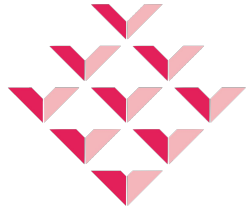# Power and Persuasion:

Understanding the Right's Digital Playbook

December 2020

ValentProjects

Valent Projects is a digital communications agency for positive social impact. We help campaigns, movements, institutions and businesses working for a fairer, greener and more equitable world thrive in the new information environment.
www.valent-projects.com

SOCIAL LIBERAL FORUM

The Social Liberal Forum is the home of Social Liberalism in Britain. We campaign for a Citizens' Britain, one characterised by a massive transfer of power from remote and unaccountable corporations and state institutions to people and their communities.
www.socialliberal.net
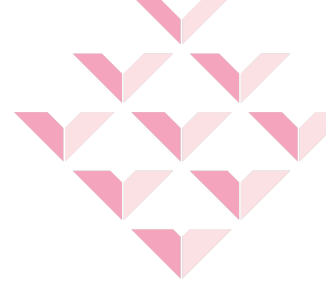
Labour Together

Labour Together is a network for activists from all traditions of the Labour movement to explore new ideas and thinking on the future of the Left. The original research for this report was commissioned as part of Labour Together's Election Review.
www.labourtogether.uk

Compass

Compass is a think tank and a home for those who want to build and be part of a Good Society; one where equality, sustainability and democracy are not mere aspirations but a living reality.
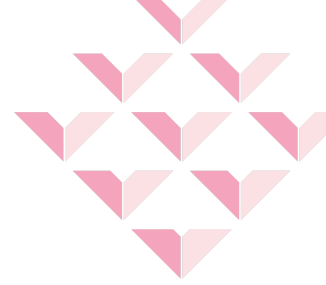www.compassonline.org.uk

Foreword

Following Dominic Cummings' departure from Downing Street, and the defeat of Donald Trump, some on the progressive side of British politics believe that there has been enough analysis of what happened in 2019, and that we as opposition parties can get "back to normal" in our electoral campaigning.

We believe this to be a mistaken view. If we fail to understand the 2019 election, we run the risk of the Conservatives remaining in Downing Street throughout the 2020s - a critical decade, in which Britain will need to recover from a pandemic, find a meaningful response to climate breakdown, face the challenges of the fourth industrial revolution, and decide whether our family of nations has a future.

The findings Amil Khan and his team at Valent Projects have brought together indicate that the Conservative Party has made a step change in its digital and data capabilities - restructuring its election operations, redesigning its data strategies, and (while not losing sight of some of the proven approaches) radically reinventing its communications channels and outputs. The Conservatives might not repeat everything they did in 2019, but they will certainly not go backwards on this front between now and the next general election. As progressive parties, we must make a significant step up.

Our three organisations occupy different points on the progressive spectrum, but this report represents a challenge to us all - and to every progressive party and voice in the country - that no one can afford to ignore. We have to understand how the right are using emerging digital spaces and, rooted in our own values, explore how we can better communicate and engage with the people we wish to represent.

Neal Lawson, Compass
Jon Alexander, Social Liberal Forum
Hannah O'Rourke, Labour Together

Summary

Progressive parties often complain that the Conservatives win elections because donors with deep pockets help them outspend everyone else. Yet in 2019, something even more concerning happened. According to official submissions, the Conservative Party spent £3 million on advertising in 2019 compared to over £5 million in 2017; and of course, they did better, gaining a majority of 80 seats.

Setting aside the political dynamics involved, this suggests that the Conservative Party has started not just to spend more, but to spend *smarter* than progressive parties, gaining more votes and seats per pound spent on social media ads, digital content creation and audience data than ever before - and more than Labour, the Liberal Democrats, the Greens, or any other progressive party. If this is the case, it represents a serious wake up call to progressive parties and movements.

It was while working on the Valent Projects investigation as part of the Labour Together Election Review that we began to suspect that the Conservative Party's approach to campaigning had fundamentally departed from that of its competitors. In light of the release of new information on election spending, we decided along with Labour Together, Compass and the Social Liberal Forum that it was time to delve deeper into this new approach and find out just how behind progressive parties were.

In the course of our research, we found evidence suggesting some highly questionable approaches. While it is highly unlikely that this Conservative government will do anything about these, other parties and indeed future governments can and should, and so these are an important element of this report.

Dodgy tactics are not, however, the main focus of this report. What is much more important is the simple fact that the Conservative Party has recognised social media and data offer a route to power and is now exploiting these new tools professionally and ruthlessly. That will not stop just because Dominic Cummings has gone. Progressive party operations seem amateur by comparison. And as our findings show, budget is not an excuse.

The resulting report looks at the way the Conservative Party's digital strategy was structured and run from narrative formulation, data gathering and analysis, to content creation and dissemination. It focuses primarily on Facebook advertising when looking at social media targeting due to the Conservative Party's clear focus on the medium and the strong likelihood that the same approach was replicated on other platforms.

The main body of the report is structured around eight key tactics which we believe contributed significantly to the Conservative Party's landslide victory. We conclude with a set of five recommendations as to what progressive parties need to do in response.

