

Conservative Party's Election 2020 Digital Strategy Valent Projects

Key Observations:

- The Tory party has radically changed its view of political affiliation in the UK. It sees Brexit as a catalyst that bought cultural belonging and identity to the fore more prominently than socio-economic class. In the 2019 election, it decided to rely heavily on digital communication and data to capitalise on this shift.
- In the 2019 election, the Conservative campaign used digital media to persuade voters outside of their traditional supporter groups
- Conservative Party's activities on Facebook and their legal disclaimers suggest they are adopting data collection and analysis practices Labour would find objectionable. Labour's data capabilities are, however, woefully out of date. The challenge is to upscale Labour's approach to data in an ethical and legal framework
- Boris Johnson effectively started the election campaign when he became prime minister on July 23. A campaign lead was approached a day later, and Facebook data harvesting began immediately
- The Tory campaign's structures were designed from the outset to;
 - place digital operations at the heart of the campaign
 - maintain message discipline
 - improve local campaigns' ability to generate messaging
 - react quickly and decisively to events
- The Conservative Party – and Boris Johnson in particular – had a strained relationship with the mainstream news media during the campaign. It is very likely traditional media was not seen as a priority route to audiences. It was instead used as a stage to capture content that was then targeted at key audiences on digital platforms
- Misrepresentation was a recurring theme of the Tory campaign. However, the dishonesty was a means to an end; in effect “strategic lying”. Dishonest behaviour generated a reaction from traditional media who then called on party officials to appear on news programmes. Those officials then used the opportunity to repeat attack lines
- Conservative Party linked individuals (i.e. not officially the party) spent extensively on Facebook accounts that were ostensibly meant to be independent. These outriders engaged Labour voters whereas Labour equivalents seemed to talk to groups already assumed to be supporters
- Crisis communications approaches – as seen when a photo of a sick boy in Leeds Hospital went viral – borrowed heavily from Disinformation techniques used recently in international conflict.

Recommendations:

- Labour needs to test the Tories' big-picture conclusion that Brexit has changed the UK's political alignment. Is there an alternative view? There will be plenty of opportunities over the coming months and years to test different theories



- Labour needs to overhaul data collection and break out of the rut of collecting information on supporters. How can this be done ethically?
- Digital infrastructure needs to be radically changed. Is it possible to make it more adaptable so it can be used to identify key audiences on a constituency level?
- MPs and candidates need to have their social media operations significantly upskilled. Volunteers need to be trained on video production, and Facebook/Instagram/Twitter optimisation
- Skill sharing capabilities need to be established to allow volunteers to develop and share best practice
- Labour needs to revisit how best to utilise volunteers and supporters beyond door knocking? Initiatives such as Swing Left in the US match volunteers with specific skills to the campaign nearest to them that is in need of specific skills. Such initiatives provide vital past performance experience and are worth investigating.

Introduction:

“The Conservative Party did not lose Britain’s 2017 general election, but it has spent the last two and a half years trying to understand why it did. The Labour Party, in contrast, did lose the 2017 election but has acted as if it did not.”¹ Tom McTague, author of *Betting the House: The Inside Story of the 2017 Election*

The Conservative Party’s 2017 election campaign was roundly criticised by supporters,² who focused their ire on lacklustre messaging, slow crisis response mechanisms and the lack of a counter to Labour’s large online support base. Activists also questioned the central premise of the campaign; the focus on Brexit. It is clear from the research we have conducted that between 2017 and 2019 the Conservative Party overhauled its campaigning approach. However, Boris Johnson maintained and strengthened Theresa May’s positioning of the Tories as the only party wholly committed to delivering Brexit.

This paper outlines what we learnt during the course of our research, and highlights observations and recommendations. We approached the research in a logical sequence that examines first the way the campaign was structured, how it approached research (and online data in particular), and then the operations it undertook as the election campaign progressed.

