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Introduction

If the 2015 General Election reminded us of one human truth it was that people often say one thing and do another. This is something that pollsters, political parties and brands alike would do well to remember.

This paper does not seek to explain why the Conservative party experienced a sudden surge of support as the British people headed to the polls on the 7th May. Rather it shines a light on the way that the parties behaved in the digital space in the run up to the election, and highlights the extent to which digital is now part and parcel of the fabric of a modern communications campaign - or at least should be.

We've called on some of the top thinkers at DigitasLBi to share their thoughts on the campaign work from a social, creative, SEO, mobile and user experience perspective.

We've also done some digging behind the obvious social data headlines to uncover some surprising insights about the effectiveness of the parties' digital activity, and the way that the population interacts with their leaders.

What we found as we assessed the major parties wasn't always brilliant. This may have been one of the least subtle campaigns of modern times - Marina Hyde described it as "the election that killed metaphor, one sledgehammer blow at a time" - but there is still much to learn from this.

It certainly wasn't YouTube (or Russell Brand) wot won this election. But we can still marvel at a campaign which spawned the #milifandom, the Green Party’s boy band video, the Dave Gets Pumped meme and the spectacle of Nicola Sturgeon borrowing a trick or two from the selfie king Narendra Modi.

In short, there’s much to learn from this campaign - the good and the bad. Enjoy!

Stuart Aitken, Lead Content Strategist, DigitasLBi
Social

Social can’t turn your manifesto into gold, says Lost Boys Managing Director Nadya Powell, as just being in social won’t automatically make you brilliant.

The election is coming. You’re a political party, and you want to win it, or at least not lose it, for all the traditional political reasons. But social has come barging rudely into your life. And you know you should get involved in it, because Obama did, and because this is ‘the first digital election’, and so on. So what do you do? You take the content you already have - your manifesto, some quotes, some TV appearances - and you ram them straight into social. There, that wasn’t so hard.

Except you’ve totally missed the point. The content you publish in social has to have value. It has to give people something they cannot get elsewhere, and it needs to be designed for the environment it is appearing in. Otherwise, you’ve just made another trivial but terrible contribution to Sharemageddon.

Obama, yes often mentioned, is pretty much the best role model for a politician in social. He doesn’t rely on just having social channels, he makes it work by originating content that is perfect for the social generation. He talks intellectually about key points he believes in and combines this with internet-derived humour that is perfect for distribution through social. Watch his recent Correspondents’ Dinner address with his anger translator. That hilarious and brilliant content was not written for the correspondents at the dinner. It was written for all the people who would take it and share it and do Obama’s ‘social’ work for him.

Sadly, judging from the output of our main parties, we don’t have an Obama on our hands over here just yet:

Conservatives

The Conservatives operate a slick, pretty corporate social presence, with well-made, regularly updated copy, images and video. But other than repetitive, rather desperate calls to share content, there’s not much effort to encourage engagement. Instead, the focus is purely on broadcasting the party’s manifesto.

Their Facebook approach, meanwhile, has seen it running up bills of £100,000 on the distinctly old-fashioned practice of buying page likes and email addresses, while recent research suggested senior Tory MPs are the most likely to have fake Twitter followers.

Labour

Like the Tories, Labour’s social channels are heavy on policy slogans and re-tweet/share requests. The tone and quality of the content feels relatively un-corporate, but they don’t seem to want to converse that much and the party’s Facebook post frequency would surely annoy the most loyal of supporters.

A brief #WhyImLabour series of posts on Instagram, however, was a rare sighting of a party doing something inherently social. There have also been also tweets promoting an MP’s live stream on Periscope, while last year’s data-capturing ‘baby number’ NHS quiz was a smart piece of work on Facebook. Decent content, made for social - it’s not that outrageously hard.

Liberal Democrats

Compared to the other two main parties, the Liberal Democrats come across more relaxed in their approach to social. Their Facebook timeline and Twitter feed present tidy, concise updates and there are fewer pleas for users to spread messages. Of all the parties, only the Lib Dems have had the wit to use general hashtags like #GE2015 and #leadersdebate to preach beyond the converted, and the videos from Nick Clegg’s election tour bus are a good touch. If a politician happens to be honest, relaxed and interesting, social ought to be their friend.
Green Party
The Green Party feels like the only party to have seriously considered social media in terms of the eyeballs it could provide their key messages. They launched their #ChangeTheTune campaign with a successful ‘Boy Band Election’ satirical music video, and the range of candidates on show offers refreshing variety from the Greens’ leader-focused rivals, though they have a frightful tendency to re-tweet anything minutely positive about themselves.

