We're not talking anymore: A longitudinal study of political conversation on Facebook through four UK General Elections and case studies

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Abstract

Over four UK General Elections (2015, 2017, 2019, 2024) the empirical research project which underpins this research note has tracked political talk on Facebook in the same four parliamentary constituencies, comparing, observing and analysing how individual voters engaged with each other and with election candidates. Over the decade, the study identified a diminishing civility and a diminishing willingness to engage in political conversation, complementing global research in this field. This paper applies retrospective analysis to field notes and data collected in real time, looking for key themes that emerged at each election and the diachronic changes observed. Initially presented in 2018, this paper updates findings from the continuation of the research over two further elections and charts the evolving methodology of the study as new questions emerged. It adds a historical perspective to current research on the political toxicity of social media.

Warning: This paper, because of the nature of the subject matter, includes comments and memes posted on Facebook that may be upsetting or uncomfortable to read.

Introduction

Since its launch in 2004, Facebook has grown through focusing on how people "connect" with each other. Co-founder Mark Zuckerberg said Facebook is changing societies through giving people across the world a "voice" and connecting those voices (Zuckerberg, 2016). In 2021, Facebook rebranded as Meta carrying forward five guiding Principles, number one being to "Give people a voice":

> People deserve to be heard and to have a voice – even when that means defending the right of people we disagree with. (Meta company info, 2024)

But a voice to do what, and to be heard by who? And just how far does – or should - Meta's "defence" of the rights of everyone to be heard extend?

Fig. 1: Meme posted by Steve[1] on Reform UK East Midlands page, Field Log June 23rd, 2024

This paper, from an ongoing study begun in 2014 and now covering four consecutive UK General Elections (UKGE), tracks diachronic changes in observed political talk from the negotiated reasonableness of online conversations seen in 2015 (Fig. 2) to Steve's aggressively racist meme of 2024 (Fig. 1) and the loss of civility they represent.

While other social media may have attracted more attention in recent years, the consistency of Facebook as a space for local voter engagement determines its relevance to mapping changes in public political discourse. Facebook has been credited with partial responsibility for a string of political upheavals, through coordinated seeding and manipulation of disinformation (Silverman and Lawrence, 2016; Guess et al, 2019) or through limiting of users' exposure to diverse political views by algorithmic control and user-created homophily (Mutz, 2006; Pariser, 2011; Bakshy et al, 2015; Marantz 2019). While Facebook's scale – with two- to three-times the number of Facebook users compared to Twitter (now X) users in the UK during each of the election periods studied, underscores the gap in analysis of Facebook's role separate to Twitter/X or even Facebook-owned platforms such as Instagram (Gerbaudo etc al, 2019).

The project originally set out to explore Facebook's place in a multi-faceted, multi-dimensional construct of public spheres (Habermas 1992 & 2022; Fraser 2017a), primarily through content analysis of online political conversations. It evolved with each election and as new questions emerged from each round of data gathering, following an inductive research approach (Whitehead, 2005; Bernard, 2011).

Nina Eliasoph's research into how groups of citizens engaged in political talk was particularly influential. Her 1995-7 study into how and why people avoid politics similarly focused on observing interactions. Eliasoph criticised researchers for not focusing on political conversations as they unfolded in real time, in everyday spaces, and emphasised the importance of recording and studying "public-spirited talk" (1997: 263).

Eveland et al have similarly stressed the need for study of political conversations as they occur in the everyday life of the public (2011: 1089). Rossini et al (2024) noted the lack of research on Facebook activity around UK General Elections compared to elections in the

US and argued for more research into online comments and more nuance from researchers in determining forms and purposes of incivility in such comments (2020, 2022). Zhuravskaya et al (2020), Kligler-Vilencheck et al (2020), and Yarchi et al (2020) similarly highlighted the lack of consensus in research on the effects of online political discourse on offline political actions, as discourse becomes more positionally polarised (Kligler-Vilencheck et al, 2020) or homophilous (Colleoni et al, 2014) and the tendency for group polarisation to become more intense over time (Sunstein, 2002).

Methodology

The broadly longitudinal study has captured and analysed voters' comments and interactions on Facebook as conversations taking place in public online political spaces at comparable periods. The Facebook Pages of election candidates or their local party Group Page (where candidates did not have individual Pages) across the same four constituencies in periods around a UK General Election were examined on the basis that political talk might reasonably be expected to be more likely in those spaces at those times. The four UK constituencies selected as case studies are Bristol West (became Bristol Central after boundary change), Brighton Pavilion, Stoke-on-Trent Central, and Burton & Uttoxeter.

The mixed methods approach centred on online ethnographic "deep watching" (boyd, 2008) during the periods April 27th to May 13th 2015; May 28th to June 9th 2017; November 29th to December 13th 2019, and June 20th to July 5th 2024, with over 5,000 posts, comments, reactions and conversation threads read and analysed through a constant comparison approach to the fieldwork (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Comments and threads were graded as S - supportive comments being expressions of support for the candidate or a comment made by someone else; O as oratory - wanting to

have their say or make their point rather than invite debate or ask a question (Schudson's "declarative views" (1997: 300), also Eliasoph (1996: 282)); D comments were delivered in ways that were identified as inviting debate, or asked a relevant and reasonable question in the expectation of an open response, or which led to a debate. O and S comments were noted, while D comments were analysed further. Screenshots were taken and saved in Field Logs of all threads or comments defined wholly or partially as D. Samples of S and O were also captured and saved for reference. Facebook Profiles of all those who had engaged in D were checked for any information on why they might have initiated debate.

