *actually do* as they work together'

(Nielsen, 2010, p.763). This makes it unclear whether grassroots practices conform to elite ideals or whether there are variations in digital adoption practice. This lack of data matters, because despite repeated coverage of the decline of party membership in countries around the globe (REFS), members and activists remain an important component of party organisation (Bale, Webb and Poletti, 2019). [Maybe add some figures about international membership rates – Luke??]. Moreover, there is already evidence that elite intentions do not always translate into grassroots practices. Indeed, work by Enos and Hersh (2015) has shown activists to be unreliable mediums for the translation of elite messages. Whilst Kreiss has found that “there were often disconnects between the desires of staffers and the at times competing expectations, wills, and even demands of volunteers’ (2014, p.543). These trends suggest, as Zittel has argued, that activists ‘at the local level may use the Internet in ways that do not sit well with the concept of professionalized campaigning’ (p.299). However, it is not yet clear what practices do categorise digital adoption, or what explains these trends. For this reason, in this article we explore the practices of grassroots activists, asking in what ways do grassroots activists adopt digital tools, and what factors explain these trends? This data is used to generate new insight into digital adoption practices, advancing our conception of adoption practices and offering new perspective on debates around organisational control.

Methodology

To explore these questions this article engages with one case in detail, the UK Labour Party. The Labour Party is a major electoral force in the UK and possesses the single largest membership in the UK (totalling XXX members). Whilst the parties’ internal organisation has evolved over the years, in recent history scholarship has highlighted changes that have strengthened elite control (Gould, 1999; Minkin, 2014).

To structure our analysis we used interviews, documentary analysis and secondary analysis of the Agents Survey data. The purpose of these methods was two-fold. First, in order to provide a base-line for analysis we undertook a preliminary study of Labour’s digital adoption practices around the 2017 General Election. These interviews sought to establish elite intentions for digital technology at an elite and local level, providing a benchmark against which we could assess grassroots practices. In total we conducted 8 interviews with party elites and strategists as part of a wider project looking at party renewal. These interviews were supplemented with an analysis of publicly available documents and web-pages pertaining to the parties’ use of digital technology.

Second, in order to address our primary research question, we conducted a second and more extensive round of interviews with party activists. In total 18 interviews were conducted with activists connected to digital campaigns in Labour Party branches, constituencies, and regional parties in England.¹ Interviewees were individuals who were active in organising the local party and in almost all cases had a formal role on the

¹ Branches are the smallest unit of Labour Party organisation and mirror the boundaries of council wards. Constituencies are composed of multiple branches and mirror the boundaries of national Parliamentary seat boundaries. Regional parties are composed of multiple constituencies.

executive of either the branch, constituency or region. We selected local parties for analysis that displayed ranging proficiency with digital tools, reviewing online content for parties around the country to identify those with extensive or minimal online presences. Interviews were conducted either in person or over the phone and lasted on average 50 minutes. Participants were asked about their local activity and use of digital tools, their relations with the national party and their party demographics and skill base using a semi-structured interview format. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed before being analysed using NVivo.² To ensure anonymity, names and geographical locations of interviewees are not disclosed, but in the analysis below, we do offer an indication of the status of interviewees. This approach allowed us to survey campaigning activity in 11 geographic locations. To reflect on the wider applicability of our findings we supplemented our analysis with data from the Agent Survey which gathers data on local campaigning activity around the country.

Characterising Labour's elite digital adoption strategy

Looking first at elite intentions for digital adoption, interviews revealed that historically 'there was not really that much expertise' in the party around digital (Interview 1) and that digital generally has often been 'under-resourced and not influential enough internally' (Interview 2). However, since 2015 interviews revealed that the Labour Party have invested heavily in digital – creating a Digital Transformation Team (Interview 3; see also Dommett, 2018) and a raft of new digital tools. One particularly notable aspect of this activity is that rather than relying on external digital expertise, party staff emphasised their scepticism about relying on 'existing commercial solution(s)', arguing that there was instead a need 'to build our own' systems and expertise (Interview 4). In line with these ideas, in October 2018, Labour launched a new bespoke digital organising system – Achieve . This is a suite of centrally designed digital software that local activists can use, comprising:

- Organise – A volunteer management tool that replicates many of the functions previously provided by Nationbuilder.
- Doorstep App – An app that allows canvassers to enter canvassing data in real time on mobile devices.
- Promote – A platform for enabling targeted messaging on Facebook.
- Insight – A platform for data analysis.
- WordPress Network – A website creation tool.