Eight Key Tactics
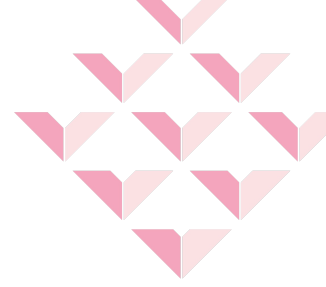
1 Nailing The Narrative

From Top Table To God Pod **2**

3 Gathering Data
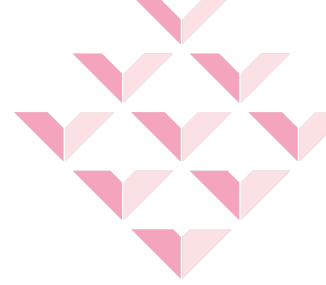
Targeting: Who, What, When? **4**

5 Building Local Skills

Outriders **6**

7 Exploiting Broadcast

Counter Crisis With Disinformation **8**

Nailing The Narrative

The Conservative Party spent about £1 million less on voter research in 2019 than in the previous 2017 election. This was in part because much of the strategy had been developed in 2017; it just hadn't been used.

Australian election strategist, Lynton Crosby - who has run campaigns for Johnson since he was mayor of London - was a key component of the 2019 campaign. His firm, however, had been researching views and refining a campaign narrative since shortly after the Brexit referendum. Those familiar with his approach characterise it as being anchored around the use of extensive opinion research to distil simple, emotive (often negative), messages that are drummed out relentlessly.

Crosby has been working with the Conservative Party for some time, and was also involved in 2017. He had developed an approach for that election based on two key messages - "make it stop" and "spend on the neglected". But while Theresa May is credited by Conservative insiders with understanding Brexit as the beginning of a broader argument about "the politics of belonging" which the Conservative Party could exploit, she did not follow Crosby's election campaign advice.

As such, when it came to 2019, Boris Johnson had a core narrative ready and waiting. Tom McTague, who wrote a book on the 2017 election, commented in the Atlantic Monthly while the 2019 campaign was underway; "I am struck by how similar this year's Conservative general election campaign is to what Crosby advised the Party to do then [in 2017]." [1]

Johnson and his team would do as Crosby had recommended, and frame leaving the EU as the start of a different political approach. As Robert Colvile, one of the authors of the 2019 Tory manifesto told the FT; "The message wasn't just to get Brexit done, but get it done so that the government could start addressing their [voters'] very real concerns about public services, cost of living and the streets and communities around them." [2]

The specific phrase "Get Brexit Done" reportedly emerged from focus group research in September but the basic territory was long fixed. [3]
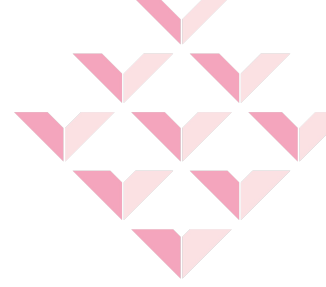
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[1] https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/11/britain-election-conservatives-labour-2017/602737/
[2] https://www.ft.com/content/ab3692b0-2317-11ea-92da-f0c92e957a96 (behind a paywall)
[3] https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/10549830/conservatice-party-gurus-boris-johnson-election/

From Top Table To 'God Pod'

The famous "Labour Isn't Working" Saatchi & Saatchi advertisement from 1978 is widely credited with playing a major role in changing the course of British politics, ending the Callaghan era, and ushering in that of Margaret Thatcher. It was the first time an advertising agency sat at the top table of a political party - before that, the Independent reported in a 2007 article looking back at this critical time, "there was no tradition of British political parties hiring advertising agencies to run election campaigns; ads, such as they were, were designed by enthusiastic supporters for free."
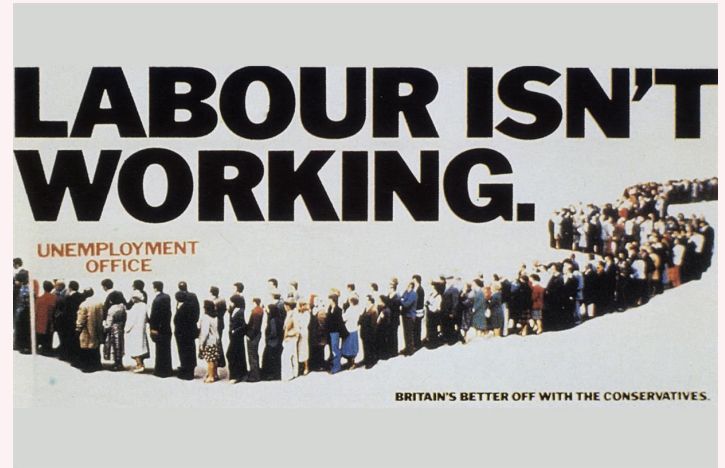
In 2019, the professionalisation of Conservative general election strategy took a big leap. Advertising agencies gave way to digital and data strategists, and these individuals were no longer assisting politicians, they were in the campaign driving seat.

The Conservative campaign top table in 2019 was replaced by what became widely referred to (including by its members) as the "God Pod". The chosen few brought together by Boris Johnson and Dominic Cummings included:

- Lynton Crosby
- Isaac Levido, a Crosby protege and digital campaign specialist, who would be sole lead on the campaign (chief among the gods: even Cummings would step back).
- New Zealand-born Sean Topham (28) and Ben Guerin (24), founders of digital agency TG, who were brought in to form a "Digital Unit". Guerin's words, quoted on New Zealand outlet Newshub, give an insight to their approach: "You're going to slap some Calibri font on a shitty reused meme and you're going to publish it and then you get onto the next one. And that content is going to do better than the thing that your poor graphic designer spent a week on. Sad but true." [4]

This "God Pod" was, it seems, put in place almost immediately. Levido was approached by Cummings the same day Johnson entered Downing Street, Topham and Guerin recruited soon after. [5] The backgrounds of these two should give pause for thought to anyone who assumes right-wing parties struggle to recruit internet-savvy young creatives able to talk the language of younger voters.

