Digital media as a driver of change in political organisation: 2010 and 2015 UK general elections

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Abstract
In Britain, by 2015, Web 2.0 had become a more widely accepted and established mode of civic engagement of which political e-participation became an observable extension. However, in the run-up to 2010, social media were newer, less understood and largely associated with younger generations. These changes present questions about how wider technocultural developments impacted political engagement between the 2010 and 2015 UK general elections. This article aims to go some way in examining this question with a theoretical focus on the role of Facebook as a driver of change in political organisation. Using the British Conservative Party as a case study, the article analyses and compares events, observations and shifting power relations associated with digital technology and organisational change observed over two election cycles spanning from 2005 to 2015. A focal aim is to examine changes in Conservative Party campaigns and organisation in order to contribute to wider debates about the impact of digital technology in changing the organisation and activities of actors, like political parties and political participants, in democratic contexts. The article concludes that a complex combination of internal and external, technological and human, and grassroots and centralised factors played roles in changing the Conservative Party.

Keywords
2010 general election, 2015 general election, British politics, Conservative Party, digital media, Facebook, party change, social media

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Introduction

Schroeder (2018) suggests that the integration of digital media in democratic contexts has changed the political environment in terms of a diversification of content and format. Others have argued that social media (Web 2.0 technologies) like blogs, Facebook and Twitter, offer additional opportunities for political engagement (Koc-Michalska and Lilleker, 2016). This article aims to contribute to the literature by analysing the impact of digital media in the context of its role in changing approaches to political organisation and campaigns, with a focus on a case study in British politics.

In Britain, during the run-up to the 2015 UK General Election, like in the election of 2010, traditional media remained the most salient aspect of the media campaign. Amid the broadcasts and newspaper stories, use of social media seemed to integrate itself into a more normalised role that became naturalised as part of everyday life. In some cases, traditional media converged with new and social media, which is most notably illustrated by the advances in, and widespread ownership of, apps, smart phones and tablets. By 2012, Internet diffusion had expanded to between 80% and 90% in Western countries, resulting in a narrowing of the digital age divide (Friemel, 2016: 313). By 2015, Web 2.0 had become a more widely accepted and established mode of civic engagement of which political e-participation became an observable extension (Beckett, 2016). However, in the United Kingdom, in the run-up to the 2010 General Election, social media were newer, less understood and largely associated with younger generations. These changes present questions about how wider technocultural developments impacted political engagement between the 2010 and 2015 UK general elections.

This exploratory article aims to go some way in examining this question with a focus on developing theory around the role of Facebook in British Conservative Party (also known as Conservatives, Tories and Tory Party) campaign communities, through analysing and comparing events, observations and shifting power relations associated with digital technology and organisational change observed over two election cycles. It constitutes a time period spanning from (1) after the 2005 General Election, in May 2005, to the 2010 General Election, in May 2010; through to (2) the 2015 General Election, in May 2015. The Tory campaign communities include both off- and online party environments such as local Conservative associations, which constitute the physical presence of the party in British constituencies and regions, and Tory Facebook groups, respectively. These off- and online communities are considered to be somewhat factional, because of their notable autonomy within their collective groups and their sometimes divergent responses to Web 2.0 in the run-up to the 2010 General Election (Ridge-Newman, 2014). That said, this article will argue that a key change was observable in the run-up to 2015 insofar that a widespread convergence and conformity in the party’s use of Web 2.0 became evident within the party’s organisational culture.

A focal aim is to examine changes in Conservative Party campaigns and organisation in order to contribute to wider debates about the impact of digital technology in changing the organisation and activities of actors, like political parties and political participants, in democratic contexts. The term ‘party participant’ is used broadly to denote actors in the intra-party context. It includes not only those who are potentially party supporters and/or members but also those who (1) are more distantly associated with the party and/or (2)
through the growing pervasiveness of digital politics could find themselves, perhaps in some cases unwittingly, engaged in political activity (Breed and Prentki, 2018).

The observations of the 2015 General Election are largely represented through a first-hand account informed by digital- and auto-ethnographic forms of engagement with the Conservatives and the party’s campaigns in public settings in the run-up to the election. Observations involving individuals are generalised in order to protect anonymity, unless making direct reference to conspicuous political actors in the public sphere, for example, active and prominent political bloggers. There is reference to some selected textual primary sources in the analysis. The newer evidence is compared with previously published findings from Ridge-Newman (2014), which chiefly analyses the 2010 General Election period and partly beyond. Much of that period is informed by evidence from off- and online participant observation and interviews with Tory Party participants. The comparison of the two periods results in the analysis benefitting from an historical sensibility.