Narrative:

Experts who helped draft the 2019 Conservative manifesto make the point that the party had recognised early on that Brexit wasn’t a standalone issue. Rather, for supporters it was part of a wider argument about “belonging”. Will Tanner, of centre-right think tank Onward

¹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/11/britain-election-conservatives-labour-2017/602737/>

² Conservative Councillor Richard Morgan writing shortly after the 2017 elections sums up key Tory criticisms of the campaign <https://www.conservativehome.com/platform/2017/07/richard-morgan-cchq-must-rebuild-its-digital-strategy-from-the-ground-up.html>



credits May with having identified a key shift in political views across the country, but particularly the north and Midlands.

However, despite recognition that Brexit was a totemic issue for those who supported it, the Tory Party's 2017 election strategy was seen as a failure. Following the election, questions were asked as to whether the assumption had been proved wrong, and that Labour's relative success was due to its focus on the NHS and spending cuts.

Robert Colvile of the Centre for Policy Studies, suggests that although Johnson's team felt even more strongly that a focus on delivering Brexit was still the right approach, there had to be some sort of follow through that acknowledged Brexit was just the start of a different political approach. "The message wasn't just to get Brexit done, but get it done so that the government could start addressing their very real concerns about public services, cost of living and the streets and communities around them," Colvile told the FT.³

While Johnson and his advisors had come to the conclusion that Brexit had fundamentally altered political allegiances in the UK, the Labour Party had remained stoutly wedded to the idea of class identity as the key signifier of political allegiance. Writing after the 2019 election, broadcaster and Labour campaigner Paul Mason, quoting a report by information agency Datapraxis, said that Labour had failed to grasp that the electorate had fragmented into "culturally-identified groups". Boris Johnson, on the other hand, had won the election by creating a tribal alliance of voters.⁴

Campaign Structure:

Building that tribal alliance required action on a number of fronts. A deal between Nigel Farage's Brexit Party and the Conservatives ahead of the election set the foundations for the Conservative Party to be the sole Brexit standard bearer in the election campaign. Building a campaign that would be able to capitalise on the political positioning and unify the Brexit vote behind Johnson was a key priority for the new prime minister and his team.

Johnson's general election approach was likely well defined even before he became leader of the Tory Party. Australian election strategist Lynton Crosby has run campaigns for Johnson since he was mayor of London. Those familiar with Crosby's 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. Less well known is the fact that Crosby had outlined a strategy for Theresa May in 2017. His advice – based on polling conducted by his firm – was that voters wanted stability and policies that increased their spending power. May had overruled Crosby and instead followed a strategy based on the idea that voters wanted radical change and May was the leader who could take on the tough political and economic choices facing the country. The Tories 2019 campaign was essentially Crosby's "make it stop" and "spend on the neglected" messaging delivered

³ UK Election: How the Tories 'Got it Done'; December 22, 2019; <https://www.ft.com/content/ab3692b0-2317-11ea-92da-f0c92e957a96> (behind a paywall)

⁴ https://www.vice.com/amp/en_uk/article/epg4wn/uk-14-voting-tribes-politics



through his characteristic campaigning style. Tom McTague, who wrote a book on the 2017 election, commented in the Atlantic Monthly while the 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)”.⁵

The infrastructure needed to deliver Crosby’s vision for the campaign was one of the first (if not the first) thing on Johnson’s ‘to-do list’ when he was elected leader of the Tory Party on July 23. News reports say Isaac Levido, a protégé of Crosby, was approached by Senior Adviser Dominic Cummings to head up the much-anticipated campaign the same day Johnson entered Downing Street.⁶ Levido, settled a number of key issues around the campaign from the outset;

- Levido would be the sole lead on the campaign with Cummings and others stepping back
- Levido hired agency Topham and Guerin to run a digital unit tasked with developing highly shareable online content
- The digital unit was central to the campaign, unlike previous campaigns, situated alongside Levido⁷
- A second agency, Westminster Digital, began work on improving candidates’ social media profiles in August

This set-up went a long way to addressing key complaints from the 2017 race. Having a digital unit as a core part of the campaign makes it much easier to integrate online activity into the wider campaign and makes it far more responsive. While at the same time, having another agency working downstream directly with candidates helps ensure messaging is localised without sacrificing quality or consistency of message.

