Social media in politics: spreading fake news or strengthening democracy?

A collection of essays from industry leaders, activists, academics and politicians

Helping to understand and engage politicians in increasingly digital political debates
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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.
List of contributors in order of appearance

- Lord Andrew Adonis
- Dr. Jennifer Cassidy
- Tim Farron MP
- Sir Anthony Seldon
- Shabnam Nasimi
- Baroness Jenny Jones
- Asa Bennett
- Dr. Maha Hosain Aziz
- Isi Daley
- Seema Malhotra MP
- Indra Adnan
- Dr. John Ault
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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 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.”

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 is of real importance when something of the magnitude and complexity of Brexit is taking place since it enables instant accountability on issues that 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 the 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.

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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
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 times of political crises.

**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 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 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 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 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.

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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, but where am I supposed to go from there?! 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. 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 fingertips, 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 Ministers (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 profile 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 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.

“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.”
Shabnam Nasimi is the Founder and Director of Conservative Friends of Afghanistan. Shabnam arrived in the UK at the age of eight with her family, fleeing the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. She has become the first Conservative activist and campaigner from British Afghan origin.

“I am young, I am from a Muslim background, I am an ethnic minority and I am female – yet I am an anomaly. Unlike many of those from a similar background, I support the Tories. And one of the important tools that helped me to become politically active was Twitter. It enabled me to question the status quo, develop a suspicion of consensus, and question orthodoxies that exist around certain topics.

When I worked for the voluntary sector, I managed and led projects that worked with ethnic minority communities to support their integration into British society. We would have conversations around race and culture, and I would be very struck by the way they understood their positions in society as victims, with the world stacked against them and facing a racial disadvantage. And this prevailing view didn’t make sense to me, based on what we know of British society, of individual experiences and the dismantling of barriers for ethnic minorities to succeed – which has meant that many ethnic groups have succeeded in Britain, with some even outperforming the white population.

It is this narrative that I’ve wanted to counter, because if you see racism everywhere, you are less likely to succeed. And through much research, conversations on Twitter and face-to-face interactions with likeminded individuals that I had been introduced to online, I found that the Left were perpetuating this narrative. My openly Conservative values as an ethnic minority were constantly being questioned and criticised. Many immigrants move to Britain to escape authoritarian politics, so no, we are not all socialists. I personally believe that saying all ethnic minorities have to vote a certain way is quite racist. We have diverse views, yes – but most importantly, we are human beings with our own thoughts, opinions and beliefs.

And it was social media that allowed me to realise that the Left that stood for equity, fairness and the liberation of the oppressed had now adopted a rigid and oppressive ideology which boxes people into categories. Having been influenced by my own background as an ethnic minority, I have become worried that we tend to think of people as being defined by these characteristics, and not seeing people as individuals.

The solution in my opinion is to be more visible. We need more and more Conservatives to speak up, have their voices heard and be part of the discussion on social media. MPs need to go outside of the usual methods to reach new voters. The tired routine of Conference, Westminster and the national press cannot last forever. To win over a generation of young voters and to change the narrative of the types of people that vote Conservative, the use of social media is of paramount importance.
Recognising the flaws of political technology

As a Green, I know what it is like to have your views marginalised in mainstream discourse and ignored by the Main Stream Media (MSM). When I was elected to the London Assembly in 2000 and started talking about air pollution, it was a minority concern. It took a regional BBC journalist to be bold and start covering the issue, before others in the MSM saw this public health emergency for the scandal it was. Social media grew in scope during this time and enabled campaigners to find a regular audience for new medical research about the impacts of bad air. Many people outside of London, including asthma sufferers, have had to rely on social media to provide the information about air pollution episodes that DEFRA and the Met Offic deliberately fail to publicise. More recently, it has enabled Rosamund Kissi-Debrah to crowdfund her legal campaign to prove that her 9 year old daughter’s death was directly related to air pollution and the failure of the authorities to take action. Social media has been a friend to a lot of campaigners who care about the science and the development of effective solutions. However, social media is not always used for the best of purposes.