This article aims to offer a reflexive approach to developing theorisation across themes in both party organisation and political communication literatures, through an analysis of Tory-nuanced phenomena observed across the two election periods. The special focus on the role of Facebook as a driver of party change within campaign communities at the Tory grassroots is placed in the context of sections presenting the wider characteristics of the social media environment and its relationship with other more salient factors like the role of the Tory leadership. The following sections expand on these components to further highlight some of the theoretical bases of the article, before subsequent sections focus on a deeper description and analysis of key observations.

Political parties and the digital environment

Party change and digital media

Scholars of political party change have argued that both internal factors, like ‘leadership’ and ‘dominant factions’, and external factors, like the ‘environmental’ and ‘contextual’, can drive change in party organisation (Bale, 2012; Harmel et al., 1995; Panebianco, 1988). In political studies, party organisation is generally considered to be the intra-party bureaucracies, processes and structures by which political parties organise their campaigns, memberships and operations. Analysis of change in party organisation tends to focus on salient, highly visible, changes across the national organisation. In terms of this research, party organisation is also considered to include the more latent, less obvious, cultural and localised aspects of engagement in the bureaucratic and campaign communities of the Tory Party.

Bale (2012) provides a rich and holistic qualitative analysis of Conservative Party change over a significant period. Bale highlights effectively the importance of context when analysing political change and demonstrates that there are some significant factors when considering the key drivers of party change. These include the principles that (1) key variables, for example, leadership, do not always drive party change to a significant degree; (2) addressing key variables in their historical context is important in order to accurately represent the extent to which they contribute to party change; and (3) the nature of each driver of change is contingent upon its complex relationships with
multiple variables. For example, Ridge-Newman (2016) argues that new media, like television in the 1950s and 1960s, can have a pervasive impact on driving more universal change in political organisation and across multiple variables insofar that the advent of ubiquitous new media forms can compel political parties to reorganise in order to remain competitive within the new(er) media environment.

In the digital media context, there are potential opportunities for collective engagement through the mediatisation of intra-party factions, for example, the ConservativeHome blog, which can challenge the hierarchal structures of existing party norms (Ridge-Newman, 2014). In the British Labour Party context, similar intra-party digital media phenomena have been observed (Pickard, 2018) in affiliate activities associated with Momentum, a faction supporting leadership candidates like Jeremy Corbyn and, latterly, Rebecca Long-Bailey. Harmel and Tan (2003) argue that the extent to which intra-party factions influence party change is highly variable and emphasise that an inherent characteristic of large institutionalised parties is to resist change. Their theory states that major changes in party identity and organisation are related to, first, whether the party has significant reasons for change; and, second, how responsive its power structures are to change.

That said, political parties’ abilities to resist external pressures from the ubiquity of pervasive new media and wider technocultural change is relatively under theorised, and accompanying empirical work is overdue. This is largely owing to party organisation and political communication literatures having been generally divergent theoretical lines of research. Addressing digital media as a driver of party change is a relatively neglected area of research, but some scholars have made notable advances towards bridging the gap (e.g. Gibson, 2015; Gibson et al., 2013; Larsson, 2016; Lusoli and Ward, 2004; Margetts, 2006; Ridge-Newman, 2014).

Gibson (2015) expands on the discovery of ‘citizen-initiated campaigning’ (CIC), which is a phenomenon that is claimed to challenge party hierarchies through the collective use of social media by political participants at the grassroots. The study provides empirical evidence to suggest that, following the 2008 Obama campaign, CIC had emerged outside of the United States. Nevertheless, in the 2010 UK context, Gibson claims that CIC was less pronounced and this is likely to have been determined by the more hierarchical party and formalised membership structures of UK parties when compared to those in the United States. Moreover, Gibson argues that dominant parties are likely to be more fervent in their adoption of CIC and that, in 2010, the Labour Party took a more enthusiastic approach to it than the Conservatives.

Likewise, in the 2015 context, Ridge-Newman and Mitchell (2016) provides evidence to suggest that grassroots Labour supporters used Twitter in a highly enthusiastic manner that was not matched by Labour Party elites. Furthermore, the Conservatives’ 2015 campaign is shown to have been highly centralised and the most sophisticated online campaign in terms of targeting individual voters. The Internet strategies of the two main parties were in keeping with the general approach to political marketing and the wider media, which was largely based on the traditional top-down and professionalised mode of campaign organisation (Wring and Ward, 2015). For the Conservatives, this seems to be a shift away from the more experimental grassroots interaction observed in 2010 (Ridge-Newman, 2014). It supports the suggestion that the advent of social media use in
mainstream British parties was more of a hybrid ‘Web 1.5’ approach in which the centralised characteristics of Web 1.0 were integrated with some interactive elements of ‘Web 2.0’ (Jackson and Lilleker, 2009; Larsson, 2013).