These complement existing – and continually evolving – platforms such as Contact Creator, Campaign Creator, and MemberCentre. Achieve provides an extensive programme of online training courses and the party emphasises sharing best practice – including an annual 'Best Digital Campaign Award' presented at the national party conference (Labour Party, no date). These activities suggest that Labour are not only providing digital tools, they are also seeking to promote certain practices and applications of tools.

² In a few instances, recordings were not made, but notes were taken and sent to interviewees for approval.

Thinking about the significance of these practices for central control, these trends suggest that the National Party is seeking to structure and guide local activity. Indeed, looking in more detail at these resources, it appears that Doorstep prompts activists to gather certain kinds of voter information when canvassing, whilst Promote includes a sign-off procedure for the approval of any locally developed Facebook advertising content.³ On this evidence the central party appears to be providing infrastructure to support local activists' use of digital tools, with the intention of guiding and monitoring local activity to ensure alignment with elite objectives.

Exploring local activists' digital adoption practices

Looking beyond elite intentions, our primary interest lies in asking in what ways do grassroots activists adopt digital tools, and what factors explain these trends? To consider this question we began by first exploring available data about grassroots digital adoption practices.

Looking to data from the Election Agent Survey (EAS) in 2017⁴ available insights suggest that of the 333 Constituency Labour Parties (CLPs) who responded to the survey, the adoption of digital tools is by no means universal. 75% of CLPs reported to have a local website for either the candidate or local branch and nine out of ten CLPs claimed to use social media in their campaigns. However, only 38% claimed to have a specific 'computer officer' and 20% were willing to admit they put little to no effort into Facebook, whilst 38% said the same about other social media (such as Twitter). This indicates that there is significant variation in uptake, despite central party efforts to provide activists with appropriate tools. Reflecting on this finding, the EAS also shows that the local parties are often disconnected from this national resource. Indeed, less than a quarter of CLPs claimed to have any kind of website design or content assistance from party headquarters. These findings suggest that there are interesting variations in local practice, and that central party does not result in uniform practice on the ground.

To generate new insight about the kind of variations suggested by this data we used our interview data to identify five types of digital adoption activity. In order to classify these differences, we argue that it is useful to focus on variations in the extent to which digital is used by local parties, and the type of tool that is adopted. This approach leads us to differentiate between parties we categorise as being digital adopters, entrepreneurs, laggards, renegades or refuseniks (Table 1).

-----TABLE 1 AROUND HERE-----

³ In this case, all adverts designed through Promote require sign off from the regional Labour Party.

⁴ This survey consists of a survey of elections agents from the Conservative Party, Labour Party, Liberal Democrats, Scottish National Party (SNP), Plaid Cymru (PC) and the UK Independence Party (UKIP) conducted immediately after the British general election of 2017. The survey covers details of the preparations for the campaign, organisation and strategy, and campaign and polling day activities. In addition, it covers an evaluation of the administration of the campaign. Surveys were sent to all agents and the dataset comprises responses from 180 Conservative Agents; 333 Labour Agents; 314 Liberal Democrat Agents; 23 SNP Agents; 28 Plaid Cymru Agents; and 114 UKIP Agents.

