280 CHARACTERS

SOCIAL MEDIA IN POLITICS: SPREADING FAKE NEWS OR STRENGTHENING DEMOCRACY?

A collection of essays from industry leaders, academics and politicians

A PUBLICATION BY

POLI
MONITOR

HELPING TO UNDERSTAND AND ENGAGE POLITICIANS
IN INCREASINGLY DIGITAL POLITICAL DEBATES

SAM CUNNINGHAM

Sam Cunningham is the co-founder and CEO of PoliMonitor. An expert in communications and public relations, Sam held a number of roles with members of the government, including a stint at No. 10 under then Prime Minister Gordon Brown.

Foreword

280 characters. That's all it is; 280 characters, earnestly written on your laptop or mobile. You click enter. A few milliseconds later, those 280 characters, those 50 words, are cast out, laid bare for all the world to see – *your* words, tattooed to the grand tapestry of the Twittersphere. For many of us, this is all it might be; a folly, a flitter, a bit of fun whilst braving the commuter trains on a Friday evening. But for some people, on some occasions, we want to say something very serious and profound about our society, hoping that fleeting thought will be heard and alter the political debate. And sometimes it does. Social media has changed the very way in which we interact with each other and the way our political lives play out. And I think this is a positive development, narrowing, if not eradicating the gap between politicians and the public. No longer do they need to wait for polling day or the postman to know what the public think. It's also lifted the lid on the esoteric world of politics. On Twitter, where more than 90% of our MPs reside, we can see their disagreements amongst one another, their feelings towards topical issues of the day and, for better use of the word, their competence in acting as our representatives in Parliament. While MPs have 17 millions followers - barely a soul tunes in to watch Parliamentary debates on television. Of course, there are downsides too. Some of us don't want to be reading what Boris Johnson had for his breakfast this morning – and more serious implications for our democracy have been detected, with Russian social media bots purported to be able to control elements of our political debate. Some even feel empowered enough to lift the filters of their daily lives through their keyboard, spouting hateful or simply hurtful rhetoric - mostly anonymously - that has no place in our public discourse. But this should not undermine the potential of social media - and technology more broadly - to strengthen our democracy. As a tool to communicate with constituents, and to broadcast to the rest of the world, their personal views, political beliefs and policy aspirations, politicians are embracing social media as a vital link in the chain of representative democracy. This is why I helped to found PoliMonitor, a political technology company that allows users to see what their parliamentarians are saying about things that matter to them on social media. PoliTech has the potential to transform how politics is done. This ebook will feature people who outright agree with me. Some, I expect, will disagree vehemently. But just like social media, let this ebook be one that starts – and continues – the debate. Social media in politics: spreading fake news or strengthening democracy?

UK MPs have a combined total of approximately 17 million followers. By comparison, @realDonaldTrump has 58.8 million followers.

LORD ANDREW ADONIS

Lord Adonis is a Labour peer and former government minister. In recent years, he has become one of the most outspoken critics of the government's handling of Brexit.

Finding a voice through social media

When I resigned from the National Infrastructure Commission in January 2018 to fight Brexit, I had just under 30,000 Twitter followers. After a year of campaigning for a People's Vote, I now have nearly 100,000. Twitter has gone from being a useful news app to an essential part of my political activity. This has taught me three key lessons. First, social media like Twitter can be a brilliant tool for democracy. It has given me a way to directly communicate and connect with like-minded people all over the country, and has been essential to building the movement for a People's Vote. For a long time after the referendum the national media treated Brexit as a closed issue and dismissed the prospect of another referendum, but platforms like Twitter circumvented this and enabled the hundreds of thousands of people who did want another say to make their voices heard. I knew that this was a serious movement with the potential to change the direction of the country when I gained about 20,000 followers in a matter of days after my resignation with literally thousands of messages along the lines of "I'm so relieved someone like you is finally making the case for stopping Brexit." The way that Twitter allows mass movements to form with this kind of speed is what makes it so powerful.