And once the God Pod was in place, they wasted no time getting started.

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[4] https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/world/2019/12/the-two-new-zealanders-behind-boris-johnson-s-social-media-campaign.html

[5] UK Election: How the Tories 'Got it Done'; December 22, 2019; https://www.ft.com/content/ab3692b0-2317-11ea-92da-f0c92e957a96 (behind a paywall)

Data Gathering

Political parties in the UK have long compiled contact details on voters. This information – usually in the form of emails, telephone numbers and addresses – aids door-to-door canvassing, phone banks, digital advertising and mailouts. Due to the way the contact data is collected, the information usually covers almost exclusively those who are already supporters.

To capitalise on Johnson's Brexit position and the new "belonging" approach and reach voters who might not have previously considered voting Conservative, however, the campaign needed to go beyond existing supporter lists. In 2019, they succeeded in doing this - and Facebook advertising well in advance of the election campaign was a major part of the process.

This is where Levido, Topham and Guerin started, as soon as they got through the door of Number 10. Johnson's own Facebook page and the Conservative Party's main page started running hundreds of ads with slight differences in colour and wording.
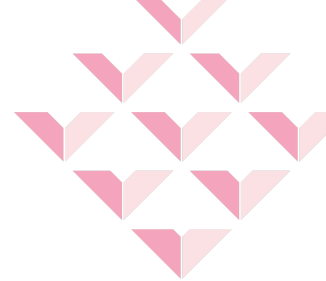
Although Facebook doesn't publicly disclose what criteria advertisers are using to identify those they want to reach, the content of the ads and the relatively small budgets (often under £100) suggests they were being targeted at individual constituencies and being used for two purposes: first, "spitballing"; throwing out messages to see what might stick; and second, data gathering, building their database in key constituencies. Facebook provides ad buyers statistical feedback on how their ads performed, so even this minimal spend would have allowed a very fast learning curve.

Fig. 1 Tory Facebook message testing reactions to Jeremy Corbyn in August 2019

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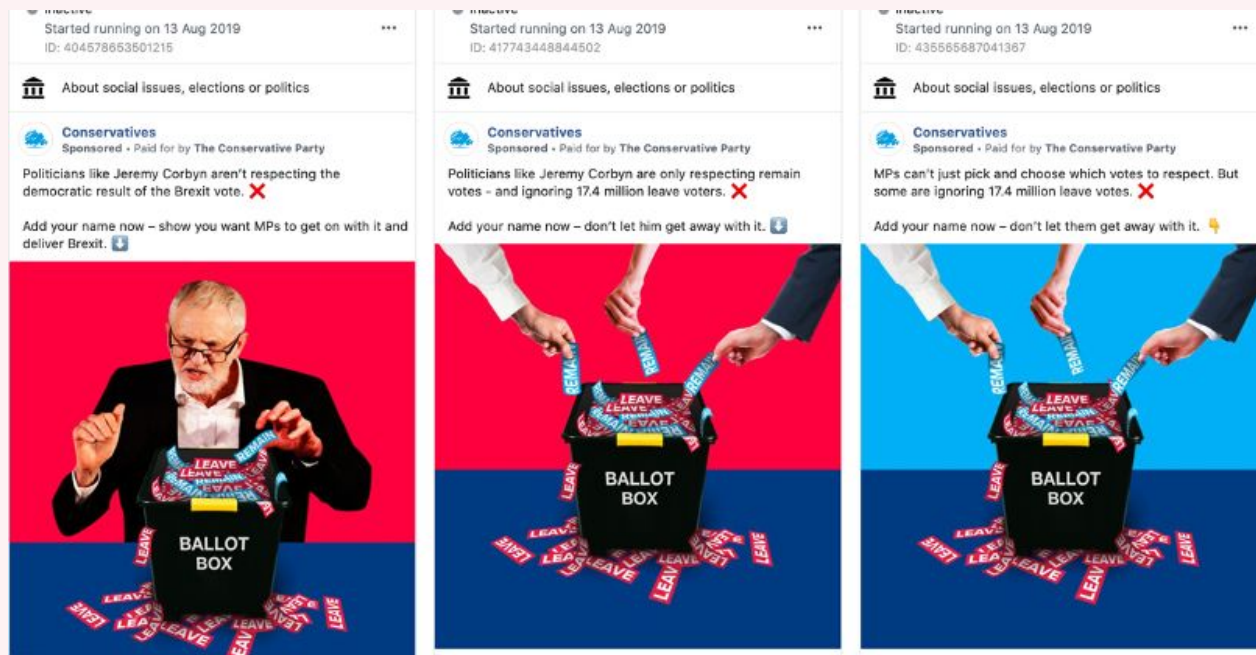
[6] Facebook has set up a central portal known as the Facebook Ads Library, where users can see ads self identified as dealing with political or social issues. www.facebook.com/ads/library

The spend soon went up, with nearly £100,000 spent in the summer of 2019. This is a critical figure to highlight, as too much discussion of online advertising spend tends to focus on spend during the campaign. This spend, long before the campaign started, was critical to the Conservative Party's approach.

As above, part of the intention of this approach was to build a bank of knowledge on how to frame arguments, which senior figure (if any) to feature on ads, and even what background colour to use in order to get the best response. But this initial phase did not just test frames and messages; it harvested immense amounts of constituency-level data on what messages work best with different groups of people based on their ages, gender, area of work and political affiliation.

