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‘Opportunities have pretty much disappeared’: The Movement for Scottish Independence in Abeyance during Covid-19

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Abstract.

This paper draws on 10 months of empirical research observing how the Scottish independence movement mobilized during 2020, the unique period of time when the UK was beset with overlapping crises: Brexit and the Covid-19 Pandemic. When the pandemic forced a cessation of physical demonstrations in March, we employed a mixed-methods research design combining manual and automatic classification of tweets with qualitative content analysis of semi-structured interviews, in order to illuminate both how the independence movement responded to the pandemic in organizational and strategic terms, as well as providing a reflection of how activists reflected on the purposes and context of their activities. We conceptualise the cessation of activities as a period of ‘abeyance’, and ask how Scottish independence activists worked to stay mobilized during lockdowns. We found that the movement utilized a variety of strategies, including online events, and by framing independence as a response to these crises. In pointing to the mishandling of the pandemic by the Conservative government in Westminster, and the oncoming end of the Brexit transition period, for example, activists were able to emphasise the importance and urgency of the movement’s cause.

Keywords: Scottish independence, social movements, abeyance, Brexit, Covid-19

Introduction:

In 2020, Scottish independence activists faced two concurrent crises which impacted the movement in different ways: the UK’s imminent exit from the European Union (Brexit), and the Covid-19 pandemic. The former was perceived by many Scots as unilateral action on behalf of the UK government, as Scottish voters had voted in large numbers against Brexit. Activists framed Brexit as dragging Scotland out of the EU against their will, and argued that it would have a variety of adverse impacts on Scottish society. Accordingly, the movement for Scottish Independence planned a series of marches, rallies and actions building up to the end of the transition period in December both to protest against Brexit and to build a case for a second Independence referendum. It was at this point that the pandemic struck. Faced by stay-at-home orders and restrictions on public gatherings, the movement had to cancel planned activities and enter a forced period of quiescence. This hiatus was formalised when the Scottish Government confirmed that plans for a second Independence referendum would be ‘put on hold’ during the health crisis.

We had originally intended to study the series of events leading up to Brexit to chart opinions, attitudes, tactics and identities in the Movement for Scottish Independence (MSI). As it became increasingly clear that large-scale events could not proceed and that there would be no rapid return to ‘normality’, we were forced to consider how the movement would cope with the suspension of contentious politics. Rather than studying a protest wave, therefore, we found ourselves confronting a movement in abeyance. What, we asked, happens to a movement in this context? How does it respond to the cancellation of planned activity? How, if at all, does it seek to maintain the networks that sustain the movement? How much can online activism compensate for the lack of public events, and how can key leaders and organisations keep peripheral members interested and die-hard supporters in check? Drawing on interviews with leading activists and data from Twitter we argue that MSI activists had to innovate tactically to keep the issue of independence alive. In what follows we begin by introducing the movement, discuss the literature on abeyance and digital networks and outline our methods, before turning to the findings of the research.

The Movement for Scottish Independence

The *Campaign* for Scottish Independence was organised through formal, institutional processes and secured a referendum on the issue in 2014. The Scottish National Party, which led the devolved Government in Scotland, was at the heart of the call for change, and pushed for the vote through institutional means. In this sense, following Diani and Bison (2004), it is best conceptualised as a coalition or campaign rather than a social movement. In the run up to that referendum, however, informal networks inspired grassroots activism ranging from rallies and marches to protest camps and gatherings, which altered the nature of the campaign and lent it a social movement character (Bennie, Mitchell and Johns 2020; Morrison 2016, 2020). Following the referendum defeat, these groups continued their activity – extending beyond the political campaign - and sought to ensure that the ‘once in a generation question’ was kept on the table. Whilst the SNP was, and remains, at the heart of the movement, both during and after the campaign those seeking Independence diverged from, and sought to apply pressure to, the party (Bennie, Mitchell and Johns 2020). Heaney (2020) identifies three tributaries to movement events: a) Coalition leaders such as All Under One Banner, Hope Over Fear, and the pro-independence newspaper *The National*; B) Local organisations such as *Aye Aberdeen, and*; C) Narrower, interest groups such as *Pensioners for Independence, Yes Bikers*, and the SNP. Like Breeze et al. (2017: 756) we would place the SNP in the first category, but include smaller parties like the Greens and the left-wing Scottish Socialist Party and Solidarity here, alongside autonomous groups like the Radical Independence Campaign and Women for Independence.

Following Diani (1992:203), we define a movement as consisting of ‘networks of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups, or associations, engaged in a political or cultural conflict, on the basis of a shared collective identity’, and argue that mobilisation around Independence before and after the Referendum came to resemble a movement. Diani and Bison (2004: 283) argue that collective action must occur ‘in the context of dense inter-organizational networking’ in order to differentiate a social movement from other instances of collective action. The rise of numerous organisations and groups fighting for Scottish Independence met this criterion. Stammers and Eschle (2005), however, note that this could result in a network of organisations, and they emphasise the significance of grassroots participation and extra-institutional activism for social movements. Does the Movement for Scottish Independence meet this more stringent requirement? Heaney et al. (2020: 11) note that ‘independence supporters have marched regularly in the streets of all major cities across the country’ since 2016, to demand a second referendum. These marches have been coordinated by different groups, mobilised individuals, groups and organisations, and moved away from the dominance of the SNP (Heaney 2020). This grassroots participation promised to increase in 2020, with marches planned in multiple cities across Scotland, as activists sought to mobilise for Independence ahead of the UK’s departure from the EU and the 2021 Holyrood Elections. It was at this point that the pandemic struck, and mass gatherings and protests were prohibited on health grounds.

