

# **How Social Media is Changing Political Representation in the United Kingdom**

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# How Social Media is Changing Political Representation in the United Kingdom

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## Abbreviations

AMs – Assembly Members (National Assembly for Wales)

Cllr – Councillor

CMS – Content Management System

EU – European Union

GIF – Graphics Interchange Format

MP – Member of Parliament

MSP – Member of the Scottish Parliament

SNS – Social Networking Site

SoMe – Social Media

UK – United Kingdom

US – United States

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## Abstract

### **How Social Media is Changing Political Representation in the United Kingdom**

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Since the introduction of social media into everyday communication, a series of claims and counterclaims have been made about its potential to either rectify or exacerbate the so-called crisis within representative democracy. Theoretical arguments suggest that social media may increase the closeness between representatives and citizens through more direct and communicative forms of representation. Based on these assumptions, this thesis seeks to assess the ways social media has changed the conduct of political representation in the United Kingdom. It does this through an original methodological approach to answer research questions from the perspective of MPs (interviews), citizens (surveys), and social media data from three social networks. This approach goes past previous literature on the use of social media that does not provide either multi-platform analysis or encapsulate data from citizens to offer a bottom-up approach.

The results show that in many ways, MPs do not fully utilise Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram to their expected potential. They seldom seek interpersonal dialogue with citizens, with only marginal increases in two-way communication attributable to social media. Instead, MPs are pursuing a strategy of broadcasting, limiting interactions to citizens who display positive sentiment towards the MP or their party: rejecting the notion that social media might foster the concept of direct representation. Concurrently, the evidence suggests citizens might not be seeking to interact with MPs, as only a limited number of participants pursued communication with them. Instead, citizens seem to follow representatives for information gathering, news, or to show support. This implies that the crisis within representative democracy cannot be overcome by interactive communication platforms alone.

However, findings indicate that social media increases feelings of representation by citizens when they follow MPs. From this, social media is found not to provide representative benefits in expected ways, but as a communication platform for a process of informational convergence which shapes the way citizens interpret the MPs they follow. This highlights a new way of approaching the benefits of representative communication towards a model in which what MPs post is of greater importance than levels of interactivity.

*Keywords: Political Communication; Political Representation; Social Media; Deliberative Representation*

## 1 - The Importance of Social Media in UK Politics

A new opportunity has now opened to use social media not just to win political power, but to wield it better. Social media builds bridges between people and institutions, and at a scale and with an ease that has never before been possible. The potential of social media to open up political debate, re-engage people in the political process and allow new forms of contact between people and their elected representatives must be harnessed.

Carl Miller (DEMOS, 2016).

I'm not on Twitter, I think that politicians do have to think about what we say, and I think the trouble with Twitter, the instantness of it – too many [tweets] might make a twat.

David Cameron, speaking on Absolute Radio. (In, O'Connell, July 29, 2009)

### *1.1 Introduction to the Thesis*

The concept of representation is a key component of the political system in the United Kingdom (UK). It is the process where the democratic wants of the people, their values and opinions, are aggregated then re-presented to the political establishment and their institutions. In the UK, this is symbolised by Westminster and most prominently to citizens, the House of Commons and the Members of Parliament (MPs) who sit in its chamber. MPs are elected by a constituency of voters and are supposed to represent their views, speaking and voting on their behalf. However, in recent years declining participation, efficacy, and trust in the political system has suggested that faith in the representative system is waning. With the perceived gap between representatives and citizens on a path of expansion (Tormey, 2014; Hansard, 2019). This has resulted in politicians and scholars seeking solutions to the problem, searching for ways to revitalise trust in the political system, close the gap between representatives and voters, and increase the representation of citizens in Parliament.

Some turned to new media as a potential solution. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have been posited as ways to increase the participation of citizens and allow them to inform their political representatives what they most want them to do, and what they most want them not to do. This is through notions of using the dialogue between voters and whom they vote as a mechanism for representation. This theoretical lens focuses on representation as a communicative act. Therefore increasing communication can foster enhanced links within the representative relationship and increase confidence in representative democracy itself (Williamson, 2010). Social media in many contexts has already been argued to herald in transformative changes in politics. Ranging from being the driving force to the Arab Spring, to being postulated as the cause of the increase in youth participation during the UK 2017 General Election (Bruns *et al.* 2013; Howard & Hussain, 2013; Sloam, Ehshan, & Henn, 2018). So why could social media not also transform representative communication in the UK? Empowering citizens to make their representatives more responsive to the demands of society through the enhanced communication between them.