What is more, Facebook wasn't the Conservative Party's only source of information on voters. The privacy statement on the party website states that it was also using a number of other resources to gather data, including: [7]

- commercial companies that sell online targeting data (e.g audience list of self-employed men over 45 who have carried out searches online on how to lower their tax bill)
- publicly available official data, such as the census
- data from online transactions
- CCTV data on those visiting Conservative Party offices

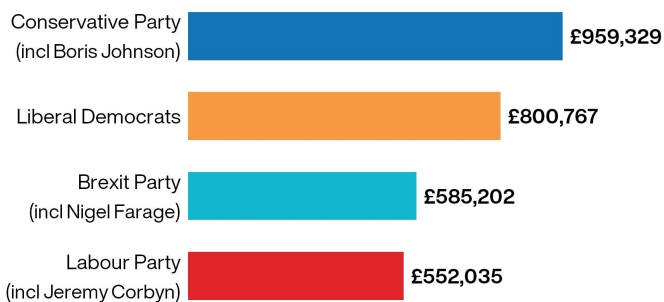[7] https://www.conservatives.com/privacy (last accessed in October 2020)

Targeting: Who, What, When?

The Conservative Party did spend a lot on digital and social media advertising in 2019. They spent £879,091 on Google advertising, and another £1 million on Facebook. But their social media advertising spend was £1 million less than in 2017. They were spending smarter - and the core of this was targeting their efforts - finding the voters they needed, with the right message, at the right time. On the available data, they were the biggest Facebook spenders in the campaign overall, but not throughout.

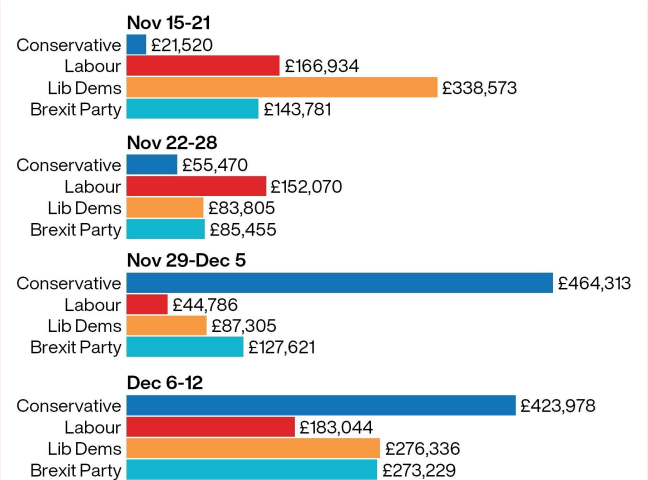**Fig 2. New York University figures on political party Facebook ad spending**

Spending on Facebook advertising
November 14 - December 12 2019

Party	Amount
Conservative Party (incl Boris Johnson)	£959,329
Liberal Democrats	£800,767
Brexit Party (incl Nigel Farage)	£585,202
Labour Party (incl Jeremy Corbyn)	£552,035

PA graphic. Source: NYU/Facebook

Spending on Facebook advertising

Nov 15-21
Party	Amount
Conservative	£21,520
Labour	£166,934
Lib Dems	£338,573
Brexit Party	£143,781

Nov 22-28
Party	Amount
Conservative	£55,470
Labour	£152,070
Lib Dems	£83,805
Brexit Party	£85,455

Nov 29-Dec 5
Party	Amount
Conservative	£464,313
Labour	£44,786
Lib Dems	£87,305
Brexit Party	£127,621

Dec 6-12
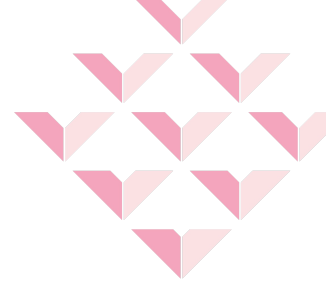| Party	Amount
Conservative	£423,978
Labour	£183,044
Lib Dems	£276,336
Brexit Party	£273,229

PA graphic. Source: NYU/Facebook. Con total includes Boris Johnson, Lab total includes Jeremy Corbyn and Brexit total includes Nigel Farage

This was partly because they were ready, with their core message refined and their data gathering done before the election was even called. In the first week of the campaign (which started officially on November 6, before the period covered in the graphs above), the Conservatives were the largest spenders on Facebook ads, paying £50,000 for 50 ads, which suggests they were capitalising on the information they had been accumulating. The Labour Party by contrast started spending small amounts on ads that were largely similar to one another. It was November, literally days into the campaign period, and Labour were doing what the Conservatives had been doing in August.

As at the beginning, so at the end: the sheer amount of spend and weight of messages that the Conservatives saved for the final stretch of the campaign was also critical. The vast majority was spent in the final two weeks, and on an extraordinary array of ads. Facebook's library shows the Party put out nearly 7,000 ads in early December. An investigation by First Draft, a non-profit that looks at use and abuse of the "social web", found 88% of these contained claims that had previously been labelled as misleading by independent fact checking site Full Fact. The final flurry, in the last days, would include - in seats where the nearest competition was a Liberal Democrat candidate - a strong emphasis on framing a vote for the Liberal Democrats as a vote for Jeremy Corbyn.