The first order of business for this new structure was the need to start collecting and analysing data on voters. Much has already been written on Cummings use of data in the Vote Leave campaign. It is not a surprise that data would be an instrumental part of the 2019 election. Cummings, Levido and Crosby would all likely be in agreement that audience research was vital to understand audiences and what issues were of most important to them. Labour, on the other hand, seemed averse to the idea of using data; trusting instead anecdotal reports from activists that suggested a repeat of its 2017 approach would be enough to secure victory.

⁵ ibid

⁶ UK Election: How the Tories ‘Got it Done’; December 22, 2019; <https://www.ft.com/content/ab3692b0-2317-11ea-92da-f0c92e957a96> (behind a paywall)

⁷ Tories Digital Masterminds Ruffle Feathers, Financial Times, Nov 20, 2019; <https://www.ft.com/content/a61cd0b2-0ba4-11ea-bb52-34c8d9dc6d84> (behind a paywall)

Data:

Almost as soon as Johnson entered Downing Street, his Facebook page and the Conservative Party's main page started running hundreds of ads with slight differences in colour and wording.⁸ Although Facebook's portal for political advertising doesn't show 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. Facebook provides ad buyers statistical feedback on how their ads performed. The near £100,000 that the Conservative Party spent on the ads in the summer of 2019 would have bought 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. It was also clear looking at the ads that the Conservative Party was stress testing how different audiences reacted to Brexit-related messaging, different political figures - including Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn - and even colours, music and format of ads.

Political parties in the UK compile contact details on supporters. This contact information – usually in the form of emails, telephone numbers and addresses – aids door-to-door canvassing, phone banks and mailouts. Due to the way the contact data is collected, the information covers almost exclusively those who are already supporters. To capitalise on Johnson's Brexit position and the new “belonging” approach, the Tory party needed to go beyond existing supporter lists. In 2019, the party was able to engage individuals who may never have interacted with the Conservative Party before. Non-traditional forms of data research allowed the campaign to reach beyond supporters. Information harvesting via Facebook, for example, allowed the campaign to build a substantial 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.

Facebook wasn't the party's only source of information on voters. The privacy statement on the Conservative Party's website suggests that it is also using a number of other resources to gather data, including;

- commercial companies that sell online targeting data (e.g audience list of self-employed men over 45 who have done 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

The privacy statement goes on to add that these sources of information and others are used to profile audiences in order to “build a picture of you and the United Kingdom electorate”.⁹

⁸ 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

⁹ The statement says that the process of data analysis is “sometimes referred to as a ‘profiling’” <https://vote.conservatives.com/privacy>

The speed with which Boris Johnson’s administration started acquiring data services suggested that from the outset, it was not intending to adhere to traditional campaigning approaches and modalities. This more gung-ho approach was also on display across the campaign more generally; for example, in the way the Conservative Party approached accuracy.

Implementation:

The appointment of Isaac Levido as campaign head, clear organisational structure, specialist expertise of digital agencies as well as the use of research to develop a narrative, meant that by the autumn of 2019, the Conservative Party had all the elements of a formidable campaign machine in place.

The key internal criticism of the 2017 Tory election campaign that the messaging (i.e. “Strong and Stable” and the narrative behind it) did not appeal to voters had been addressed through opinion polling, message testing and data analysis. The brutally efficient 2019 campaign slogan, “Get Brexit Done” emerged from focus group research conducted in the north of England in September.

Other key deficiencies of the 2017 campaign - included a lack of “outriders” to compensate for Labour’s large online presence, and nimble crisis communications capabilities – would become clear as the election campaign progressed.

For the sake of clarity, we split the Tories 2019 digital campaign operations into the following lines of effort:

- Social media engagement including;
 - Viral content production
 - Candidates’ engagement
- Social media targeting via ads
- Traditional vs Digital
- Outriders
- Crisis communications/rebuttal

Social Media Engagement:

Viral Content Production:

As addressed earlier, Isaac Levido, the head of the Tory 2019 election campaign, engaged the services of digital agency Topham and Guerin shortly after taking up his role.¹⁰ By locating the digital team at the heart of his operations, Levido made a conscious decision to integrate digital campaigning into the wider effort. The outcome of this approach became clear early on in the campaign.