Pleyers (2020: 295) notes that ‘not only did the coronavirus outbreak bring the weekly demonstrations to an abrupt halt; it has also been seized by governments to call for national unity and regain legitimacy’. The MSI is in a somewhat different position to many movements in this regard, since the party leading the Scottish Government remains a central social movement organisation. In many ways it resembles what Muldoon and Rye (2020) term ‘party-driven movements’. Whilst the UK Government sought to silence calls for independence, the nested nature of UK governance means that the Scottish Government at Holyrood could use its handling of the pandemic to signal differences from Westminster (Parker 2021). To retain legitimacy, however, it needed to put plans for a Referendum on hold, and focus on the health crisis. This context is important because, as Della Porta (2020: 355) illustrates: ‘Against all odds, the first stages in the Covid19 pandemic have been met by ... a new wave of protest’. Pleyers (2020: 296) similarly found that movements had ‘been particularly active during this period’ and identified five roles that they played: ‘protests (that re-emerged in some countries despite sanitary risks); defending workers’ rights; mutual aid and solidarity; monitoring policymakers and popular education’.

Whilst individual MSI activists engaged in some of these actions, the movement as a whole entered a 'time of latency' which, Pleyers (2020: 296) argues, 'challenges social movement studies' focus on protests and suggests paying more attention to less visible aspects of social movements'. Melucci (1996), refers to these less visible flows of communication and interaction as 'submerged networks' and argues that they play a central role in movements. Stall and Stoecker (1998: 729–730) build on this, and argue that: 'The community is more than just the informal backstage relationships between movement members, or the foundation for social movement action. It sustains the movement potential during the hard times, when the movement itself may be in abeyance'.

Abeyance: offline and online strategies

Taylor (1989: 761) coined the concept of abeyance to describe 'a holding process by which movements sustain themselves in non-receptive political environments and provide continuity from one stage of mobilization to another'. Whilst Taylor links abeyance to periods of movement decline, more recent work points to active processes of community building and information sharing during this phase (Holland and Cable 2002). Simi and Futrell (2020: 131) develop the concept of 'active abeyance' as a deliberate strategy to 'strengthen solidarity, sustain movement organization, and potentially recruit new adherents until new opportunities emerge to pursue different mobilization strategies'. Such scholarship allows us to view the pandemic as a period of abeyance when 'normal' protest repertoires and tactics were suspended and the MSI had to sustain itself through other means.

There have also been significant innovations in computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies since Taylor's initial article. 'Even during movement abeyance', as Lee, Chan and Chen (2020: 4945) argue, 'social media networks remain the conduits through which political communication occurs, and such political communication activities can shape individuals' activities toward contentious politics'. Social media platforms enable the creation of new digital social networks which, as Housley et al (2018: 2) note, facilitate 'new forms of deliberation, debate and civil participation' and have played 'a key role in the emergence and/or growth of activist campaigns that are both highly distributed and centrally organised'. Twitter has emerged as a key social networking service and is increasingly 'used for citizen participation in socio-political discourse relating to events' (Burnett and Bloice 2016: 396). Significantly, the platform allows for one-to-one or one-to-many engagements between activists and senior political figures in a way that is absent from traditional media (ibid.). Chen (2011) also suggests that Twitter now constitutes a means of community-building.

CMCs have been particularly important during a pandemic that has required social distancing and been accompanied by lockdown orders. Hashtag activism, as Clark (2016: 800) argues, offers ‘digitally networked solidarity for otherwise alienated individuals’, making it a critical tool during this time. Della Porta notes how ‘digital assemblies allowed activists to discuss perspectives and to build proposals’ through periods of lockdown (2020: 355). We might expect similar processes to play out in Scotland given Shephard and Quinlan’s (2015: 498) point that the MSI has long embraced digital campaigning, and that the 2014 Scottish referendum could be seen as ‘the first social media referendum’. Burnett and Bloice (2016: 397) agree, noting how ‘social media (and Twitter in particular) were used extensively by both sides in the 2014 Scottish Referendum’. Their emphasis on the centrality of social media messaging, echoes Shaw’s (2012: 381) argument that online communities are ‘not only engaged in “maintenance” of social movement networks for later organised activism, but in fact have the political aim of changing discursive perceptions, norms and ways of understanding mainstream discourse’. Engström (2020: 587) notes how Twitter users sought to influence opinions during the 2014 Scottish Referendum by citing authority figures, using polling data as authoritative information, and using legitimisation and de-legitimisation strategies. Periods of ‘abeyance’, thus, may be opportunities for discursive politics as well as community building.

A few notes of caution are in order here. Housely et al (2018: 3) observe that ‘tweets within a specific campaign can be dominated by a small number of, often high profile, users who seek to self-promote and avoid reference to potentially contentious issues’. Burnett and Bloice (2016: 398) note the higher frequency of tweeting by males, and Quinlan points to the domination of social media by younger generations, limiting how representative platforms like Twitter are. Online activist campaigns, therefore, should not be seen as homogeneous, but as networks of digital interactions between posters who may be more or less engaged with the campaign. There is also the question of how effective digital campaigns are at reaching out beyond the movement. In a pithy comment, Quinlan (2014) observes that ‘the social media world is more one where the committed interact with each other rather than one where converts are made.’ Digital activism, thus, may facilitate networking and communication *within* the group, but fall short in terms of recruitment. Finally, Quinlan and Shephard’s (2015: 498) analysis of the 2014 referendum, notes how ‘engagement with online campaigns appears to be driven by events, illustrating that behaviour observed on social media seems to be strongly influenced by specific newsworthy items.’ We cannot, thus, assume that it will prove to be as central to campaigning during the pandemic.

Research questions

Drawing on the literature presented here, we asked the following research questions:

1. What did Scottish Independence activists see as the priorities in light of the postponed Second Independence Referendum, a lack of physical demonstrations, and the imminence of Brexit on 31 December 2020?
2. Did the independence movement go into 'abeyance' or employ alternative means of political participation, political change and coordinated action?
3. How (if at all) did they mobilise to respond to this situation?

In the next section, we describe how we addressed these research questions, and the background of the project more generally.