At the same time, others may be more cautious about such assumptions. While the platforms that social media envelops may be new, hope that new online technologies are the key to representative revival are not. It has been previously suggested that platforms, including websites and blogs, could do much to restore the links between representatives and constituents through increased connectivity (Coleman, 2005c). However, it seems many of these supposed effects have failed to materialise, or effects have been limited. This has led some to argue that technological changes have done little to fix issues within representation. Alternatively, the mechanisms behind the concept are so unwieldy that it would take more than a plucky new communication platform to fundamentally transform how it is conducted (Pitkin, 1967:8; Judge, 1999b).

In this context, this thesis will understand the role social media has within representation in the UK. This will be done through a study of the communication between citizens and their representatives across the three most popular social media sites in the country (Facebook, Twitter and Instagram). It will test a number of existing assumptions about the ways new communication platforms can change political representation, with a focus on Coleman's *direct representation* (Coleman, 2005a). This is the hypothesis that the internet will foster a new type of representation between citizens and representatives due to quicker, instantaneous, and more frequent online communication. The study adopts an original research methodology that seeks to understand how citizens and representatives communicate on social media using elite interviews, citizen

surveys, and social media data. In doing so, this thesis can evaluate how and when this communication happens, the representative content of these communications, and how it is interpreted by citizens and MPs alike. The analysis will answer a number of supplementary questions which are: is social media useful for MPs to judge the values and wants of their citizens? To what extent is representative communication the primary strategic reason for MPs using social media? Given the assumption that citizens want a closer relationship with their representative, what actions do citizens take towards their MPs? And finally, how is the communication between them manifested, and what is the extent of the representational benefit of this? (see also, table 1.2) In sum, this thesis will seek to understand to what degree has social media changed political representation in the UK.

The results of this thesis show social media is not used to its fullest extent by representatives for interpersonal interaction, and that many of outcomes from the research questions find little space for the notion of more direct forms of representation on any of the social media platforms covered. From the interviews and data from MPs it seems that they are not using social media to inquire or communicate with citizens. Instead, they are seeking to use social media to market themselves to citizens – limiting the potential representative benefits suggested within this thesis. However, the survey from citizens suggest that when they are exposed to MPs social media content, they are likely to feel a variety of different positive effects, with some citizens reporting that they are more engaged in politics, more knowledgeable, and importantly, feel more represented. From this, it is found that social media is not providing representative benefits in the expected ways through increased inquiry, but instead through increased accountability and connectedness. This highlights a new way of approaching the benefits of representative communication towards a model in which what MPs post is of greater importance than levels of interactivity. However, while ultimately citizens feel more represented, the evidence suggests that overall the actual representative transference is superficial and top-down.

### *1.2 Can 280-characters Really Change Politics?*

In 2007, a Labour politician, Alan Johnson, became the first MP to send a tweet on a new social media platform called Twitter. Johnson had recently announced his bid to become Deputy Leader of the Labour Party, and his campaign team had started to work on plans to connect with Labour

party members. By embracing the new communication platform, they hoped it would reach a younger more technologically minded audience and help win Johnson the election. Sadly, no one in 2007 thought to archive the first-ever tweet, and the account (@Johnson4Deputy) has long since been deleted (Singleton, 2017, 26 Oct). However, what is known, is that the first use of Twitter by an MP was to update followers with where they were campaigning, and share positive comments about the campaign - as one tweet saved in a news article shows:

“Heading off to Leeds after a really successful campaign launch. 65 PLP [Parliamentary Labour Party] supporters already declared ...”

Tweet by the Johnson4Deputy account, from Jones (2007)

At the time, it was argued that his use of social media as a political representative was ‘potentially the biggest waste of time in the world’ (Jones, 2007, 17 May). Johnson’s subsequent defeat by Harriet Harman MP did not raise hopes of the platform being a game-changer in UK politics (BBC NEWS, 2017, 24 June). It raised questions about the use of the platform in the future: Was the use of social media during the campaign a wasteful use of time, with minimal impact? Or, did it suggest that the platform itself is only that, a platform, and what the MP has to say is more critical in gaining trust and respect of voters?



**Figure 1.1** - Four examples of notable tweets from MPs. Ed Balls tweeting his own name; Number 10 Twitter account announcing the 2012 Cabinet reshuffle; Emily Thornberry’s Rochester tweet; and David Cameron announcing the results of a negotiation with the EU.

Despite Johnson's defeat, his use of social media symbolises the start of their growing use in the political arena, with a small number of early adopters starting to use the platform, such as Lynne Featherstone, Kerry McCarthy and Grant Shapps who were soon followed by other MPs (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011). The numbers of politicians using the service spiked in 2009 - seemingly in preparation for the 2010 General Election (McLoughlin, 2016, 20 June). The impact of this shift towards the use of Twitter, amongst other social media websites, has significantly affected the political landscape in several ways, moving beyond elections of deputy party leaders. One example of significant change has been within journalism, where its growth has transformed the nature of current affairs creation and news. In less than 13 years, the concept of the print deadline has gone from the focal point of the day to a near irrelevance as journalists now race to become the first to release news online and to be the first to have their account of a story shared. In 2006 *The Guardian* became the first UK paper to use a web-first policy, after finding that they were losing readership numbers to online-only news titles who published the latest political exposé online before the papers hit the shelves the following morning (Sweeney, 2016, 7 June; Stanyer, 2009:204). Newspapers also started to face competition from a new class of online journalists and bloggers who began to publish their content exclusively on social media (Shirky, 2009; Newman, 2011; Gent & Walker, 2018; Bruns, 2018:69).

