



POLITICAL CAMPAIGNING AND COMMUNICATION

# Political Participation on Social Media

The Lived Experience of Online Debate

Elizabeth Anne Bailey



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# Political Campaigning and Communication

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## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Researching and writing this book has been a fully immersive experience. As the author, I have the epistemic advantage of many years of daily experience on social media, often engaging in political discussion myself. In this sense, it has been a labour of love. Throughout this project, social media has been used to share (non-confidential) learnings from the research, ask generic questions of contacts and to act as a retrievable diary. Engagement with others either online or face-to-face with the topics of debate has led to the acquisition of a much more nuanced understanding of why people might think the way they do, and also of the issues of debate. My mind has been changed in at least some ways about each of the contextual case study debates discussed, evidence itself of the ability of constant exposure over time to influence thought. Fully immersive involvement in these media as an observer and participant can at times be an emotionally demanding experience and the reactions of others can sometimes be difficult to rationalise. An internalised acceptance of this fact nonetheless has helped towards a rationalisation process over time.

With a background in national and local government, I have brought an existing personal understanding of UK politics to this study and a pragmatic approach to these matters. My past career has involved a lot of direct and varied contact with the public from all walks of life and I have learned to value these diverse voices greatly. The consideration of issues of identity, for example, has been influenced by living and working in a ‘superdiverse’ environment and latterly, a professional involvement in public health has

supported reflections on the role wider health determinants and wellbeing play in how people engage politically.

This study was initiated to answer questions which, apart from their evident wider application, have been a personal preoccupation for some time. In part it has been provoked by an occasional difficulty in comprehending why people sometimes behave in certain ways in certain situations. The research process has begun to provide some answers. It has also provided a substantial amount of learning and personal development, better self-understanding of the roots of the perspectives of self and others and a degree of greater tolerance. The process of gathering initial data has been a significant learning experience in understanding not only this researcher's own prejudices and biases, but the very grounded and heartfelt reasons many people hold the beliefs they do. I have been persuaded to think more laterally about my own political opinions.

Practically, multiple useful lessons were learned on this project about the organisation of qualitative field research, including how to conduct interviews fruitfully to an accompaniment of rush hour trains, espresso machines, honky-tonk pianists and weight-trainers as I spoke to people in environments of their choice and where they felt comfortable.

I would like to thank the following whose help has been invaluable:

Professor Jon Silverman for offering constant encouragement, constructive criticism and suggesting many useful avenues for exploration. Rosa MacPherson, Maggie King, Sanjeev Kumar and Francis Sealey for their generous help in organising focus groups and webinars. The 85 people who generously and freely gave their time to be interviewed individually by me or to take part in focus groups or webinars, each one of them an inspiration. It has been impossible to do full justice to their contributions, but I have tried to represent each one, as fairly as I can. Professor Krista Cowman and Michelle Patel for their good personal friendship, encouragement and opinions over many years. Nigel Bailey, my husband, for his endless technical ingenuity in fixing IT problems, suggesting recording solutions, editing MP3s and keeping the household running while this work was completed. Allegra and Beatrix, my daughters, for providing a constant example of the mechanisms of argument, and for making me laugh out loud daily. Lastly, the late Eric and Ivy Johnson, my parents, whose vigorous debates across a political divide

inspired a lifelong fascination with how people argue about politics. This work is dedicated to them, and to the memory of my friend Saad Ullah Khan, who would really have loved to have done this too.

Luton, UK

Elizabeth Anne Bailey



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# Introduction

## A SNAPSHOT IN TIME

In the dying days of October 2019 and after months of deadlock, the final departure of the UK from the European Union was still to be ratified. A divided, politically punch-drunk country was about to face its third general election within five years. As yet, there was little inkling of a soon-to-emerge, all-encompassing global public health crisis, the social and political fallout of which would eclipse many of the most turbulent events of the previous decade. Widescale public protest that would result, amongst other things, in statuary across the country being defaced, toppled or politely removed lay unanticipated, months into the future.