A recent report commissioned by Green MEP, Molly Scott Cato, looked at the role Facebook has played in abuses of personal data for political purposes and the spread of disinformation, particularly during the Brexit referendum campaign in 2016. Platforms like Facebook want to make money and that means marketing. They need to mine their 2bn active users for information about their likes and dislikes. They then sell access to this information. This does not make Facebook a neutral trader in a market place of ideas, as it is all about the distorting impacts of big money. The more money you have, the more people you can reach and target. Rich people buying influence is nothing new and most of the MSM is owned by billionaires. What makes Facebook different is that we saw it as a neutral space and until recently, we were unaware of how bots and the placement of ‘fake news’ memes, could capture our timelines. Molly details the ways in which the social media giant has consistently lied to the public and to regulators in order to conceal or misrepresent the ongoing abuses to which it has been party. Common sense tells us that social media need regulating and electoral laws need updating. We need standard, simple and easily understandable privacy settings set by default to ‘no sharing of personal data with other organisations’. Social media companies should be required to verify the identities of all their users before accepting them onto their platforms to prevent automated posts by non-human agents. Pages should be linked to legally founded organisations or associations with responsible (named) people behind them. Above all, we need raise awareness of all the dark money tricks on social media and to develop a more robust scepticism. I’m not arguing for cynicism, far from it, but for all of us to actively step outside of our echo chambers and engage with those we disagree with (as long as they do so in a civil manner). We are right to complain about the distribution of fake news by Russian bots, or right-wing autocrats, but we also need to double check the latest key fact being used by those we agree with and to challenge it if we think it’s wrong. Social media has become an essential part of modern democracies, but we need a new democratic spirit to match the challenges of that technology and to recognise its flaws.
Donald Trump would not object to being known as the president fit for the social media age. In fact, the Twitterholic commander-in-chief has made clear his inclination to agree, admitting recently that he would not be sitting in the White House if he had not been able to “get the word out” so easily. The President relishes Twitter as he can get around what he sees as the “fake news media” to speak to his people directly. Such a communication strategy is far from new, as I note in my new book how Julius Caesar marked himself out as a pioneer.

When he was off conquering Gaul, his enemies in Rome feared that as soon as he came back, the Roman people would rush him into high office. They were desperate to push the narrative that he was on a selfless mission to save his people from the French hordes. Caesar had invented his own newspaper, the “Acta Diurna”, in order to keep the Roman people up to date. But he could not just fill it with his preferred spin on his Gallic conquest, as the Senate - in which many of his enemies sat - controlled what was published. He sent back letters, but his allies were stopped from reading them out in the Senate. And so he went around the established channels of communication to offer his preferred narrative to the people. His “Commentaries on the Gallic War” gave them a blow-by-blow account of the decisions he took against fearsome French foes, which typically ended in triumph. No amount of “fake news” from the Senate could stop Roman readers from lapping up the swashbuckling tales of derring-do they were getting straight from Caesar. Caesar is now held up as one of the greatest leaders in history, something President Trump clearly aspires to. Although if he was around today, he would clearly be taking to Twitter with just as much aplomb.

Politicians have long fought to push out their preferred messages, in order not to have their reputations shaped by their enemies. As Trump put it recently: “It is the only way to fight a VERY dishonest and unfair “press”. Many stories & reports are pure fiction!” In the same way, Caesar worked to put his own story out to avoid his supporters buying the “fiction” that he was a power-mad glory-hunter, although some of them - like a man called Brutus - went on to think that - with a bloody result that we know all too well. For as long as there have been political offices to pursue, campaigners have waged a propaganda war. Social media has not so much rewritten how this works, rather opening up a new front for politicians to focus their efforts - being able to serve up their messages even faster. As spectators, we’re spoiled rotten about how much they now want to tell us.
Dr. Maha Hosain Aziz is a professor, author and cartoonist focused on global risk and prediction in NYU’s MA International Relations Program and a visiting fellow at the LSE’s Institute of Global Affairs. This article is based on ideas in her new book, Future World Order.

The Activist Tech Billionaire: A New Influencer in our Evolving Political Systems?

