

Reinventing the attack ad – the political parties’ use of Facebook video during the 2015 UK General Election campaign.

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Introduction:

The mainstream political parties approached the 2015 General Election believing that it would be one of the tightest races in recent history. Following five years of Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition, the polls seemed to suggest that no party would gain an overall majority. There was also little consensus on who would be the largest party. Of the 92 polls conducted during the short campaign, 33 had a Conservative lead, 41 a Labour lead and 18 a dead heat. Virtually all were within the statistical margin of error (Cowley & Kavanagh, 2015).

As a result, the party campaigns were looking to find new ways to cut through to undecided voters and persuade them to back their candidates. Digital technology had been used in previous elections to reach voters, the Labour party had started using videos to appeal to voters in the 2005 General Election campaign; the Conservatives had deployed WebCameron – a YouTube video channel focussing on David Cameron - in the run up to the 2010 vote. (Ross, 2015)

However, by the time of the 2015 campaign Facebook’s ability to target voters and to deliver seamless video to mobile, as well as more traditional devices, made it the target technology for the major parties. Twitter was also heavily used by campaigners from all parties despite David Cameron’s famous line that “too many tweets might make a twat” (Ross, 2015). The Conservatives, however, viewed it as an elite platform filled with Labour supporters and journalists and not normal voters. For the Tories, its function was to influence those journalists with traditional platforms and audiences. A well-timed tweet might persuade newspaper news editors or TV bulletin producers to pursue a certain line (Ross, 2015). It was also used by the Conservatives to break one particularly influential story – Alex Salmond’s budget gaffe. Facebook, however, was used to influence voters directly and video, as the campaign progressed, became the medium of choice.

In order to understand why this was the case it’s necessary to look at the size of Facebook in the UK. By 2015, 35 million people in the UK used the service (Byrne, 2015). Two thirds of online adults use social media, almost all have a Facebook account, and 60% of them check it more than once a day (Ofcom, 2014). The popularity of watching video online continues to grow with around 60% of adults watching video online at least once a month (emarketer, 2015). The Labour Party claimed, in its best month prior to the short campaign, to reach 16 million people via their Facebook page and deliver 11 million video views. The Conservatives claimed its page reached 17 million people a week during the short campaign (Cowley & Kavanagh, 2015). These headline figures may flatter the depth of this engagement though; Facebook records a video as being watched after three seconds. With most users’ timelines defaulting to autoplay video, many people will have not engaged deeply with the content.

What is certainly true is that the number of people engaging with political Facebook pages rose during the short campaign.

This table shows the rise in likes/fans across the campaign.

	Posts	Fans	Change +/-
Conservative Party	205	480,995	+112,162
Green Party	221	215,955	+51,136
Labour Party	491	304,875	+77,315
Liberal Democrats	89	113,126	+5,862
Plaid Cymru	293	18,223	+3,440
Scottish National Party	187	203,883	+14,392
UK Independence Party	165	462,672	+110,766

Fig1 – Facebook posts (Lilleker, 2015)

This paper will look at the use of Facebook video by parties contesting the UK general election. Those included in the sample are The Conservatives, Labour, the Liberal Democrats, UKIP, The Green party, The Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru. These parties were chosen because of both the level of their support and the fact they were invited to take part in the televised debates during the short campaign. The paper will establish the uses of Facebook video through a quantitative analysis of video uploads to Facebook during the short campaign and an analysis of the policy areas, tone and purpose of the videos. It will also seek to show that as the parties escape the tightly regulated confines of broadcast television as a delivery method for video for the more laissez faire environment of online political marketing, they have sought to innovate in content terms and in delivering aggressive messaging aimed at rousing the passions of their supporters. And to do that they have sought inspiration from a much maligned source; U.S. politics and the attack ad.

Section 1 – The development of video as a messaging tool in UK elections.

Political parties have long known the importance of filmed content for persuading viewers to vote for them. While the clichéd response to the announcement that “there now follows a party election broadcast...” is to go and put the kettle on and make a cup of tea; in fact, there is good evidence that as durations have been brought down and production values improved, viewers have become more tolerant of party election broadcasts (Worcester et al, 2015).

The first general election where party election broadcasts were used in the UK was in 1951. During the past sixty years the importance of the PEB has grown. Paid political advertising on television is banned in the UK. Parties are given free air-time based upon their political support and the number of candidates being fielded at General Elections. A number of conventions have grown up over the years; that there be no more than five per party and that the governing party and the main opposition should have the same number of broadcasts. While the PEBs are governed by the broadcasters’ codes of practice they are not bound by the Advertising Standards Authority and the content is the responsibility of the political parties themselves. (Gunter et al, 2014) The duration of each election broadcast has now settled at around three and a half minutes.