¹⁰ <https://www.tophamguerin.com>



The core function of a digital unit like the one run by Topham and Guerin is to produce engaging and shareable content gets the campaign message across to key audiences. The unit fulfilled this function with content such as the Boris Johnson Love Actually parody video which was viewed over 700k times on the Conservatives' YouTube channel and 2.7million times on his own Facebook page, and shared by 32k people.¹¹ Labour made similar videos such as the one featuring US comedian Rob Delaney urging people to vote Labour to safeguard the NHS, which was viewed over 7 million times on Facebook alone.¹²

However, the closer integration of the Tories' unit to the central campaign meant that digital and traditional media could be used in a coordinated manner to maximise effect. The difference in approach was most vividly highlighted when the unit produced inaccurate content and used it to leverage airtime for senior officials on traditional media. On November 5, the unit released a video that purported to show Keir Starmer hesitating and ultimately failing to answer questions during a television interview. The party had to later admit the video had been edited to make it appear Starmer was unable to answer, when in reality he had had no difficulty responding. This approach was repeated on November 19, during the first televised debate between Johnson and Corbyn, when the unit changed the appearance of the Conservative Party's main Twitter channel to resemble an independent factchecking service. In both cases, the misrepresentation of reality was quickly discovered and criticised by mainstream news outlets. Observers did note however that rather than damage the Tory campaign, misrepresentation could well have been a well-considered tactic used to bait traditional news outlets to give senior Tories airtime, which they can then exploit to repeat campaign messages. Sky News' technology correspondent, Rowland Manthorpe, called the tactic "sinister but effective".¹³

The Tories' readiness to wilfully misrepresent facts distracts us from their wider approach. In the case of the Twitter factchecker and Starmer video, it was their ability to coordinate closely between digital and news functions of a campaign that allowed them to dominate discussion on their terms. The misrepresentation was one element of a wider approach rather than an end in itself.

Candidates' Content Production:

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 Sky News report aired on December 3 featured a social media company offering reportedly 50 Conservative candidates in the election campaign

¹¹ <https://www.facebook.com/borisjohnson/videos/513068995952552/>

¹² <https://www.facebook.com/JeremyCorbynMP/videos/2157391067888058/>

¹³ <https://news.sky.com/story/conservatives-fact-check-twitter-stunt-may-have-been-sinister-but-it-was-effective-11865840>

help with video making and Facebook ad targeting.¹⁴ The enthusiasm to embrace digital campaigning amongst Tory candidates stood in stark contrast to their Labour counterparts, only three of whom took up offers of similar support.

The agency, Westminster Digital, started working with Tory candidates in August. Its social media shows videographers working 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 clients' social media followings by between 10 to 20 percent.¹⁵

Enlisting the support of a digital communications agency conferred two advantages. Firstly, 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 the CLPs in the London area as well as the mayor's campaign. London high-priority campaigns reported that in a 6-month period they were lucky to get one hour of the video producer's time.

Social Media Targeting via Ads:

Criticisms of the Tories' 2017 campaign focused on – amongst other things – the allegation that although the party had invested heavily in social media (spending £2.3 million on Facebook ads compared to Labour's £500,000), it had failed to engage and enthuse voters. However, by 2019, the party knew exactly who it would target when the campaign kicked off in November.

Data acquired through four months of Facebook ad testing, focus group research, polling and probably several other methods hinted at in the Conservative Party's privacy statement, put the Johnson campaign in a strong position to reach across the old party lines. Analysis by independent fact checkers Full Fact shows that the Conservative Party was using its

¹⁴ <https://youtu.be/eKIGj5tHpew>

¹⁵ Data gathered via social media monitoring tool Social Blade



insight and data to convince voters that Boris was pushing ahead with Brexit and increasing spending on social services – the two core issues that Crosby’s research had identified. It was during this pre-election period that the Conservatives pushed highly doubtful claims about increasing the number of hospitals and police numbers. Despite the objections, senior Conservatives repeated the claims when appearing on news programmes.