It’s a tough time to be a politician. In recent years, frustrated citizens have done everything from throw food at their elected officials (e.g. in Brazil, Germany), slap their politicians (e.g. in Nepal, India), set themselves on fire outside state offices (e.g. in Morocco, Greece), launch mass demonstrations to protest specific policies (e.g. in Chile, Portugal) and even bring down entire regimes (e.g. MENA). Democracy or dictatorship, citizens are clearly unhappy with their governments – and they are not afraid to show it. This is a global crisis of political legitimacy where the status quo is recurrently being challenged by tech-armed citizens. But we are also witnessing the rise of other political influencers to fill that legitimacy gap – the activist tech billionaire. Today’s activist tech billionaire is spotting trends and sharing his policy views publicly more than ever, acting like the public intellectual of the 21st century when government fails short. Many of these billionaires see it as their responsibility to remind us of the negative impact technology will have on society, including more unemployment. For instance, as Alibaba’s Jack Ma put it, “In the coming 30 years, the world’s pain will be much more than happiness” as robots replace some jobs. This has sparked a recurring policy debate among activist billionaires about how universal basic income (UBI) might help us cope with automation-related unemployment in the coming years. Slack’s Stewart Butterfield suggests “giving people even a very small safety net would unlock a huge amount of entrepreneurialism.” Virgin’s Richard Branson takes the policy suggestion one step further – AI will wipe out jobs but will create extreme wealth that can be reinvested in part in UBI, if governments can’t afford it. Activist tech billionaires have also spoken out about climate change, specifically U.S. President Donald Trump’s decision to withdraw from the Paris accords. But the activist tech billionaire is also putting his money where his mouth is to shape policy. Think again of UBI – Y Combinator’s Sam Altman decided to take the ongoing debate between activist billionaires to the next level with a pilot project in California to see how UBI what might work. According to his team’s blog, their next experiment is to see if people’s motivation to work and quality of life improves with UBI. In climate change, Michael Bloomberg pledged $15 million of his own money to the UN and has also facilitated “a new coalition of cities, businesses and universities” to take a lead role in fighting this global challenge. Other billionaires, led by Gates, have put their funds into a $1 billion venture fund for clean energy tech to fight climate change. And more recently, Tesla’s Elon Musk offered to rebuild Puerto Rico with his solar power battery packs, after Hurricane Maria (and President Trump’s tweets that aid cannot continue “forever”). And what do you think, Reader – is the activist tech billionaire the new influencer in your country’s political system?
Isi Daley is student mobilisation co-ordinator for For our Future’s Sake, a youth and student-led movement which is part of the People’s Vote campaign.

A double-edged sword: empowering young people but helping sow the seeds of division?

“Politics is so deeply intertwined with social media, that it would struggle to flourish without it”

Social media is a pivotal tool to master if one seeks to engage the youth of today. Co-ordinating a national movement, whilst building, maintaining and expanding engagement with a demographic that is usually perceived as disenfranchised, would not be half as effective, nor efficient, without social media. I champion social media for strengthening democracy, by giving the marginalised a platform when one was not afforded to them. It gives young people, like me, a voice in an industry inclined to favour older generations. It allows for young voices from all backgrounds to be included in conversations, express opinions and be taken seriously when doing so - thus promoting greater social understanding on issues outside of our immediate bubble. It also allows for constructive criticism and the consideration of alternative perspectives from first-hand accounts. Prior to dipping my toes into the political realm, my understanding of the importance of social media in this field was widely underestimated. In politics today, the personal is public. What you believe becomes what you represent and therefore who you are. This can be an incredibly tricky double-edged sword to manoeuvre. One wrong statement, an incorrect gesture and it is projected to the world and permanently stamped on your cyber resume, not only tainting you as a person but, by association, what you represent. On the other hand, it is a fantastic tool in holding those who govern or contribute to the socio-political landscape to account. The danger, however, is when being held to account is no longer valued amongst those in the conversation. This is where we see the spreading of so-called “fake news” and hypocrisy, which goes unapologetically unchecked by those who spew it, ultimately injecting division and polarising society with contradicting narratives. Politics is now so deeply intertwined with social media, that it would struggle to flourish without it. Those who wield it must understand the responsibility they have to those they represent by using it intelligently, diligently and integrally.

In the past 6 months alone, UK MPs Tweeted approximately 356,000 times - almost 2,000 times a day!
Seema Malhotra is the Labour and Co-operative MP for Feltham and Heston, having been elected in 2011. A former management consultant for Accenture and PwC, Malhotra founded the Fabian Women’s Network and was special adviser to Harriet Harman during her tenure as leader of the Labour Party.

Using social media to connect with my constituents

Today, having a Twitter account is essential for engaging in national political dialogue, staying up-to-date on the local news and getting your finger on Westminster's pulse. Yet what people consider less often is how crucial a tool Twitter can be for amplifying local issues – particularly, ones that are indicative of system problems. In this way, Twitter can serve as a channel of communication between MPs, their constituents, and the broader public. Recently, a major pipe in my constituency burst, causing flooding and lack of water. Using Twitter, I was able to connect with constituents who had been affected by these issues, as well as holding Affinity Water and housing associations who had exacerbated the problem responsible. But there is a problem here: just who am I connecting to when I use Twitter? Twitter’s own figures suggest that 24% of the UK population use Twitter, but they skew younger than the general population. In my own experience, many of my followers aren’t actually constituents but journalists, politically engaged young people, and Labour Party supporters from across the country. While this is an important audience to make connections with, there needs to be more straightforward lines of communication between the MP and their constituents. Facebook represents one channel, with several of my colleagues dividing their social media communications between Facebook for constituency-related matters and Twitter for policy-related matters. A newsletter can also be useful, especially as MPs have access to their constituency party’s email addresses and can gather more through an opt-in box on petitions or surveys. And sometimes it is the old-fashioned ways which can have the most impact: leafletting and street stalls still represent an important form of connection, especially with people who might not be online for various reasons, whether that’s expense, age or another factor.