Methodology

This paper is the conclusion of 10 months of research into mobilization around Scottish independence during 2020. In December 2019 we began organizing questionnaire-based surveys of Scottish independence demonstrations aiming to chart the wave of marches and rallies planned to take advantage of Brexit, framing it as a decision made against Scots' will. We surveyed one march in Glasgow in January 2020 before events started to be cancelled, and the lockdown that came into force in March compelled us to redesign our study. The revised research design was based on a mixed-methods approach that combined semi-structured interviews (n = 8) with members of key organisations and political parties to better understand the organisational dynamics of the movement and how it understood and adapted to the circumstances, with qualitative content analysis of Twitter data (n=10595). The rationale was that activity was shifting online, and that Twitter was the social media platform of choice during the 2014 Referendum (Burnett and Bloice 2016). We used interviews to get a sense of the day-to-day aspects of movement activity during the pandemic and to double check the Twitter data.

Interview participants were sampled from the National Yes Registry (<https://nationalyesregistry.scot/>) which mostly lists organizations associated with the 'Yes' Movement. We opted to use it to geographically diversify our sample on the basis that social distancing measures impacted organizations differently depending on location: arranging meetings outside is more feasible in less populated areas. Participants were contacted via email, before being interviewed online. This has the limitation of confining interviews to more formal 'Yes' groups and excluding the more radical and fringe organisations, but the virtue of enabling access to people in strategic positions at the heart of

the MSI network across Scotland during the pandemic. We developed two sets of codes to analyse the interviews. One is deductive and derived from elements of social movement theory so that data is categorized according to three main themes: movement repertoire, movement identity, and movement organisation. The other coding set is inductive, aiming to allow the emergence of relevant themes. These are: Covid, Independence, Brexit, and UK elections.

Twitter data was collected to gain an understanding of how these issues reflect in discussions among a more diverse group of people, including officials, activists, opposition and the general populace. It also was useful to identify differences in opinion and different interpretations of how the movement should respond to the situation. Our research objectives required an approach that was able to track discussions over time, identify sentiments, and make the topical structure of the dataset intelligible. In this we followed other research that has demonstrated qualitative analysis of tweets to be an effective instrument in uncovering trends and discussion over time (Papacharissi, 2012; Lee *et al.*, 2014; Altoaimy, 2018; Chew and Eysenbach, 2010; Baker and McEnery, 2015).

Using the Rtweet package for R software, we collected all tweets that included both the keywords 'scot' and 'independence' in weekly intervals between the 26th of March and the 28th of September 2020. We ended up collecting data on 176 out of 186 days (94,6%). On the remaining 10 days, we were either handed tweets from an insufficient timespan by the twitter services (for reasons unknown to us) or failed to collect data on time. A three-step analytic procedure was developed. First, three researchers each took a random sample (n=400) from the dataset from which a codebook was developed inductively in an iterative process. Second, these codes were merged into a single codebook in which 13 major themes were identified (See Table 1, Appendix). Detailed definitions of every code were aimed at increasing inter-rater reliability. In a third step, qualitative content analysis was conducted. Following these definitions, the researchers read all tweets and assigned all codes applicable. Of particular interest were tweets that discussed these topics in conjunction. Four major conversations were identified: Covid in relation to strategy, motivation in relation to EU accession, Brexit in relation to Covid, Anti-Independence in relation to post-independent Scotland.

The ethics of using Twitter data are contentious (Fiesler and Proferes 2018), with some viewing 'non-protected' tweets as public utterances (like letters to a newspaper) and others maintaining that consent should be negotiated and privacy managed. We have opted to anonymize users by paraphrasing tweets, replacing words with synonyms and changing the sentence structure. This was done to render de-anonymization efforts using Twitter's own search engine or common general-purpose ones (such as Google and Bing) ineffective. This method allowed us to retain a tweet's sentiment and content whilst obscuring

the identity of the author. We used these conversations as the basis for our qualitative analysis of the tweets, trying to understand what the movement was talking about on Twitter with relation to these themes. The results of this analysis, in conjunction with the results of our analysis of the interviews, are presented in the next section.

Thematic Findings

In this section we discuss the findings of our study grouped into three themes: priorities, abeyance, and tactics, relying on qualitative analysis of data from interviews and Twitter posts. This lets us develop a narrative understanding of how the movement responded to the unique situation of campaigning under the twin crises of Brexit and Covid. We begin by highlighting how activists viewed the situation in 2020 and their sense of the priorities to be followed. We conceptualise the way the movement sought to maintain itself during a period of in-person inactivity, particularly focusing on digital networks, as a period of abeyance. Finally we address whether and how the movement adapted its tactics to respond to the situation and consider the organisational structure of the movement during this time.

Twin Crises: Protesting against Brexit in a Pandemic

The demonstrations in early 2020, prior to the lockdown, featured anti-Brexit and pro-EU imagery, and the discourse about Brexit as a whole in the movement similarly featured it as both a call to arms and an opportunity to achieve existing political objectives. In other words, Brexit was distressing for many Scots, and independence activists sought to frame their cause as an answer to this distress. In interviews, the Leave campaign and Westminster were characterised as lying, politically motivated, corrupt, and unaccountable to the voters. This is contrasted to Scotland and the SNP's positive relationship with the EU and to European citizens living in Scotland. These legitimising and de-legitimising strategies (Clark 2016) were evident in Twitter data too.

A popular trope on Twitter was to note that voters in 2014 were told that staying in the UK was the only way to guarantee EU membership:

The Tories totally miss the point. Scotland voted to remain in the union provided it also remained in the EU. This was a key campaign point during the referendum. The UK has left against Scotland's will.

The point here is that the democratic will of the Scottish people has been ignored. The implications of this were spelled out further by pointing to the material consequences of Brexit, including not being able to take advantage of the EU's pandemic relief. Note that such tweets were made prior to discussions around the vaccine roll-out in which the UK was seen to have done

better than the EU. The key aim is to de-legitimise the actions of the Westminster Government and present it as distant from, and problematic for, voters in Scotland. The logical conclusion of the perceived illegitimacy of UK Government actions was to argue that it was essential to protest against Brexit and for Independence *despite* the pandemic restrictions. Two tweets representative of this view, capture the sentiment:

Should Scottish Independence be halted due to the pandemic, or is it a necessary response to the Corona crisis? #CoronaCrisis

Why has the pandemic halted work on Independence, but not Brexit?