**Characteristics of the social media environment**

Digital media as a mode for political marketing contrasts with the use of social media for party and campaign organisation – even though both uses could potentially involve the mobilisation of party participation. Gibson (2015) seems to conflate these two main roles played by digital technologies in parties and campaigns. This article aims to advance the understanding of research on the role of digital media in political parties through making clear distinctions between (1) party uses of digital media to win votes via political marketing techniques, (2) Web 2.0 used for party and campaign organisation and (3) cases in which both modes lead to participant mobilisation. The first role provides a medium for direct and targeted political communication; the second acts as a tool for political and party organisation; and the third can be an interaction between the first two. The same digital medium can have multiple functions with different user outcomes on the basis that Web 2.0 is complex and plays multiple roles within political parties.

Twitter and Facebook are both social media but have unique characteristics and function in distinct ways. In Britain, Twitter has significantly fewer active users than Facebook. GlobalWebIndex (2015: 17) states that, in 2015, 68% of Britons were active on Facebook compared to 30% on Twitter. In the political sphere, Twitter has become a space for conversation among a relatively elite group of participants. Facebook functionality features include targeted adverts, group and page functions, and large and actively engaged UK audiences, which results in it being an ideal medium for both political marketing and party organisation. That said, to date, scholars of digital politics have generally favoured research that analyses Twitter.

**Tory leadership and digital media**

Considering the role of the party leader, and other elites, is important in order to place the role of Tory campaign communities in context. The public face of the Conservative Party, while in opposition (1997–2010), underwent significant change. It was marked by the arrival of David Cameron’s fresh-faced leadership (Bale, 2010). Cameron’s election to the leadership in December 2005 was an outward and symbolic expression of change in the party insofar that his style and socially liberal agenda were in stark contrast to the more stayed and traditional images of the Tory leaders that went before him. Conservative Party membership underwent fluctuations under David Cameron. It is reported to have declined by almost half from 253,600 in 2005 to 134,000 in 2013 (Payne, 2013) with a slight bounce to 149,800 in 2014 (Wallace, 2014). Furthermore, there is some evidence to suggest that it was Cameron’s youthfulness that attracted younger participation to the party (Pickard, 2007).

For better or worse, Cameron’s name and face became integral to the party and its rebrand. One of the most innovative, prominent and symbolic expressions of change in the party was the leadership’s use of Internet technologies in the form of WebCameron.
and Ask David, which acted to connect the party leader to voters through new multidirectional channels online (Ridge-Newman, 2014). Hindman (2009) argues that the notion of digital democracy is a myth and suggests that new elite participants fill niches in its place. WebCameron and Ask David could be argued to fit this theory. However, by 2015, the Conservatives’ central operations acted to cleanse the web of access to many of its 2010 centralised digital innovations (Ridge-Newman and Mitchell, 2016). In addition to WebCameron and Ask David, this included MyConservatives – the Tory 2010 campaign equivalent to the Obama campaign hub MYBO (Gibson, 2012).

Therefore, in the 2015 case, the Tory leadership voluntarily vacated its dominance of certain niches that it had filled in 2010 cyberspace. Flip-flop changes from innovations in 2010, which first digitised the Tory leader, to his subsequent digital regression in the run-up to 2015 suggest that the leadership’s role as a driver of technological change in the Conservative Party is more symbolic than substantive (Bale, 2012; Ridge-Newman, 2014). Furthermore, it signals that the identity of the party elite underwent digital adaptations in both 2010 and 2015 for different reasons (Harmel and Tan, 2003). In 2010, the party focused on the election theme ‘Time for Change’, and subsequently used new media to portray Cameron as a fresh, new and innovative change to the other post-Thatcher Tory leaders. By 2015, the party’s portrayal of Cameron was as a prime minister and statesman who was asking Britain to trust in the message that ‘We’re All In This Together’. Therefore, the emphasis became about continuity rather than change. Subsequently, the party leadership shifted from acting as a radical Web 2.0 innovator, in 2010, to supporting the professionalisation and digitisation of tested marketing strategies, in 2015 (Ridge-Newman and Mitchell, 2016).