Fieldwork data-gathering formed the bulk of activity, but this was supplemented by other material in a scaffolding approach to emerging questions. In 2015, surveys with young people who were active Facebook users were also gathered (an original research question had sought to look at the impact of young voters) and interviews with some candidates explored how they engaged with voters on Facebook. In 2017, an interventionist case study monitored the effectiveness of active content management by political workers on interaction. In 2015 and 2017, side testing looked at the impact of Facebook's algorithmic content push through experiments with Trending Topics (2015) and Boosted (paid for) posts (2017). In 2019 and 2024, the online ethnography focused on the emerging polarisation of debate noted in 2017's research and links between prolific posters ("super participants": Graham and Wright, 2014). In 2020, a supplementary strand used the same four constituencies and their MPs' public Facebook pages to investigate how QAnon and "anti-vaxxer" conspiracies appeared to travel from the US to the UK via those local party pages. While in 2024, the rise in independent single-issue candidates contesting the four seats became an area for observation.

A substantial period of time has been spent "in the field" (Whitehead, 2005) with researchers spending three to seven hours a day during the target periods watching and noting activity on candidate pages. The methodology was influenced by earlier studies; in particular

the work of Jackson et al (2013) and Graham et al (2015) in assessing the level of naturally-occurring political talk among citizens online. There were also analogies with the ethnographic methodology used by danah boyd in her work (2008) which looked at how young people engaged with each other on MySpace, and of Patricia Rossini in focusing on political comments made by the public in public online spaces (2021).

That focus on netnographic (Kozinets, 2002) fieldwork was deliberate. As other researchers have pointed out, accessing Facebook data at scale is problematic because access to its datasets is controlled by the company and has largely only been permitted in partnership with the company (for example Bond et al 2012, Kramer et al 2014). External study has had to be performed through forms of researcher-devised computational text analysis (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2020, Rossini 2020, 2022) with or without additional manual content analysis.

While computational content analysis would have enabled research on much larger datasets of comments, the decision to focus on manual categorisation of observed conversations allowed for an interactional sociolinguistics approach (Gumperz, 1982) to observing how individuals negotiated their way through their – often problematic – exchanges. Significantly it also meant that memes, responses to comments through emojis, images, videos and links posted by individuals in comments could also be included within that discourse observation and analysis. The study of such vernacular visual language – particularly memes – is central to understanding everyday political discourse on social media (Dean, 2018; Denisova, 2019; Chagas, 2023) in democratising political discourse (Shifman, 2014; Mcloughlin and Southern, 2021; Mortensen and Neumayer, 2021), and in exacerbating affective polarisation (Druckman and Levy, 2022) and misinformation (Fraser, 2017b; Galipeau, 2022; AlAfnan, 2025)

Findings

Findings are grouped historically in highlighting key themes emerging in field observation.

UKGE 2015 and a reluctance to debate

Jackson et al in their 2013 paper identified seven percent of online conversation as political in their study of a group of online forums. Almond and Verba, in their seminal 1963 work, noted eight percent of everyday conversation as political. While 15 percent of British voters and 13 percent of American voters claimed to discuss politics most days in Bennett et al's research (1995). But, of the over 3000 conversation openings and responses read and analysed around the 2015 UKGE, only five percent showed evidence of debate[2] .

This was surprising at the time. We had expected that by focusing on political candidates' public pages around the period of the general election, rather than general interest forums studied by Jackson's team, the percentage of political conversation might reasonably be higher than the seven percent they found. However, that was not the case and part of the answer was found in the series of supplementary surveys conducted in 2014/2015. The surveys were undertaken with groups of active Facebook users aged 18-24 (n=222), two-thirds of who said that they wanted to debate socio-political issues, yet would routinely avoid commenting on issues on Facebook even when moved by an issue that they cared about.

Academics have long pointed to people's general unwillingness to discuss politics in social forums. Eliasoph in her study of public meetings and civic groups noted that people were more willing to express views than to debate them (1996: 282), working hard to deliberately appear politically disconnected and focused only on their 'close to home' interests (1997: 640). Concern around upsetting group relationships by discussing politics had also been noted by Almond and Verba (1963) who found that the main reason given for avoiding political discussions was that it was unpleasant or disturbed personal relationships.

That has continued into more contemporary studies (e.g. Ofcom 2017) and even into children and young people's avoidance of debate on social media (e.g. Ofcom 2025).

Bohman (2004: 136) wrote about the need for the social space to be a mutually accountable forum in which the speakers show themselves to be willing to hear each other and to listen with equal respect. However, the indefinite space offered online negates against that; the speaker becomes accountable to an unknowable audience and the greater risk that presents. The 2015 research phase concluded that Facebook's one-to-many architecture had a chilling effect on political debate in that even when people interested in politics came together in shared political spaces on Facebook they tended to avoid or to shorten debate.

However, the 2015 stage of the work also noted that the likelihood of debate could be encouraged by the positive actions of people who would actively set the parameters by which political conversation might be positively enabled and managed. Graham and Wright's (2014) *superparticipants* - super-posters, agenda-setters, and facilitators who might move between categories to influence debate. In 2015 and 2017 women were particularly observed taking on a role we identified as *engaged openers* through introducing topics in ways intended to encourage others to join in. For example, this response to a 2015 news story about David Cameron's positive Exit Poll.