In our interviews, activists shared the frustration at the inability to protest in public. Brexit felt like an opportunity that was missed because of the lockdown. Although some of the independence supporters continued their activities online, for many others the lockdown restrictions left them feeling unable to take advantage of what they perceived as blunder from the UK government. Margaret from Yes4EU, for instance, said:

It [Covid] made things very difficult I think, for Independence campaigners. ... I think people who would be out on the streets regularly, in big numbers, now, first of all to protest against Brexit because the 30th of June is the deadline for asking for a transition extension. My group certainly, we would certainly be out there demonstrating against that. But then over the next few months it is going to be increasingly clear what a bad deal Brexit actually is. And we would be out there demonstrating against the bad deal and also demonstrating in favour of Independence. ... So, it's very frustrating not to be able to go out and march and that sort of thing.

Whilst several Twitter users expected the Scottish Government to continue their campaign for a second referendum on Independence, pointing to the UK Government's ongoing Brexit campaign, others emphasized the need to mitigate the negative effects of the pandemic: indeed, the majority of tweets opposed in-person events and the SNP was criticized for not taking appropriate measures to prevent such events from happening.

Many Independence activists were caught in a double bind. On the one hand they wanted to protest, but on the other they recognised the gravity of the health situation. As Mark from Christians For Independence put it:

There's big pressure to have that referendum, and Nicola Sturgeon has said she was going to have the referendum this year, but of course Covid came along and the whole thing was put on hold, **correctly**. Her job in a

situation like this is to concentrate on the pandemic and making sure the country gets through it the best as possible and that there are as few deaths from Covid-19 as possible (emphasis added).

Interestingly, less than 10% of our dataset was concerned with Brexit and Covid-19 (See Table 1, Appendix). Analysis of topics by month, however, reveals that the pandemic was discussed in 16.4% of all tweets in April, and then gradually lost importance reaching 1.72% in August (See Figure 1). Twitter activity related to Brexit and Scottish EU accession spiked in July (8.52%) but was of little importance in May (3.26%) and June (2.61%). This trend correlates with a general increase in online activity, with less than 700 tweets collected in April and more than 2100 collected in July, August, and September. In this sense, Independence supporters on Twitter quickly returned to ‘business as usual’, which mostly consists of Tweets discussing party politics, public opinion, people, and (post-independence-) strategy. The debate on Brexit in June came at a time where Scotland was emerging from lockdown.

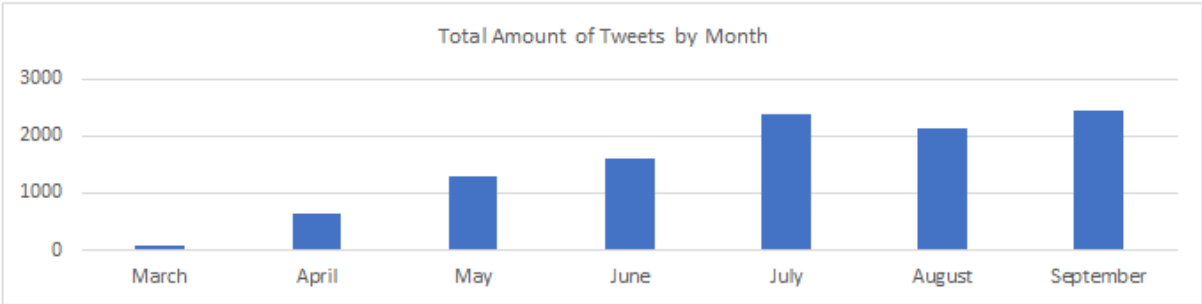
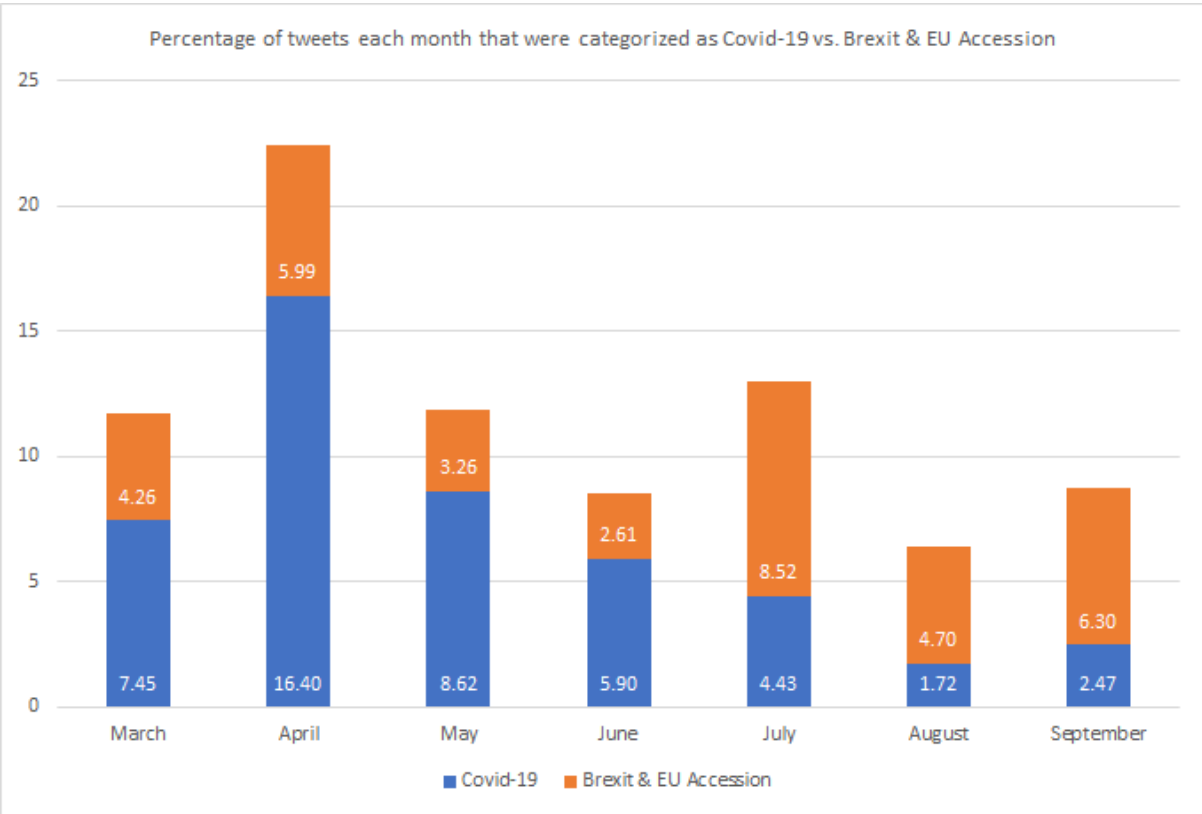