In the run-up to 2010, Conservative Campaign Headquarters (CCHQ) and Cameron’s communications team managed the Conservatives and David Cameron Facebook pages, respectively. Rather than being interactive, these pages acted as noticeboards for the party to post text, photos, links and videos of interest to the Tories’ campaign and manifesto (Ridge-Newman, 2014). Notably, Cameron went from being the person who said ‘... too many tweets might make a twat’ (Cameron, 2009), pre-2010, to being the first Tory prime minister to front an official Twitter page in 2012 (Neild, 2012), which is 3 years ahead of President Obama. This illustrates the central party’s response to the pervasiveness of Web 2.0, by 2012. In 2010, through WebCameron, the leadership favoured an interactive medium that was under total CCHQ control, which is further evidence of the Web 1.5 approach. By 2012, it seems it was deemed to be, superfluous, of diminished political capital, and unbefitting a statesman. However, it was, nevertheless, followed by acquiescence to a, once dismissed and relatively uncontrollable, social medium that had matured to play a more normalised role in British political discourse: perhaps a central Tory Party shift forward to a Web 1.75 approach?

In 2010, the Tories’ uses of the Internet in UK politics in both centralised and non-centralised contexts appear to have softened the boundaries and dynamics of democratic and intra-party engagement, respectively. In one respect, it could be argued that some of the boundaries have been redrawn, because, in 2015, the Conservative Party largely continued in its new tradition of Facebook use for party and campaign organisation. However, the party strategy to jettison the WebCameron brand and revert to portraying the party
leadership in the more traditional statesman style supports the argument that the Internet is potentially a more useful tool for opposition parties (Agre, 2002).

**Tory participants and Facebook**

In using Facebook and other social media in 2010, political participants had access to a novel medium in which non-elite participants could build an audience and ‘fan’ base that placed them on a more even playing field with elite actors, like, for example, frontbenchers, at the top of party hierarchies (Jensen and Anstead, 2014). It allowed the less elite within the party, like candidates and activist, the opportunity to potentially challenge the popularity of those in more established roles at the top of party structures. Examples of individuals who achieved this near the time of the 2010 General Election include prominent Tory bloggers, like Harry Cole (Tory Bear blog; Guido Fawkes blog), Iain Dale (Iain Dale’s Diary blog) and Tim Montgomerie (ConservativeHome blog). All now play significant roles in political discourse, but their impact was much more muted before their engagement in digital politics. This challenge to traditional party hierarchy by, generally, younger and less elite participants at the party grassroots was evident in a cultural shift in the way in which younger party participants at the party grassroots interacted with and used new political technologies like Facebook.

Ridge-Newman (2014) names this phenomenon as ‘Cyber Toryism’ and describes it to be a distinct phenomenon observed in younger Tory cohorts between 2008 and 2010. By 2012, such practices had somewhat diffused and become more naturalised behaviour throughout the party organisation. The Ridge-Newman (2014) empirical case supports the Loader et al. (2014) theory that young people can be significant actors in aspects of democratic change – albeit a change in internal democracy in the Cyber Tory case. Cyber Tory campaign communities acted through a type of intra-party ‘connective action’, which is a civic engagement phenomenon mobilised through Web 2.0 and has been especially identified in cohorts of young people (van Dijck, 2012; Vromen et al., 2015). Moreover, the advent of Facebook technologies acted to (1) loosen party structure, (2) amplify the voice of younger participants and (3) facilitate divergence from CCHQ’s traditional control of party communications (Gauja, 2015).

By 2010, Facebook was also acting to dissolve certain barriers to political engagement. As a venue in cyberspace, it allowed individuals of a like mind to convene in virtual groupings that did not discriminate based on traditional geographical boundaries. For example, Conservative participants, who were once isolated by the geographical remoteness of their home constituencies, like those in North Wales, could now interact and engage in real time with fellow activists from all other parts of the United Kingdom, thus bringing both rural and metropolitan participants together in interactive political communities without the necessity for travel. Furthermore, this dissolving of spatial limitations (Lilleker et al., 2010) connected communications between campaigning communities with greater interactive immediacy and in more visually stimulating ways than email or text message could offer. In 2010, this acted to further dissolve the younger Tory activists’ adherence to traditional party structures and practice. It provided them with a (cyber) space in which to innovate and contribute to the party’s aims in new ways, and from within their own Cyber Tory communities. The central party’s lack of understanding of
this unfolding phenomenon meant that the party’s younger wing (at the time known as Conservative Future (CF), but formerly and then, again, latterly named Young Conservatives) and its use of Facebook acted to unwittingly shift some control over organisation and communications from the party centre to the grassroots. In doing so, CF’s connective action led to a latent power shift that circumvented the central party’s direct involvement in the change (Harmel and Tan, 2003). Therefore, youth culture at the party grassroots responded organically through a CF-led organisational evolution.