MPs use of social media has become the subject of news, and also competition with news titles themselves (Broersma & Graham, 2015). Since 2010, MPs widescale use of social media, particularly Twitter, has resulted in hundreds of tweets per day to update their followers what they are doing, their opinions, and what is happening in Parliament. Rules were even changed to allow MPs to use mobile devices within the chamber, allowing them to provide live commentary during important parliamentary debates (Procedure Committee, 2011). Citizens tune in to MPs live updates directly, and journalists report on the tweets themselves (Broersma & Graham, 2012). This constant use of social media by politicians has generated notable headlines in recent years. Figure 1.1 shows some prime examples, such as Ed Balls MP mistakenly tweeting his name in 2011, which online communities now celebrate as an annual event through internet memes and jokes (Martinez, 2013, 17 April). In 2012, it was demonstrated how social media was changing the way the executive released statements, as the results of a Cabinet reshuffle were live-tweeted from the Number 10 Twitter account, to much fanfare due to the unprecedented announcement



to the internet before the press<sup>1</sup>. Newman argued that this shift towards social media communication was a way to gain access to online audiences and one which allowed MPs to avoid media scrutiny (Newman, in Atkinson, 2017, 11 Jan). This suggests that MPs are doing more than just competing with news titles: they are trying to supersede them.

There have been a number of tweets by MPs that have gone on to have significant political consequences. In 2014, an offhand tweet by Emily Thornberry MP showing a white-van and the English flag showed what could happen if audiences online took exception to an MP's post. Thornberry was hugely criticised for being 'snobbish' against the 'white working-class', which led to a mass outrage online that eventually resulted in her resignation (Donald, 2014, Nov 21). Another notable tweet was one by former Prime Minister, David Cameron, in his announcement of the results of UK-EU negotiations in 2016. The tweet was a summary of a speech he had made announcing how the negotiations had gone, showing not only the shorter and punchier new style of political communication but how social media was now being used to frame narratives. Each of these tweets displayed in figure 1.1 is significant in their own way, and each shared thousands of times. The tweets also show the range of impact that social media can have on how news is shared and created, as well as how MPs speak to the public, and what happens when they get it wrong.

Social media has also changed how general elections campaigns are organised in Western liberal democracies. The Obama 2008 US Presidential Election campaign, in many ways, shaped and galvanised how future campaigns would be organised and structured. Drawing inspiration from the Howard Dean 2004 campaign, Obama's strategists used Web 2.0 technologies and social media to decentralise the campaign, making it easier for people to participate in campaigning without strict formal hierarchies (Harfoush, 2009; Cogburn & Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011; Bimber, 2014; Stromer-Galley, 2016). Future election campaigns sought to replicate this strategy by handing over elements of the campaign to communities on social media, or even allowing third-groups to create their own satellite campaigns on Facebook (Gibson, 2013; Dommett & Temple, 2018). The use of such groups is advantageous, as they often create campaigns that better match and speak to the audience of which they are members. For example, an online campaign, led by

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<sup>1</sup> Some tweets from the @10DowningStreet Twitter account have since been deleted but are accessible from: <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/twitter/10DowningStreet>

a 17-year-old student, Abby Tomlinson, managed to captivate an audience of young, predominantly female, citizens into a fandom surrounding Ed Miliband (Dean, 2017). Likewise, evidence has been presented that during the 2016 US Presidential Election, the Trump campaign appeared more authentic (although amateur) due to the relative freedom given to campaigners; compared to Clinton who appeared more professional, but less authentic due to the professionalised top-down approach to campaigning (Enli, 2017). It seems strategists are finding it advantageous to transfer elements of their campaign to groups who can influence vast captive audiences around common themes, including sharing memes, engaging voters who are typically harder to reach by traditional campaigns (McLoughlin & Southern, forthcoming). During the 2017 General Election campaign, while Labour was being outspent on social media by the Conservatives, satellite campaigns and an army of Labour supporters online managed to turn the tide and seemingly dominated the social sphere (Segesten & Bossetta, 2017; Shapard, 2017). Although Labour did not win the election, the strategy was fundamental in denying the Conservatives an overall majority in the House of Commons through the shift in the polls towards Labour due to the sudden upsurge of youth turnout – an event which was later dubbed the ‘youthquake’ (Sloam, Ehshan, & Henn, 2018). Social media has changed political campaigns from a top-down affair to a relationship between campaign organisers and an army of enlisted supporters on their computers, tablets and smartphones.