The style of the broadcasts has also developed. The most common format tends to focus on the leader talking about their values or tackling perceived mischaracterisations, introducing him or her to an electorate who may be largely uninterested in political personalities. For example, in the 2015 PEBs the Conservatives spent time showing David Cameron as an ordinary father watching his son playing in a school football match; Labour had Ed Miliband talking of his own father as an immigrant who served in the Navy and became a removal man. It rather skipped over his Professorial life as a leading academic expert on Marxism who taught at the London School of Economics.

Much of this faux documentary style of video can be traced back to Labour’s 1987 campaign which introduced Neil Kinnock to the electorate. But perhaps the most influential was the 1997 film by BAFTA award winning documentary maker Molly Dineen, which became known as Blair: The Movie.

It aimed to introduce the young, relatively unknown Leader of the Opposition to people and tried to show him as an ordinary family man; someone with interests outside politics and who understood voters’ frustrations with ordinary politicians. In this it was enormously successful. It contributed to the sense of Blair being a new type of politician, modern and lacking in ideological baggage, which preceded the 1997 Labour landslide.

UK PEBs also tend to split into negative or positive. Positive ones tend to feature “ordinary” members of the public praising government policies. The negative emphasise fear and the impact, or lack of it, of government policies. Many use sombre music and monochrome to paint a distorted picture, taking inspiration from the ‘Willie Horton’ ad created by the Republicans during the 1988 US presidential campaign to discredit the Democratic candidate, Michael Dukakis. (Haigron, 2012)

Emphasising difference and using humour can also be a very successful tactics for PEBs. During the 2015 campaign, the Green party successfully created a parody of boyband videos in order to emphasise the similarities of the other male-led parties.

This was clearly designed for cross-over impact. To amuse on TV and go viral online – on YouTube it racked up nearly 900,000 views and 9,000 likes during the short campaign. But there were some Green party members who thought being laughed at by the voters wasn't a sensible strategy – one member of the campaign team said “We're going around saying “We're competent. We're serious. Vote for us to govern”, and then we put out something like that. Yes, it was funny, but we weren't trying for funny.” (Cowley & Kavanagh, 2015). But it did get cut through with voters and generated positive press coverage, something the Greens desperately needed. The party has since tried to repeat the impact of the PEB during the EU referendum campaign with a film representing other party leaders as children in a nursery.

Section 2 – The use of Facebook video.

In order to establish a quantitative analysis for this paper, Facebook posts for the seven main parties contesting seats in England, Scotland and Wales were captured for the six weeks of the short campaign. Parliament was prorogued on the 26th of March, 2015 and dissolved the following week. This led to a six week short campaign ahead of the General election on the 7th of May. All posts were captured through this period up until polls closed at 10pm on the 7th of May. Also captured were the 380 videos posted by the parties on their main Facebook pages. These included videos shared to the timeline from other pages, usually party leaders' pages.

Videos were coded using the following information:

1. Date
2. Number of views
3. Number of shares
4. Number of likes
5. Duration
6. Style
 - Animation
 - Blog
 - Broadcast clip
 - Party Election Broadcast
 - Political ad
 - UGC
7. Content
 - Attack ad
 - Campaigning
 - Celebrity endorsement
 - Non celebrity endorsement
 - Interview
 - Leader Statement
 - Other politician statement
 - Policy explainer
 - Voxes
8. Policy area
 - Business
 - Defence
 - Economy
 - Education
 - Energy
 - Environment
 - Europe
 - Devolution
 - Foreign Affairs
 - Government record
 - Horse race
 - Housing

- Immigration
- Leadership
- NHS
- Religion
- Spending
- Tax
- Various
- Voting
- Welfare
- Workers' rights

9. Tone

- Positive
- Negative
- Neutral

It is worth pointing out at this stage that due to the sampling process it is impossible to be certain that all the views, shares and likes took place during the short campaign. Some may have taken place afterwards. However, the nature of Facebook is that it emphasises new content and it can be quite difficult to look at historical content, older than a few days, on a normal feed. As such, the figures should represent a reasonable snapshot of the popularity of any individual piece of content. Labour also made sure that material wasn't viewed after the election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the party, by deleting all the material posted during the short campaign.