Figure 1: Tweets per Month

In keeping with the Twitter data above, interviewees bemoaned a lost opportunity caused not only by the shift to mainly online tactics and digital campaigning, but also because of the demoralising effects of the struggles of living through a pandemic. As Margaret from Yes4EU put it:

I think everything has slowed down. And I think that's what makes the Brexit situation even more worrying actually because we would have been out there protesting, there would have been things that we could do to raise awareness and to target frustrated people. There would have been things that we could have done that we can't do. We feel kind of frustrated and I think the UK Government will get away with it, whatever the Brexit outcome is. They will get away with it without much protest. Because all our activities have slowed down and also because the focus of your attention really has to be elsewhere, you know, you've got friends and family who are ill or you're struggling.

Importantly, Margaret and others felt that online activities were no substitute for being out on the streets:

So we've got lots of activities online but we can't meet in person and I think those opportunities to suddenly discuss politics like you would normally do. Those opportunities have pretty much disappeared. Because when you're meeting online it seems to be much more intense, you know, you have to get everything done within a particular period of time and you have to stay completely focused on what we're doing and so on. It's much harder to have those informal chats and actually quite apart from discussing the actual politics, the substance of issues that are going on, it is also a bit of a disadvantage in terms of really getting to know people, which we did with the previous group. And I think that is a real loss at the moment."

Covid was seen as limiting the repertoire, the organising, and the motivation of activists. For some independence groups, street stalls have been quite a popular and efficient method of organizing, as well as large gatherings and protests. They could help garner support for a future Yes vote, recruit new activists, and strengthen ties between group members. As most action moved online, using social media and email lists, all interviewed activists had experienced a slowdown of movement activity due to the inadequacy of such tactics (or the digital struggles of some members) in comparison to the offline 'traditional' repertoire. Paul, from a local Yes group in Edinburgh noted:

Our reason for existing is primarily to campaign and to interact primarily with people that don't agree with us. And we can't do that [laughs] ... We've had a lot of discussions within our own group, but not really any activity ... Social media campaigning is more of an individual action. So, there might be individuals within our group who are doing all kinds of social media stuff that I don't know about. It's quite possible. ... I mean, the technology we... It's mainly... We're all learning how to use Zoom, so we're having Zoom meetings. But other than that, it's just email really. So, we're not very technologically advanced in that sense.

Support for this position comes from the Twitter data which, like Housely et al (2018: 3), found that content was dominated by a few very active users. In our sample the top 10 users accounted for 1893, or 17.9%, of the 10595 Tweets. By the far the most active user was the pro-Independence newspaper *The National* (ScotNational - and its Sunday edition's account) which accounted for roughly 6.4% of all tweets in the dataset; and it's influence is even greater than this suggests, given that many of the other tweets included references or responses to the paper. Out of the top ten most active users (See Figure 2), 7 were individuals/activists, 2 were newspapers and 1 was an activist group. This may well be an artefact of our data collection, but it does raise questions about how digital networks around IndyRef are organised and the extent to which we can speak for the whole movement based on this data. Dan from the Digital Covenant pointed to this in grumbling that: 'We're not getting a lot of mileage out of the National'.

The snapshot of Twitter users presented here raises the question of whether the MSI Online is really a grassroots movement structured around locally engaged people as opposed to a network cohering round a few well-resourced actors who foreground particular strands of the wider movement? Further research on Twitter and other platforms is needed here, but the suggestion was also of a movement in suspended animation. As Sean from Pensioners for Independence noted:

The focus has been keeping the members of my organisation on board, and keeping them interested in the issue. despite some saying that politics wasn't important any more right now. It's very easy for the general public to become apathetic about politics, saying that it doesn't matter, and that the politicians are all in it for themselves, and stop voting, especially in poorer areas, a lot of people never even registered to vote. so it's always a challenge to attract the attention towards an issue and hold it, and get them enthusiastic.

This reduction in activity and mobilisation arguably saw the movement enter a phase of abeyance.

Abeyance, keeping the issues alive?

Whilst many bemoaned the lack of in-person events, and Sean's quote above recalls the 'holding process' that Taylor (1989) describes, others viewed the requirement to operate online as an opportunity. Significantly, it allowed geographically isolated independence activists to participate in events, and lowered the threshold for participation. As suggested in the literature, we found that social media offered opportunities for engagement, community building and activism even during a hiatus in wider activity. Responding to a piece in *The National* one tweet summed up this position:

There's no reason why we can't campaign during the pandemic. Look at the work of grassroots activists, bloggers, debunkers, vloggers and others. There are so many ways for us to be campaigning right now.

Similarly, interviews suggest that the increased reliance on Zoom and Skype for organising led to an increased connectedness of the wider network of Yes groups, particularly those from rural North Scotland. This allowed them to participate to a fuller extent in the overall movement than they would have been able to if organizational meetings were carried out in-person. As Mark from Christians for Independence told us:

I would say, actually, more people have been getting involved since the pandemic lockdown than before. Because more folk, through the use of technology, are able to attend meetings. That's particularly true in the Highlands and Islands. ... Because we're using zoom, and in a sense we're forced to use it. Up until then we would do our usual, jump on a train or a bus, travel great distances for meetings, and lots of folks couldn't do that. So our meetings would be not so well attended. What we've been finding, because of Zoom, we're getting more people interested. Because they don't have the travelling. We've had good attendance in the past, but the meetings would be once a quarter, but recently these meetings have been less than once a month. Every few weeks. Because we can do this without losing a whole day. Just 2 hours, or the length of the meeting.