This is particularly worrying as communication isn’t a one-way process – just as I want to talk to my constituents, my constituents want to talk to me. While the advent of services like Write To Them has certainly helped in this respect, it’s still only a subset of constituents who are getting through to me. While these concerns will become less pressing over time, as demographics shift, they will always play some part in the lives of our constituents. There is a need for bold thinking facilitating communication between an MP and her constituents that takes account of the sensitivities of age, socioeconomic factors and personal choice.
The Alternative UK is a new political platform that responds to the question: if politics is broken, what’s the alternative? We committed to the task the day Jo Cox was murdered: the result of one man’s inability to process his emotions. Within the context of an increasingly polarised society, triggered constantly by a media whose business model it is to make us react. The fact that so many of us are stressed by the fear and loathing generated by the media, is not the fault of journalists alone. Nor is it entirely the responsibility of social media activists. They are part of a much larger, failing system, that keeps us all hooked on trying to get our basic emotional needs met through superficial means. Being able to shock, insult or goad someone, out of physical reach, gives those frustrated with their lack of agency in real time, a feeling of power. Generating original ideas and publishing them online, satisfies our needs for autonomy. Sharing posts and retweeting the views of those we admire, gives us belonging. In many ways, social media is a pressure valve for our frustrated society. But should we be so reduced? The image of 21st C citizens, addicted to their phone because they cannot get their emotional needs met in a healthy way, is pure bathos. What happened to the visions of human potential conjured up after each World Wars, the 60s revolution, the Millennial Dome. In the process, social media has created a power economy that cannot be ignored. Not so much hard power – the ability to force others to act. But soft power, the ability to influence through story. Both direct tale-telling – true and fake news – which shapes people’s preferences. But also longer-term narrative building, which has the power to energise or sap people of their ability to act at all. Whereas once, governments paid huge sums to design leaflets and drop them in plane loads over enemy territory. Today any non-state actor can share their propaganda with the whole world at the push of a button. One could read all of this as an ode to a more democratic era. Any person is now free to express themselves and have a go at shaping the public space. And there is no doubt that we are all learning about ourselves and each other at a pace no previous years could boast. If you doubt that, ask yourself why it took so long to really understand that the BBC has an agenda. Just like everyone else. Today, we are totally primed to seek out what the intention of the writer is: fake news is an issue discussed by all. On the other hand, we could read it as the final symptoms of a dying civilisation. The one that has, until now, been content to instrumentalise human beings to serve the growth economy, that so few benefited from. As people increasingly wake up to the extent to which social media operators, big and small, are prepared to manipulate their freedoms (check how many exposes about Dominic Cummings) they have begun to look for alternatives. Not only in the increasing popularity of mindfulness and other means of ‘taking back control’ of our own thinking, but also through seeking solace in a more real time community.
Dr. John Ault is director of the UK’s leading election observation group, Democracy Volunteers. He has recently been Head of Mission observing and reporting on elections in The Netherlands, Sweden and Finland.

**On the impact of technology on elections**

Whether you are a Leaver or a Remainer, a Conservative or Labour supporter, a Liberal Democrat or a Nationalist, at some point you will have been targeted to vote one way or another over the internet. You may be aware of this targeting, you may even have noticed it, but as campaigning develops we should be aware that this campaigning exists in something of a legislative no-man’s-land that is unregulated and often unknown. As elections become more dependent on technology, observers have become more concerned about the integrity of our elections. These days voters register to vote or apply for a postal vote online, councils keep the electoral register electronically and some have argued that we should begin to allow electronic voting in the future. To some extent we now live online and our some of our engagement with the democratic process exists on the internet as well – but before you wonder if this is an argument for electronic voting or internet voting – it is not. Analogue elections are much more robust compared to the potential interference in digital elections. This is about how we moderate and understand the ways that political campaigners have learnt to use e-campaigning; currently our legal framework is woefully behind where it needs to be to be to monitor it. Somehow we have to manage a digital campaign with an analogue voting process. Most of the recent debate has concerned the electoral framework in which parties essentially remain unregulated online. This legal framework was created in 2000 with the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 (PPERA) which has now become so out of date that the processes by which it expected campaigners to conduct their election campaigns have become defunct – because of online campaigning. The context in which we now find ourselves is much more dynamic because of the potential for micro-targeting on the internet using social media. Some have argued that this void between the legislative framework and the campaigning reality means that we should consider how the advances in technology now require us to engage in an administrative, and presumably legislative, transformation. In this electoral officials, candidates and campaigners would have greater clarity of the legal framework fit for the modern online world. When the PPERA was passing through parliament twenty years ago, neither Facebook nor Twitter had even been imagined, so we should also be conscious that any modern legislation should not only be introduced to assess their impact and that of online micro-targeting but also be adaptable enough so that when new campaigning technologies come along, they can also be given oversight. There is no point in having a framework which is so rigid that it cannot be adapted to deal with new campaigning as they emerge in the next twenty years. Of course, one creation of the PPERA was the Electoral Commission, and it must be the body tasked with the management of this new e-campaigning landscape. To do this it must be better resourced and able to deal with the rapidly changing online environment in which it has to function.