Based on the last paragraph it could be argued that the changes seen because of social media are little due to politicians themselves and how they have used social media during campaigns. Instead, it has been driven by the hive of activity by citizens within the campaigns aided by new technology. In each election since 2008, sections of the public turn to social media to comment, to discuss, to campaign, and even to complain about elections. This creates a large amount of data which researchers and journalists alike have collected and have attempted to use as the basis for a prediction of the election or as an indication of public opinion (Franch, 2012; Anstead & O’Loughlin, 2015). Inferring that the activity of citizens during elections has become the real focal point of interest. The use of the medium by MPs has little changed; studies from the UK and New Zealand have demonstrated that during elections MPs have avoided dialogue with voters, often sticking to pre-created broadcast-style communication (Graham *et al.*, 2012; Ross, Fountaine, & Cormie, 2014). Overall, this suggests that changes in elections campaign methods, while aided by parties and MPs, is primarily driven by citizens; how they campaign, express themselves and promote causes important to them.

Despite early arguments that Alan Johnson's use of social media was a waste of time, more and more MPs have started to join and post messages on the platforms. MPs can now be found on *Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat* and *Reddit*, amongst others. Figures from this thesis found that only 4.2% of MPs had no single social media account by 2018. However, it was not just MPs driving the increase of usage; citizens too started to sign up to these services en-masse. From its relative infancy in 2004-2006, social media websites now have three-quarters of the UK population using their services (Ofcom, 2018b:72). Many citizens seek to use the services not only to view political information, but to post, to reply, to share, to influence, and to network (Ellison & Boyd, 2013; McNair, 2018:63). As social media websites feature relatively flat hierarchies, publicly accessible profiles, and can facilitate communication between users, academics began to wonder about the possibility of social media as a place for citizen-representative communication, exploring questions such as: Will the platform lead to dialogue between representatives and those they represent? If so, how might the two converse? What will this mean for other forms of communication? What about campaigns? (c.f. Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Williamson, 2009a; 2009b; Grant, Moon, & Grant, 2010; Jackson & Lilleker, 2011; Highfield, 2016; Stromer-Galley, 2016). What is clear is that political communication between representatives and citizens is experiencing swift and significant change, affecting the environment of political knowledge, news, and potentially, representation.

### *1.3 The Crisis of Representative Democracy*

At the same time new forms of political communication emerged, another debate relating to the health of democracy was ongoing. Since the 1960s literature suggested that there is a crisis of representative democracy, with increasing distance between the citizenry and the systems of democracy supposed to represent them (Tormey, 2014). The result of which is that governments face a dilemma with decreased legitimacy as fewer citizens engage and endorse them; and the under-representation of particular groups in society leading to tyranny of the majority (Putnam, 1995; Hayward, 1995). This lack of representation of the people has gone so far in some liberal democracies that some have questioned if they can still be classified as one. Gilens and Page argued that the US should be classified as an oligarchy due to the lack of representation of citizens, and the strong presence of corporate interests within politics (2014). However, as Tormey writes, the reasons for this divide have changed over the decades and that issues within

contemporary democracies are not the same as those faced in previous eras (2014). Early work by Crozier, Huntington, and Watanuki blamed the apparent European crisis with democratic overload (1975). While more recent work has suggested that party decline, media malaise, the decline in social capital, and the effects of globalisation are the reasons for the decreasing levels of participation and trust in democracy and its institutions (Newton, 1999; Putnam, 2000; Andeweg & Farrell, 2017; van Aelst, 2017; Aarts, van Ham, & Thomassen, 2017). However, a permanent fixture throughout the debate is that the crisis relates to a foundational problem of the breakdown between the system (often politicians) and citizens (Noe, 2017).

Whatever the reasons are, within the UK, the crisis has manifested itself through declining participation and trust in political institutions. The 2001 UK General Election had the lowest turnout since 1918. Subsequent elections saw increases in voter participation, yet only 66.8% of the population voted in the 2017 General Election - still lower than the 1918-2017 average of 72.9% (House of Commons Library, 2017). Other measurements, such as civic engagement, have also slowly declined, with evidence that citizens have become less community-focussed and more individualised (Putnam, 2000; Norris & Curtice, 2004). A report by Bromley, Curtice, & Seyd (2004) found that between 1974 and 2003, trust in government had declined from around 38% to 17% (2004:17). Additionally, a 2013 poll revealed that 72% of the population agreed that politics is dominated by 'self-seeking politicians protecting the interests of the already rich' (Lent, 2014). More recent reports have found an increasing sentiment that the current UK political system requires a 'great deal' of improvement, with an increase from 18% in 2004, to 37% in 2019 (Blackwell, Fowler & Fox, 2019). However, there is some evidence that citizens are not turning away from politics altogether, with a rise of non-electoral political activity by citizens, and general political interest remaining consistent (Bromley, Burtice & Seyd 2003:10). Others have suggested that low trust in government might not turn them off politics, but it could be the cause of citizens disengaging from voting, or interacting in forms of traditional participation (Norris, 1999; Coleman, 2005d). Instead, citizens have shifted their political activity to single-issue campaigns, charitable actions, online political marketing or selective purchasing (Hilton *et al.* 2010; Penney, 2017).