Despite his somewhat downbeat account in the section above, Sean reported similar experiences:

In regards to bonding with the people, I believe we've been doing it better since lockdown because of Zoom. ... With Pensioners for Independence we used to have a monthly meeting in the basement of a Pub, and this was the Glasgow group, often with a guest speaker. It's only attended by people

that are in Glasgow and near by, but with zoom we put it out to all 800 members. And in our last meeting we had people from all over Scotland joining us.

Laura from Common Weal also noticed how social media activity increased due to the lockdown, and viewed this as an opportunity:

Certainly, the activity on twitter, in particular, has been lively. I think activists have taken the opportunity of Covid, to a large extent, to put more work in.

The pandemic, in other words, provided the need to adapt to new circumstances but also new possibilities for organizing support online, and the possibility of including geographically isolated activists. Of necessity activists discovered the values of digital networking, echoing Chen's (2011) finding that it affords opportunities for community building. Following Simi and Futrell (2020), thus, the MSI could be said to have been in 'active abeyance'. One Tweet that expresses this idea clearly writes:

Online organizing means that living far away doesn't mean you can't take part in discussions.

Set against these opportunities to reach a wider audience, our interviews echoed Quinlan's (2014) finding that digital networks are less good at reaching out and converting people to a cause. Sean notes how the move online has not only deprived them of the income they gained from street stall, but also that:

The stall was good for connecting with people outside the bubble, however, the zoom meetings are only for people that are already in the bubble. So while we've had bigger meetings, ... we are not attracting as many new members as we usually did, we are making more out of the members we already had.

Agreeing with this, Dan from the Digital Covenant expressed his frustration at trying to engage people in debate online: 'Oh, forget it. Everybody is an expert. There are not enough hours in the day to argue with them'. Mark from Christians for Independence notes two further concerns. Firstly:

It's much more difficult in a zoom meeting to have a sense about what people are feeling. You can't read people in the same way on a screen. Especially when there's maybe 20/25 people in front of you. You can't get to know them as well. If you're at a meeting and there's a break for a coffee, that's when you just have a chat, and you find out more about them. ... So we lose on some of the softer aspects, and networking.

Movement activism, this reminds us, relies on persuasion and interaction to recruit new members. Mark also noted the resource implications of moving online:

We've been using a lot of social media, Christians for Independence publish almost daily on Facebook and twitter. We get pretty good responses, so we're reaching all of these people, but there's a lot of poorer people who do not have the technology and don't access social media. You see that in schooling as well, remote schooling is fine if you have a nice home and plenty of space and an iPad or laptop. A lot of poorer folk don't have that.

Dan concurred, noting how difficult it had been to get people to sign the Covenant online:

We want to talk to people who don't have internet access, go around with a laptop and help them to sign. And to talk to activist groups all over the country, so they can go out and they can preach the message to their local communities.

In the absence of traditional means of reaching out to others and organizing support, there was a risk that the pandemic would reinforce internal group identity and solidarity but alienate or bypass others. There was a need, therefore, to find methods for keeping people motivated and engaged. In the next section we turn to the tactics and strategies adopted to this end.

Tactics in Transition

Covid was treated as limiting the repertoire, organising, and motivation of activists. The Covid lockdowns limited the range of tools available right when Brexit and the approaching 2021 elections provided opportunities for protest. As Paul put it:

There's not a huge change towards independence, but there are more questions, and [people's] attachment to the Union has been severely dented by the Brexit experience. I should say, this area voted 75 percent to remain in the EU and about 60 percent to remain in the UK. So, it's a strongly unionist, strongly pro-European area. So, there's a lot of people who are very conflicted there [...]. That's a very fertile territory for us.

Twitter data also highlighted the opportunities provided by Brexit. Tweets often used very emotional language about being robbed of their rights as EU citizens, and the incredible urgency of leaving the UK behind.

As a Scot, I get the impression that the Brexit debate has corrupted England to a point where it's gone quite mad. Brexiters would justify Boris drop-kicking puppies into a volcano. It's time Scotland gets its independence.

Or, more forcefully:

From today on we no longer have freedom of movement with the EU. The hedge funds have made their millions, how long until they ditch Boris? We need Independence 100%. #independence #indyref2

As seen here, and contrary to Engström (2020) we found an increased use of personalised attacks directed at individuals. In 2014 the Yes Campaign was marked by a more positive vision of Independence, whereas No voters singled out Salmond and Sturgeon for criticism. Our data suggest that 13.24% of tweets (See Table 1) focused on public figures and their opinions or actions. Part of the reason for this shift, we suggest, is frustration about the lack of opportunities to protest. Paul observed:

Normally our strategy, in cases such as going door to door, or at the stalls would be to target the 'soft no's'. we would ask on scale from 1 to 10 where do you stand for independence, where 1 is for the union and 10 is for independence. and this told you right away whether there was a point in trying to persuade these people. we would just forget about the people who would say 1-3, but the 4-6 we would engage with. so to reach these people who wouldn't normally be too interested in politics you can't get them to read a website or an opinion column, but to get their attention you have to get right in their face. I even used to run wee musical group and we would go in care homes and engage with pensioners, and sing Scottish folk songs ... unfortunately it seems as if doing this again will be off the table for the foreseeable future.

Whilst digital networks facilitated community building events, they were much less effective at persuading others. Activists, thus, had to adapt their tactics and find new ways to reach out. One method, Paul said, was to return to more old-fashioned means of interaction:

The only thing that we can do, and we've started a letter-writing group to try and write letters ... to interact with No voters through the press, by responding to articles that are anti-independence, or anti-SNP, or whatever. And just to get individuals from our group to write letters and try and get them published.