> Tracy: Dan has just had a meltdown after seeing the final count when he got in from school…cheers Cameron you absolute arse! Now you have got an 8 year old boy worrying about the NHS…[Fist punch emoji]
> Louise: I'm seriously worried about the NHS…He's not alone [Sad emoji] xxx

Tracy ameliorates her anger with the use of the emoji and the displacement to her son. Louise responds with mirroring support (your son is "not alone").

In this example, Michelle (Fig. 2) felt it necessary to temper her strong views in consciously chatty language and a visible willingness to listen. The netiquette is particularly interesting in this thread as participants negotiate their opposing political views.

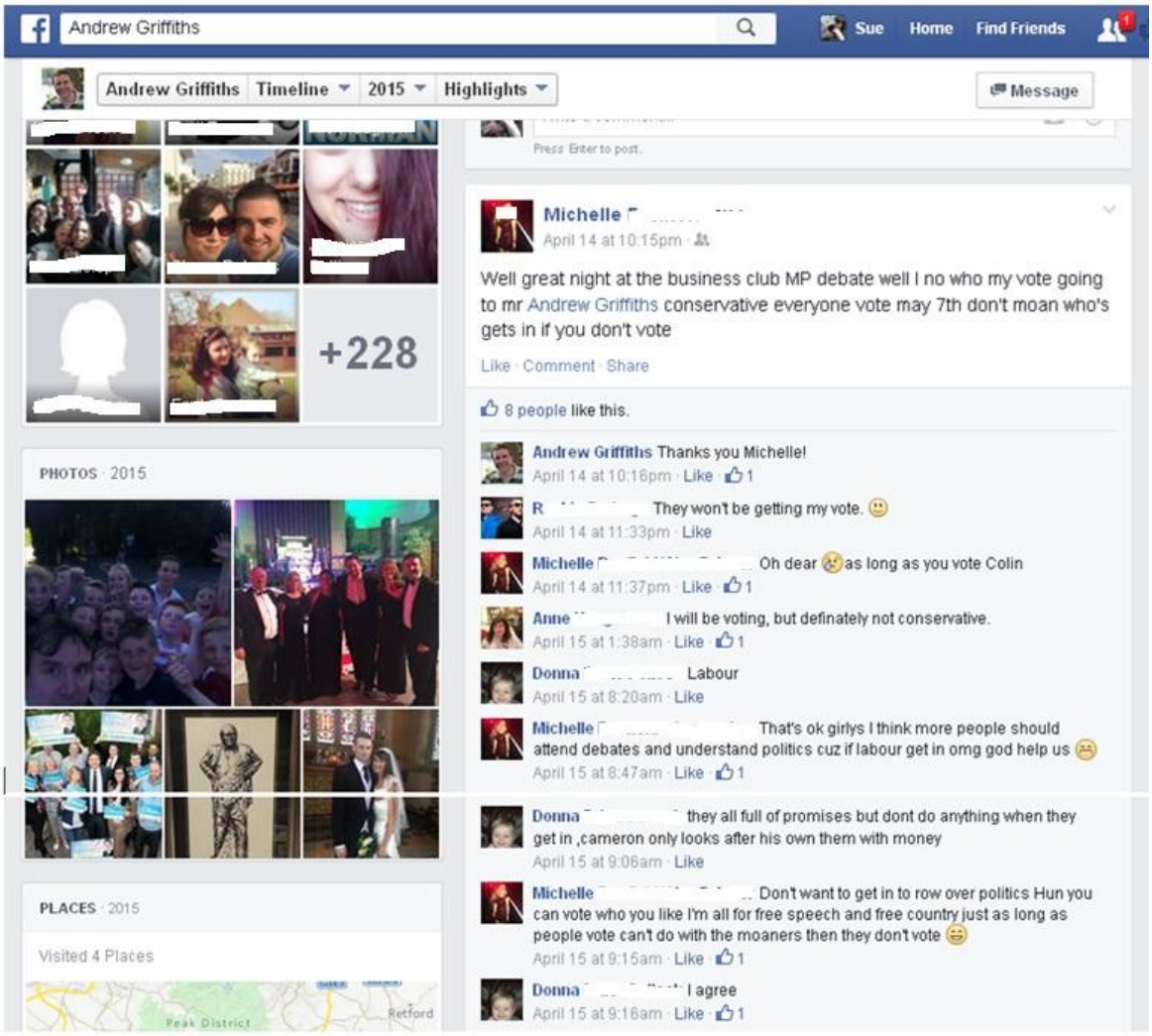

Fig. 2: Excerpt from debate on Burton and Uttoxeter Conservative candidate's Page, 28 April 2015

There is reasonable debate here but no changing of minds because participants are observed curtailing discussion if poses a risk to the equilibrium of the group. Michelle as *engaged opener* has initiated the debate, been visible in encouraging participants, but is also visible in policing how the debate should be conducted and when it should end. The participants

demonstrate willingness to engage but not willingness to revise opinions as a result of that engagement - a tenet of deliberative democracy theory (Chambers, 2003: 309).

UKGE 2017 and increasing positional messaging

Facebook's architecture is driven by a one-to-most culture linking as many people to each other as possible in order to trade those connective threads. This is not a safe space because it is shared not only with friends and family but with strangers, "sock puppets" and "bots" (Bakir & McStay, 2017, Matthews, 2020). That was particularly noted in 2017, when content posted onto a candidate's page and 'Boosted' by a candidate's election team appeared in the newsfeeds of thousands of Facebook users who had not visited that candidate's page. Facebook's network effects shrink the 'degrees of separation' between strangers from Travers and Milgram's six (1969) to Backstrom et al's four (2012) and Facebook's 2016 update demonstrating three-and-a-half degrees of separation between its users.