This circumvention of the central party’s dominance over matters of general party organisation and communication of key party message was historic. The Conservatives’ trend of decline in its mass membership and a more centralised and professionalised CCHQ since the 1960s (Gibson, 2015) was accompanied in 2010 by a mass divergence from party norms by many CF participants. Ultimately, it acted to shift power from CCHQ to Tory campaign communities at the grassroots. This compliments Gibson and Ward’s (2012) theory that, in the UK context, social media hold the potential to play a role in reshaping internal party democracy insofar that it offers opportunities for more connected campaign communities.

By 2015, the aforementioned, change at the grassroots of CF had diffused throughout the party organisation becoming the new norm for the wider party’s engagement with Facebook. However, this diffusion of Cyber Toryism meant it was important for the party to begin educating its participants and, to some extent, controlling the use of Web 2.0 through professionalised practices. In the run-up to 2015, the party did this through the employment of professional digital media consultants who trained candidates and senior activists in Facebook use. At training sessions, candidates were encouraged to use especially Facebook for exporting the party brand through Web 2.0. The party was aware of, and strategising around, the fact that Twitter had significantly fewer users in the United Kingdom when compared to Facebook. The party’s approach became driven by data insights (Anstead, 2015) rather than the general experimentation of 2010, which marks a significant change.

**Tory factions, Facebook and change**

Ridge-Newman (2014) shows that, in the Conservative Party’s 2010 campaign, Tory Facebook participation was characterised by a significant age divide. Sometimes to the bemusement of older Tory participants, the party’s youth wing, CF, developed new and innovative ways of engaging with one another and organising party events. This emerged from within through a combination of Conservative on- and offline community interactions at the grassroots, which developed into a viral culture of sharing and passing-on Tory-specific user practices. For example, CF used Facebook to offer quid pro quo rewards in order to entice participants to engage in offline campaign activities. In 2010, CF and other campaign communities, like the Bow Group, Progressive Conservatives, Tory Reform Group (TRG) and Conservative Way Forward (CWF), used Facebook groups, in a generally ‘open’ and publicly visible manner, as a tool to organise events and campaign activities. By 2015, this had changed significantly. Many of the Conservative Facebook groups had become either defunct; ‘closed’ and/or ‘secret’, thus operating in a more clandestine manner, or converted to the use of a Facebook page, which can be made
accessible online both inside and outside of Facebook. In terms of party organisation, this suggests a shift to a less interactive Web 1.5 mode that is a more mature, cautious, sanitised and professionalised form of Facebook use by Tory factions.

In contrast to Facebook groups, Facebook pages act like a political shop front – a display window – that allows participants to furnish the page with dynamic audio-visual multimedia messages, which can include text, photographs, videos and hyperlinks. Ridge-Newman (2014) suggests that Facebook pages are used to sell political messages to a new market of political consumers. In 2010, Facebook allowed both individuals and collectives to promote political messages to UK audiences in ways that had not been seen before. By 2015, individual Tory members and factions seemed to become more professionalised or, rather, institutionalised in the central party’s Web 1.5 approach.

The relative ease with which sequestered audiences can be targeted, and the low financial cost of engagement for users (Gibson, 2015), means that social media techniques can be accessible to everyone with an Internet connection, device and basic digital skills. The fact that general Facebook access was not extant in the United Kingdom until 5 months after the 2005 General Election further highlights how significantly communication culture changed in the run-up to 2010. Therefore, historically, this is a significant and symbolic advance in terms of user-led political communication when compared to earlier UK general elections (Lee, 2014). It also gives some credence to the equalisation hypothesis, which, in contrast to the normalisation hypothesis, suggests that advents in Internet technologies can facilitate types of political engagement that would not be possible otherwise (Anduiza et al., 2009; Larsson, 2016). Furthermore, there is little evidence to suggest that the political factions in the Conservative Party played any significant role in driving technological change (Bale, 2012; Ridge-Newman (2014), but rather adapted their own organisational approaches to fit with wider technological changes in intra-party interactions.

The speed at which sections of the Conservative Party adapted, seemingly organically, to the use of Web 2.0 in 2010 seems at odds with the Harmel and Tan (2003) suggestion that institutions like the Conservative Party resist change. However, it is important to emphasise that the enthusiasm for this change was driven from the grassroots and, more specifically, the younger cohorts within Tory campaign communities. Indeed, the more senior grassroots members acted with suspicion, in general, to the use of Facebook at that time (Ridge-Newman, 2014). It is through this cleavage that the Conservative digital and age divides became observable in the 2010 context. Furthermore, although the party underwent a process of change within younger cohorts in 2010, the changes would not have been possible without the use of Web 2.0.