8 https://firstdraftnews.org/latest/thousands-of-misleading-conservative-ads-side-step-scrutiny-thanks-to-facebook-policy/

In between, the Conservative Party was ready to tailor their advertising around their core messages. First Draft News characterised the Conservative approach to ads as "laser guided". For example; one ad aimed at men under 34 used neon graphics and up-tempo music, with the core message "Get Brexit Done". The same ad targeted at men and women over 55 included, alongside the Brexit commitment, pledges to fund the NHS and tackle crime. The style was also altered to include classical music and soft colours. Another ad ran two versions that were almost identical except for the wording. The version targeting men simply talked about "Getting Brexit Done", while the one targeting women added the line "so we can invest in our NHS, schools and police". The campaign paid between £4k and £4.5k for each ad and reached around 300k and 350k people in each case. Speaking to First Draft News in mid-November, Tristam Hotham of Bath University and Who Targets Me said; "You can already tell the people the Conservatives have on board know what they are doing… They are matching content to the demographic, which they didn't do in 2017". [9]
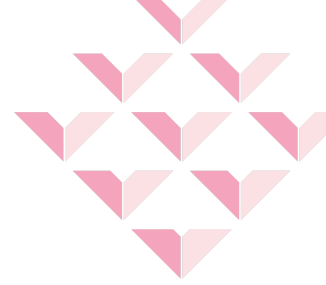
The Conservative Party also changed their advertising rapidly in response to what worked and didn't. This was particularly clear in their use of advertising featuring party leaders. As the campaign started, it became clear the Conservatives had realised that some audiences reacted negatively to Corbyn and Johnson. After the campaign began, campaign managers identified who didn't like Johnson and removed the prime minister from those ads. And, similarly, they realised who didn't like Corbyn and pushed ads featuring the Labour leader extensively to those audiences. A useful contrast is the inflexible approach of the Liberal Democrats, for whom the increasingly unpopular Jo Swinson remained a focal point of the campaign throughout.

Perhaps most importantly, they invested heavily in the best-in-class external data which could inform where they should focus their spend, in a way that the progressive parties failed to do. In 2019, one of the research products the Tories were buying was Multilevel Regression and Post-stratification (MRP), a method used to model voter intentions down to constituency level and on a daily basis, based on a wide variety of data, in contrast to traditional polling which seeks to question a group of respondents who reflect the make-up of the electorate. This would have allowed the Conservatives to move their spend to the places where it might have most impact on a daily basis. The Election Commission's published information shows the Conservative Party paid a company called Focal Point to conduct an MRP for its 2019 campaign. They spent £554,000 on four data firms; Experian, Populus, Focal Data and Uplifting Data. The largest fee was paid to Focal Point.

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[9] https://firstdraftnews.org/latest/uk-election-how-political-parties-are-targeting-voters-on-facebook-google-and-snapchat-ads/

Building Local Skills

After the 2017 election, many Conservative activists called on the party to allow local parties to take charge of their own messaging in future elections. The risk inherent in such an approach is that consistency in message and production quality is lost. This would be particularly troubling to a campaigner such as Lynton Crosby, who places premium on message discipline.

In 2019, the Conservative campaign found a way to improve local candidates' messaging while maintaining consistency. A television news report aired on December 3 featured agency Westminster Digital offering 50 Conservative candidates in the election campaign help with video making and Facebook ad targeting.[10] The enthusiasm to embrace digital campaigning amongst Conservative candidates stood in stark contrast to their Labour and Liberal Democrat counterparts. Valent Projects was involved in one offer of similar support to progressive candidates; only three (all Labour) took up the offer.

Westminster Digital started working with Conservative candidates in August. Its social media shows videographers worked with around a dozen candidates. Checking the performance of those candidates' accounts in terms of followers and interactions from summer 2019 to polling day suggests the company succeeded in raising their social media followings by between 10 to 20 percent.[11]

Enlisting the support of a digital communications agency conferred two advantages. First, if the campaign had produced all social media content centrally and distributed it to local parties to put on their platforms, the outcome would have risked seeming out of touch, as it had in 2017. However, providing a local party with the expertise of specialists allows them to direct how messaging should be framed for local audiences. This ensures the final products are relevant to local audiences while still of good enough quality to effectively convey professionalism and maintain the campaign's message discipline.

Secondly, by starting work in the summer, Westminster Digital would have made the accounts of the candidates they were working for better optimised for content distribution. In essence, social media platforms rank accounts according to the quality of the content the owners post. Consistently posting good quality graphics and video results in the algorithms promoting the account to larger audiences. This means that posting good quality content over time benefits candidates much more than just advertising. If 50 candidates had continued to post better content, when the campaign started their accounts would have been reaching three to four times more people, and any ad spend by the candidates would have also reached a greater audience.

In comparison, in the months leading up to the election, London Labour was reported to have only one internal video producer tasked to work with all candidates in the London area. London high-priority campaigns reported that in a 6-month period they were lucky to get one hour of the video producer's time. The Liberal Democrats - despite a heritage as a decentralised party characterised by strong local candidates and campaigns - appear not to have developed even this level of resource.

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[10] https://youtu.be/eKIGj5tHpew
[11] Data gathered via social media monitoring tool Social Blade
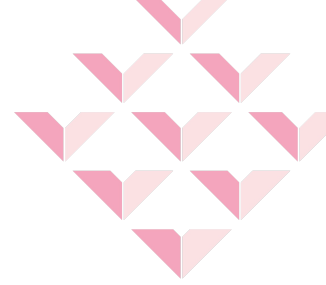
Outriders

One of the most commonly repeated criticisms by Conservative activists of the 2017 campaign was the lack of "outriders", groups who would operate independently of the official party campaign, but echo its key messages. For Labour, Momentum and alternative news outlets (like Novara Media, Evolve Politics and the Canary) proved to be powerful complementary voices in that election, achieving greater virality than most mainstream media. All were genuine, freestanding organisations created by known people.

The Conservatives were right to be concerned. As the 2019 election kicked off, these Corbynite-left outriders were joined by a number of smaller organic groups, primarily supporting Labour but also promoting tactical voting and sometimes Liberal Democrat candidates: groups such as FckBoris, Tactical.Vote, Green New Deal UK, More United, and more.