Plaid Cymru
Little can be said about Plaid Cymru’s social media efforts because they’re almost entirely focused on providing their audiences with a day-by-day update of where the party leader has been, rather than what she stands for. Would they sift through this stuff, if they weren’t making it? So why would anyone else?

SNP
Like the Greens, the SNP features a range of personalities on its YouTube channel, although over on Facebook and Twitter you could be forgiven for thinking you’ve accidentally stumbled onto a Nicola Sturgeon fan club. Sturgeon however should be praised for neat personal touches on her Twitter feed - see image below.

Surprisingly, the SNP appears to be the only party to have run a live Facebook Q&A, but that’s about as far as the moments of real audience engagement go.

UKIP
UKIP maintains a Facebook page, Twitter account and YouTube channel, though the content across these leaves a lot to be desired, with copy often very long and re-tweet frequency irritating. Of all the leaders, Nigel Farage personally achieves the highest average number of favourites per tweet (79).

Conclusion
Political parties are marking their place in social, rather than mastering the art, and it’s a damning sight. Which bubbles up the real challenge for the political parties in social: it works best when it is powered by the kind of personality that generates great content. And if your personality relies on spouting on and on about your manifesto or leader, then no matter how many fans you stupidly buy, social won’t work for you - it will expose you.
Mobile

Mobile is a bag of tricks the political parties have not yet mastered, according to DigitasLBi’s Head of Mobile Illico Elia. But give them time, and personalised, targeted mobile communications might one day cut through where nothing else can.

At the last general election, the iPad was two weeks old in the UK. This time around, it’s a key element of a major shift that has seen mobile devices become our research tools of choice. Smartphone usage among Britons of voting age, meanwhile, has mushroomed from roughly 20% to more than 70% in five years. Where in 2010 mobile constituted a cool, niche channel, mobile in 2015 is a medium through which every message of any importance will inevitably flow.

Among 16-24-year-olds, most of them first-time voters, 40% now get their news through their phones, compared to 4% of those in the 55-plus range. If there is a real desire to reach young voters, mobile, rather than traditional digital channels, ought to be the focal point.

For political parties, mobile sites are vital. It doesn’t take a highly-paid political strategist to realise that apps are a golden way to maintain an on-going, long-term relationship with supporters. Disappointingly, this time around, apps still aren’t an integral part of reaching the electorate. Gallingly conspicuous by its absence is any evidence of targeting or personalisation of mobile messaging. On the positive side the uptake of responsive design has helped parties’ mobile user experience enormously.

We’ve taken a look at the parties’ efforts to date and found some reasonable work and plenty of room for improvement. In our initial assessment we were pleasantly surprised. What stood out most was how the design language of each of the respective sites seem to talk to a cliché of their audience, ensuring a committed voter for each party will feel at home.

Conservatives

The Tory mobile strategy aims to make mobile activism as easy as possible for its supporters. Navigation on the mobile site works well, but their content lacks depth, with only the shortest, most bite-sized nuggets of policy content.

Their app is a social network, again aimed at encouraging supporters and volunteers to share content around the major social networks. The content itself is rehashed from the main Tory website, so social here feels like an amplifier of standard messages.
Labour

The Labour site is well designed and has an interesting “personalised manifesto”. You choose what is most important to you, share your postcode and your personalised manifest complete with “local data” is delivered. This has excellent potential and should help to better connect with voters, but the degree of personalisation and the limited local content held the idea back.

Labour has quietly abandoned its iCampaign app of 2010, leaving it app-less. It could be argued that a dedicated app wouldn’t contribute much to a six-week election when there is plenty else to be done. Equally, it could be argued that parties shouldn’t fire up their digital strategies just in time for election season.

Liberal Democrats

As with Labour, there is no dedicated app. On mobile the party’s site leads on updates from promising Lib Dem constituencies, as well as manifesto pledges dressed up as news stories. I would have expected the manifesto to be front and centre as it is on the other main party sites. Having said that, smartphones may not be best suited to these long form political documents. This highlights a weakness in standard responsive design, which tends to promote simply converting desktop sites to mobile.

According to our research, based on favourites and RTs, the Lib Dems and Plaid Cymru are the parties least engaged with on Twitter, and Nick Clegg is no mobile natural, sending 47% of his tweets from his desktop - the most of any party leader.

Green Party

In 2010, the Green party was notably proud of its new mobile app, which allowed users to assess how closely aligned their views were to the Greens’ policies. This time around, there’s no app, though the party’s mobile site is a good example of clean responsive site. The Greens have created a “mini” and “youth” targeted manifestos and seem to be the only party with a “Sign Language” version of the manifesto, however there is also an over reliance on PDFs to deliver the manifestos.