This switch-off from the institutions of democracy has significant representative impacts. If citizens are not talking, how are elected representatives supposed to hear them? Less interaction with politicians, either through mistrust or indifference towards politics altogether means that citizens are not expressing their views, while MPs are making judgements based on a smaller and

smaller portion of politically-active citizens. Research by Coleman found that this could be one of the core reasons for the increasing divide between citizens and democracy. As citizens distance themselves from institutions due to feeling a lack of representation, the less these same institutions know about citizens and what issues they wish to be represented on: compounding the issue (Coleman, 2005d:198; *The Power Inquiry*, 2006:261). This has been described as the dissociation effect which can alter how citizens perceive representational institutions (Richards & Smith, 2015:42). Coleman finds that this is an issue driven by MPs being either unknown, invisible, too distant, arrogant, or alien to citizens (Coleman, 2005c). There are indications that this could be the case, with 50% of citizens agreeing that ‘main parties and politicians do not care about people like me’ (Blackwell, Fowler & Fox, 2019:51). This statistic could be used as an explanation for the decline of traditional party models of representation, as citizens feel that parties no longer represent them and political participation through parties has declined as a result (c.f. Barnhurst, 2011; Andeweg & Farrell, 2017). The growing feeling of not being represented may cause a decline in traditional forms of participation and with it the transference of representation these political acts previously maintained. However, within the evidence of the breakdown of representation, authors also posit potential solutions. If bonds between citizens and representatives/parties could be fostered, then we could see a reversal of the effects of the decline in representative democracy (Coleman, 2005a;2005c; Coleman & Blumler, 2009). As citizens and representatives become more connected, the core areas that people consider when asked if they feel represented could be addressed; such as if the MP is contactable, accountable, and if citizens feel they can be heard in the policymaking process (Richards & Smith, 2015:50).

#### *1.4 Is Social Media the Solution? The Prospect of Citizen-Representative Communication*

It is unsurprising that any new platform that might increase citizen-representative communication is an exciting prospect for some. After all, conventional theory on what is *good* for democracy suggests that citizens and representatives conversing, leads to a much healthier democracy: ‘At the heart of a strong democracy is talk’ (Barber, 1984:174). Many expected that the potential of social media to make communication between people quicker, cheaper, and easier would result in a *better* democracy. Coleman and Wright found that by reducing the degree of distance in the citizen-representative relationship to an almost unmediated status results in the enhancement of dialogue; the perception of conversational reciprocity; and dismantling the political

communicative monopoly (2008, see also Dunleavy, Park & Taylor: 2018:145). All of which would be good for democracy. The authors go as far as to claim that internet communication technologies could reverse the ‘crisis of political communication’ (*ibid*, 2008:2). Furthermore, social media might also undo previous trends that are making citizens less civically minded as communication could become a more shared and networked experience (c.f Putnam, 2000). Cumulatively asserting that platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram could be the key to a stronger, healthier, democracy through interactive representative processes (*ibid*, 2008:2; Coleman, 2004; Coleman, 2005a; Coleman, 2005b; Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Williamson, 2009b:309).

However, at the same time, others have argued that social media hinders democracy and representation. Authors like McChesney argue that rather than bringing people together, the structures of internet communication platforms might do more to divide citizens, as companies are economically incentivised to produce controlling behaviours over their audience (2013). Sunstein highlights issues within social media platforms themselves which have led to citizens becoming more polarised in echo-chambers, where trust in news is attacked by ‘fake news’, and heavily curated ‘feeds’ limit what citizens see (Sunstein, 2018). Rather than uniting the public under a more inclusive virtual public sphere, the internet has instead fostered divisions as citizens choose to stay within likeminded virtual communities akin to an echo-chamber of similar and agreeable views – fostering polarisation of the public (Papacharissi, 2009:244; Prior, 2013; Colleoni *et al.* 2014). Similarly, the ease and nature of online communication facilitate more negative and abusive communication rather than reasoned debate (Phillips, 2011; Buckles *et al.* 2014). MPs have potentially been driven away from the platforms due to the abuse they have received which could decrease the potential for citizen-representative interaction (McLoughlin & Ward, forthcoming).