In this context, it is extremely interesting to examine how effective Conservative-aligned outriders were in 2019, and how much they spent as part of the overall, declared election war chest.

Table 1. Breakdown of Conservative social media outriders based on data released by the Electoral Commission

Name	Bio	Ad Spend	Impressions
Campaign Against Corbynism	Claims to be a collection of cross-Party activists	£52,000	2.5 million
Working4UK	Anti-Corbyn Facebook page	£105,049	4.25 million
Parents' Choice	Pro private school and anti-Labour education policy	£48,996	2.2 million
3rd Party	Mostly targeting Green and LibDem supporters	£41,746	0.6 million

Table 2. Breakdown of Conservative social media outriders based on data obtained directly from Facebook

Capitalist Worker	Pro-market, anti-Corbyn	£37,760	2 million
City Action	Anti-Labour from a City perspective	£40,534	2.1 million
Right to Rent, Right to Buy, Right to Own	Pro private landlords, against rent caps etc.	£56,386	2.75 million

Our research identified several anti-Labour or specifically anti-Corbyn groups on Facebook that became prominent on social media in the months before the 2019 election. As a rule, the groups did not acknowledge a link to the Conservative Party, although a little digging revealed a councillor, official or lobbyist behind each. The tables above outline the groups, how much they spent on ads and how many impressions the ads received.[12]

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[12] Impressions are the number of times an ad appears on a user's timeline. As such, the number of people who see an ad will likely be less as ads can show up multiple times on the same person's feed.
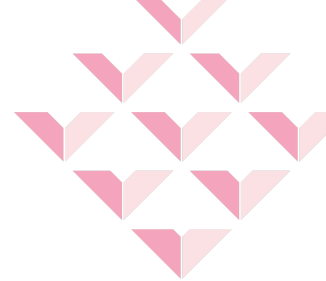
Table 1 on the previous page lists Facebook Pages that are included in the Electoral Commission's latest data on non-party campaigns. Table 2 lists those pages that are not included in this list, meaning that data on spending has been taken from Facebook's political advertising database. (It is possible data on those groups not yet listed is yet to be released. However, it is also possible they did not register.)

These numbers were dwarfed by Momentum's ad spend and reach on Facebook. Over the election period the group spent about £712,000 on ads and achieved about 75 million views. In the same time frame, Novara Media gained about 800,000 video views (although the left-wing media outlet did gain further views on YouTube). Smaller groups spent tiny sums, usually between £1,000 to £5,000.

However, the big difference here was targeting. As might be expected of authentic outriders, the progressive groups lacked strategic targeting approaches, which undermined their own objectives. Novara Media reaches people who are likely already Labour supporters, and most of its output focuses on intra-left issues. Momentum, despite its huge spend and reach, was mostly targeting broad national-level demographic groups ("students" for example) which meant it was using its spend as a "broadcast" effort rather than an engagement tool finely attuned to specific concerns or grievances.

The contrast with the Conservative outriders is stark. Covering a spectrum of audience groups - city workers, private school parents, landlords, centrist Labour voters - each of the Facebook pages listed above had a specific and distinct audience, and spent their money on targeting those people with content designed to address their interests. Also, it is worth keeping in mind, the funding source for the ads run by these Facebook Pages is not clear.

To take one example, Campaign Against Corbynism states it was set up by a collection of activists from different parties and praised the "historic accomplishments" of the Labour Party and left wing politics in the UK. Facebook rules, enacted since the company faced criticism for the opacity around ad funding in the 2016 US election and the Brexit referendum the same year, now require those paying for ads to now be publicly named. When journalists contacted the named individual they found he worked as a freelance journalist at the Daily Express, not known for its left-wing views. Despite the page's stated claim of being the work of a collection of individuals, including those from the left, the sole administrator of the account was not able to identify any other collaborators. Electoral Commission data puts the group's Facebook ads spend at £52,000. It would be unusual for that level of funding to be provided by the individual identified as responsible for the ads. At the very least, this highlights the limitations of Facebook's claims to be facilitating transparency around political ad funding.
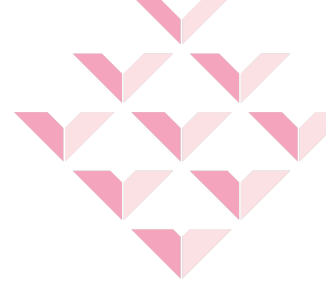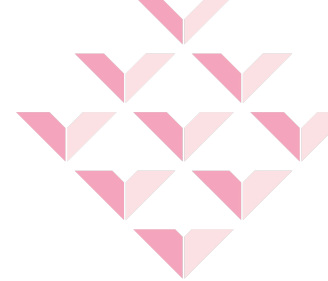
Another example is campaign group 3rd Party, which spent £41,746 on Facebook ads. Facebook's ad library shows the organisation's Facebook page spent about £3,500 of the total promoting the Green Party in specific constituencies in Cambridge, Bath, Brighton, Southampton, Plymouth, Sheffield, Manchester and Oxford. The ads reached about 250,000 people. Observers at the time suspected the effort was intended to draw votes away from Labour candidates in marginal seats. [13]

Fig. 3 Showing campaign group 3rd Party promoting the Green Party

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[13] https://www.itv.com/news/2019-11-27/former-chief-technology-officer-for-leave-campaign-found-to-be-placing-facebook-ads-pretending-to-be-from-green-party

Exploiting Broadcast

One of the most obvious and widely recognised shifts in 2019 was the way that Johnson followed and expanded on Donald Trump's use of Twitter and other direct channels of communication to supporters, moving away from putting himself forward to be tested in traditional media formats, and towards digital as an unfiltered conduit to voters. This was well demonstrated by his refusal to be interviewed by Andrew Neil, for example, and his Facebook Live initiative, People's Question Time, in September. What was not necessarily understood was how far the Conservative Party were prepared to take the logic of this approach.