Second, social media strengthens the accountability of politicians. It has inverted the old top-down structure of politics being delivered to the public. Now it is the quick wit or brilliant fact finding of an unknown person on Twitter that goes viral and is delivered to politicians. This

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is of real importance when something of the magnitude and complexity of Brexit is taking place since it enables instant accountability on issues that political journalists and politicians have little knowledge. For example, the fact checking by trade experts on Twitter of Brexiter claims about the benefits of a 'WTO Brexit' has hugely valuable in shooting down this nonsense. Social media like Twitter is not just a megaphone for politicians, but a way for the public to get involved too. Thirdly, social media works best when you focus it on real people. The dark side of sites like Twitter is the torrents of abuse politicians, including myself, receive from strangers behind a wall of anonymity, as well as its

potential to rapidly spread lies and fake news. My solution to this is to remorselessly cut out nasty people and focus on those that I know in the real world. I use Twitter not just to promote the tour of country I am currently doing, but also to connect with people that I meet along the way. It is much more rewarding and productive to concentrate on messages from people I know are willing to show up in person as well as online rather than worry about what 'FarageFan1945' with a bulldog avatar said about my last tweet. Don't tell anyone, but some of my best tweets were inspired by meet at events, such as those hosted by PoliMonitor, and who stayed in contact via Twitter. If you had told me years ago when I first started politics that I would in the future send 20,000 'tweets' in a year of campaigning to stop the UK leaving the EU, I wouldn't have believed you for several reasons. But platforms like Twitter can be used to strengthen our democracy, hold politicians to account, and connect with people in the real world, and we need that more than ever.
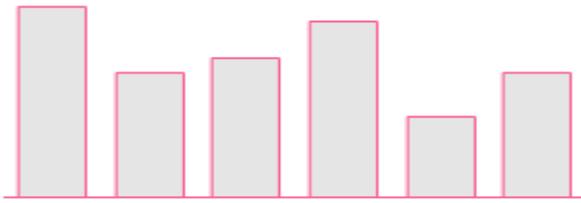
DR. JENNIFER CASSIDY

Dr. Jennifer Cassidy is a former diplomat and Lecturer in Politics at St. Peter's College, Oxford. Dr. Cassidy's PhD centred around the topic of Digital Diplomacy, questioning how diplomatic agents use social media platforms during

Diplomatic Communication in an age of real time governance: evolution or revolution?

To begin to understand how diplomacy is operating in this era of real – time governance it is vital to understand two things. The first is Tran Van Dinh reigning thesis on the vitality of communication to diplomacy. In his seminal work *Communication and Diplomacy in a Changing World*, Diplomatic Scholar Tran Van Dinh, penned the words now famed throughout the corridors of diplomacy: *Communication is to diplomacy as blood is to the human body. Whenever it ceases, the body of international politics, the process of diplomacy does to.* Although composed in 1987, a far cry from today's communicative environment, Van Dinh's words have without question, stood the test the time. They have moved and intertwined themselves seamlessly, with

each passing global communicative change. Indeed, the power of their echo has proven immovable and steadfast through the diplomatic realm. From Embassy, to Consulate, to Ambassador, to the United Nations, European Diplomatic Service or African Union, the commitment to these words, that is, diplomacy's commitment to the art of communication, has only slightly altered in tone and character with each technological advancement. The second thing to acknowledge when assessing diplomatic communication in any era, is that – and I warn you, this statement may come as quite a shock to many but – diplomats do not like change. It's true. As an institution, it's not known for its welcome embrace of all things transformation, particularly

when it comes to methods and tools of communication. It is an institution based on historic practice, rules grounded in precedent, and protocol which has evolved over centuries of tradition. Full stop. Indeed, when the British foreign secretary, Lord Palmerston received the first telegraph in 1851, "My God, this is the end of diplomacy!' But the plot twist was indeed for Lord Palmerston, as although the telegraph was to substantially alter diplomacy, it was not to end it. And as time would show him, or indeed those after him, the same would ring true for the fax machine, the radio, the telephone and now the age of real – time governance, where social media dominates the lines of public diplomatic communication. We have this that from the power of the

hashtag to frame political discourse online, to the use of online messenger services such as Whatsapp to conduct press briefings, the technological revolution has had a substantial impact on the practice of diplomatic communication. From their extensive reach capabilities to the instant power of connection, popular online platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram are demonstrating to their users and observers alike that the age of the digital – in particular the age of social media – has altered how we now practice and perceive the role (and power) of communication within the diplomatic realm.