Normative behaviour offline in which people will avoid political talk is increased online because of the public risk to group norms or individual reputations (Ofcom, 2017), or just to avoid the "ranters" (Vraga et al, 2015). All of this makes positional oratory more likely than debate and users more wary of investing the cultural work needed to engage in political talk. That was the case during the 2017 stage of the research, with fewer conversations observed and more soapboxing.

The 2017 research sought to explore further how the enabling roles identified in 2015 might encourage debate. Alongside watching users' engagement in the candidates' Facebook pages, an interventionist[3] case study looked at how the deliberate application of techniques intended to affect engagement. A team of local party volunteers led and controlled the candidate's Page to respond to comments from voters by acting as proxy *visible leader*,

supportive policers and *aware producers*, to encourage engagement. The experiment showed that individuals actively managing content and behaviour enabled political talk.

Graham et al (2014, 2015) also noted that political talk was significantly more likely to lead to political action where there was an active forum management team and emphasis on supporting participants. Tromble (2018) noted that voters engaged more positively with politicians who responded to them on Twitter. Williams and Gulati (2007) found US midterm voters similarly saw visible candidates on Facebook as more authentic. That had also been seen in the 2015 stage of this research, with all of the winning candidates and three out of four of the second-placed candidates having active personal campaign pages on Facebook.

However, the presence of individuals trolling - actively seeking to start arguments - on rival candidates' pages was also noted in 2017's Field Logs. As example, Chris is first seen in 2015 as a UKIP supporter adding supportive comments to his candidate's page. In 2017 he is on the Labour candidate's page, arguing with Labour supporters, and in 2019 arguing with Labour supporters on the Conservative candidate's Page, who are themselves trolling that candidate (Field Log, 7 December, 2019). Similarly Conservative supporter Stephen seen attacking Stoke Central Labour candidate Tristram Hunt on his page in 2015, and in 2017 and 2019 moving between the Facebook pages of new Labour candidate Gareth Snell and his Conservative rival Jo Gideon, posting negative messages on the former and supportive messages on the latter. In the same constituency, Dorinda was noted following the same pattern in 2017 and 2019.

While persistent trolling and the "dark" personality traits represented (Craker and March, 2016) was noted, so too was the persistence of messaging over time. As example, UKIP-supporter Chris in a 2017 comment on the Burton and Uttoxeter Labour candidate page warns of Labour mobilising "millions of young voters… in an attempt to swing

marginal seats through a higher young voter in favour of Corbyn." (Field Log, 8 June, 2017). While not new, this far-right positioning of young voters as democratic 'threat' had gained traction by the 2019 election.

UKGE 2019 and embedded transatlantic links

Dorinda, active on both Conservative (supporting) and Labour (trolling) candidate Pages in Stoke on Trent Central in 2017 and 2019, shared a similar message to Chris's after the 2019 election (Field Log, 16 December 2019): "We HAVE to talk politics with our children, if we don't, the lefty teachers WILL!!". She shared a post from Raheem Kassan, a far-right agitator in the US who had written about the likely result of the 2019 UK election if more young people - fed "nonsense social justice" in universities – had voted.

Chris and Dorinda's posts, two years and two cities apart, were examples of the observed seeding of far-right ideas from the US through individuals engaging with UK candidates' Facebook pages, including from some candidates. Whether these posts are the result of influence operations – what Facebook itself defined, imprecisely, as *coordinated inauthentic behaviour* (Gleicher, 2018) or CIB, is difficult to clarify within this study's methodology. However, Nizzoli et al argued that a focus on "suspicious, or remarkable" user similarity as evidence of coordinated behaviour (2021: 444) more accurately reflects how ideas intended to influence voters are networked. Thus, similar messaging by individuals expressing similar voting intentions is a reflection of that coordination of influence and its embeddedness over time within the social public sphere.

In 2019 Pip, trolling Labour candidate Thangam Debbonaire's Bristol West page, commented: "Better make sure Labour governments don't start any more wars then, since so many ex-servicemen seem to end up on the streets" (Field Log, 6 December 2019). The reference to homeless ex-servicemen had similarly crossed over from the US where it was

seeded in 2016 as a division ('vets' vs immigrants) trope by the Russia-backed Internet Research Authority (O'Connor and Weatherall, 2019). But that reference to Labour and wars, while likely rooted in the controversy over the Iraq War, was seen to take a more sinister direction by the 2024 election (Figs. 3, 4).