Table 1: Types of Digital Campaign Practice

	Official Party tools	Non-official party tools
High Use	Adopters	Entrepreneurs
Low Use	Laggards	Renegades
No Use	Refuseniks	

Introducing each classification in turn, we first identified digital adopters as local parties that demonstrated high use of digital tools that were offered by the central party. Activists within parties presenting this behaviour would say things such as ‘Doorstep, Turnout... I can certainly see the benefit of them. They are really well thought out resources’ (Interview 6), ‘Doorstep is absolutely brilliant’ (Interview 7) and ‘[i]n Organise itself, we’ve been giving a really powerful tool not just in terms of communicating with members, but also organising with members’ (Interview 8). These views accorded with the belief of one party elite that ‘[local parties are] very receptive normally. When it’s things that they can see are going to make their life easier, I think they’re generally like, “Oh, that’s great”’ (Interview 9; also 5). Such accounts provide evidence of local branches capitalising on affordances offered by the central party and suggest that, through these mechanisms, party elites are able to exercise control over the activities local parties undertake.

Our second category, entrepreneurs, was different in that these parties demonstrated high usage of digital tools, but often used systems and procedures that were not provided by the central party. In our analysis, it was rare that local parties exclusively used non-official tools, rather, we found instances where local actors were supplementing official party tools in ways that central party elites did not devise (or seem to foresee). For instance, one activist described how they:

‘wrote a computer programme that strips through an Excel spread sheet that has been exported from Contact Creator and it figures out how many people live in the house, and if it is five different surnames then it just lists their first names, and if there are two people who have different surnames it will say “hello Jenny Baker and Frank Goodwin” and it will just figure out how many characters it can fit...in an address field’ (Interview 7).

In this example we observed an activist utilising an official tool – Contact Creator – but moving beyond this system to adapt and build upon capacities offered by the central party. Some entrepreneurial behaviour was more mundane, with one interviewee explaining that they used Googledocs, by saying ‘I haven’t seen any Labour way of doing this better’ (Interview 10). Yet, others were more innovative, with another interviewee describing how a skilled volunteer has ‘started messing around making his own mini animations, we made a couple of those and they went viral’ (Interview 17). Another noted that they had created a MediaWiki to log agendas, meetings and minutes of local branch meetings, all hosted on their own servers. This particular branch used digital tools for campaigning but was also highly focused on developing a more on-going digitally-mediated sense of efficacy amongst members. Whilst noting that nothing could replace human contact, they pointed to ‘the valuable role of technology in managing and

mediating' (Interview 16) political participation. In such instances official party tools were not neglected, but they were often only a part of the digital arsenal used by local activists, meaning that a considerable proportion of local party activity was beyond the control of central party structures and procedures.

The third category, laggard behaviour, describes practice in which there was low use of official digital tools. Activists identified a range of different explanations for the minimal uptake of digital tools. Some lamented the systems provided by the central party, arguing that 'the Labour Party seem to have built horrible, clunky impenetrable systems' (Interview 8). Others, however, pointed to a lack of capacity and local skill, arguing that the local party did not have the ability to utilise these tools. Indeed, one interviewee expressed frustration at the lack of local skills, reflecting:

'I don't understand why I couldn't [find someone with the necessary digital skills]. I mean we're bloody 650 people in a middle-class area, an academic area... There *must* be somebody who can do, who's got the software... I couldn't find anybody who had the software to do anything more than the most basic leaflets' (Interview 13).

Others again simply exhibited 'a kind of inertia issue because local people who have done it for years think they're doing it right' and therefore have no interest in gaining digital skills or using these tools (Interview 14). What united these parties was minimal evidence of local activity, but where actions were taken, this tended to draw upon official party tools, allowing the central party a degree of control.

Fourth, renegade parties are those that demonstrated low levels of digital practice, but when tools were used these tended to be unofficial rather than those provided by the party. In the place of centrally provided systems such as Contact Creator or MembersNet, parties tended to use 'mundane', generic options such as email and Excel spread sheets to organise their activities. Once again, this outcome was the result of different impetus. Some parties lacked infrastructure or skills, whilst others eschewed official party systems as difficult to use. In a climate where many (often older) activists were seen to 'still struggle with email, let alone Facebook and WhatsApp' (Interview 6), activists preferred to rely on familiar services and platforms rather than often complex and unreliable party interfaces. In such instances, the central party's capacity to influence local activity was limited, and elites were often unaware of what party activities were.