> " …the age of social media… has altered how we now practice and perceive the role (and power) of communication within the diplomatic realm "

However not all has been smooth sailing, with such shifts in communication strategies creating an increasing amount of hyperbolic discourse or "myths" concerning what diplomatic actors are actually doing online. Some, if not all, of these myths have been informed by the *possible* or *expected* power of online technologies and not by what is actually happening in practice. The problem here is that these myths begin to wrongly obscure or alter what the core goals and aims of this historic practice are. Core goals and aims have not been substantially altered in line with communication trends. This is something that I wish to press on more and more when we choose to engage with any discussion on digital diplomacy – that what we are currently witnessing, or

practicing, is an evolution of diplomacy, not a revolution. My concern is that

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sometimes the marvels of communication technology in the present have produced a false consciousness about the past – even a sense that communication has no history, or had nothing of importance to consider before the days of television and the Internet. We must remember that the radio did not destroy the newspaper television did not kill radio; and the Internet did not make TV extinct. In each case the information environment simply became richer and more complex. And that is what we are experiencing in this crucial phase of transition to a dominantly digital ecology. An ecology – which is in our case that of diplomatic practice. Therefore if communication strategies are to become truly effective in the digital age, such hyperbolic discourse surrounding the technological revolution needs to be dissected and discussed. We need to separate hype from genuine transformations within the digital communication arena, and move the discussion from that of an online presence focus, to one which is centred around strategic output and effectiveness. This in turn will allow for diplomats to create one of the scarcest things the information age – credibility. As one of the scarcest things within this new digital ecology that both the user and producer of information has, is attention. And attention goes to arenas of credibility. And diplomats, just like politicians, or journalists, are in the

credibility business. As something that we are noticing more and more when we study the use of diplomatic accounts online is that diplomats have to be careful that the gap between rhetoric and performance doesn't develop and widen any more than it has. It is great to talk about democracy and human rights and all the public diplomacy goals you wish to promote, be these through your Ambassador or Embassy accounts. But when you preach it, and don't or can't always follow through – you may actually get a rebound that's worse than if you had of been more moderate in your initial tone. In short – if your practice doesn't link up with your online narrative - you will ultimately expose yourself to hypocrisy and if there is one thing that erodes credibility - its hypocrisy. So reducing this gap, these "myths", concerning what diplomatic actors are expected to do online due to the power and capacity of these new technologies and what they are actually doing or indeed want to be doing online, is and will be for some time one of digital diplomacy's greatest challenges. Therefore by acknowledging the notion of belief versus reality, and accepting the narrative that the era of real – time governance is simply one more step in the evolution of diplomatic communication, and not in fact a seismic revolution, as some would have us believe, diplomats and diplomacy can truly begin to harness the power of the current technological order in a strategic, distinct and intentional manner. But for now, we continue to do as we have done. Tweet, work towards progress, and then tweet about all the progress we have done and will do.

TIM FARRON MP

Tim Farron MP was the leader of the Liberal Democrats from 2015-2017, and is now the party's spokesperson for Communities and Local Government.

A mixed blessing or a colossal distraction?

Andy Warhol notably said that everyone is famous for 15 minutes. But this was before the age of social media, which allows everyone to be famous all the time. We all seek to live lives that win the approval of others, and social media allows us to present the best of ourselves. But it also compels people to constantly show themselves off as the wittiest and the prettiest. This puts us under enormous pressure; it encourages fakery and exacerbates mental health issues. The mega audience offered by a platform like Twitter is of course irresistible for many of us politicians. I always say that politics is showbiz for ugly people, and social media plays to our vanity, with thousands of people hanging on our every pronouncement. We all enjoy a bit of affirmation, but we also need to keep some perspective. The Indy100 website recently wrote an entire story around a tweet I made to Nigel Farage pointing out that he didn't stand down as an MEP when he left UKIP. They suggested this was "possibly the best tweet of my entire political career." Now that's all very lovely,

There is also the misery factor. A single tweet can spiral out of control and cause great hurt to both tweeter and responders. Typing from behind the safety of a screen means we lose our courtesy filter, and allows folk to say things they would probably never dream of saying in person. But words are weapons, and a thick skin is not an automatic add-on that you acquire when you open a Twitter account.