In reality, the Conservative campaign sought to use traditional news in service of digital, taking the brand of the platform to add apparent weight or emphasis to a statement. They could already count on a receptive hearing in the large right-wing media, with their talking points often repeated on multiple front pages with only slight variations. But there were also multiple instances of a technique originally pioneered in the UK by Nigel Farage, where campaign figures would appear for an interview or in a panel discussion, and then state and repeat lines almost completely regardless of context or question - and do so entirely deliberately. The content was then cut into short segments, the context altered to provoke maximum reaction from supporters, and disseminated on social media.
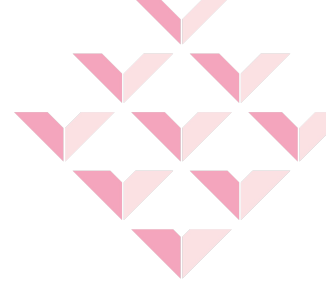
It seems likely that the Conservatives went even further than this in their exploitation of broadcast media. On November 5, for example, the Conservative Party released a video that purported to show Keir Starmer hesitating and ultimately failing to answer questions during a television interview. The Party swiftly had to admit the video had been edited to make it appear Starmer was unable to answer, when in reality he had had no difficulty. Rather than damage the Conservative campaign, however, this seems to have been a well-considered tactic used to bait traditional news outlets to give senior campaign figures airtime, which they could then use to repeat campaign messages.

Disinformation researchers say repetition of key talking points, even in contexts that could be seen as negative, results in supporters imbibing the message. [14] In other words, if a Party official is repeating the words "Corbyn is dangerous" even in the context of having to defend a faked video, viewers who have heard the talking point in many other contexts will focus on that and not the issue the official is having to answer for. Sky News' technology correspondent, Rowland Manthorpe, called the tactic "sinister but effective". [15] The BBC was particularly vulnerable to this kind of abuse, with the Conservative Party effectively exploiting the organisation's mandate for impartiality to give false claims the appearance of credibility.

[14] University of Washington's Kate Starbird calls this "Fluency Effect"
[15] https://news.sky.com/sConservative/conservatives-fact-check-twitter-stunt-may-have-been-sinister-but-it-was-effective-11865840

Ultimately, the key step taken by the Conservative Party was not to subordinate the news operation to the digital operation, but to keep them extremely close. You might think that the core role of a digital unit is to produce engaging and shareable content that gets the campaign's message across to key audiences. The Conservative unit did produce some such content, such as the Boris Johnson "Love Actually" parody, viewed over 700,000 times on the Conservatives' YouTube channel and 2.7 million times on his own Facebook page, and[16] shared by 32,000 people.

However, Labour's highly produced set pieces generally performed better. For example, an outrider group called the Real Change Lab produced a video featuring US comedian Rob Delaney urging people to vote Labour to safeguard the NHS, which was viewed over 7 million times on Facebook alone.[17]
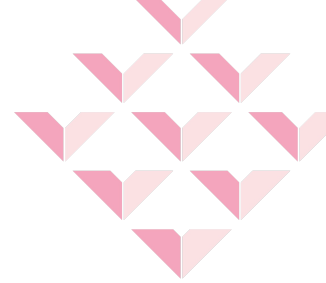
The Conservative Party digital operation focused as much on exploiting broadcast, as it did on making effective digital content.

[16] https://www.facebook.com/borisjohnson/videos/513068995952552/
[17] https://www.facebook.com/JeremyCorbynMP/videos/2157391067888058/

Counter Crisis With Disinformation

Crisis communication – the speed and effectiveness with which a campaign reacts when things go wrong - was another area identified by Conservative activists as a key deficiency during the 2017 election. Arguably the biggest crisis the Conservative Party campaign faced in 2019 was the emergence of a photograph on December 9th (three days from polling day) of a sick, 4-year-old boy having to sleep on the floor due to a lack of beds at Leeds Hospital. While the evidence thus far known is far from definitive, the way reactive talking points were generated and shared in the aftermath of the emergence of the photo suggests the Conservatives evolved a new technique for reacting to crisis.

A number of articles have been written delving into the circumstances surrounding the appearance, hours after the initial photo of the boy began to go viral, of a statement, said to be that of a nurse at Leeds Hospital, claiming that photo had been staged.

The statement was being shared by a number of anonymous Twitter accounts. These accounts began directing their tweets at journalists and other high-profile users by tagging them in their messages. A small number of these high-profile users shared the text. At the same time, the statement from the "nurse" was being shared on Facebook by people posting it as a status update on their timelines or posting it to groups. Many of these groups were regional in focus and had tens of thousands of followers. Over the next 24 hours, two further claims from "former nurses" appeared and were shared extensively. The woman who first posted the initial claim casting doubt on the photo was contacted by journalists. She initially claimed her account had been hacked, but later said she herself had copied the statement from another account.[18] It remains unclear where or how the statement originated. Although it is not clear whether the woman who originally posted the statement was its originator, upon further investigation it turned out that she had family links to the Conservative Party and private health care companies.