Plaid Cymru

Plaid Cymru has no mobile site and can’t be found in app stores. Justifying the investment required to optimise for the mobile audience can be difficult, but with 35% of Wales web traffic from smartphones or tablets, it is essential if your voice is to be heard across the electorate.

On the plus side Leanne Wood is the most mobile-happy party leader in social terms, making 70% of her tweets from an iPhone.
SNP

The SNP has no mobile site, which just goes to show it’s not a requirement to achieve a large swing, but it does seem out of place for a party that promotes the importance of connecting with voters. A basic app, launched in late-March, offers contact details for politicians, as well as news and opportunities to get involved, but misses out on the opportunity to build loyalty and advocacy for the fastest growing political party in the country.

UKIP

UKIP’s mobile site is a messy affair, with an inconsistent layout and large swathes of text. The main navigation menu is inelegant and some pages render poorly, requiring horizontal scrolling.

The version of their app available at the start of the campaign was a charmless affair, but an updated version, made available in the final weeks of the campaign was more polished.

Happily the major parties have realised that offering decent mobile usability on their websites is absolutely essential, even if it’s still a far cry from the mobile-first approach that a forward-thinking mindset might dictate. The parties need to grasp mobile’s full significance and targeted campaigning potential.

More broadly there’s plenty of room for improvement, especially with regards to creating and targeting content. And while apps might seem like a luxury in a relatively short lived election campaign, building sustainable, long-term, and conversational relationships are an app’s greatest strength and would surely benefit all parties.
Creative

Simon Gill, Chief Creative Officer UK at DigitasLBi, casts an eye over a cagey, negative and creatively empty-handed Election campaign while the DigitiasLBi creative team assesses the individual parties’ efforts.

You don’t need to be an avid follower of general election advertising campaigns to know that this election isn’t being driven by creativity. In a world crying out for radical thinking on so many fronts, we’ve seen some of the cagiest, most non-committal, creativity-deficient electioneering anyone can recall.

But the same sense of reheated thinking and creative stagnation can be seen in the parties’ ads too. From Labour’s ‘The Doctor Can’t See You Now’ poster - a horribly belated heckle pastiching the winding queue of the Tories’ 1979 ‘Labour Isn’t Working’ ad - to at least four separate Tory ads featuring a little Ed Miliband sheltering in an SNP pocket or as a puppet on its strings, this has not been one for the portfolios of those involved.

It is, of course, a depressing truth that various factors seem to mitigate against creativity in modern politics. From a purely advertising perspective, there’s a clear reluctance to be seen spending significant money on slick ad campaigns, so we can expect the production values to clunk a bit. But this is also an age of coalitions, of voter cynicism, of dark political choices and instant backlash, and no politician wants to be caught dead in support of a position that might come back to haunt their days in power.

So what we get is fudging, bet-hedging, unverifiable numbers, dated satires of old ads and, above all, low-rent swipes at everyone else - none of which makes for strong, positive creative messaging.

Some of the attack work, when cleverly done, provokes a certain admiration. A late-arriving Labour mock-up of David Cameron’s email inbox came with a 16-page deconstruction of George Osborne’s alleged spending plans, masquerading cleverly as an official Tory memo. The same party’s election broadcasts starring Martin Freeman and Jo Brand seem to come from a place of genuine conviction.

But when the truth about power is increasingly clouded and obscured, the real problem is that we can’t easily believe what we are being told by politicians, and it takes more than a good ad to fix that.

Undaunted, our creatives selected one piece from each party for appraisal:

**Conservatives**

The Conservatives are well-placed to deliver creativity. After all, chairman Grant Shapps’ alter ego was a bona-fide internet marketing guru, and the party’s budget dwarfs those of its rivals. Sadly though, a search for creativity yields little beyond press coverage of alleged tinkering with Wikipedia pages. From the earliest days of the campaign, the Tories have indulged in negative campaigning - something for which even its supporters have criticised them - and their SNP poster series is a particularly unimaginative, cheap example.

*Jon Attaway, Head of Copy*
The General Election 2015
Insights on digital activity
DigitasLBi

Labour

Tablets have played a big role in the Labour campaign. Surprisingly though the party decided to focus on the 8ft tall biblical kind rather than the more modern handy sized digital version. A memo gone wrong? Despite a lot of pre-Election hype about the party’s digital campaigning capacity, the best they’ve been able to muster was the http://www.torysecretplan.com push which – while laudable – was perhaps most notable for the fact that it happened in almost total isolation. The party had of course hoped to be the biggest beneficiary of social media - but Russell Brand’s last minute endorsement on his YouTube channel The Trews didn’t deliver the result some had expected.