Further observations presented below suggest that, by 2015, an equalisation (Anduiza et al., 2009; Larsson, 2016) had occurred in the Conservative Party, which led to a more general and widespread use of social media. In turn, this became a more normalised aspect of the party’s traditional approach to organisation and campaigning. Therefore, the forward, progressive, adaptations observed in 2010 are somewhat balanced by a blend of both new and old, potentially regressive, characteristics in the run-up to 2015. Therefore, Conservative Party organisation could be argued to have resisted overarching institutional change (Harmel and Tan, 2003) to a certain extent, while integrating certain
wider technocultural changes through the use of technological tools that adhered well to its traditional organisational and campaign practices.

**Observations of politics and cyber space**

*Conservative campaign communities and Facebook*

In early 2008, members of CF branches in London and the Home Counties were leading the way in terms of Tory innovations to party and campaign organisation on Facebook. The dissemination of best practice in Conservative Party Facebook use largely unfolded in an experimental learning and copying manner within Conservative campaign communities in and close to London, which diffused organically further afield over time. Twitter was used more in terms of intra- and inter-party collective conversations, but, in CF communities, it did not gain the same level of organisational traction as Facebook. The Conservatives’ 2008 London Mayoral campaign for Boris Johnson employed the use of a ‘Back Boris’ Facebook app. It was the first of its kind in mainstream British politics and seemed to inspire a new generation of Conservative activists in terms of political Facebook engagement (Ridge-Newman, 2014).

This was especially apparent in the activism and social activities of the University College London (UCL) Conservative Society, whose president became prominent through his use of the society’s Facebook group to organise large numbers of Conservative supporters to attend campaign and social activities. At that time, Facebook was used as both a party organisation tool and networking tool for social events and making new connections within the party among cohorts in CF. By 2012, the age and types of party participants engaging with Facebook had begun to change. By 2015, the full spectrum of the party were actively engaged in Facebook use, including senior party volunteers like local association chairmen and representatives of the National Convention, and Government ministers and CCHQ professionals.

In 2010, the central party and candidates at the local level did not invest heavily in the use of paid Facebook advertising. By 2015, this had changed with a sharp focus on using Facebook advertising at both local and national levels for political marketing purposes. The central party apportioned a significant part of its campaign budget for strategically targeting voters via Facebook adverts (Ridge-Newman and Mitchell, 2016). Furthermore, through candidate training, it encouraged its candidates to do the same at the local level. Conservative candidates in both target and non-target seats employed this centrally led innovation. Candidates reported that this helped to (1) raise their profile in their constituency campaigns and (2) improve interactivity with potential constituents. It signals a significant development to the 2010 approach through which the central party remained relatively removed from the steering of Facebook best practice in campaigns. Furthermore, in 2010, the drivers behind Facebook use were largely linked to grassroots participation (Ridge-Newman, 2014).

By 2015, in response to wider technocultural developments, the central party had begun to act more directly as a driver of change in Tory Facebook use. However, whereas the grassroots activity in 2010 leans more towards impact in party organisation practices, the central party’s encouragement of Facebook use in the run-up to 2015 was much more
centred on campaign organisation and directly targeting the voter. Therefore, by 2015, Facebook was transitioning from largely facilitating organisational interactions to include uses of the social medium as a political communication tool at central and grassroots levels of campaign activity. This suggests that, unlike in 2010, by 2015, the central elite had identified good reason for the party to adapt (Harmel and Tan, 2003) to use Facebook in its political communications, primarily because the central party had awoken to the appropriateness of investing more resources in Facebook as a tool to facilitate its direct targeting strategic objectives.

In 2010, Facebook groups and event pages were used by activists as forums for networking and organising events that largely centred on the younger members and their CF branches (Ridge-Newman, 2014). Candidates did use Facebook pages, but it was not the norm. By 2015, Tory Facebook communities were becoming represented by a diverse and broad cross section of the Conservative Party. The age and digital divides were no longer significant limiting factors. It had become the norm for Tory candidates and senior activists to have a publicly viewable politician page, separate from their personal profile on Facebook. Trailblazing activities by participatory innovators in 2010 had informed CCHQ by 2015, which was now outputting best practice through training presentations delivered by CCHQ digital professionals. It seems that this development offered wider Conservative participants, like candidates of all hierarchal levels and ages, the confidence to adapt. The use of once experimental practices observed in 2010 had become standard and centralised practices in 2015. It saw Conservative candidates and politicos presenting, updating and managing a Facebook politician page as a norm rather than as an innovation.