Whilst social media allows for information sharing and bonding *within* the group, in other words, the mass media remains a key means of communicating with the wider society (Stammers and Eschle 2005). Such communication was seen as essential given the often polarised nature of social media, as Dan notes:

Everybody seems to think that if you don't agree with their ideas then everybody else is wrong and they end up insulting them online or not speaking to them at all. And I just get fed up with that, because you don't get anything, you don't get anywhere with that kind of a situation.

There was a clear desire to be out and about campaigning. Indeed, Margaret observed how some local groups did what they could off-line:

Well it is best to have both [online and offline]. When we were able to get out and campaign at meetings or on the street or so on, we used online communication as well, we used social media then as well. ... One other group did some actual physical campaigning outdoors just a couple of weeks ago, when they went around to talking, writing messages on paper and sticking up posters, kind of fly-posting here and there and so on. And that was quite interesting. We might try some of that. ... We've done that sort of thing in the past, we might do that again. That's possible during Covid.

Dan summed up the situation as follows:

We're doing what we can. [...] Certainly less effective than what I had expected to be at this stage. I thought we could be knocking on the door of a million signatures [for the Covenant] by now, and we're far, far away from that. And the main reason for it is that we're just not getting out there and getting the coverage.

Lacking set-piece protest events with which to generate interest online, activists had to rethink their tactics. The weakness of Twitter as an event-centric platform (Quinlan and Shepard 2015) is perhaps evident here. Rather than advertising or discussing in-person actions, activists needed, in Shaw's (2012: 381) terms, to change 'discursive perceptions, norms and ways of understanding mainstream discourse.' Two key strategies that emerged from the data were the de-legitimation of the UK Government and the use of polling data. One issue highlighted regularly was the perceived mismanagement of the Covid crisis by the UK government which had a pronounced role in the way activists campaigned during this time. One Tweet which summed up this view very well, reads as follows:

Imagine being a Scot right now. You were threatened with EU expulsion so you voted no to Independence, then England drags you out the EU. Now you've got Boris in charge and Covid is killing your people. I'd be sprinting out the UK.

In her interview Margaret agreed, arguing that 'the UK Government's response has been shockingly poor. Dreadful actually'. In contrast, the Scottish Government's response is seen as more careful and mature by this activist and others we interviewed, with a sense that they have a better understanding of, and connection with, the people of Scotland. On Twitter, this was also a major theme, and an important narrative developed concerning the different approaches of Westminster and Holyrood. Pro-independence users on Twitter drew on Nicola Sturgeon's responsible leadership in the handling of the pandemic, contrasting it to that of Boris Johnson:

Once we're done with the pandemic, it will be all about Scottish Independence. If you consider performance during the pandemic, who do you trust more? Nicola Sturgeon or Boris Johnson?

This offers an example of both legitimation and delegitimation strategies (Engstrom 2020). In addition to the forced cessation of its relationship with the EU, Scotland was framed as being impeded in its pandemic response by being part of the UK. This was discussed in relation to the ability to provide financial aid as well as PPE. One representative Tweet says:

Legally speaking, the Scottish Government lacked the power to impose a general lockdown earlier this year. It also lacks economic powers to protect incomes. We need Independence to give us the power to respond to the pandemic.

By stressing these issues, activists could use the pandemic to their advantage, but only by reinforcing the centrality of the SNP in the process. As noted above, however, the Scottish independence movement is not homogeneous. Dan, for instance, critiqued the focus on the SNP:

I try ... to point out that party politics isn't really the key to an independence movement. That's a different thing. But I have experience of people saying: 'the SNP have been really good in government'. Well, if I examine the Scottish Government's actions over the last five years, I can find plenty to pick holes in.

Several posts criticised the strategy of the Scottish government for being too soft and conciliatory towards Westminster. They felt that Sturgeon should

pursue Independence as well as handling the pandemic, while others argued the pandemic should be her only priority. One Twitter user wrote:

We need to start moving on Independence, virus or no virus. The people want independence ASAP. Westminster has shown us we can do better.

One of the main rationales for demanding Independence sooner rather than later was found in polls. A key finding from the Twitter data was that activists were using polling, and especially exciting-sounding statistics and data visualizations, as a proxy for the marches they held prior to the pandemic. Engström (2020: 587) notes how Yes Scotland used ‘conformity authority strategies’ in 2014 – pointing to polls to suggest that a majority of people are in favour of Independence. In the absence of marches, polls assumed greater significance and were used strategically to show that Scottish independence was more likely than ever:

In the middle of the largest global crisis since World War II, support for independence has just INCREASED to 50%.

Reference to ‘experts’ sought to emphasise the credibility of such figures - ‘A polling expert notes that Brexit could be an opportunity for Indyref2 - and the popularity of their cause: ‘An Ipsos Mori poll for BBC Scotland found that 63% of Scots now want another Independence referendum’. In other words, MSI activists found ways to create ‘events’ to Tweet about and keep the demand for Independence alive. As such, activists we interviewed were not too disheartened by the period of abeyance, though they invariably looked forward to a resumption of contentious politics.

Conclusion

The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and its attendant lockdowns forced a movement used to public engagement, in person events and rallies into abeyance. With the cancellation of the series of events planned in the run up to the end of the Brexit Transition period, much of the energy and impetus of the movement was lost. Like Lee, Chan and Chen (2020: 4945), however, we found that social media networks allow for some continuation of contentious politics. That said, we would qualify their assertion that such networks allow for political communication to occur, noting that such communication appeared to be most effective *within* the group. Activists did seek to generate political conversations both through Twitter and letters to media outlets, but it is unclear how effective this was. We echo Clark (2016: 801), therefore, in calling for future research to ‘grapple with the political implications of online speech and the socio-political effects it produces’. Lacking the usual means of reaching out to non-converts, Scottish Independence activists emphasised community

building and information sharing, making use of virtual meetings to include those who might otherwise have been unable to attend. They also sought to change the discourse around the pandemic to their advantage. In this sense, the pandemic offered an opportunity for ‘active abeyance’ (Simi and Futrell 2020) particularly for the better connected and resourced sections of the MSI. As public health restrictions are lifted we would expect the networks built and strengthened over the past 12 months to result in a renewed and concerted push for a second referendum. As Keith from the SNP and Scottish Independence Foundation, put it:

Certainly the campaign slowed down for obvious reasons, we couldn’t meet in person, but it’s still going on online, on Zoom, and it’s definitely waking up again, now, and I think much more invigorated and probably the better.