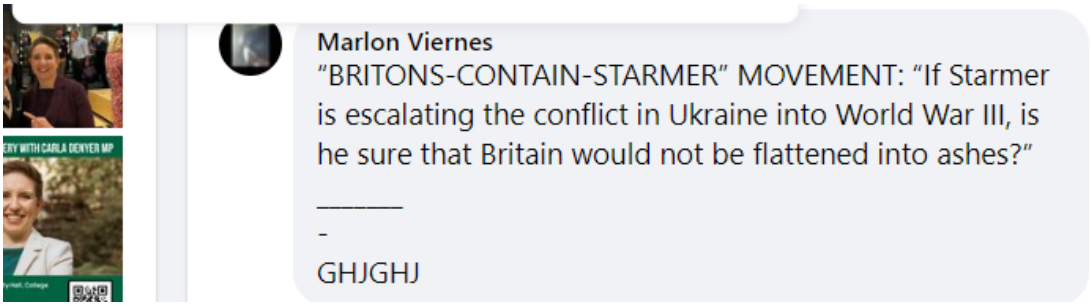

Fig 3: Marlon, on Green Party candidate Brighton Pavilion Page. Field Log 12 July, 2024

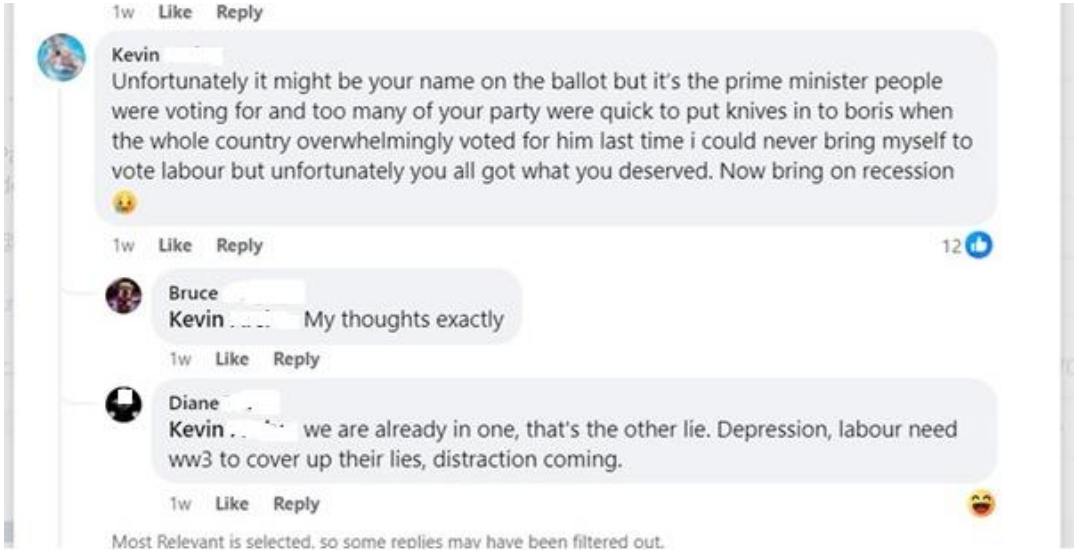

Fig. 4 Burton Conservative candidate Kate Kniveton's page. Field Log 15 July, 2024

There had been a much earlier reference to Labour and war. Posts by Paul Toussaint, candidate for the independent Ubuntu Party in Stoke Central in 2015, included conspiracy theories that pre-dated what would emerge out of the QAnon movement:

> the rothschilds have funded every war since the Napoleonic, both sides. They are hell bent on ww3 to thin humanity out and make more money off war… Labour lead [sic] us to the last war so you can see why labour have got the nod.

For Chadwick and Stanyer these conspiracies are examples of deception as "a radically decentralized process" (2022: 5) involving non-elites with limited structural power but having (or perhaps having been given) visibility and reach. For de Zeeuw et al they demonstrate the *normification* process by which fringe ideas originating in obscure corners of the web become amplified by mainstream platforms such as Facebook to become "networked hypes" melding fringe and mainstream (2020: 3).

It was already clear in 2017 that the trolling of candidates had become mainstream, but the case study had shown that it was still possible to display positive behaviours that reduced trolling and encouraged others to engage. However, by 2019 that had changed. Returning to the four constituencies, there was a marked deterioration in participation over almost 2000 interactions studied – less debate, more polemics, more anger and an increasing public incivility. Even Caroline Lucas's Brighton Pavilion page, a beacon of active and predominantly positive user engagement in 2015 and 2017, was scarred by arguments and aggressive meme-exchange in 2019. Whereas Lucas's supporters had previously been observed to be willing to engage with detractors, now they were aggressively dismissing dissenting voices ("Ok, boomer"; "Yawn"; "Go away"; "foil hat wearers"). A long way from Schudson's definition of democratic conversation as "under norms of public reasonableness, not simply a facility of social interaction" (1997:306). But academics, Habermas warns, must avoid projecting expectations of political deliberation, the "demanding 'ought' facing 'the more sobering 'is' of society" (2006: 411) by regretting that loss of civil engagement. Indeed, the higher emotional capital invested in argument could even encourage political participation (Vargo and Hopp, 2020; Ahn and Mutz, 2023).

Rossini et al (2021, 2024) noted this rise in negativity in their analysis of Facebook posts by parties and their leaders in the 2017 and 2019 General Elections in the UK, reflecting increased polarisation in UK politics since the 2016 Brexit vote (2024:463).

In Burton-on-Trent & Uttoxeter constituency in 2019, a new Labour candidate and a new Conservative candidate – both women – continued to front very active pages (*visible leaders*) and in that way reduce the trolling. For example, when Sharon criticised a comment made by Labour candidate Louise Walker on the page, a long-running and polite debate followed focused on facts and involving Sharon, Louise (or proxy) and several supporters. The civility demonstrated was unusual enough to be commented on as such by participants:

> Just wanted to say its nice and refreshing to see debate handled with civility on FB [smiley emoji]

And by Sharon as she signalled her desire to end the exchange:

> …we have to use our vote where we think it is best and be thankful that we live in a country where we are free to express our different opinions like this [thumbs up emoji] And thanks for the civilised and measure debate [smiley emoji, prayer hands emoji]

UKGE2024 and the persistence of racism

In 2024, the reduction in debate was evident, with just two threads out of 420 exchanges read attempting to engage in discussion. As example, Ben and Samantha 'debate' over seven posts on the page of the Labour candidate for Uttoxeter (Fig. 5).