Yet the question remains, can social media bring UK citizens and representatives together? The answer is somewhat inconclusive. Early perspectives found that little genuine dialogue is happening between citizens and their representatives – there are plenty of status updates, comments, and shares by both parties, but some suggest this is by no means a conversation (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011). A review of Twitter communication by MPs finds that politicians send unidirectional broadcast communication to citizens, hardly what could be defined as an exchange

of communication by Rafaeli's<sup>2</sup> definition (1988; Jackson & Lilleker, 2011; Graham *et al.*, 2013a). This is not a just a problem in the UK as research on elected politician's communication style from the US, Canada, Australia, and Sweden, all suggest limited evidence of genuine conversation between representative and citizenry, and a broadcast heavy approach by politicians generally (Small, 2010; Grant *et al.*, 2010; Shogan, 2010; Grussell & Nord, 2012; Jungherr, 2014; 2016). Given the tools and an interactive platform for dialogue with constituents, politicians have chosen not to use them for this purpose.

Other notable studies have suggested that social media does indeed have positive benefits overall for democracy. Vaccari *et al.* found that social media use has a positive relationship with information gathering and higher forms of political engagement by citizens (2015). Similarly, a US meta-analysis suggests there is a relationship between social media use and political engagement - inferring that there is more to the story of social media, political communication, representation, and engagement than previously reported (Boulianne, 2015). This thesis will later argue that previously undertaken studies do not fully explore the citizen-representative relationship on social media. For example, the focus on Twitter, with its systematic layout, encourages a particular type of communication and does not represent the entirety and range of social media websites. There is also the tendency for studies on political communication and social media to focus on elections or campaigns, which represent a specific period of high activity and a different style of political engagement (Highfield, 2016:2). Additionally, analysis based on the rates between broadcast messages and those which can be classed as interactions, do hint at an overall picture, they do little to explain what happens when interaction does occur. There is still much more to explore when it comes to the question of social media communication between politicians and those whom they represent.

### *1.5 What is Social Media?*

Defining and explaining social media (SoMe, also referred to as social networking sites (SNS)), is crucial to the focus of this study. Social media, to many, has become a ubiquitous part of everyday

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<sup>2</sup> Rafaeli defines communication as a series of at least three messages, all which relate to the last (1988).

life. As displayed by Table 1.1, the three-quarters of UK citizens have at least one social media website (Ofcom, 2018b). SNS allows citizens to share user-generated content, create online profiles, communicate with others, and to network virtually. Such platforms can be thought of as virtual agoras with the function to exchange media with others who are also acting as producers and consumers instantaneously (Chandler & Munday, 2011). This definition might seem somewhat broad, yet the continually changing landscape of technologies, platforms, and purposes are a challenge to define accurately. Similar, broad definitions have been used in the creation of *The Conversation Prism* which lists several websites outside of most normative definitions of a social network (Solis & JESS3, n.d). Boyd and Ellison's social media timeline also includes websites not traditionally seen as social media platforms but do meet the broader definitions of social media (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). This results in a situation where the everyday vernacular use of the term 'social media' is often in reference to sites like Facebook and Twitter, but it is also used to describe more definitionally problematic platforms too. For example, it is often been used to define more publicly restricted or obscure websites or apps such as Snapchat and FourSquare, or even services whereby main objective is not for social networking or communication but does have some community elements of social media built within, such as Spotify or YouTube. Overall, this makes the use of the term 'social media' rather ambiguous.

A broad definition, as often used, raises two crucial issues: firstly, if the wide-ranging description of social media as a term includes technologies such as USENET and bulletin boards, how does one explain the current distinction assumes that only 'new' social media websites are classified as being social media (c.f. Garramone *et al.* 1986; Bailey, 1995; Trottier & Fuchs, 2014). The current assumption that social media, as a concept, is new along with the implication that social interaction on the internet is also new, raises specific challenges. If the broad definition is taken at face value, then should research (such as this thesis) seek to span backwards within their literature reviews? Secondly, even if there is cause to only study newer social media platforms, then which of the 199 social networks should be worthy of study? (see Solis & JESS3, n.d).

In response, the scope of this research will use qualifiers to limit which services to study. Firstly, a more comprehensive definition of social media from Obar & Wildman, was applied, which defines social media as a service which has four characteristics:



- 1) Social media services are (currently) Web 2.0 Internet-based applications,
- 2) User-generated content is the lifeblood of social media,
- 3) Individuals and groups create user-specific profiles for a site or app designed and maintained by a social media service,
- 4) Social media services facilitate the development of social networks online by connecting a profile with those of other individuals and/or groups.

(Obar & Wildman, 2015:1).

This definition reduces the number of social media services significantly when compared to broader definitions. It does this by limiting to websites which have Web 2.0 technologies, and the greater affordances of connectivity this brings along with it. The definition reduces the number of services by stating that the purpose of social media is user-generated content; de-classifying websites like Spotify.