Stuart Aitken, Lead Content Strategist

Green Party

Strong and consistent design, excellent video, clear-cut policies, even a crowd-funded campaign that accepts Bitcoin - the Greens are about as creative as British political parties currently get. Although their ‘mini manifesto’ is a poor translation from print to digital (and a general eyesore), they more than make amends with their ‘Change The Tune’ YouTube hit. Harnessing wit and parody to sing the shortcomings of the opposition, they’ve hands-down won the political LOL-wars.

Sam Clements, Copywriter; Adam Hunt, Designer; and Imogen Nicole Reeves, Digital Designer

Liberal Democrats

Most of the Lib Dems’ creative work lacks a clear definition of their own ideals, choosing instead to focus on the faults of the two leading parties, which feels like a weak stance. One uncharacteristically sassy piece of work was their series of 404 pages. In February, these were swiping at Ed Balls (‘just like Labour’s plan for the economy, this page doesn’t exist’) and lately they’ve been having fun with David Cameron’s ‘brain fade’ incident (‘just like David Cameron’s loyalty to Aston Villa, this page doesn’t exist’). But couldn’t they have related the put-down to their own policies to reach undecided voters?

Gabrielle Choo, Copywriter
Plaid Cymru
The first problem for Plaid Cymru is that their URL isn’t plaidcymru.co.uk or even plaidcymru.com but this: https://www.partyof.wales/?force=1, which is surely a massive #FAIL when thinking about SEO. From a creative standpoint, I haven’t seen a site designed like this on purpose since the late-90s. The green and yellow is potentially a nice touch if you’re South African or Australian but doesn’t exactly smack of Wales. The daffodil icon is cute but looks like the Marie Curie terminal illness logo. Surely the dragon is a better symbol of Wales and politics?

Kay McMahon, Lead Content Strategist

SNP
The SNP’s website looks like a relic from a decade ago and its creative is generally lacklustre, but a digital campaign around its women’s pledge is easily one of its more accomplished pieces of content. The images effectively display the party’s values, the copy is digestible and straightforward with short, snappy hash tags. The designs use muted colours while still being bold, composed and memorable, and as perfect squares, they work within the image formats of Twitter, Facebook and Instagram

Dan Parry, Copywriter, and Yuri Yoshimura, Designer

UKIP
From the stark typography to the mish-mash of designs, UKIP’s creative output and messaging are inconsistent, reflecting what the party is: a political newcomer with plenty of rough edges. While their poster campaigns are provocative and get them the media coverage they were designed to, a lot of their other communications - this error-strewn flyer or this misspelt constituency - lack rigour. Even the 90-second manifesto on the website comes not from UKIP itself but from a national newspaper.

Jim Haryott, Copywriter, Andrea Wirth, Senior Designer, and Richard Morgan, Art Director

Conclusion
To sum up then, this has not been a creative campaign in any sense, though isolated gems point at what the parties might have done.
User Experience

UK politics has a UX problem, says DigitasLBi Global Head of User Experience Marcus Mustafa. And the parties’ websites are only the start of it.

Many clients understand User Experience simply to mean ease of web and mobile browsing. Are my consumers satisfied by my digital interface? Do my online properties do what they should? But how ever the various parties’ desktop and mobile sites perform, whether or not their content engages and their navigation delivers, UK politics appears to have a UX problem.

From its 1950 high of 83.9%, turnout at the 2015 General Election was 65.7%, and in spite of the hugely heartening 84.59% figure in Scotland for the independence referendum, the UK at large appears far less engaged, particularly among younger potential voters. Too many users don’t see themselves as such, and are contemptuous of any political experience you might offer them.

Could digital help? Would the disenfranchised younger generation be more likely to vote, for instance, if they could vote online. Indeed, research suggests they would. And how would a UK party fare that advocated the Estonian online voting model, or that of Argentina’s Partido de la Red, whose app lets residents of Buenos Aires vote on any bill proposed in the city legislature?

Such questions do, of course, raise security and practicability issues, but in any case, the user experience of democracy is changing on its own. Social activity of all kinds has become the glue that binds together the political UX journey. Much of the official activity only adds to the noise, but the effect of social’s relentless scrutiny, I suspect, will be to force politicians to be more human.

Against this backdrop, the DigitasLBi UX team experienced the parties’ actual digital properties is just one issue, but it remains an important one. We experienced them all, and this is how they made us feel as users:

Conservatives

Behind the Tories’ overwhelmingly blue website façade there is a surprising lack of content, much of it locked behind a user-unfriendly social log-in function. When you do find it, it tends to be combative in tone and negatively focused on the party’s opponents, particularly the SNP and Ed Miliband. A little more glamorous in design than the Labour site, but less responsive, the site has some nice features, such as the ‘find your local team’ function. The sharing functionality is good too, although we couldn’t work out the points system.