Amidst this relative calm, BBC Online published a low-key story reporting a substantial increase in the number of UK people applying to study politics at university.<sup>1</sup>

Within it, an academic mused that the fierce and sometimes toxic nature of online political chat was a significant factor piquing the interest of young people in politics. He felt that divisive debate offered a strong emotional appeal and was thus putting ‘bums on seats’. In saying so, he hinted at a head of steam that had built up incrementally over the past decade, arising from the extraordinary attraction so many of us have had to engage in political exchange online. Moreover, that underlying a phenomenon of seemingly vast social significance were some very human

factors. Behind some big things, in other words, were some apparently small ones.

Based on an original series of one-to-one in-depth interviews, focus groups and webinars undertaken with 85 UK participants over three years, this book will reflect people's lived experience of discussing politics on social media during these politically volatile times. It considers an extraordinary and often exhilarating period when mass adoption of portable electronic devices and participation in social media platforms coincided with events of marked significance in UK politics. It does so through the prism of a series of major UK debates; the Scottish Independence Referendum of 2014, the EU Referendum of 2016 ('Brexit') and ongoing deliberation over the leadership direction of the British Labour Party. In this sense it is both a retrospective and a snapshot. It is also an attempt to understand, from very individual perspectives, how we got to where we are now.

With reference to a breadth of supporting theory, it will argue that online political behaviour has very personal, social, and emotional roots. Everyday political practices, particularly online, are complex, messy and yet often melded with daily life. The online political conversation of everyday participants takes place socially, between school runs, after a few beers, amid tough bereavements and divorces, around joyful wedding plans and Eid celebrations and sometimes, in the bath. Further, it is a constellation of human factors which make this environment often difficult, dangerous, unpredictable and counter-intuitive, but also an unprecedented communal learning environment which might be having profound and lasting effects on our social and political behaviour. Rather than being, as is often claimed, a failed or inadequate public sphere, it is instead a rich, documented, collective conversation about who we are and what we might want or need to become. As such, it offers evidence of why we could benefit from political infrastructures and civic epistemologies that better accommodate, protect and support our complexity and diversity as human beings and as communities, rather than simply expect our compliance.

The chapters which follow approach gaps in understanding by asking how people themselves interpret and make sense of their experience of online political participation. Through key perspectives which emerged as dominant themes in interviews, it will explore how they understand their own role, see the relationship between their activity and real-life political outcomes and what factors they believe might have a bearing on

their views and behaviour. Chapters 1, 2 and 3 set the context and justification for this approach. These consider the context of study, critical perspectives on politics and the internet, human factors and why people's own accounts might help us to understand this arena better. Chapter 4 will then reflect on the significance of some common behavioural tendencies. Chapters 5 and 6 will go on to consider the role of belief, identity and emotion in people's online political exchange. Chapters 7 and 8 will examine self-understanding of participation and efficacy. Personal involvement in specific UK debates and related experience of interacting with the wider media through a social media perspective will follow in chapters 9 and 10. The book finishes with a concluding chapter on what might be drawn from the discussion, including reflections on opportunities, how problematic aspects of online political debate might be addressed in the future and suggesting areas for further research.

## ACADEMIC CONTEXT

Two key elements of this work mark out its contribution to the study of communication and digital political participation. The first of these is the relationship between online participation and individual subjective experience being explored. The second is the qualitative approach.

Internet-based political activity continues to inspire a wide span of research. Much of this rests on an implicit assessment of how it functions as a public sphere in the Habermasian sense, that is, a space for rational deliberation in support of formal democratic ends. The aim behind this book however has been to contribute to this body of knowledge while seeking a deeper understanding of the meaning and significance of informal, online political expression to individuals. Why is this important? The development of a more nuanced, observational understanding of why people act and interact as they do in this environment has in turn the potential to support a more holistic understanding of macropolitical change. Further, it might help open ways of thinking reflectively that could support constructive interaction in the longer term.

As Stephen Coleman notes in his study of how voters feel, it is often the case that 'sweeping currents of systemic and structural effects are meticulously chronicled to the exclusion of situated phenomenologies of sensation and affect'(Coleman 2013). Understanding and acknowledging the complexity of human experience matters in understanding