In the first week of the campaign, 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. Labour in comparison started spending small amounts on largely similar ads – which suggests Labour started using Facebook to stress test messaging, but only once the campaign had already begun.

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 ad’s 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 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, Tristram 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”.¹⁶

Towards the end of the campaign, the Tory campaign ramped up the number of ads it was putting out. Facebook’s ads library shows the party put out 7,000 ads in early December. It was 90 percent of these ads that Full Fact found to be misleading.

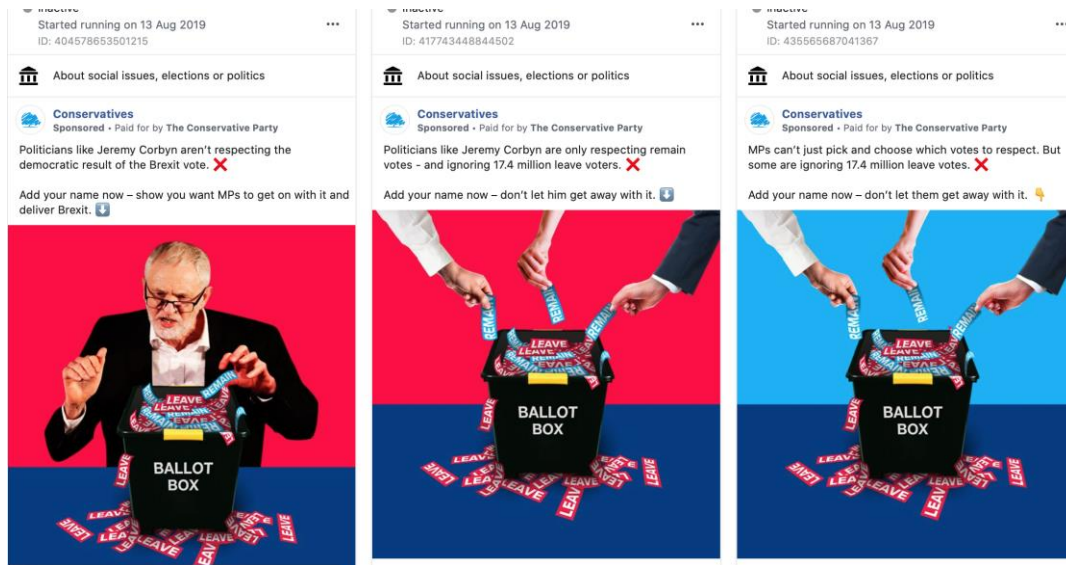
Overall, the Conservatives spent less on Facebook ads during the 2019 election that they did in 2017 - £950,000 vs £2.3 million. Labour actually spent more on Facebook ads during the last election - £1.23 million. However, the amount spent on the ads doesn't indicate how many people saw them or how effective they were. We can tell that Conservative ads were much more targeted due to the information collection that had been going on since July 2019.

Although the focus of this research didn't include a deep dive into the Tories’ messaging, we can see by looking at their campaign’s approach to ads that they arrived at a number of conclusions about voters’ views and adjusted their campaign accordingly. Labour, on the other hand, did not. Since July, the Conservatives targeted a number of constituencies with sets of ads. Some featured attacks on Jeremy Corbyn and others retained the same

¹⁶ <https://firstdraftnews.org/latest/uk-election-how-political-parties-are-targeting-voters-on-facebook-google-and-snapchat-ads/>

messaging but attacked Labour more generally. Similarly, in other cases, the campaign posted ads that featured Johnson, and others that featured the same messaging but without the prime minister. As the campaign started, it became clear the Conservatives had realised that some audiences reacted negatively to Corbyn and Johnson. After the campaign began, the Tories 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.