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Appendix

Topic	Definition	N (% of Total Tweets)
COVID-19/Pandemic	Tweets that discuss independence in the context of the pandemic.	520 (4.91)
Brexit	Tweets that discuss independence in the context of Brexit	422 (3.98)

Strategy	Tweets that do at least one of the following: 1. Discuss organizational and/or political means of achieving independence. 2. Discuss planned or future events related to independence (e.g. marches, protests, online events etc.)	2048 (19.33)
Post-Independence	Tweets that discuss policies in an independent Scotland.	534 (5.04)
Other Independence Movements	Tweets that refer to Independence Movements in other countries (e.g. Catalan Independence Movement, Welsh Independence Movement)	1306 (12.33)
Motivations	Tweets that discuss reasons why Scottish independence is desirable to either them or someone else.	639 (6.03)
Anti-Independence	Tweets that display negative sentiment towards independence in either explicit or implicit (mostly humorous) ways.	595 (5.62)
Party Politics	Tweets that discuss independence in the context of Party Politics, either in Scotland or the United Kingdom as a whole.	1256 (11.85)
People	Tweets that discuss public figures and their opinions, actions and contexts.	1403 (13.24)
History of Scottish Independence	Tweets that discuss the history of scottish independence.	129 (1.22)
Media and News Outlets	Tweets that discuss institutions of media and news outlets.	255 (2.41)

EU-Accession	Tweets that discuss Scotland joining the European Union after leaving the UK	162 (1.53)
Other/Unrelated	Tweets unrelated to independence or where none of the above codes applied.	2528 (23.86)
	Total =	10595

Table 1. Multiple codes can apply to a single Tweet. Hence, percentages do not sum to 100%.

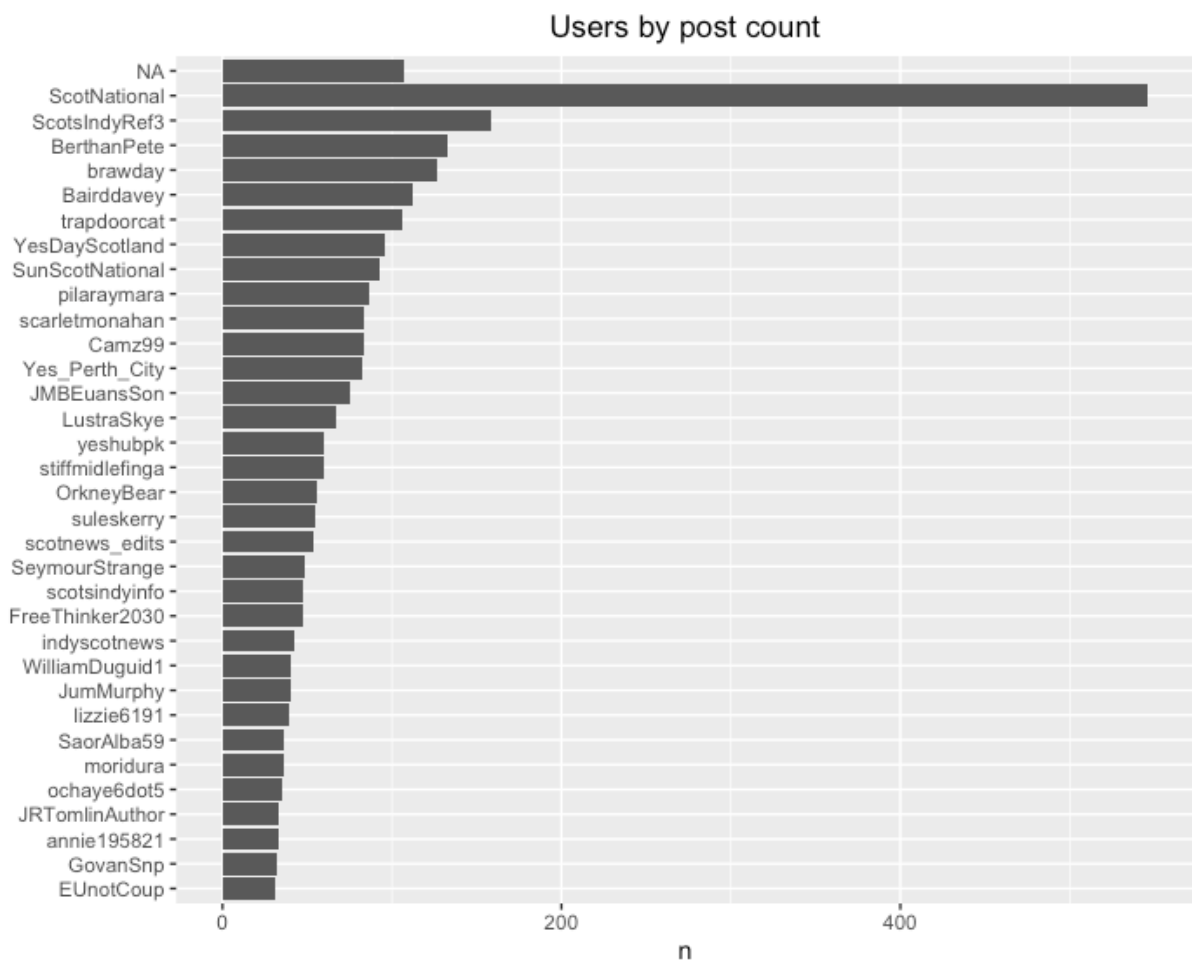


Figure 2: Users by Post count.

Distribution of Topics by Month in %.