Labour

Labour’s desktop site is a good experience from a technical perspective, but it doesn’t excite, and there’s no warmth or humanity, which can’t have been their aim. The ‘will you be voting?’ splash page is annoying, and it is disturbing that they ask for name and email details at this stage, suggesting, not for the last time, that the party is desperate for your data. But they do some things well here: the manifesto is central to the page; users can select key issues to create their own manifesto, although again name and postcode information is required, ruining the experience somewhat.
Liberal Democrats

The Lib Dems offer a clear, simple and well laid-out website that puts policy and achievements in the foreground. The site leads on key campaign issues, which is a strong strategy, and lots of content focuses on evidence of achievement, which contrasts strongly with the Conservatives. They have also tried to use social effectively by featuring Twitter feed integration. This positive feedback hides a massive UX error however, as their ‘issues’ section is incredibly hard to find (hidden behind an unclear label above the main navigation). A truly terrible UX decision.

Green Party

The Greens serve up a clean and simple digital experience. Care has been taken to make content as shareable and consumable as possible. At times this can make the content feel flimsy, however. The ‘mini manifesto’ feature is a good idea but could be done better; ‘find your closest campaign’ is also a good engagement tool.

Plaid Cymru

This website has fundamental structural problems. As far as navigation is concerned, there is just too much of it - 55 links within the main navigation, with 16 links in one section (Get Involved) alone. The content is available in Welsh and English as users would expect, but there are too many blocks of copy and too much stock photography.
SNP
A very poor digital experience, definitely not befitting a party that prides itself on being forward-looking and progressive. Their content discussing ‘progress’ lacks facts and figures, which is disappointing for a party in power. This contrasts with the content in the ‘Vision’ section, suggesting the party puts more stock in theory than in action. The homepage feels more like the Ryanair website, and there is no mobile site, though they have an app. The best feature of the site is the shop, which suggests the party has some strange priorities.

UKIP
The most divisive of the parties has produced a simple, content-light but outdated website, featuring prominent use of (fairly poor-quality) video, with too many broken links. Too often, users are met with a wall of copy - the policy pages, for example, read like a Word document. There is also a lack of visibility on their (in)famous immigration policies, and an appalling mobile experience.

Conclusion
There’s good and bad here in pure UX terms. Parties need to ensure their digital properties are engaging people and true to their political values, but the political establishment as a whole could afford to reflect on its usability too.

Thanks to Chris Ball, Kartik Poria and Annmarie Kiddle for additional UX insight.
Search

SEO lies at the foundation of all healthy digital strategies, says DigitasLBi search strategist Glynn Davies, and needn’t be all that hard. So why are the political parties making such a hash of it?

Nobody, as far as we are aware, has ever suggested that SEO wins elections. But then again, it would be foolish to deny that good search can help. Any party attempting to do anything in digital needs its search to be doing a reasonable job of the basics, and if any of this year’s contenders were to come to us as clients – well, let’s say we’d find plenty to get our teeth into.

It must be said that search isn’t like social; you can only really see what any given organisation is doing up to a point. But one thing we can say about the political parties is that virtually every basic optimisation they could be doing either isn’t being done, or could be done a good deal better.

Page titles aren’t being taken care of properly; structured data and Open Graph is often omitted; a couple of parties are still in denial about mobile SEO, and let’s not even start on meta descriptions. What’s more, most of the parties have failed to appreciate that official blog content can do a lot to help you own your soundbites – or those of your opponents.

Perhaps the parties have judged that there isn’t a great, steady stream of search traffic relating to policy, and concluded that good SEO isn’t worth the trouble or cost. But then again, big, well-publicised events such as manifesto launches and televised debates clearly generate large spikes in inward queries that no party can afford to fumble (see charts 1 and 2).

We had a crawl around the sites of the seven key parties and this is what we found.

Conservatives

The Conservatives make as many basic site optimisation errors as any of their rivals (pitiful page titles, missing meta descriptions), though they have scored some reasonable ranking success – especially when it comes to “owning” soundbites. At the time of writing, they’re outdoing the official Parliament website by scoring number one in Google for “how to become an MP” (without speechmarks), and also held a respectable position in Google for the coalition mantra “we’re all in this together”. The result is for a rather fetching A1 poster, for sale via their online shop.

Interestingly, they’re halfway down the first page of results for “big society”, though they get in via the back door to top-three positions on account of a couple of gov.uk results.

Labour

Labour’s SEO rankings in general looks suspiciously poor – which is surprising given their well-publicised relationship with Blue State Digital. We can probably put a lot of this down to an apparently botched site migration last year,
in which they have been stingy with the redirects and consequently lost a great deal of SEO heritage. Within weeks, their SEO performance went through the floor, and though it gradually recovered as the election approached, there’s no way of knowing how much better they could be doing.