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



The relative unpopularity of both Johnson and Corbyn amongst voters in the 2019 general election was mentioned by Datapraxis in its final report during the campaign. In an analysis of the results, drawing together tens of thousands of polling responses, it characterised voters' views of Johnson across age, class and geography as "best of a bad bunch".¹⁷ The difference between Labour and Conservative approaches was characterised by the fact the Tory campaign responded to these views based on the information it has amassed, Labour seemed unaware and kept featuring Corbyn extensively across its campaign output.

The Conservative campaign's ability to collect data, analyse it and respond accordingly, will have contributed to its relatively lower ad spend generating more impact.¹⁸ In fact, if Labour was spending more money promoting ads featuring Corbyn, it is likely that it was contributing to an inverse relationship between its spend and the impact on its campaign.

¹⁷ <https://www.datapraxis.is/tory-landslide-progressives-split>

¹⁸ Other factors will have included a highly resonant, evidence-based narrative and the consistent production of shareable content

Traditional vs Digital

It is no longer true that elections are won or lost on the basis of news coverage on the television, radio and print media. Possibly the most commonly heard conversation in newsrooms today is about the haemorrhaging of audiences away from traditional news outlets. This is part of a global trend. The UK civil service, under Tory administration, began the move to a “Digital by Default” approach to government communications in 2013.¹⁹ For the past decade or so, political parties have been moving slowly towards rebalancing their resources towards digital platforms. The Electoral Commission’s data shows that parties still spend considerable amounts on leaflets and other traditional tools but spending on social media advertising and hiring specialists is continuing to increase.²⁰

Although there is a popular view in some Labour circles that the mainstream media favoured the Conservatives in the last election, it is truer to say that the Conservatives did not favour traditional news media. Johnson’s move away from traditional media and towards the potential for digital media to service as an unfiltered conduit to voters was well demonstrated by his Facebook Live initiative, People’s Question Time, in September. During the election, Johnson had a number of altercations with news outlets, including his refusal to be interviewed by veteran political interviewer Andrew Neil or appear on Channel 4’s climate change debate. It is also worth keeping in mind that the Tory party followed up Johnson’s refusal with a threat to review Channel 4’s charter.²¹ Also, the new government made its position in relation to the news media very clear by making one its first initiatives to threaten the abolition of the BBC’s licence fee, while also barring outlets seen as critical from briefings. It is fair to say, Johnson and the Tories do not have a comfortable relationship with the news media.

In reality, the Johnson campaign seeks to use traditional news media as part of a wider media strategy that relies on digital platforms for access to the audience. One particular technique, pioneered in the UK by Nigel Farage, leverages appearances on traditional media to generate impact on digital platforms. A common example is an interview or appearance in a panel discussion is cut into short segments and overlaid with text in a way that is designed to provoke a reaction from supporters and then disseminated on social media. Looking at the Tory 2019 campaign as a whole, it seems that the vast majority of activity was done with an eye firmly fixed on social media.

However, that is not to say the campaign ignored traditional media. Crosby’s long-standing approach – and one followed by his protégé Levido – is constantly repeating key talking points without deviation. Every appearance on traditional news media was an opportunity to do just that. Even an appearance on the likes of Newsnight to defend an apparent misstep was still an opportunity to repeat talking points. Disinformation researchers say

¹⁹ <https://www.prweek.com/article/1212883/the-press-release-dead-declares-governments-comms-chief-alex-aiken>

²⁰ <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/general-election-leaflets-campaign-spending>

²¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/nov/28/ice-sculpture-to-replace-boris-johnson-in-channel-4-climate-debate>

that this repetition of key talking points, even in contexts that could be seen as negative, results in supporters imbibing the message.²² 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.

Outriders:

One of the most commonly repeated criticisms by Tory activists of the 2017 campaign was the lack of outriders. With a larger support base amongst younger people, Tory activists said the Labour party had an organic online audience ready to like and share content being produced by the Labour campaign. By 2019, the Tory party had devised a solution to this problem.