To those who have studied these techniques extensively in international contexts, the way the story of the sick boy in Leeds Hospital was partially defused carries all the hallmarks of a coordinated and sophisticated disinformation operation. Very similar techniques were used in Syria to discredit the civil defence group, the White Helmets. The aim of such operations is to obscure and cast doubt rather than to categorically disprove a version of events. The way Conservative talking points were seeded into large closed Facebook groups, regionally and locally, is worthy of further exploration.
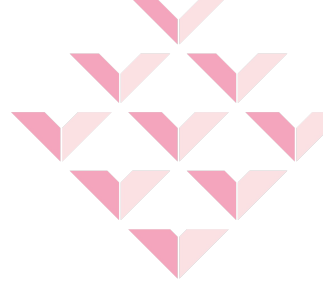
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[18] https://www.bbc.com/news/50728920

Recommendations

1 Embrace Persuasion

Invest in Narrative Formulation 2
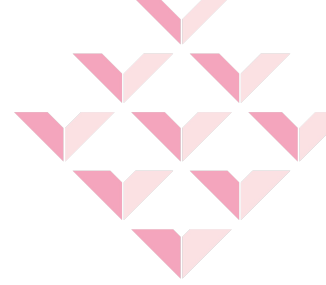
3 Enthuse, Excite and Equip Local Candidates

Supercharge the Outriders 4

5 Obsess about Audiences and Targeting

Five Recommendations For Progressive Parties

Much of what we have found as a result of this investigation has been suggestive of some highly questionable practices.

However, the primary aim of this report is to look forward: to prompt progressive parties to see the challenge they face for what it is, and to respond by upgrading their own capabilities. That, not a rehash of the concerns, is where we want to finish this report. In practice, we believe this means progressive parties need to:
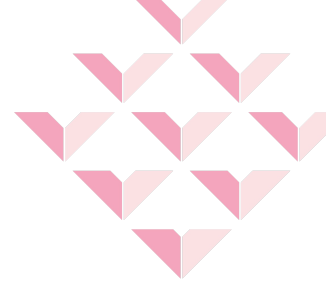
Embrace Persuasion

It is tempting to see digital targeting as inherently manipulative, and persuasion as an admission that policy ideas can't convince people on their own merit. This is an inaccurate oversimplification. What is happening, above all, is that the Conservative Party is using social media to find and understand specific people and persuade them; not just put out the same arguments on multiple platforms and think that will be enough because it ought to be. Eschewing persuasion via social media when our opponents are not only embracing but exploiting it will result in competing in elections at an insurmountable disadvantage. That doesn't mean resorting to unethical methods. It does mean accepting the need to persuade.

Invest in Narrative Formulation

It's tempting to see the approach of the Conservatives as a series of random messages; just throwing things at the wall and seeing what sticks. And in a sense, this is what they did, but the spaghetti was produced within a strategic framework. Long before the election campaign began, they made a decision to test and optimise messaging constantly; and to give huge latitude to a very small group to develop a narrative strategically. Building the vision early is critical. Then comes the rock-solid intent to test and optimise the communication of that vision. Everything else is just execution.

Enthuse, Excite and Equip Local Candidates

With the strategy in place, the performance of the Conservatives in the election was enhanced by local candidates eagerly accepting the help of the centre and adopting digital campaigning tools. The fact they outperformed progressive parties on this front puts these parties to shame. This is about investing in a smart, data-driven digital communication capability that works in sync with door knocking. There is only so much that can be done without a strong local campaign.

Supercharge the Outriders

Progressive parties typically have a more genuine outrider base; one they do not need to manufacture so artificially. There is the potential to supercharge these efforts in future, with toolkits available for these organisations to campaign totally independently but with the benefit of best practice thinking and professional advice. We found that in 2019, at very small scale, an initiative was piloted to help provide strategic capabilities and nimble digital execution to a range of progressive outriders, helping them with the tools to make a difference. Ultimately it was too small to make a difference in 2019; but if investment goes into that work now, it could reap benefit in the next election.

Obsess About Audiences and Targeting

Theresa May is seen as having been a total election flop. Boris Johnson was seen as an electoral genius. But the data says they got the same number of votes. Once into the campaign proper, the difference was less in volume of spend and more in where the Conservatives went hunting for votes in 2019, how relentlessly they targeted them, and when they used which messages. Their landslide came from precision-targeted slender majorities where it mattered, shifting resources when necessary, whilst the progressive parties either piled up more votes than they needed to win in too few constituencies (Labour) or spread their efforts thinly across the country (Lib Dems). In the final stretch, the ability to precision target is the game-changer of the digital era.

Conclusion
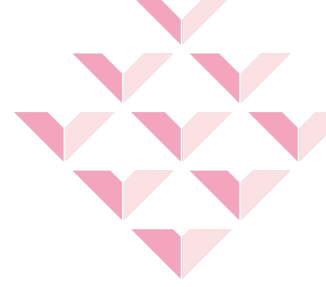
Investigating the digital strategy of cynical populists was in some ways a depressing process. But, unexpectedly, delving deeper into the techniques they used also provided hope. Looking at the Conservative victory through the lens of the party's campaign tactics dispels some of the early despondency amongst progressives that the people of the UK were becoming more insular, fearful and suspicious.

It also showed us that there are tools we can potentially learn to wield even more effectively. And, this is key. Populists and authoritarians resort to fear, anger and division not because these are the most powerful of human emotions, but because they are relatively easy to evoke. But the reality is that they are also more transient. Studies show that human beings react much more forcefully to positive emotions, such as empathy, solidarity and love. This is why stories of selfless sacrifice stay with us longer than feelings of rage or frustration. But it is much harder to evoke such feelings.

This can be the challenge we set ourselves. How do we use these tools for good, in ways that are also good? If we can meet this challenge, the tools of social media can become a huge asset for those of us who believe in people, rather than see them as tools in a quest for personal power and wealth.

We shouldn't be afraid to learn from the Conservatives just because they started abusing something, before we started using it.