The use of Facebook groups and events to organise action days and social events, like debates and dinners, also continued as a new norm in 2015. However, between 2010 and 2015, Facebook functionality changed itself a number of times (Caers et al., 2013). By 2015, the functionality for organising group events on Facebook had become less friendly for the organisation of large numbers of users in a network. Facebook architects had added greater barriers to the ease of inviting large numbers of Facebook friends and group members to events. Changes in the way Facebook users could personalise notification settings meant that it became easier for individuals to ignore or miss entirely invitations to events and it was further impacted by the more limited interface that tends to be characteristic of smart phone functionality. This was coupled by an increasingly disengaged user culture towards Facebook events in which invitations to an event via Facebook became a weaker form of interaction than observed in the CF campaign communities of 2010.

By 2015, Tory event organisers were reporting that it had become increasingly challenging to attract firm RSVPs when inviting party participants via Facebook, and there was a greater chance of gaining successful and accurate RSVPs if Facebook event invitations were accompanied by more traditional methods like email, text message and a direct telephone call for verbal confirmation. Therefore, in the run-up to 2015, in order to safeguard event and/or campaign efficacy, there was a return to more intensive forms of participation encouragement of which Facebook was a central feature amid additional methods of communication.
The mix of communications was particularly observable in the approaches used by the central party, which integrated targeted and personalised email and Facebook techniques that called for participation in a wide range of national campaign events and targeted all ages. Outcomes from using these techniques is demonstrated by CCHQ’s success in attracting activists across diverse age groups and geographical locations to participate in Team 2015 – the Tories’ activist ‘battlebus’ that travelled across the United Kingdom to support target seat campaigns. The techniques used in 2015 were a new approach, but reminiscent of those techniques used by innovators at the grassroots in 2010 (Ridge-Newman, 2014; Ridge-Newman and Mitchell, 2016). Therefore, it seems plausible to suggest that it was the uses of Facebook by ordinary members of the party grassroots in 2010 that drove aspects of the central party’s strategic adaptation to ‘getting supporters out’ on the campaign in the run-up to 2015.

United Kingdom Independence Party participants Facebooking the Tories

Unlike in 2010, the rise of UK populist parties in 2015 is significant, especially in terms of Conservative Party membership and change. The impact of smaller parties on- and off-Facebook was less pronounced in 2010. However, by 2015, a notable grassroots phenomenon had begun impacting Tory Facebook users. It involved inter-, as well as intra-, party factors resulting in Facebook interactions between the Conservatives and the Eurosceptic and socially conservative United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), led by Nigel Farage. David Cameron’s socially liberal agenda to legalise same-sex marriage in Britain has been documented in terms of its controversy and impact on the Conservative Party (Clements, 2014; Hayton and McEnhill, 2015). Fallout from this policy agenda led to reports that many Conservative members resigned from the party (Furness, 2013). Some Tory members switched to UKIP, which has been identified as a ‘radical-right’ party that targets potential Tories for recruitment (Ford and Goodwin, 2014). Furthermore, digital observations of Tory and UKIP members in the run-up to 2015 suggests that UKIP Facebook users were targeting Tories through a process of ‘friending’ via Facebook.

By 2015, Tory networks on Facebook had grown considerably in terms of size and demographics. Therefore, when certain Tories began switching to UKIP, there were significant numbers of Tory Facebook users who found themselves within Facebook friend networks comprised of a growing number of UKIP members (Ridge-Newman, 2015). This became evident to some Conservatives on Facebook, because UKIP members tended to post and display prominently their party’s propaganda on their Facebook walls. Moreover, on becoming a Facebook friend of those UKIP participants actively targeting people via Facebook, the targeted Tory was also likely to find UKIP participants adding them to Facebook groups rooted in the Eurosceptic agenda. Following 2010, Facebook functionality changed to allow Facebook users to directly add their friends to groups that the Facebook friend being added may or may not want to become a member of, thus placing some users in a position in which they are responsible for removing themselves from any unwanted groups. It is a process that drew some Tory participants into group deliberations and private conversations, via Facebook message exchange with UKIP participants, through which policy and political interests were shared across parties.
By 2010, technological advances like Facebook had begun to present opportunities for the erosion of traditional intra-party hierarchies and the dissolution of barriers to participation, like traditional geographical divides (Lilleker et al., 2010; Ridge-Newman, 2014). Subsequently, the 2015 UKIP-Tory case suggests that Facebook facilitated a digital ‘crossing the floor’, like in Parliament where members switch parties. Kim and Chen (2016) demonstrate how online interactions between ‘like-minded’ political participants can be facilitated by Web 2.0. Therefore, the UKIP-Tory case seems to be an example in which Web 2.0 has blurred the lines of party organisation online, between two parties with a familial relationship. Through connecting political participants across political, social, generational and geographical divides (Lilleker et al., 2010), Facebook acted to facilitate greater interaction and oil the process for potential defections.