“As elections become more dependent on technology, observers have become more concerned about the integrity of our elections”
Fake News: Fanning the Flames of Global Health Epidemics

With Britain’s support, the marvel of science will once again outwit the protagonists peddling anti-vaccination myths.

Three years after the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the UK to be measles free, that status has been lost. Around the world, child vaccination rates are stagnating. So much so that UNICEF has warned that, today, one in ten children are missing basic immunisations against the life-threatening infections of measles, diphtheria and tetanus. While the context within countries experiencing these trends varies enormously, a common thread connects them: the spread of false information, accelerated by social media platforms. At home and abroad the dissemination of fake news is contributing to fewer children being vaccinated against preventable diseases. Prime Minister Boris Johnson has responded by summoning social media companies to a summit and urging them to quash misleading anti-vaccination messages on their platforms. It is sobering to think that despite the vast body of scientific evidence proving that vaccinations protect against preventable diseases, unfounded rumours are causing global setbacks. But it too, is important to remember how far we have come. According to the WHO, smallpox was ‘one of the most devastating diseases known to humanity’. In 1980, following a global immunisation campaign, the disease was eradicated. Gone. In 1988, more than 350,000 people developed paralytic polio, and at least 70 million were infected with the virus. In 2018, there were just 18 cases worldwide. So as the debate about ‘fake news’ fuelling a resurgence by anti-vaccination protagonists takes hold, it is important that we remind ourselves of the huge progress made, and for us not to lose sight of what’s possible, when we persevere. Disinformation – the spread of false information with the intention to deceive – has historically hindered medical responses to outbreaks of disease. Whether responding to outbreaks of Ebola in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) or a newly diagnosed case of polio in Pakistan, medical professionals and community workers are having to compete with fake news. In the case of the DRC, misinformation has undermined efforts to control the Ebola virus, with people told that Ebola is spread by the government in Kinshasa as means of suppressing political opposition. A situation that was complicated further this year when efforts to contain the outbreak prevented some provinces from taking part in the DRC elections. This disinformation contributed to the death toll which at the time of writing was confirmed by WHO as being 1696 people. With polio in Pakistan, political insurgents have used social media platforms to peddle myths that vaccinations will sterilise boys or contain pork or alcohol, forbidden in Islam. Atul Gwande, the medical doctor, author and global healthcare pioneer, examined the case of polio vaccination efforts in India in 2003 in his book ‘Better’. He recounts the instance of a mother in a village in Karnataka state who had refused polio vaccinations for her children after rumours had circulated that the Indian government was giving different drops to Muslim boys in order to make them infertile. As we can see, while WhatsApp and Facebook might not have been around 16 years ago, the pernicious spread of disinformation was alive and well. After a 5-year period as a polio-free nation in 2016, polio was declared to have been eradicated in India, the country that the Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI) considered the most difficult region in the world to achieve eradication. The protagonists lost there, and they will again. While the tactics to deceive and manipulate populations in pursuit of military, ideological and political ends are as old as the practice of conflict itself, the advent of affordable and near universally accessible communication technology asks different questions of the response of global health programmes. The answer lies in part in technology itself, as we have seen in Sierra Leone, where the fight to contain Ebola was aided by the use of the WhatsApp messaging service. The dream of the internet’s creator, Sir Tim Berners-Lee, to connect the world to share information for the good of mankind can still be realised. But as it stands, it’s fuelling global health epidemics. The British government is leading the charge, calling on the tech giants and social media platforms to be the enablers of accurate information, in whichever hand, wherever in the world their platform connects to a device. Because to tackle Ebola in Africa, polio in Asia and measles in Europe, we first must defeat the spread of fake news.
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