This analysis started to reveal some trends.

For example, all the parties put a lot of effort into turning around broadcast clips from the various televised debates. Unlike journalistic content, which in broadcast news has a legal duty to be impartial, this material was designed to make each party's leader look good. Either by emphasising a particular policy or line of attack, or sometimes by making their opponent look inarticulate, there were even clips that were just attacks on opposing politicians by members of the public – for example people telling David Cameron they didn't trust him were emphasised by Labour; the studio audience gasping when Ed Miliband said Labour hadn't overspent in office was used by The Conservatives.

Certain themes were also prevalent. Of the 65 videos posted by the Conservatives, 19 of them were about the economy and another 17 were about the horse race. This reflected two of the big campaign themes for the Tories – that they had a long-term economic plan and could be trusted over Labour to deliver on it; and that Labour would bring parties such as the SNP into government in order to form a coalition – a message that resonated with swing voters in marginal English seats.

There have been suggestions that the SNP line of attack was developed during the short campaign, but in fact it was clearly a major strategic line of attack right from the start. On the 22nd of March, just days before Parliament was prorogued, the Conservatives posted a slick animation with professional voice-over warning of the dangers of the Alex Salmond, the former SNP Scottish First Minister, acting as a hidden puppet-master, pulling the strings of The Labour Party's leadership. It was professionally produced, slick and effective. It was watched 295,000 times and racked up 3,917 shares and 4,493 likes on Facebook.

Labour too tended to emphasise its campaigning areas. Of the 84 videos posted in the short campaign, 18 were about the NHS, a subject the party leadership viewed as a key campaign battle area.

Both the main parties tried to maintain a balance between negative and positive videos. Neither party opted for a relentlessly negative campaign. But where there were negative messages, they were forcefully delivered and tended to pick up on news stories or themes from broadcast coverage.

For example on April 22nd, the Conservatives released a video that appeared to show Labour leader Ed Miliband echoing SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon's words. It was short, punchy and visually strong with the image of Sturgeon playing with a puppet of Miliband, echoing the theme of the earlier Salmond video.

Labour too used comments by its opponents to create attacking political messages. In one video released on April 7th, the party used cut up clips of a series of Sky News interviews with senior Conservatives to illustrate their evasiveness over questions about cutting the top rate of income tax from 45% to 40% for those earning over £150,000 per annum. The constant evasions are effectively illustrated with a counter clicking up each time the politicians refuse to answer the question. However, where the Conservative videos are short, sharp and punchy this video runs on for more than two minutes – running counter to much of the data analysis about how long people will watch a Facebook video for. Nonetheless it was still watched 217,000 times on Facebook and shared 3,896 times.

The cut-up technique clearly delivered results for Labour. The party used it time and again to match Conservative claims against questions from the public or speeches by Ed Miliband.

The other major use of video was to promote a positive message about the party and its ambitions in office. This was done through three main strategies – statements by the leader or celebrities endorsing the leader, films about campaigning or policy explainers.

Short graphical explainers of policy were used by most of the parties. However they were rarely shared virally among users – mostly running up a few thousand or tens of thousands of views. The Green party had more success than most others with this format – perhaps as the Greens had struggled to articulate some of their policies on broadcast television. An interview with leader Natalie Bennett on January 25th with the BBC's Sunday Politics programme had been widely criticised, appearing to show her under-informed on the detail of her policies. (Payne, 2015)

All of this demonstrates both an agile approach to the creation of video as well as a clear understanding of how it relates to the campaigning and news agenda. Tom Edmonds, one of two digital directors of the Conservative campaign said: "We could put together ideas quickly in house, get approval from Lynton (Crosby), who would be sat beside us in the office, then send it out immediately. We could also track its impact. If it seemed to be working we would press on. If people weren't engaging, we tried something else" (Delaney, 2015)

It is clear the parties all drew influence for the creation of their videos from traditional broadcast advertising and broadcast news. Indeed, many of the clips posted by the smaller parties were just broadcast clips recorded and reposted to Facebook – for UKIP, Plaid Cymru

and the SNP this was the bulk of their content, alongside the PEBs and some UGC statements recorded by the leaders. But there was also a degree of influence from web-native publishers and parody videos too.

The use of cut-up material to re-engineer alternative meanings is a trademark of the semi-anonymous duo, Casetteboy. Their parody videos of news programmes and political speeches to deliver satirical messages have been both hugely popular and influential online – they’ve even found a home on the website of The Guardian newspaper.