politics if politics are to serve people at all well. Dahlgren asserts that a viable democracy must connect to people's lived experience, personal resources and subjective standpoints. Meaning, identity and subjectivity are important aspects of political communication. It is important not to lose sight of the idea that democracy lives, ultimately, with citizens who talk with each other. What he characterises as civic culture can have non- or pre-political features but may move towards formal politics, so context and process are important. Politics, he notes, are constructed incrementally by word and deed (Dahlgren 2005). It is argued that informal and 'nonpurposive' everyday political talk is a practical form of 'dialogic deliberation' and a 'fundamental underpinning of deliberative democracy'. Through everyday political talk, citizens develop their identities, build common understanding, develop public reason, construct opinions and develop protocols and resources to support deliberative democracy (Kim and Kim 2008). It is interesting that this often untidy and challenging learning process now happens more and more in public view. Stromer-Galley argues that there are key unanswered questions about informal online political discussion, including the need to know who participates and who does not and why. She also points to a lack of understanding of the variables affecting the quality of formal and informal political talk. More work should be done to characterise and map fragmentation and polarisation, and lastly we could know more how national, political and cultural contexts shape online debate (Stromer-Galley 2017).

A review of scientific studies on social media, political polarisation and misinformation points out that while research has already revealed many of the characteristics of online political dialogue, there is still a lot more to understand. For example, how common informal political discussions are on these platforms, how often these cut across partisan boundaries and if so, if this happens mainly through existing relationships or through weak ties such as friends of friends. It argues therefore that research might focus on the prevalence and types of political discussions which take place in this environment, the degree of exposure to wider opinions, the roots and outcomes of uncivil behaviour, and the characteristics of each channel that encourage particular sorts of expression (Tucker et al. 2018). It has been reasoned that all such cases of mediated participation should be seen as very contextual, and that empirical studies might investigate the varying contexts of engagement, the ways in which digitally mediated social interaction shapes everyday participation and the subjective as well as societal meaning surrounding this (Wimmer, Wallner, Winter, and Oelsner 2017).

Another study suggests there should be more attention paid to situational and dispositional factors when assessing the implications of social media for political communications (Vaccari et al. 2016).

Findings from ‘*Why We Post*’, a global anthropological research project on the uses and behavioural consequences of social media have prompted questions around the absence of politics in some people’s output, suggesting this should itself be a subject of study. A key point is because while social media can support political involvement it does not guarantee that it will (D. Miller 2016). This is an interesting assertion in relation to actual percentages and demographics of people involved in on- and offline discussion noted in the annual UK Hansard Audit over five years and implies a situation of some complexity worth exploring. The 2019 report showed 53% of those polled said they had not undertaken any form of online political activity in the past year. This last statistic might echo findings from the US where 46% of those polled said they are ‘worn out’ by political posts and discussions. Across every demographic group, there is more exhaustion than excitement over political content (Anderson and Quinn 2019).

Research gaps may be symptomatic of the fact that the voices of participants themselves are insufficiently represented in accounts of the effects of social media on political practice. People have been analysed, but not necessarily included. Yet these voices are both fascinating and instructive. There indeed remains considerable scope to explore the immense range of individual and community experience in different contexts, particularly using inclusive, qualitative approaches. In the introduction to his engaging account of the effects of online media on democracy, *Ctrl Alt Delete*, journalist Tom Baldwin concedes that many of the people he consulted were like him, political and media professionals of a certain age, background and social class (Baldwin 2018). Indeed, this cohort has been well represented in accounts given so far. So, there is ample room for the diverse voices of everyday users to be heard.

Also less well studied have been the crosscutting interactions of our social practice, psychology and indeed physiology with these relatively novel affordances, and the often difficult-to-predict outcomes of such complex and chaotic processes. Some factors driving behaviour are now understood to be hard-wired, and our need to satisfy innate and visceral drives is an underlying mechanism that is effectively exploited by platform developers (Williams 2018). However, in achieving this, the law of unintended consequences has played a role, as online spaces also allow a free

rein to fast-thinking base urges and incivility, particularly when it comes to politics. This fact is well understood by the various bad agents of coordinated inauthentic behaviour. What might be the long-term effects of this? Swingle describes how heavy interaction with electronic media is linked to variations in neurochemistry, neurocircuitry and functional morphological and anatomic brain changes commonly seen in conditions like substance disorders. In line with epigenetic theory, excessive use for activities like gaming can be viewed as an environmental trigger that allows an underlying susceptibility to express, potentially having developmental effects (Swingle 2015). As will be shown, many political encounters on social media can for good or ill be stressful. It is understood that stressful interactions with an environment can induce specific changes in behaviour and in brain structure and function (Hunter 2012; Williams 2018). Based on such understanding, it is not unreasonable to speculate that the profound and affecting processes of online debate in themselves might be having longer term adaptive effects on susceptible human brains. This in turn may have the potential to influence longer term trends in behaviour. Talking to people will not, of course, yield scientific data on this score, but it may present useful clues to what might be going on and hint at new avenues for research.