Liberal Democrats
Amusingly, Nick Clegg’s Knowledge Graph result lists a credit for I’m Sorry, the Auto-Tuned viral hit song mashed up in 2012 from Clegg’s video apology for the Lib Dems’ broken promise not to raise tuition fees (see image left). The Lib Dems, in common with UKIP have some nasty looking URLs but do at least put them in a discoverable Sitemap.

Green Party
The Greens, along with UKIP, are the only party making any use of Open Graph data, enriching and providing a measure of editorial control over their social shares. With every party desperate to drive shares, that’s a pretty major omission on the part of the big guns, and an easy thing to get right.

Plaid Cymru
The otherwise ambitious Welsh nationalists are no better and arguably a bit worse than their rivals where SEO is concerned: no mobile site, no structured data, no XML Sitemap and some ropey page titles, never mind anything cleverer.

SNP
The SNP’s website, while no star performer (like their Welsh counterparts they’re braving a brush with Mobilegeddon), does at least have some decent page titles. It seems remarkable that even the big parties aren’t getting this basic optimisation right, but with the exception of parts of the Labour site, they’re not.

UKIP
Remarkably UKIP are around the top of page 2 in Google for “gold silk tie”, beating John Lewis, House of Fraser, Debenhams, and other arguably better-known purveyors of ties. In fact, UKIP aren’t too bad at the basics, with Open Graph meta, a crude but functional mobile site and reasonably well-optimised page titles.

Conclusion
There are remarkable numbers of basic errors here, which point to some deeper strategic ones, or more accurately an apparent absence of SEO strategy all together. Political parties need to remember that if you don’t get your search working in the quiet times, you won’t be able just to turn it on for the busy ones. SEO is a process, not a task, and the parties should put that in their private manifestos for next time.
Conclusion

Fern Miller, Chief Strategy & Insight Officer, International at DigitasLBi, argues that the 2015 General Election wasn’t a very edifying spectacle for anyone involved - but there is still much to learn from the experience.

One day at the outset of this General Election my five year old daughter and I happened across a small, swaddled huddle of Conservatives on the bit of grass in front of our local butchers. I know they were Conservatives because one of them had pale blue knuckles clenched around a sign to that effect. Another stood on an upturned crate with two men beating drums on either side of him. Another eight or so people comprised the audience as the person on the crate shouted things through a loud hailer at them.

My daughter looked at me, confused, and asked “Why don’t they just go indoors and talk normally?”

It was a bloody good question, not just because it was beginning to drizzle, but also because the seat being shouted about has been Conservative since the ward was formed in 1950, with the current MP in situ since 1997. But preaching to the converted has always played a large role in election campaigning, whether eight at a time on a windy Sunday rally, in newspapers read largely by right or left wing voters, or in emails urging party faithfuls to “keep up the good work”.

Only 1% of people in the UK actually belong to a political party. That’s the same number as believe Elvis is alive as the estimable blogger Steve Van Riel points out. With turnout at 66%, those 1% and a slightly wider team of individual MPs’ personal support team have traditionally been the cornerstone of a party’s “direct marketing”. You don’t get more direct than a knock on the door from Kenneth down the road with his elbow crooked around a sheath of leaflets. Kenneth is the converted, roused to action in the usual way. He has a little poster in his front window to tell us so. So the majority of effort in the campaign is unlikely to be played out in digital channels.

If a brand were to pursue a marketing strategy that comprised people who work for the brand putting up little posters in their windows and knocking on doors in their area there would be many Shoreditch digital marketing folk snorting in derision. Political campaigning continues to run a strategy that Avon Cosmetics modernised in the 90s. But before we write Kenneth and his leaflets off, we should weigh up the benefits of his work against the shiny new digitally-fuelled work this election brought us.

Technology has given Kenneth some intelligence to his canvassing in recent years. If he is a Labour, SNP or LibDem doorstep he would have been armed with findings from famed social and owned data platform NationBuilder, knowing who’s on the same side as him (or at least, who says they are on his side) as well as why and how long that as been the case.

This is why any attempt to read a Party’s manifesto and stories on their sites is interrupted by demands for your social log in and email (and some might argue that this demand is a little bit previous, if it comes before the’ve made any actual promises as a party to you, the voter).

Barack Obama’s campaign, with his own army of fresh faced door knockers has offered the political class the example of technology used to create an unstoppable, unprecedented digital engine that connected the national’s digital natives and dreamers with data driven intelligence and an armoury of slogans, films and ideas than galvanised a real movement toward the ballot box: YouTube films that made them cry; 140 character calls to arms, and the day-to-day unfolding of a campaign drama designed for the social media age. Obama’s footsoldiers were provided with a believable, visionary cause and a backdrop of cool shit people could share at work.