Finally, we also gathered data that some local parties exhibited 'refusenik' behaviour whereby local activists did not demonstrate any form of engagement with official or unofficial digital tools. Although the branches and constituencies we studied were not categorised in this way, our interviewees recounted stories of other local parties who did not use digital tools at all. They also recounted examples of refusenik attitudes amongst some local actors who were sceptical about the advantages of digital tools. One interviewee therefore described how they had faced 'resentment' and were 'told councillors they ought to be knocking on doors and talking to people' rather than engaging in digital activity (Interview with Paul Blomfield – need to check code).

In offering these five classifications (Table 1) it is important to clarify that our unit of analysis is the local party branch or constituency rather than particular activists. This is significant because parties are comprised of numerous activists, making it possible that a single local party contains refusenik and entrepreneurial activists. In offering these classifications, we focus attention on the activities of the local party – exploring not the number of activists displaying these traits, but rather the nature of the digital activities that we did observe within the party. This approach means that an evaluation of party activities could uncover evidence of entrepreneurial and adoptive behaviour. What we are interested in is the extent to which these different practices are observed and the drives behind these different trends.

Offering this classification we turn now to discuss the reasons behind these different practices. To do so, we coded our interview data to identify possible causes of local variation. The analysis below does not, therefore, claim to provide an exhaustive account of all possible drives, but rather to highlight factors seen pertinent by interviewees. This indicative discussion is subsequently used to inform discussion about the significance of these variations for our understanding of party organisation today.

The significance of these differences for central party control

In characterising the emergence of different digital adoption practices, we argue that it is alone insufficient to study elite intentions, as central party intentions can be realised and subverted by local parties to different degrees. This makes it important to consider different practices in more detail to determine whether they challenge central control and may be problematic for parties. In what follows, we argue that whilst differences in the extent of usage are relatively unproblematic, the uptake of unofficial tools does present problems for central parties' attempts to wield control.

Thinking first about variations in the extent of usage, within our analysis we uncovered evidence of local parties using the technologies provided by parties to very different degrees. In part these differences were due to variations in the local parties we examined. Whilst the Labour Party boasts a large membership relative to other UK parties (Audickas et al., 2018), it is by no means the case that this membership is distributed evenly across the country, or that it possesses the same skills and levels of enthusiasm. Whilst some local parties have large memberships, others had few members and in both large and small organisations there are variations in the degree to which members are willing to take on official roles and tasks. Indeed, we uncovered instances where local party organisation was described as 'moribund, so no networks to disseminate or coordinate activity amongst activists' (Interview 6). Others described how despite having 'around 1500 members in constituency' they had about 200 people 'active in some sense' and only about '60 people' actively involved at election time (Interview 8). An MP similarly argued that 'I don't think we've got an activist base', despite having one of the largest constituency memberships in the country (Interview 14). In essence, we found little uniformity in the degree to which local parties had functional structures, let alone manpower to devote to the uptake and use of digital tools. Indeed, many of the

parties we spoke to reported that they did not have 'social media or communications officers' and '[n]o knowledge of people in other branches' (Interview 6).

These differences mean that, in many places, there is little activism or local organisation for central parties to control. These variations were readily acknowledged by interviewees within Labour Party HQ who reflected that '[e]very CLP is different' (Interview 11). Whilst this may appear problematic for attempts to exercise central control, we found little evidence that elites found these variations, and particularly the lack of local uptake of digital tools, to be an issue. Indeed, the elites we interviewed argued that there was always going to be variation in the uptake of certain tools, what was seen to matter was that the party was promoting access to those who wanted to take action. We therefore found evidence of the party creating a national mailing list for campaign organisers, webinars and conference training sessions designed to promote the adoption of digital tools. Where activists were aware of these initiatives, these affordances were seen to be exceedingly valuable in supporting digital campaigns. One local interviewee therefore reflected how at conference they:

'...did a lot of training with the party nationally...it opened my eyes as to how we could do things. They were training us to how to write good emails, trained us on how to use Organise. They did training in a kind of workshop fashion. I was sat with people from all over the country and we shared ideas and best practice from people all over the country' – 'I took a lot of ideas from that' – 'I told our conference debrief meeting, this is what we're doing wrong and right' (Interview 8; see also 6; 13).