**Table 1.1** Number of MPs and UK users across five social media sites

Social Media Website	Number of UK Users	Number of UK MPs users
Facebook	40m*	544
Twitter	13.6m*	582
Instagram	24m*	234
LinkedIn	27m*	61
Reddit	27.4m†	5 <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> – Many of these MPs only joined the service to do an ‘Ask Me Anything’, few had a consistent presence on the service

\*WeAreSocial (2019): based on the total number of the addressable advertising audience

† Estimate based on Reddit Blog (2018) and Alexa (n.d). Figure based on 330m users, which a previous study stated 8.3% of users came from the UK

Usership figures are the second qualifier as this thesis addresses political communication between citizens and social media, therefore only sites where these two groups are present should be studied. Table 1.1 shows 2018 figures comparing where MPs could be found compared to UK citizens. It shows that three social media websites have some evidence of the potential for

representative-citizen communication: Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. While some activity has been found between citizens and representatives on LinkedIn and Reddit, the low numbers of MPs on these services would significantly limit the usefulness of the findings of the study. Likewise, while a large number of MPs have YouTube accounts, but the platform is less of a two-way social media website, and more of a streaming service and has well-documented issues in regards to poor quality of dialogue between two people (Lange, 2007; Tait, 2016, 26 Oct).

Social media has had an immense impact on societies. From changing the way people come to view and prioritise real-world friendships (Ellison, Steinfeild & Lampe, 2007); the way news is created and consumed news (see below); how people find entertainment and spend their time (Kaplan & Heanlein, 2010); and more. Yet, grouping social media platforms as a single homogeneous group is problematic. As shown below each platform has unique characteristics and communication structures, different uses by citizens, and MPs (Chapters 5 and 6) meaning that a finding for one is not attributable to all.

### *1.5.1 Introduction to Facebook, Twitter and Instagram*

An essential facet of understanding how citizens communicate on social media is understanding the structure of each. Bossetta stated that the structural design of a platform and its environment affects how humans react and communicate (2018, see also Wright & Street, 2007; Pappacharissi, 2009). Therefore, when looking at the findings of this paper, it is essential to understand why the results might differ between Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

#### *Facebook*

Facebook is by far the UK's most popular social media platform in terms of audience (Ofcom, 2018). Initially launched in 2004 to Harvard students as a directory, it started to allow the general public access to the platform in September 2006 with the mission 'Give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together' (Facebook Newsroom, n.d). The platform focuses on building networks of friends, from either offline or online, following pages, or interacting with online communities called groups. The structure allows users to post status updates with text, images, or video where people within the network can comment, share and react. The majority of connections on the network are synchronous, i.e. both people have to

accept the friendship on both sides, however, people can follow pages without the need for a two-way relationship (which is what most MPs seem to use – see chapter 6). When logging into the platform, users are greeted by a heavily curated social feed where content from friends, groups and pages are found (alongside adverts). This content is ranked and placed by an algorithm that uses user’s data to predict what types of content a user will find most interesting or relevant (see Butcher, 2015). Of all the platforms discussed in this thesis, Facebook is considered the most close-knitted of the social networks, with users most likely fostering relationships with those they already know. It is a less publicly accessible space, leading to a user’s content to be more personal (Waterloo *et al.* 2017).

### *Twitter*

Twitter was founded in 2006 as a microblogging site, allowing users to post 140-characters (later 280-characters) messages, also called tweets to the platform. Users can also attach images, videos, and GIFs to each tweet. Originally based on the idea of an SMS based messaging website, it quickly developed into a mobile orientated social network (MacArthur, 2019, 1 July). Users were asked ‘what are you doing?’ when posting – providing a platform focussed on the here and now. The website included several innovations, such as public posts using the @ symbol which was used to notify another user to the post, retweets (shares), and hashtags, which allow users to self-categorise content. The platform is heavily unidirectional, or asymmetric, as users ‘follow’ others rather than friend them. As such, one user could have thousands of people following them, while only following one or two people themselves. Unlike Facebook, users’ social walls are heavily unfiltered, with content mainly ordered in chronological order, but users can search for content that contains specific hashtags, or terms. Any of these hashtags or terms that are tweeted enough are then displayed on a trending wall, allowing popular content to be displayed to users even if none of the people they follow is tweeting about it. The platform has become useful for many as a news source, with the platform speedily adopted by journalists to deliver first-scoops to their audiences (Broersma & Graham, 2012).