Unfortunately the Obama campaign’s heart and soul wasn’t replicated in the UK’s 2015 election campaigns, just the digital strategy.

So for those parties that invested in the processes, yes, data was used to follow up leads with paid digital media creative, or daily email comms, with or without rather gratuitous use of people’s name in the cause of personalisation (Real life example: “So, Stuart from Lewisham West and Penge: how about it?”)

And if the “target” had expressed any interest in the Conservatives they may have had their working day interrupted by a slightly alarming “Dear Chum” from Rt Hon Eric Pickles in their inbox. If it was Labour that they momentarily introduced themselves to, they may received an email headed “!!!”, assuming it got through the spam filter, or Justine Milliband’s rather jolly election day emoji message. If they had given the LibDems their email they might have had, one day, an invitation to dinner with Hugh Grant and the next, a harrowing story of the evil Labour plot to “get rid of” MP Simon Hughes despite his historic heroism as an MP, this latter suggesting some confusion.
about the electoral process in the LibDem camp. I ploughed through hundreds of emails from people who volunteered them as part of this project because we know that these formed the backbone of the Obama campaigns and still do whilst he is in office. But the correspondence offered by those in the UK were by turns assumptive, odd and unrewarding.

Another notable use of digital in recent years has been the use of social content to drive the offline movement into new audiences, with new messages: from Obama’s youtube channel and Twitter feed, to comedian Jon Gnarr’s insanely successful mayoral campaign in Iceland and Hollande’s appropriation of JayZ’s “Niggas in Paris”. Although the TV debates still drew millions of viewers, the election broadcasts were absent, outdoor spend was slashed, and creative became “agile”. Or what we used to call tactical.

There was little charm in the centrally produced digital campaign creative that the parties put out, which seemed largely to be the product of some wisearse in central office watching cassetteboy’s films and some Tumblrs and trying to follow suit, forgetting that it is one thing for satirists to send politicians up in little, beautifully crafted cartoons, and another for the political class to send each other poorly crafted rude notes. Although the Greens excellent spoof Change the Tune shone out as being better executed than most, it ultimately said less about why you should vote for a Green candidate other than the other guys all looked the same.

There were little rays of sunshine: notably “ginger ninja” Naomi Long for the Alliance Party’s twitter feed showed warmth and humanity and even her post-loss update was memorable and charming. Nicola Sturgeon’s live tweeting was, in common with her approach to all her on camera moments, refreshingly human. Ed Milliband in Brand’s kitchen might have been a bit odd in parts but it was memorable, human and headline grabbing.

However we must ask ourselves whether transferring such a complex election onto social media wholesale was part of the reason that the traditional “Big Three” parties struggled to make themselves heard ideologically. If everyone is behaving like a challenger in your feed, sniping and quipping and larking about, it is no wonder the high ground seems to have been left open.

So, ultimately some might argue that Kenneth was more likely to provide his neighbours with persuasive content than some of the UK parties have managed in this election. He might avoid the sort of childish “those other guys, they’re rubbish” messaging that dominated the social media creative of most of the parties’ feeds. He won’t offer you tea with a celeb (unless he is one) but he might offer some time to explain a confusing policy or listen to what you have to say on immigration or the NHS. He might suggest that your choice in the election was ideological or advantageous to the local area. In short, Kenneth can do what only humans who care about something can do, and speak to you like a human being. Although he will undoubtedly ring your bell just as you are serving up your tea, he hopefully won’t use a megaphone to shout in your face. He’ll probably avoid the word ‘chum” when he sees you, as well, which would be a bonus.

In short, my digital strategy recommendation to the main parties is the same as it would be to any brand. To leave the tactical messages around election time to people who are prepared to knock on a door for a cause, and to focus on providing the people of the UK with a higher purpose for your organisaiton, and a brand that might withstand satire in the next four years rather than one that can take a punch and dish it out with the rest of them . I would ditch the “dad at a disco” tumblr cynicism in favour of something that expresses a purpose and a cause to drive real choice come the next election and use that to fuel a consistent presence in digital from the search terms you select and dominate to the films you make and the shop window of your websites.

I’d offer Kenneth and the other footsoldiers you have mustered a clearly articulated and differentiated cause to care about and fuel a real movement in your favour behind them so they don’t just find themselves facing cynical, angry people on the doorsteps in the rain, or at least so they know what to say when they do.

Because whoever did well, whoever didn’t, this wasn’t a very edifying election spectacle in terms of content and tone, and digital communications, especially those in social tended to expose and amplify the snarling and personal rather than celebrate choices and ideas.
Infographics

Twitter Performance

The following infographics are highlights of a larger piece of work carried out by the DigitasLBi Data team which accompanies this Whitepaper.