Another reflected 'the training campaign bulletin....[if] you are on that, you are not going to miss anything, you're not going to miss the national campaign day that they want you to be doing, and you're not going to be missing the training either – I can imagine if you are not on that then you could miss stuff a lot of the stuff, and the training' (Interview 18). This strategy was therefore seen to be extremely valuable on the ground.

In attempting to facilitate adoptive behaviour, however, elites were aware that not all parties were aware of central party support⁵ (something they were aiming to change), or had the capacity to enact ideas. Acknowledging this, elites appeared to hold different expectations for local party adoption. Whilst attempting to promote awareness and

⁵ We found considerable evidence that many local actors – especially in laggard and renegade parties – were not aware of central party support and tools. This was evident in comments such as: '[i]f the party provide support, I have no idea how' (Interview 17); '[w]hen it came to social media we had nothing from region, no content, no protocols' (Ibid.), 'that is the first I've ever heard of the Labour Party doing webinars...I've never been told about it' (Interview 6); '[t]here is an absence of distribution strategy from the centre, and there is not enough thought given in terms of engagement' (Interview 17); 'I was expecting guidance with how to run the social media campaign... [but] they left me to my own devices' (Interview 10); 'The software is only as good as the person that is using it. The Labour party have a responsibility to get everyone up to scratch, because it is their software. I would look at it how a business would do it – I've seen it happen in my industry and you have champions, and they go to national training and filter that down by giving training – I've never seen that happen' (Interview 6).

uptake of certain 'core' activities and affordances - such as Contact Creator - elites were relaxed about the fact that many parties were not utilising more sophisticated tools. Indeed, when reflecting on the uptake of the Promote tool, one interviewee argued that they 'wouldn't have thought that all branches use those kinds of channels' and recognised that where these tools were being applied, they would be being used with 'varying degrees of efficiency' (Interview 9). Whilst it was therefore seen to be desirable to promote digital tools and to encourage local parties to be active (via digital or non-digital means), party elites were aware of their limited capacity to compel local parties to do things, especially when that organisation lacked (an active) membership. Instead, emphasis was placed on providing tools to those who were willing and able to take action.

When thinking about the extent of usage, issues of central control therefore do not appear pressing, but when turning to the second dimension considered above - the use of official and unofficial digital tools - more concerns emerge. As captured above, the categories of digital entrepreneurs and renegades describe instances in which local actors exhibited both low and high usage of unofficial digital tools. Across the local parties we studied there was significant variation in the type of unofficial tool that local parties utilised. In many parties, these mechanisms were not sophisticated, but amounted to the use of email and Excel. However, in others, local activists possessed considerable digital expertise that they used to write new software programmes, to develop digital apps and data management systems, or to develop new means of internal party communication or volunteer management.

The drives behind the adoption of unofficial tools tended to be similarly diverse. As suggested above, renegade behaviour tended to stem from frustration with official party tools, or an unwillingness or inability to invest time in learning party systems and tools. Amongst entrepreneurs, however, the use of unofficial tools was often driven by those with pre-existing digital skills. The activists we spoke to therefore often had backgrounds in digital businesses or computer science, or had Masters degrees in political communication, or design skills. These individuals were highly competent and had 'skills in making videos and graphics design, web design that perhaps not everybody who becomes an organiser would necessarily have' (Interview 7). This meant that they were able to create bespoke pieces of software and databases (Interview 11), acting in an entrepreneurial way to not only capitalise on tools offered by Labour, but also to use other software.