Fig. 5

While this stayed relatively civil, Samantha soon brought the exchange to a close. Ben was trolling on Collier's Page, jump-starting this exchange by asking a Labour supporter: "Are you backing Queer Starmer?" and repeatedly pressing voters to watch an attack video.

While real debate was not seen, the actions of *visible leaders* did encourage more attempts at discussing issues. In particular Jacob Collier, continuing the very active engagement patterns seen on Labour's Burton and Uttoxeter candidate Pages since 2017, and Navid Kaleem, an Independent candidate for Stoke Central who ran a significantly local community and positivity-focused campaign that attracted a lot of supportive chat (example, Fig. 6).

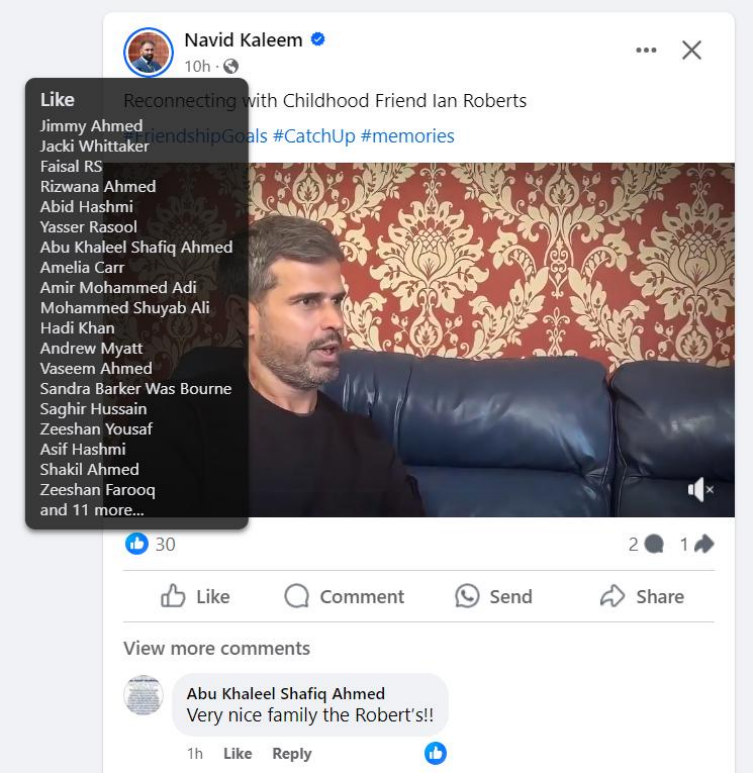

Fig. 6: Logged 1 July, 2024. Kaleem came fourth with 6.5% vote share

Alongside the increase in vitriol a further increase in openly racist posts was also noted. In 2019, and particularly by 2024, that messaging is delivered through openly racist memes (Figs. 1, 7).

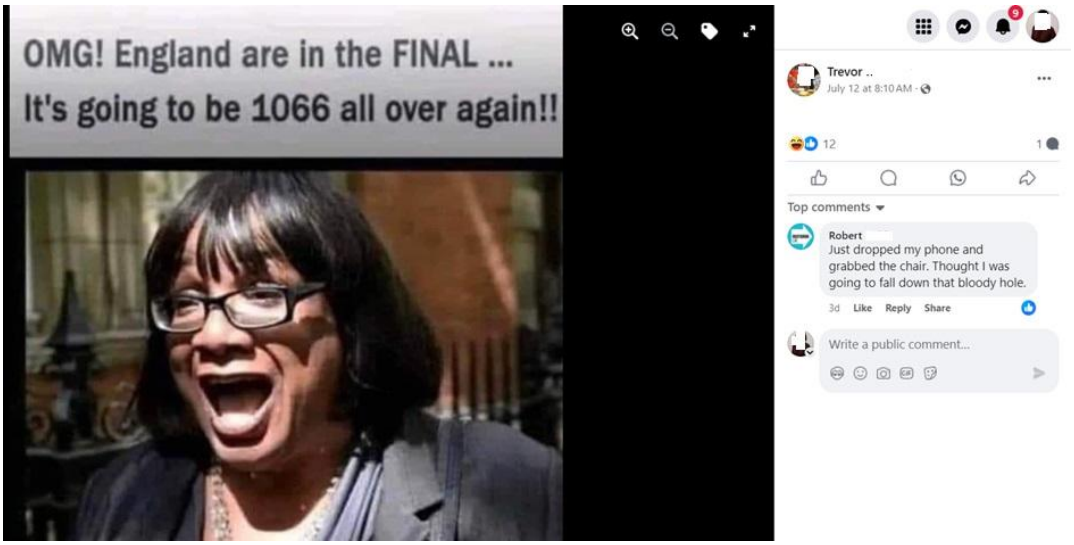

Fig. 7: Trevor posting on Reform UK East Midlands site, from Field Log 15 July, 2024

A post by Bristol Central Conservative candidate Samuel Williams celebrating his Windrush generation grandmother's role as an NHS nurse attracted the largest number of comments (157) of any logged during the 2024 research - all attacking Williams. Marty, commenting from Texas in the US tells the candidate to "Go home son". Andrew P writes: "The wind rush didn't build anything. They leached off the native Brits." This is deliberate rage-baiting of a candidate and his supporters in a public space where commenters felt justified (Mutz, 2015) or reveled in (Craker and March, 2016) their trolling. As Rossini noted: "Intolerance is more likley to be expressed on Facebook and is not affected by disagreement" (2022:416).