Gustafsson (2012) used focus groups to assess the role of social networks in political participation in Sweden. The study concludes that those who were politically inactive were unlikely to be spurred into political activity through social media alone. In the US context, a study of the 2008 presidential elections showed a strong correlation between participation in Facebook groups and offline activism (Conroy et al., 2012). Furthermore, another study of the same election showed a correlation between political Facebook participation and other forms of civic engagement (Vitak et al., 2011). These studies suggest that Facebook was a fertile environment for UKIP participants to attempt to recruit disaffected Tories, because potential recruits were already politically engaged on- and offline. Therefore, the UKIP-Tory Facebook phenomenon could be argued to be a pioneering digital recruitment strategy by UKIP. However, the question of whether the strategy was an organic development at the grassroots or centrally executed to target Tory recruits remains inconclusive and requires further research. Either way, the phenomenon demonstrates how Web 2.0 holds the potential to facilitate both inter-party and intra-party dynamic connections, which is a new encroachment on traditional Conservative Party organisation that sits outside the phenomena addressed by aforementioned theories and studies. Further research that assesses the digital relationships between Conservative supporters and the growth of the Brexit Party between 2016 and 2019 holds potential for interesting comparisons.

Conclusion

This study has attempted to compare observations from two case studies that represent a range of Conservative Party themes across two electoral cycles. It seems that a complex combination of internal and external, technological and human, and grassroots and centralised factors played roles in Conservative Party change between 2005 and 2015. While prominent Tory leaders, like Cameron and Johnson, used innovative forms of new technologies in 2010, their roles seem symbolic rather than substantive. A key driver of change in 2010 was the organic and collective use of Facebook by the party’s younger members, CF, at the grassroots. By 2015, this organisational behaviour had diffused to become more normalised in the party across diverse hierarchal and demographical groups.

As theorised by Harmel and Tan (2003), the role of factions seems variable here in the case of the Conservative Party. In 2010, CF’s use of Facebook drove significant and lasting change in Conservative Party organisation in the ways in which the party organised
campaigns and events, and attempted to mobilise its supporters. By 2015, these practices had become norms to a significant extent. Moreover, in the run-up to 2015, CF’s role in Facebook innovation became more muted. The central party played a more prominent role in Conservative Facebook use by taking over the reins in order to control to a greater extent the way in which the party used the medium. Under a newly professionalised approach in 2015, the emphasis shifted from Facebook for grassroots organisation, albeit still utilised for such purposes, to CCHQ actively and strategically steering Facebook’s use towards being a political marketing tool. The latter use fits the party’s wider objectives and approaches in 2015, which were to directly target voters both on- and offline. It is a further aspect that fits well with Harmel and Tan’s theory that states parties adapt when they have a reason to change.

While in 2010 the use of Facebook contributed to an expansion in intra-party democracy for the Conservatives, by 2015 the central party had developed strategies that used Facebook to begin reclaiming back some power and control over the use of the medium. Therefore, the grassroots’ empowerment through its use of Facebook in 2010, which circumvented the trend, since the 1960s, towards more centralised and professionalised power structures, seems to have been a possible blip. By 2015, CCHQ employed (1) new digital marketing strategies and (2) best practice dissemination through candidate training, which helped to reposition its approach to Facebook and, thus, shift the party back onto a course of centralised control over Facebook by party professionals. Therefore, where the party grassroots was ahead of the central party in 2010, in terms of responding to wider Web 2.0 technocultural trends, by 2015, CCHQ had caught-up and adapted its operations to begin a process of mastering its organisational and political marketing use of the social network.

Interestingly, the UKIP-Tory Facebook case demonstrates how different combinations of events and actions, both inside and outside of the party, and on- and off-Facebook, hold the potential to facilitate interactions that can lead to the evolution of new digital phenomena. In this case, Facebook appears to have (1) played a role in blurring the boundaries between the organisations of two distinct political parties, which were represented in the social network by digitally active party participants and (2) oiled the mechanisms for potential defections, which in turn encroached on the interests of the Conservative Party to the benefit of UKIP, prior to the advent of the Brexit Party in 2019.

This exploratory work offers a focused insight into a much wider void in our understanding of how political parties and other democratic actors adapt to new media. More in depth research about how political engagement and political parties change over time, as newer pervasive political media mature and become more established, warrants deeper study. Are there comparisons to be made between the impact of radio in the 1920s, television in the 1950s and the Internet in the 2000s on political organisation, political communication and democratic engagement? In an age where digital is driving convergence, greater attention is needed to bridge theoretical gaps between these now highly related yet often mutually exclusive lines of academic inquiry.

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