So how do individual participants interpret their online political experience? What does this all mean to those taking part, as they articulate it, and beyond this, what relevance to the wider political environment is there? How do people learn to navigate and negotiate a still relatively new and often challenging social environment and what effects might this be having on them?

This book explores these questions and looks at the possible motivations, mechanisms and meanings behind these phenomena seen (and sometimes not seen) from the perspective of participants.

## POLITICAL CONTEXT

The experiences looked at here are part of a complex interactive system being shaped by, and in turn, shaping external political events. The research underpinning this book took place in an established democratic setting, the UK. Here, freedom of speech is commonly tolerated and to a degree is managed and protected under law.<sup>2</sup> Interviews focused around (although not exclusively) patterns of online involvement in relation to the series of national debates in focus. These were chosen in part because



they attracted high levels of online involvement and it seemed as if few people avoided engagement with at least one of them. The discussion surrounding them is notable for the richness of available evidence. All are both symptomatic and reflective of other changes in the demographic and political landscape.

Worldwide, this landscape has experienced profound shifts since the turn of the century. A rise in populism has been attributed to a range of factors, including economic insecurity and ‘cultural backlash’. That is to say, a ‘retro reaction’ by previously dominant groups to progressive changes in values (Inglehart and Norris 2016). This follows on longer term trends in changing behaviour. In the UK, incremental shifts include continued decline in engagement with traditional practices like voting, party membership and trade union activism (Hansard Society 2013). Although it should be noted that voting remains the norm, overall (Duffy 2019). Turnout at the June 2016 EU Referendum was 72.6%, higher than any UK general election since 1992 (Uberoi and Johnston 2019). When it matters, it matters. Sixty one per cent of UK people polled said they would be certain to vote in an immediate election (Hansard Society 2020). A significant issue however is increasing inequality in turnout, giving affluent and older voters more influence in the polling booth (Lodge 2013).

Over the past 50 years there has been a steady decline in membership of the main UK parties. ‘The political party is dying’, wrote journalist Andrew Rawnsley in 2013 (Pickard and Stacey 2015). Members of the UK’s four main parties are now most likely to be male, middle class and over 50 (Guardian 2018). Certainly, in the years since then, each of the parties has undergone disruptive change. This long-term decline aligns with patterns seen over several decades in most established democracies (D’Art and Turner 2007; Whiteley 2011). A substantial body of scholarship has continued to focus on this ‘crisis’, with Crouch and others suggesting terminal deterioration to a ‘post-democratic’ situation (Crouch 2004, 2016). On certain measures, such as levels of trust in the system, Britain does appear to have been facing a predicament. The 2019 Hansard Audit of Political Engagement presents a sobering picture. Key indicators of engagement remain stable but feelings of powerlessness and disengagement are intensifying (Hansard Society 2020).

However, participation beyond the ballot box has over time been increasing, (Bromley, Curtice, and Seyd 2004). Electoral politics can be

sidestepped, signalling a division between traditional politics and single-issue advocacy (Dahlgren 2005). This may be influenced by factors such as the rise of identity politics, which some maintain has caused a shift from a redistributive to a recognitive paradigm. This has displaced collective, class-based political expression with more personalised, individual manifestations based around values and multiple, often overlapping causes and identities (Bennett 2012). It is also facilitated by technology. Community action and mass petitioning through online campaigning organisations such as ‘Change.org’, ‘Avaaz’ and ‘38 degrees’ and lobbying for causes have shown that many people do want to have a say in public life, but factors like simplicity, convenience and immediacy are important draws. While fewer people use conventional ways to make their voice heard, the use of social media for politics has ‘exploded’ (C. Miller 2016).

Why might this be? Coleman has argued that relations between the public and political authority in democracies like the UK have been in a period of ‘transformative flux’. He suggests new ideas about citizenship are being created and put into action while mainstream political communication is entering a decline (Coleman and Blumler 2009).