Interestingly, we also found evidence that entrepreneurial behaviour was facilitated through non-party networks, with organisations such as Momentum playing a role in sharing resources and ideas outside of official party structures. Interviewees displaying entrepreneurial behaviour therefore often highlighted the significance of Momentum training sessions for sharing skills (Interview 18, 16). External resources, digital knowledge and content were therefore a valuable resource for many entrepreneurial activists who, crucially, had 'ideas for campaigning' that were 'different to the Labour Party model of what campaigning is' (Interview 6).

These practices are of particular interest in the context of debates around control as they suggest that some local parties are using systems that the party has little, if any, oversight of. They also suggest that there are alternative power structures – in this case, Momentum - through which knowledge and skills are being shared. These outcomes are likely to be of more concern for elites as they can result in potentially problematic practices and can challenge party control.

To illustrate this point, it is useful to consider some specific examples of entrepreneurial party practice to discuss the kind of challenges that can arise. To do so, we take the example of Facebook advertising. In recent years, Facebook advertising and content boosting has emerged as a key element of political party campaigns (Dommett and Temple, 2016; Dommett and Power, 2019). This tool has particular value as Facebook both provides data to enable targeted messaging and offers a new medium for communication. In recognition of the importance of Facebook, the Labour Party – as outlined above - created the Promote system as an interface that allowed local activists to design and pay for adverts that could be targeted on the basis of Labour Party canvassing data and Facebook data. This system was designed to facilitate campaigns whilst also maintaining control, as users had to submit adverts to approval to Regional Office before they were published online. In practice, however, the Promote system was exceedingly complex, with activists presented with a 100-page manual – leading one activist to reflect that they ‘didn’t get the impression from the national party that this is something we should be doing’ (Interview 10). It was also hampered by problematic sign-off procedures as regional staff often failed to approve adverts in a timely way. Indeed, one activist reported how ‘region tied our hands’ because ‘an advert... took 4 days to get approved’ (Interview 10). For these reasons, we found examples of local activists eschewing the official party system, Promote, in favour of creating and publishing their own adverts by working on Facebook direct. One interviewee therefore described how ‘[w]hen we tried to do it, we couldn’t work with region, we couldn’t use Promote – so we got people to put it on their own pages’ (Interview 8). This experience led them to go onto create a number of their own local adverts that were designed and executed with no input from the regional or central party. Whilst these adverts had a limited audience, we heard local digital activists talk about the value of running controversial and emotive content in order to provoke a reaction to their online campaigns. This type of campaign messaging and strategy is unlikely to be approved through official party procedures, suggesting that unofficial mechanisms are lessening central party control.

To take another example, we found examples within renegade parties where local activists were using Excel spread sheets to manage and process voter data. Having downloaded contact data from Contact Creator, activists who were uncomfortable with the official party system developed their own data collection and analysis systems that were not subject to central oversight or control. Given parties’ requirement to ensure the safe and appropriate use of voter data, these practices were particularly concerning, as it was not only impossible for the central party to observe how voter data was being used, but was also not possible for them to see how that data was being stored and shared (a particular concern given practices we observed).

These examples suggest that whilst elites are comfortable with different degrees of official campaign tool usage, there are reasons to be less comfortable about the use of unofficial party tools. Whilst local actors do appear to be acting in line with the broad spirit of central party objectives by running active campaigns and organising local activities, in circumstances such as those outlined above, it is challenging (if not impossible) for elites to exercise control. This is because they are often unable to observe, let alone react to the problematic use of unofficial tools. A further concern also relates to the role of non-party organisations in supporting these activities, and the potential for other actors (besides party elites) to exert influence over local party campaigns. With organisations such as Momentum providing a mechanism for spreading best practice in campaign activity (often promoting unofficial campaigning tools), it appears that there is a potentially competing source of authority governing local party campaigns. For party elites, this poses a conundrum, as whilst such activities can help to facilitate vibrant parties and effective campaigns, they can also result in activities that are out of line with party objectives and that can prove damaging to the party brand.