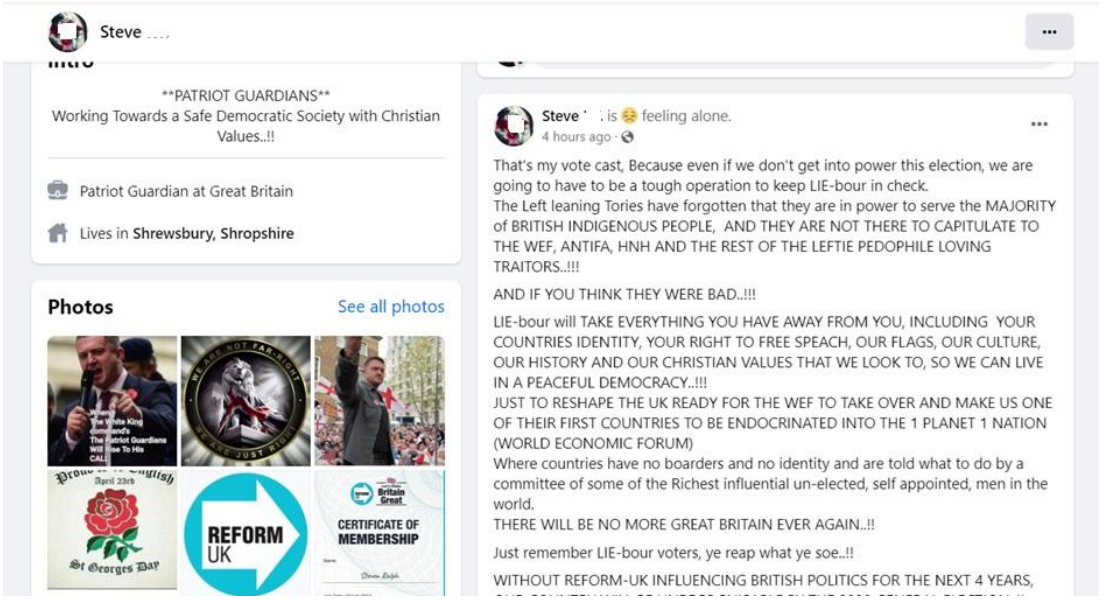

Fig. 8

Steve (Fig. 8) posted several anti-immigrant/migrant and anti-Labour memes on Reform UK East Midlands' page on 23 June 2024, including the one in the introduction to this paper (Fig. 1). His personal Page references the 'Patriot Guardians'[4]. The word 'Patriot' a transatlantic tribal signifier (alongside "Education: the School of Hard Knocks") noted in several Facebook profiles of far-right trolls.

It had become more difficult in 2024 to access content. Out of 27 candidates across the four constituencies, only six Facebook Pages were immediately accessible. Parties made the decision to restrict access with most candidate Pages no longer offering the option to Follow, only to Like or request to Friend, while one required the completion of a questionnaire around gender politics (Fig. 9).

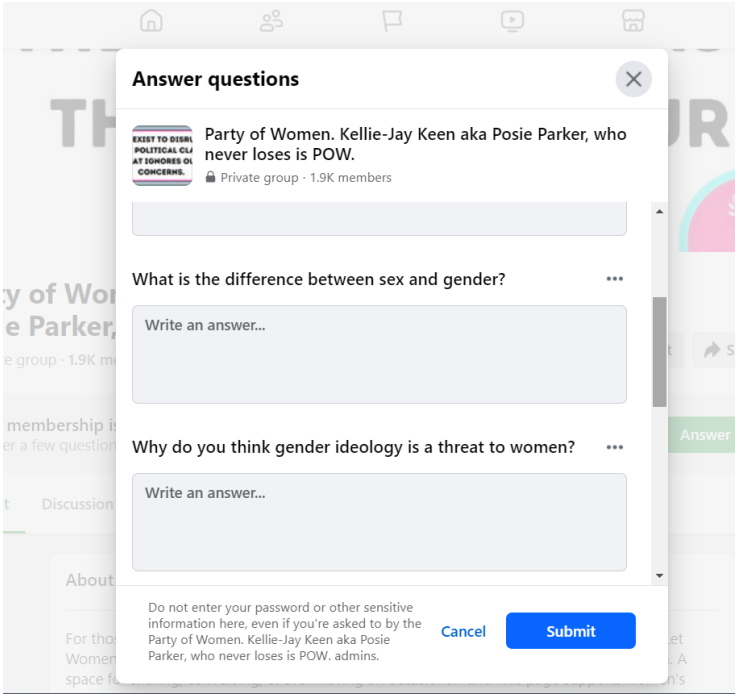

Fig. 9

Moderators too were open about their role in keeping away people they didn't want to hear from, as in the example below (Fig. 10) noted in the Field Log on 3 July, 2024:

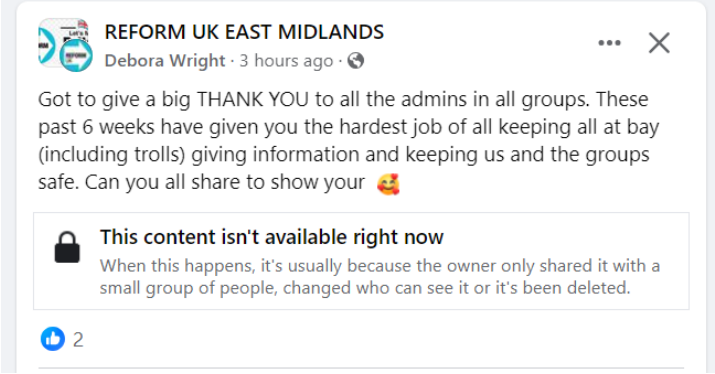

Fig. 10

Conclusions

For Bennett et al, political talk is political action: "To talk with others about politics is to participate in the political life of one's community or nation" (1995: 279) and as Dahlgren noted, democracy "resides, ultimately, with citizens who engage in talk with each other". (2005: 149). While for Chambers and other scholars in the field of deliberative democracy, "deliberation is part of any democratic order" (2012:53). While in 2015 and 2017 normative reticence to publicly discuss politics was observed to be overcome by candidates and citizens demonstrating reasoned discussion and thus inviting participation, by 2024 candidates and their supporters were seen to be much more focused on moderating or curtailing dissent, including through changing the terms on which page owners would accept participants. The question may then become what does it mean for deliberative democracy if deliberation is actively discouraged?

The management of debate emerged as the key area of study, whether management by political Parties and their supporters to elicit interaction or to limit it. But there is a further layer of that management - political actors using Facebook's algorithms to influence voters. This issue became even more relevant as Facebook came under investigation into the platform's role in data scandals linked to UK and US elections between 2015 and 2017 (Adams, 2018). In August 2020, Meta launched its own research project to look at the impact of Facebook and Instagram on the US 2020 Presidential election. The company has invested in tackling what it terms 'coordinated inauthentic behavior' (CIB) since 2018, defining CIB as "coordinated efforts to manipulate public debate for a strategic goal" (Meta, Oct 11, 2024).

Changes in Facebook user demographics over the ten years of this research also need to be acknowledged, albeit to a lesser degree than might be expected. In 2015, Facebook was the most popular social network in the UK with 31 million users and used by 58% to 65% of

the population (varying between data sources), against YouTube at 51% (Department for Culture, Media & Sport, 2016) and Twitter at 29% (Reuters Institute for the study of Journalism, 2015) with users most likely to be aged 25-44. By the end of 2024, Facebook had 38.3 million UK users - 69.6% of all over 18s (WeAreSocial, 2025) and it continued to be the most used social media platform in the UK (Reuters Institute for the study of Journalism, 2025), ahead of YouTube second and X third.

However, while statistics such as these demonstrate Facebook's continued dominance of the social media landscape, what they do not prove is that Facebook's dominance is antithetical to the role of other social media within deliberative democracy. Facebook is part of a social media ecosystem in which users will use more than one platform and may assign differing engagement to each platform. Ofcom's 'Online Nation' 2024 survey reflected this with users aged 25 to 44 averaging 43 apps on their smartphone, of which Facebook was the second most visited (Meta's WhatsApp Messenger first and Instagram fifth).

Facebook may dominate but is also woven into that ecosystem and it is not possible to isolate its influence on the rise in affective polarisation separate to the influence of other social media. What can be said however is that Meta, the company that owns the three platforms (Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram) that dominated social media use in UK voters from 2015 to 2024, carries degrees of responsibility for the increased polarisation academics have witnessed. It is not sufficient for Meta to take down (some) bad actors engaging in CIB when the algorithms that have enabled the commercial success of the company continue to reward argument and filter exposure to counter-attitudinal views (Pariser, 2011, Levy, 2021, Druckman and Levy, 2022).

The controversial work of Dr Adam Kramer (Kramer et al, 2014) in testing how Facebook algorithms can influence the positive or negative emotional state of Facebook

users, and an earlier experiment on influencing the actions of 61 million American voters via Facebook (Bond et al, 2012) demonstrate the ease with which the company can change ranking mechanisms in its algorithms and impact extraordinarily large numbers of people in doing so, and a 2018 test showed that a "simple scalable nudge" in the content a Facebook user was shown could decrease polarisation (Levy, 2022). Social media users may not have to choose between disengaging with a platform or navigating their way through its cultivated fury were Meta to choose to 'dial down' the furious voices.

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Endnotes

[1] Only election candidates are identified by their full name in this paper for ethical reasons. Others are identified only by their first name. (Internet Research Ethical Guidelines 3.0, AoIR, 2019)

[2] While reference is made here to political debate, the study used a broader interpretation of political conversation, particularly between people of opposing viewpoints (Mutz, 2006) as public,

reasoned conversation rather than simple oratory and indicative of willingness to revise opinions (Chambers, 2003)

[3] Sample posts were written for the web team of a new candidate in a constituency (Burton-on-Trent and Uttoxeter) which had had candidates who were particularly active on Facebook in 2015, to test engagement by voters through different types of negative or positive political messaging.

[4] Possibly linked to the Patriotic Alternative, see: 'Patriotic Alternative' trying to inflame local tensions in Britain to spread Far Right stance' The Guardian, 15 Feb 2023