Flux is an apposite word. In early 2015, despite overall long-term trends, an observable spike in the membership of minor UK parties occurred. More than 100,000 people joined the Greens, the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and the Scottish National Party (SNP) in a few months (Pickard and Stacey 2015). That was something denied to the main two parties until the UK Labour Party elected as leader, twice over, a man widely viewed then as an outlier candidate himself. This was followed by an increase in that party’s membership to more than half a million, making Labour by any analysis one of the largest parties in Western Europe at that point. The Jeremy Corbyn phenomenon nonetheless suffered a fatal blow in the 2019 general election.<sup>3</sup> By this time factionalism in the party was deeply entrenched and being played out very publicly online. UKIP, meanwhile, experienced marked fluctuations in its fortunes over the period, a later challenge being the emergence of the Brexit Party.<sup>4</sup> UKIP, the Scottish independence campaign and a revived Corbyn-led Labour left nonetheless stood out as significant, emergent movements over this turbulent time. Initially without the backing of well-established party infrastructures, they relied on social media to build and maintain support. Each won involvement from amongst the disengaged, and all have been focused towards major political events.

New forms of affiliation have increased the reach of parties or factions without a financial support base. Social media has been a useful tool for parties to spread messages and win voter support which they use in varying ways (Greenwood 2015). Digital activity became an add-on for supporters which some used without formal membership, meaning digital affiliation could offer a new campaign resource (Gibson, Greffet, and Cantijoch 2017). The 2015 Labour leadership contest leading to the unexpected victory of late-nominated Corbyn drew in large numbers of new supporters partly because of online media activity promoting a new ‘registered supporter’ scheme and via an online canvassing ‘app’.<sup>5</sup> The outcome has been followed by fierce, stubborn and ongoing online debate.

Steady detachment from establishment politics has not necessarily meant lack of interest per se, but rather movement away from formal, bounded, existent systems of power to a less rigid scenario where boundaries between politics, cultural values, identity issues and local concerns become looser. So, as Dahlgren noted, politics are not merely goal-oriented but expressive, and a way to demonstrate group values, ideals and belonging (2005). Also, the increased availability of previously marginalised messages, primarily through social media, has possibly been doing one of two things. It might either be persuading people to change their minds, or indeed giving them ‘permission’ to follow some deeply instilled or sublimated inclinations. It also appears to be supporting reactivity and volatility.

Commentary over the past two decades highlights a trend towards more direct forms of activism and single-issue politics (Coleman 2013; Dahlgren 2005, 2013). Key upswings in engagement in the UK have single issues at their core—including the Scottish independence campaign and the growth of UKIP. Questions of identity and values have been at the heart of both UKIP and SNP campaigning and the Labour leadership debate—and indeed much current political discourse. These are significant and emotive existential questions which find fertile ground in the inclusive, opportunistic, immediate yet often combative environment of online political talk. Greater opportunities have coincided with perceived greater reasons to engage, and both social media companies and would-be influencers and manipulators have rushed to exploit the compulsive and highly engaging characteristics of social media and the behavioural effects they tend to nurture.

Many of us like to talk about politics and we like the way social media allows us to do it. Political talk is widespread on these platforms. The period under discussion has seen an ‘unprecedented digitalisation’ of this experience (C. Miller 2015). Social networking sites have become a key venue for political discussion and civic-related activities (Anderson, Toor, Rainie, and Amith 2018). ‘Tribal’ political posts on Facebook increased during 2017 (Rayson 2017). These growth patterns are likely a function of multiple factors, including the increased take-up of devices and media, the number of high-profile political events, organised attempts to motivate people and those people’s increasing willingness to engage. The affordances offered by portable computing in the form of phones and tablets enabling social media to flourish thus have the potential to nurture, magnify and potentially distort many political trends, with often unpredictable outcomes. Allen and Light note that the ways in which we gather information and communicate it have been transformed by digital media. They observe that the political is no longer confined to formal arenas (if it ever was) and that has profound implications for how we understand participation (Allen and Light 2015). Political talk does not just take place in designated ‘political’ spaces such as dedicated discussion groups but is threaded through ordinary conversation on newspaper and broadcast media outlet ‘comments’ sections, social media and other online forums, and anyway, people’s own definitions of ‘political’ will vary and have fuzzy boundaries. Graham et al. discuss how, for instance, pre- and para-political talk infuses self-help forums such as *MumsNet* and *Money Saving Expert*, which might offer a more welcoming or accessible route to discuss the everyday concerns which are at heart, political (Graham, Jackson, and Wright 2015). Reagle argues that commenting in itself is a specific cultural form, arising from complex and various impulses focused around the same opportunity, and can tell us a lot about the meaning of participation (Reagle 2015). This has been backed up by this author’s own research.