Taken together, these points suggest that an elite strategy of controlled-interactivity is not guaranteed to deliver elite's objectives or to enable central party control. Variations in the degree of usage and in the uptake of unofficial tools can lead local activists to act contrary to elite desires. Whilst variations in the extent of activity appear relatively unproblematic for elites, we argue that the use of unofficial tools and the support of non-party actors raise questions about party control that challenge the idea of a centralised, authoritative organisational structure. In this sense, local activists and even non-party campaign organisations can exercise autonomy to act either in line with, or contrary to elites' aims.

MAYBE ADD THIS BACK IN FROM PARTY STAFF INTERVIEWS: Rather than prescribing how these tools and other digital affordances should be used, one elite party interviewee therefore described the party's approach as about making 'it easier for people to do what they do' (Interview 5), whilst another mentioned giving volunteers 'the skills and the confidence to use them effectively', continuing that digital 'shouldn't just be a national programme' (Interview 4). This suggests that whilst Labour did intend to exercise some degree of central control by producing tools and creating procedures that shape digital practices locally, they are also open to the idea of local innovation and autonomy.

Conclusion

The organisational dynamics of political parties have long been of interest to scholars of political parties who are keen to understand how authority is exercised within these organisations, and where power lies. In this article we have sought to extend our understanding of central-local party dynamics using a study of the uptake of digital tools in the UK Labour Party. In contrast to previous studies that have tended to equate discussions of elite party strategy and practice, we have conducted a multi-levelled analysis that, first, identified an elite desire for controlled-interactivity (as opposed to

citizen-initiated) in the adoption of digital tools, before, second, showing that despite the provision of common tools from a central elite, grassroots practices were not uniform. Focusing on variations in the usage of digital tools and activists' tendency to use official and unofficial party mechanisms, we have argued that many local activists are acting in ways that are not subject to central control. Presenting different examples, we have shown how and why this may prove problematic. As such, we have attempted to show the tensions that can exist between elites and local activists, and the challenge of balancing autonomy and control.

In addition, our article has highlighted the potentially significant role paid by non-party actors in campaigns. Discussing the significance of Momentum as a structure for sharing expertise and providing training, we have highlighted the presence of an alternative site of authority that may challenge party elites' ability to exercise control. If party activists begin to utilise systems, procedures and technologies that are beyond party oversight, then the capacity to exercise control may be threatened rather than advanced. This indicates that whilst such organisations can provide benefits in the form of additional capacity and expertise, they also have important implications for our understanding of organisational power and control, adding a new dimension into traditionally singular structures of autonomy and control.

These conceptual insights offer new perspectives on the dynamics of party organisation, but they also demonstrate the value of multi-layered analysis. By looking at narratives and practice at an elite and local level we have shown that intentions and practices often diverge, making it problematic to focus only on the desires of elites. Whilst the picture of party practice we produce is perhaps messier and more complex than that produced when focusing on elite desires alone, we argue that it helps to capture the challenges that parties face. In particular, we believe it demonstrates the need for parties to consistently monitor and regulate local practices (rather than presuming compliance) in order to prevent practices that may harm the party brand. Although it is easy to conceive of party members and activists as passive, docile agents for the goals of elites, our analysis has shown that the process of exercising control is by no means straightforward, helping to explain why parties require internal organisation and resource, and how scandals can emerge. In thinking about the consequences of these findings for wider studies of party organisation, we argue that there is accordingly a need to look beyond elite desires and strategies to consider the relationship between elite intentions and practices on the ground.

Looking beyond the Labour case, our findings suggest that any party seeking to promote the use of digital tools – or indeed to promote vibrant offline campaigns – faces a range of challenges about *how* they seek to drive forward these ideas. Our analysis has shown that local actors' response to central party tactics (whether defined by a desire for controlled-interactivity or a citizen initiated approach) are unlikely to be uniform, and may result in behaviours not only contrary to, but also potentially damaging to parties' aims. For this reason, central parties need to understand, anticipate and respond to differences in local parties if they are to achieve their desired balance of autonomy and control.

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