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Social media also affirms us in our echo chambers. We are all tempted to believe things that support what we already think. And there is always a fake fact out there to help. Every business closure can be jumped on by Remainers to prove that Brexit is a disaster. Some of them probably aren't even linked to Brexit, but it doesn't stop people imbibing non-facts as truth and retweeting enthusiastically. Likewise, we see some incredible

being shared in the opposite direction. MPs have recently been contacted by quite sensible constituents who have been taken in by news that the Lisbon Treaty means that if we stay in the EU we will have to adopt the Euro by 2022. That this was an invented piece of garbage didn't occur to the thousands of people who read it, wanted to believe it and shared it. Of course, 'propaganda' has been used for centuries to influence people to think and respond in a certain way. The difference now is that a fake story can reach millions in minutes. And digital manipulation can make it very convincing, even literally putting words into people's mouths. The upside is that with multitudes of fact-checkers, it is also easier to verify and discount a lot of what is said - but is the damage is often already done with the spreading of the initial story. So I tend to see social media as a mixed blessing. Information and communication are at our finger tips, but we also breathe in fake facts and abuse alongside the endorphins. Not to mention the fact that it is a colossal distraction from the real work we are supposed to be doing!

SIR ANTHONY SELDON

Sir Anthony is the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Buckingham, known in part for his biographies of the last 5 UK Prime Minsters (Margaret Thatcher to David Cameron).

Social media in politics: Democracy in crisis?

We are living in times unprecedented in the history of democracy. Never has the Mother of Parliaments so consistently failed in its duty to compromise on matters of policy as it fails now, in relation to Brexit. Not since Watergate has a US Presidency so tested America's celebrated Constitution. Elsewhere, from Turkey to the Philippines to Brazil, so-called populists are leading insurgencies against the established order. The common thread is the way in which technology is revolutionising our democratic processes, offering new ways of obtaining and maintaining political power. First deployed as a technique in Barack Obama's re-election campaign in 2012, machine learning algorithms form increasingly sophisticated judgments on how likely an individual voter is to support any given candidate. In the 2016 US election, the consultancy Cambridge Analytica reportedly built a database of almost the entire US voting population – some 220 million Americans – complete with psychological profiles of each voter based on 5,000 separate data points

harvested from social media and other currently disputed sources. This enabled the Trump campaign to use social media bots and advertisements to 'micro-target' voters with messages tailored to their profiles and prioritising emotion over reason. President Trump now engages almost every day, directly with his almost 60 million Twitter followers. This provides the Executive branch with a powerful new capability, enabling the circumvention of the traditional media and weakening its ability to hold the Executive to account. Thankfully the UK has yet to fall prey to such a bombastic character, yet similar dynamics are observable – albeit at a smaller scale – in the increasingly intimate relationships that various campaign groups have formed with their audiences. The proliferation of online news organisations and the increasing importance of social media to the dissemination of news means that media organisations find themselves competing for the attention of social media users. This is changing the relationship between producer and consumer, and the content itself – which is often designed to appeal to pre-existing biases, further entrenches consumers in their political or cultural 'bubble' and further alienates people from the counterview. Deliberation online therefore degenerates to argumentation

and frequently to insults. What is the solution? It seems clear that regulation must form at least part of the answer. Technology has always challenged and disrupted existing norms and it will continue to do so. But abuses of data have been tolerated for too long, whether by a lack of understanding, by political indifference, or worse – the prospect of sharing power with big tech corporations. It might seem spurious to argue that *more* technology will address today's problems, but ever has it been thus. Regulation can

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only ever be part of the answer. And sure enough, people around the world are waking up to the shortcomings of social media and developing new technologies that seek to revive the political climate and culture by - like Polimonitor - making accessible and transparent the social media activity of our political representatives and other public figures, or fact-checking their publications or posts. It will be vitally important that they receive as much support as we give them.

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