The interactive, iterative nature of public conversation arising from this situation has resulted in a vast and ever-increasing proliferation of online political and pre-political discussion, position-taking, meaning creation and belief formation. Huge in volume, various in form and unprecedented in that the musings of so many are being (reasonably well) preserved, sometimes having effects long after their authors might have forgotten them, this material forms an extraordinary, exhilarating, passionate, living intertext, (inter)active record and public sphere, with its own distinctive sociological and political features. This offers an engaging and revealing

source of vernacular conversation about fundamental political issues and a fulsome demonstration of the characteristics of informal political argument. It is an endlessly rich information source which in turn lends itself to exploration from multiple theoretical perspectives.

## ORIGINAL RESEARCH

The idea for the study underpinning this book grew from a long-term personal fascination with the way people talk about politics, the challenges they experience in doing so and why, and an observation that something, or more accurately, some *things* of marked social significance were happening in respect of how people discussed and debated politics in online media in particular. Moreover, it was apparent that academics and commentators had begun to articulate, from a variety of different perspectives, aspects of what they believed to be happening, but there were clearly many more angles from which phenomena might be understood. A key question therefore has been what these angles might be. Whatever the prevalence and quality of participation, and whatever the factors one might speculate lie behind it all, the significance of this online output both to participants and the wider social and political world offers many potential avenues for the curious researcher.

The original research supporting this work asked about people's experiences during the (approximately) five-year period between the announcement in March 2013 of an independence referendum by the Scottish government up to the passing of the UK European Union (Withdrawal) Act in June 2018.

In total, 85 people contributed to original research via:

- three UK-based focus groups, one of seven people conducted in the Scottish town of Alloa in late September 2016, one of six people conducted in Luton, Bedfordshire, in September 2017 and a third of six people conducted in Plumstead, South London in January 2018
- two webinars of 10 participants in total hosted by the UK-based political discussion group GlobalNet21 (GN21) and facilitated by the author in September 2017 and June 2018
- a series of 56 in-depth individual interviews with participants around the UK undertaken between September 2016 and March 2018. These were mainly conducted amongst members of the public, although there were in addition interviews with two serving UK

Members of Parliament (one who subsequently ran for party leadership), two local councillors (one of whom became an MP in December 2019), two party-political officers and several former political candidates and political officials.

Interviewees were from a diverse range of backgrounds, culturally, socially, and economically. Focus group and individual interview data were collected up to 2018. Individual interviewee's names have been pseudonymised and group members anonymised except in the case of public figures who gave permission.

Complementary open discussion frameworks were used for both group and individual interviews. These were developed as a result of group observation exercises during scoping work, when key themes and trends were identified. These addressed levels and understanding of participation; subjective and interpersonal experience of online political discussion; event-specific experience; issues of identity; perceived efficacy; media consumption and literacy plus open observations and emerging findings.

The rationale behind the choices of topic area was to develop a holistic picture of the main inputs, influences and considerations informing the world view of participants. Subsequent analysis of data aimed to identify key domains, or categories of understanding and thence related sub-themes through which ideas could be usefully explored and accounts interpreted. This was to allow for further interpretive exploration of the data and potential identification of unanticipated and emerging themes, then relate data to hypotheses and theoretical perspectives discussed through the book.

## A NOTE ABOUT PLATFORMS

This book looks at mainstream patterns of political social media use. Based on the understanding that the 'big two' platforms, Facebook and Twitter, remained overall the most used (Smith and Anderson 2018; Statista 2018), and given that in these environments, participants situate their political talk amongst a much wider social and political context, a working assumption was made that most interviewees would focus on these two main channels. Indeed, they most often did, but talk about other platforms has not been excluded. Facebook has been, almost by default, the primary focus of study because of its size and reach, its social and discursive nature, and the fact it is the overwhelmingly most popular