

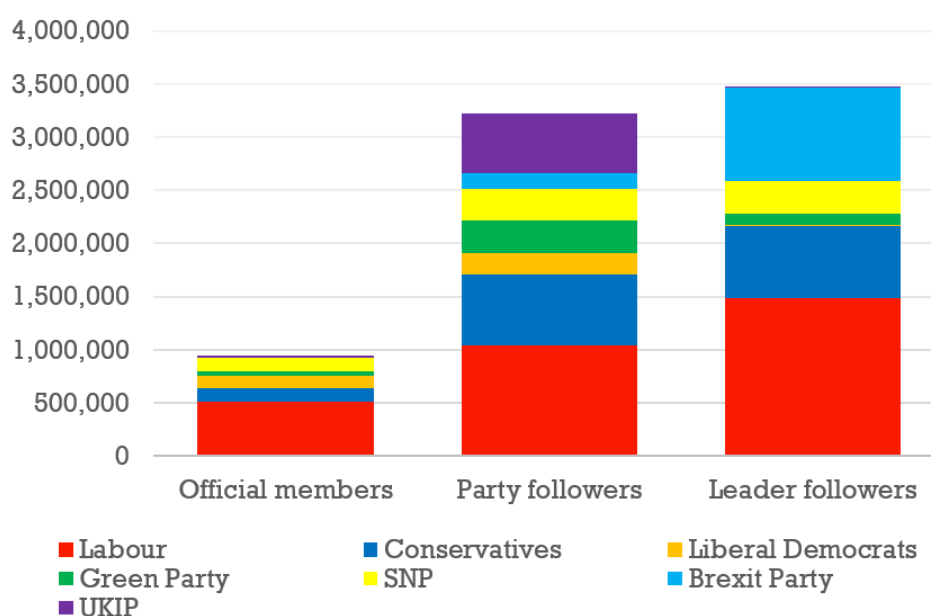
Mr Tristan Hotham – written evidence (DAD0021)

By Tristan Hotham, LL.B, MA, MRes – Current PhD student at the University of Bath studying British political parties Facebook campaigns.

Q1. How has digital technology changed the way that democracy works in the UK and has this been a net positive or negative effect?

1 - Throughout my PhD examination of British political parties campaigns on Facebook from 2010-2019, it is clear that social media has brought to the fore a whole new body of individuals who are engaged with politics but who reject official membership. In my examinations of this new force of 'virtual members', followers and supporters of the parties on Facebook are younger and more representative of the British public than official membership. Graph 1 shows that the huge body of virtual memberships for both party and leader pages accounts for 8,800,000 potential individuals, vastly above the near 1,000,000 members accounted for via official membership.

Graph 1 – 2019 Virtual memberships of party and leader pages, alongside official membership data



2 - This new found online support undermines many scholars' previous assertions that we are seeing 'the decline of parties', with many bemoaning the decline in official membership. However, it is clear that although official membership has declined, that online virtual membership via following political parties has vastly increased. Social media and the internet has rejuvenated parties, with new bodies of younger and highly active online support. The key difference however is that these virtual members' engagement and activity primarily occurs online and not offline. This fact has led many to fail to appreciate the democratic renewal that is taking place.

3 - Although not a revolutionary force yet, Facebook offers parties and the public a genuine new avenue for political engagement that is a force for good. The fluidity that social media offers has opened up political interest and activism in demographics that are traditionally less engaged, such as young people. While parties rigid structures of membership are now rightly being recast to appreciate the power of social media in how parties can organise support, inform the public, democratise their policy systems and open up politics to a wider body of the public. Overall digital technology has had a major positive effect on British parties over the last decade.

Q10. What might be the best ways of reducing the effects of misinformation on social media platforms?

1 - One of the central approaches that would be of benefit to understanding malicious fake news and misinformation is allowing researchers such as myself access to public Facebook data. Recently Facebook has been shutting down access to API tools that can extract data from pages, including posts that may be deliberate fake news. Facebook is closing its doors to researchers in the wake of the Cambridge Analytica scandal, using the scandal as a smokescreen [to make Facebook much harder to analyse](#). This is a huge problem as researchers need post data in order to understand what misinformation is, who sends it and what impacts it is having.

2 - The latest casualty is the app Netvizz, which was shut down on the 21st of August 2019. Netvizz was a research tool used by hundreds of academics to gather public Facebook data. The app gathered more than 300 academic

citations and was used to produce studies on everything from Norwegian political party videos, to public opinion about the London 2012 Olympic Games. The tool was also used to gather fake news posts and examine the effects of misinformation on Facebook (see Senaweera & Dissanayake, 2018; Ookay, 2018; Burger, Kanhai, Pleijter & Verberne, 2019). In its place Facebook has partnered with Social Science One, however approaches have failed to provide a clear solution to data access, with reports of [data not delivered](#) and avenues for data access deliberately restrictive. Facebook appears to think we can fight misinformation via restraining researcher's access to data. This is a tactical error, if we are still barely scratching the surface of misinformation during the open-API era; how will we be able to understand the problem after access is further shut down? Overall, the best way we can reduced the impact of misinformation is by understanding it better as it is still a relative unknown. Government can help support the fight against misinformation by pressuring Facebook to create a public, searchable archive of public posts akin to its Ad Library, but for organic posts. This would allow both the public and researchers to understand what they are being sent by the powerful, and reduce the incentive of pages sending false information as it can be held to account.

3 - Facebook is hollowing out our abilities to hold the corporation and the powerful who spread fake news and misinformation on the platform to account. Facebook is being turned into a black box that no-one will have access to. Those who will get to research Facebook are going to become a specially chosen group of researchers (Social Science One). What chance have researchers got to ask difficult questions about the platform if Facebook, through Social Science One, are the arbiters? All of this presents an end to understanding Facebook at a time when its influence on participation is growing (Boulianne, 2018).

References

Academic articles

- Senaweera, Malith, et al. "The Influence of Community Interactions on User Affinity in Social Networks: A Facebook Case Study." *2018 National Information Technology Conference (NITC)*. IEEE, 2018.
- Ookay, Tuğçe. "Hoax News Websites at the Crossroad between Popular and Political." *Editorial Coordinators: Rufus Adebayo, Ismail Farouk, Steve Jones, Maleshoane Rapeane-Mathonsi* (2018): 291.

- Boulianne, Shelley. "Twenty years of digital media effects on civic and political participation." *Communication research* (2018): 0093650218808186.

Other

- YouTube – Bitrate Politics – Is Facebook starting a war on knowledge? – By Tristan Hotham <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5EyUSnvCl6M>
- BuzzFeed News - Exclusive: Funders Have Given Facebook A Deadline To Share Data With Researchers Or They're Pulling – By Craig Silverman <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/funders-are-ready-to-pull-out-of-facebooks-academic-data>