**Affinity in the Palm of Your Hand**

- **Conservative**: 5.1%
- **Green Party**: 39.2%
- **Lib Dem**: 5.6%

Conservative Twitter followers are more likely to use a BlackBerry than any other party’s followers.

Green Party Twitter followers are more likely to use an Android phone than any other party’s followers.

Lib Dem Twitter followers are more likely to use a Windows phone than any other party’s followers.

**Location by Party**

Outside of London, what are the top three locations for each of the parties?

- **Conservative**: 4% Edinburgh, 5% Manchester, 3% Bristol
- **Labour**: 4% Edinburgh, 4% Manchester, 7% Liverpool
- **Liberal Democrats**: 5% Edinburgh, 6% Manchester, 5% Cardiff
- **UKIP**: 5% Edinburgh, 10% Manchester, 5% Birmingham
- **Green**: 7% Glasgow, 30% Aberdeen, 6% Brighton
- **Scottish National Party**: 30% Edinburgh, 46% Glasgow, 5% Edinburgh
- **Plaid Cymru**: 50% Cardiff, 13% Edinburgh, 9%

**Favourite Musicians**

- **Katy Perry**: 9%
- **Billy Bragg**: 12%
- **Will.I.Am**: 11%

Most popular musicians by party: percentage of party followers who follow these musicians.

**The Leaders**

- **Early Bird**: Leanne Wood starts tweeting earlier than other party leaders with 29.3% of her tweets sent between 6AM and 9AM
- **Midnight Tweeter**: Natalie Bennett stays up to tweet later than any of the other party leaders, with 30.7% of her tweets sent between 6PM and 11PM
- **Tablet Queen**: Nicola Sturgeon uses her iPad more than any other leader – 31% of all tweets come from the device
- **Going Nowhere**: Nick Clegg is the biggest desktop user of all the party leaders using one for 42% of his tweets
THE GENERAL ELECTION 2015
Insights on digital activity

**TWITTER PERFORMANCE**
The Parties, The Leaders

- **Leaders have higher engagement rate per post at 0.28 compared to 0.16 for parties.**
- **#SNP uses the highest amount of hashtags with #38% of all tweets featuring them.**
- **79% of Leanne Wood tweets are RTs, higher than anyone else.**

**Retweets per tweet**
101 SNP average

**Response rates @mentions**
- @BEST
- @WORST

**Highest party average favourites per tweet**
- **UKIP**

**Twitter performance by gender**

- **Female followers**
  - Nicola Sturgeon 37.04%
  - Natalie Bennett 33.69%
  - Nigel Farage 17.82%

- **Male followers**
  - Ed Miliband 33.03%

**The Green Party, with 35.95%, has the greatest proportion of female followers.**
**Labour is the only large party with over 30% female Twitter followers.**

**Media outlets**

- **As used by each party’s Twitter followers**

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Data is based on the top 20 overlaps for each Twitter account. An overlap is the percentage of fans that follow an account that also follow another account.
And Finally

What Twitter says about the party leaders by Joseph Kay

The infographic shows the top ten adjectives and nouns for David Cameron, Ed Miliband, Nick Clegg and Nigel Farage, based on an analysis of tweets from the beginning of May 2012 to the end of April 2015. The top ten are the words that are used to describe that leader the most disproportionately when compared with the other leaders combined.
Credits

Fern Miller
Chief Strategy & Insight Officer, International

Marcus Mustafa
Global Head of User Experience

Simon Gill
Chief Creative Officer UK

Ilicco Elia
Head of Mobile

Nadya Powell
Managing Director at Lost Boys

Glyn Davies
Search Strategist
About DigitasLBi

DigitasLBi is a global marketing and technology agency that transforms businesses for the digital age. We help companies of all shapes and sizes decide what’s next... and then we take them there.

In 26 countries around the world, across 40 offices, there are more than 6,700 digital experts working to enrich people’s lives via our unique blend of strategy, creativity, media and technology.

Our skills span insight, brand building, content creation and distribution, as well as the ability to help clients organise themselves for the consequences of the change. We act as strategic partner to some of the world’s most exciting brands across travel, financial services, FMCG, publishing, telecoms and retail.

There are many things that make DigitasLBi unique but if we had to choose one it would be our ability to connect data with storytelling to help make brands special, shareable and more ultimately valuable wherever, whenever and however people choose to engage with them.

Contact

Julia Conroy
UK PR & Marketing Director
Julia.conroy@digitaslbi.com
+44 (0) 20 7063 6465
digitaslbi.com