Their signature style of sampled, auto-tuned clips over a backbeat has clearly influenced some of the approaches taken by digital marketers in the political parties.

Part of the reason for this influence was a change in copyright law in the run up to the election, with the passing of the Copyright (amendment) Bill, 2014. The coalition government decided to make it legal to use bits of video to create creative montages “for the purposes of parody, caricature, or pastiche” – Casetteboy even posted a video on the same day the legislation came into force with the sub-titled message “Seriously though Dave, thanks for legalising parody videos” (Baker, 2015).

That is not to say there aren’t some potential issues with the legislation. A Green party video, which appeared to show a Parliamentary argument between David Cameron and Ed Miliband that resolved with them telling voters to vote Green, would not have been protected as footage from inside Parliament has a specific exemption and isn’t permitted for use in satirical or parodic videos or broadcast comedy programmes – perhaps part of the reason there’s still no UK equivalent to The Daily Show. Despite an attempt by the satirist Charlie Brooker to persuade Parliament to change the rules via an intervention by his sister-in-law, the Ealing Labour MP Rupa Huq, the government has recently reaffirmed its commitment to the rule.

There is also the issue that the videos have to be funny – in a court case a judge would have to decide whether they were or not. Mike, one half of Casetteboy, told Index on Censorship that “They’ve ended up prioritising parody over all other forms of artistic expression. These videos can also be moving, or make you cry, and that should be equally valid.” (Baker, 2015)

Section 4 – The electoral impact

The Conservative Party was returned to power at the General Election with a 12 seat majority. A shock result that apparently took all parties by surprise and confounded the polling experts who had predicted a hung Parliament.

Throughout the campaign, David Cameron had insisted that he was attempting to form a majority administration, that there were just 23 seats between his 2010 result and a single party government. Very few people took him seriously. No Prime Minister had increased their number of seats in office since Margaret Thatcher in the 1983 election. In fact, the Conservative Party eventually won a net gain of 24 seats and a very slightly increased share of the vote at 36.9% (BBC)

Both Labour and the Conservatives sought inspiration from American politics as part of the campaign, and in particular the Obama campaigns of 2008 and 2012. Labour hired Obama's former chief election strategist, David Axelrod, as an occasional adviser. The Conservatives brought Jim Messina, formerly Obama's deputy chief of staff, in as a full-time campaign strategy adviser, working closely with the campaign director, Lynton Crosby. They brought with them their experience of presidential campaigning and, in Messina's case, a considerable insight into the best way to target messages at specific voters using Facebook data.

The Conservatives identified 100 marginal seats as key targets for the election and used Facebook to specifically aim messages at floating voters in those constituencies. In the months preceding the election, the party was rumoured to be spending £100,000 a month on Facebook advertising to ensure that video messages, attack ads and other content was delivered to floating voters in those constituencies using Facebook's own sophisticated market segmentation data (Ross, 2015).

The degree of precision is startling. By accessing this information, the Party was able to target specific messages to specific voters – reassuring male voters over 55 with a tendency to support UKIP, or delivering positive economic messages to women in their 30s considering buying a house. This might appear Orwellian and sinister. But the Conservatives Digital Director, Craig Elder has pointed out that they used exactly the same data as was available to commercial Facebook advertisers (Ross, 2015).

The other parties in 2015 lacked this level of sophistication. Partly this was a matter of resource, the Conservative digital operation was better funded, partly it was organisation. But the main issue was the detailed and granular understanding of how to deliver the right content to the right voter at the right time. As the Labour party has moved left under Jeremy Corbyn there has been a growing desire to use social media to counteract the perceived bias of the main-stream media, which he and his team see as irrevocably right wing. What is not yet clear is whether they have managed to grasp that social media is not a broadcast medium but one which delivers individual conversations – that is where the Conservatives were so successful in their use of social media and Facebook video during the 2015 election.

It is clear from the data analysed in this paper that the use of Facebook to deliver video messages has changed campaigning. The parties have created increasingly sophisticated

adverts designed to motivate their supporters, swing floating voters or denigrate the opposition. While political advertising may be banned in broadcast media, the parties have effectively circumvented the ban by creating their own content, of varying degrees of quality, and transmission mechanisms. The parties have long sought broadcast and digital marketing skills as part of their election fighting tool-kit. That imperative looks set to grow as attack ads become one of the dominant mechanisms for fighting elections in the future.

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