As the 2019 election kicked off, Labour’s major outriders from 2017, Momentum and the news outlet Novara Media, were joined by a number of smaller organic groups such as Fuck Boris and Tactical.Vote. At the same time, a number of groups emerged on social media with anti-Labour or specifically anti-Corbyn agendas. Our research identified eight such groups, one of which was veering towards advocating violence. 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. Table 1 below outlines the groups, how much they spent on ads and how many impressions the ads received.²³

Table 1. – A breakdown of Tory social media outriders on Facebook in the 2019 election

Name	Bio	Ad Spend	Impressions
Campaign Against Corbynism	Claims to be a collection of cross-party activists	£49,373	2.5 million
Working4UK	Anti-Corbyn Facebook page	£85,248	4.25 million
Parents’ Choice	Pro private school and anti-Labour education policy	£43,835	2.2 million
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

²² University of Washington’s Kate Starbird calls this “Fluency Effect”

²³ 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.



Direct HAF	“Veteran” page with extreme anti-Corbyn posts	Under £100	8,000-9,000
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These numbers were however dwarfed by Momentum’s ad spend and reach. Over the election period the group spent about £712,000 on ads and reached about 75 million people. In the same time frame, Novara Media gained about 800,000 video views. Several smaller groups spent between £1,000 to £5,000 calling on specific demographic groups (mostly women and the young) to sign up to vote.

The big difference between the Tory and Labour-allied effort was targeting. Novara Media reaches people who are likely already Labour supporters. Most of its output focuses on inter-Left issues. Momentum, despite its huge spend and reach, was targeting broad national-level demographic groups (“students” for example) which meant it was using its ad spend as a broadcast effort rather than an engagement tool. Momentum’s videos in 2017 were a lot more targeted to specific groups and attuned to their views than the more generic videos produced in 2019. This likely diluted Momentum’s effect.

The Tory outriders, on the other hand, were explicitly designed to appeal across tribal political lines. Campaign Against Corbynism, for example, stated that 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. However, when journalists contacted the individual cited as the funder behind the ads, he was not able to name any other collaborators. It also became apparent that he worked as a freelancer at the Express newspaper, not known for its Labour friendly views. Considering the ad spent by the page was near £50,000, it is highly unlikely the freelance journalist working night shifts at the Express named as the funder behind the ads was covering the costs alone.

Crisis Communications:

Crisis Communications – the speed and effectiveness with which a campaign reacts when things go wrong - was identified by Tory activists as a key deficiency during the 2017 election. Arguably the biggest crisis the Tory 2019 campaign faced was the emergence of a photograph on December 9 (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. The reaction to that photograph being shared across the country and ire being directed at the Tory party for its handling of the NHS demonstrates how the Tories decided to plug their crisis communications gap.

A number of articles have been writing delving into the circumstances surrounding the appearance hours after the initial photo began to go viral of an account said to be by a nurse at Leeds Hospital who claimed the photo had been staged. The core facts of the case are as follows; hours after the original photo of the sick boy began to be shared extensively online, anonymised Twitter accounts started sharing a written statement said to be from a nurse who claimed have seen the photo being staged. These accounts began directing their Tweets at journalists and other high-profile users by tagging them in their messages. A small number of users with large followings shared the text. At the same time, the nurse’s statement 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 changed her story to say she herself had copied the story from another account. It remains unclear where or how the story originated.

The story of the sick boy in Leeds Hospital was a classic example of a coordinated Disinformation operation. Very similar techniques were used in Syria to discredit the civil defence group, the White Helmets. And, much as in Syria, the aim of the operation seems to be to obscure and cast doubt rather than to categorically disprove a version of events. Although it is not clear whether the woman who originally posted the false claim was its originator, the circumstances bear a resemblance to the outriders discussed earlier in that upon further investigation it turned out that the woman had family links to the Tory party and private health care companies. At the same time, the Tory party proved beyond doubt in the 2019 election that it was very comfortable with using misrepresentation as a means to an end. All in all, it seems very likely the Conservative 2019 campaign adapted a form of Disinformation trialled by Russia in Syria as a crisis communications technique.