### *Instagram*

Instagram, launched in 2010, is a photo-sharing mobile application and SNS that allows users to take, edit, and share pictures to their followers. The SNS is focussed on photography, aesthetics, and one’s own self; with many posts relating to what a person is doing or selfies. The platform

is limited in that photos can only be shared through the app, and not through a desktop computer. Much like Twitter, the platform allows for unidirectional network relationships and has a chronologically filtered social wall. However, the site is heavily image-focussed, with text only found as captions to images or as comments. If a user chooses, they can tag their images with hashtags and locations to show their content to a wider audience.

As described before, each platform promotes different types and styles of communication (see also, Alhabash, & Ma, 2017). For instance, during the 2016 US Election, it was found Instagram was used to promote a more finished and visually appealing message to a candidates' audience, while Twitter has a rough and more instantaneous approach to posting content (Bosesstta, 2018). Likewise, it was found that users of Twitter were most likely to use to platform to display membership intention (such as party affiliation), while Facebook and Instagram were based more on sociability and friend groups (Phau *et al.* 2017). Age and social characteristics can be used to determine social media use generally, as there are appear to be demographic factors differentiating between the use of the three platforms. Age and gender are a predictor for the use of Facebook and Twitter, but not Instagram (Blank & Lutz, 2017). Providing further evidence that the variances in functionality, filtering (feeds), and networks have an impact in who, and potentially how each platform is used. What is not yet known is how this changes the ways people interact with political representatives.

## *1.6 Problems with Existing Research*

### *Can social media fix representation? Lack of bottom-up perspectives*

The first problem is regarding the lack of research that approaches social media from all angles: perspectives from representatives, from citizens and to a lesser degree from data. As demonstrated above, within the literature surrounding the crisis of representative democracy, claims have been made that dialogue between representatives and constituents is broken, and ways of fostering new forms of communication (such as social media) could be the fix (Lusoli *et al.* 2006; Coleman, 2009; Zittel, 2010). No extensive evidence from a UK perspective has been put forward that addresses this question from one side of the debate: citizens. In a content analysis of 575 journal articles that studied the use of Twitter, the majority of them studied the tweets themselves, and only 21% of these looked at users/viewers on the platform (Williams *et*

*al.* 2013). The reasons for these seem to be primarily methodological – it is easier and quicker to collect and download social media posts than to ask citizens through a survey methodology. At the same time, such an approach is necessary for testing Coleman’s theory that internet communications can lead to a significant change in the conduct of representation (2005a; 2005c). To test the hypothesis that more communication can increase feelings of connectedness between representatives and citizens, one would need to understand the perspectives of citizens themselves and how they assess if the communication they have had with representatives leads to the transference of their political values and issues into Parliament (Coleman, 2005c:3).

#### *Need for research on political communication in-between elections*

Problematically, the study of social media in political communication has tended to focus the subject within the context of elections. Periods of campaigning or elections are a hive of political activity, providing a useful time to collect a significant quantity of data in a relatively short period. There are also ontological arguments for focusing on elections. For many, elections are and will remain the heart of the representative process (Judge, 1999b:198). This facet of democracy remains the most study-worthy aspect to those of this persuasion. For either of these reasons, it seems large parts of research are fixated on elections (c.f. Broersma & Graham, 2012; Franch, 2012; Baxter & Mercella, 2012; Graham, Jackson & Broersma, 2014; Anstead & O’Lochlin, 2015; Ross, Fountaine, & Comrie, 2015; Stier *et al.* 2018; Ross & Burger, 2017; Enli, 2017; Dommett & Temple, 2018; Bossetta, 2018). This is in comparison to the much smaller number of papers that seek to understand the use of social media for communication between citizens and representatives outside the electoral context (c.f. Williamson, 2009b; Grant, Moon, & Grant, 2010; Jackson & Lilleker, 2011; Auel & Umit, 2018; Fisher *et al.* 2019). However, the impact of this electoral and campaign focus has two issues. The first is methodological. In a meta-analysis of 36 studies by Boulianne, it is argued that the use of social media campaigns and elections as the basis of studies skews the perspective of what happens on social media generally (2015). Similarly, Highfield argues that elections and campaigning represent a specific point of high interest in politics, with different logics of political engagement (2016:2). As a result, what is mostly known about citizen-representative communication comes with the condition of mostly applying to times of elections.

The second issue with this focus is based on representation theory. Representation cannot rely solely on elections, and to fully act *for* citizens, representatives must do their best to find out the

concerns of their constituents between elections and to take them into account. This is in part what is described as *responsiveness* in Pitkin's notions of representation (1967:209). Urbinati goes as far as to say that while 'elections "make" representation, but they do not make representatives' (Urbinati, 2006:224). She explains that representation is a process where the general will is refined, filtered and mediated on an on-going basis (*ibid*, 2006:227) To understand the representative relationship, research has to focus on what goes on in between elections (see also Esaisson, Gilljam, & Persson, 2013).

### *The need to differentiate between social media platforms*

Current research in the areas of political communication and representation lacks a framework for understanding the impact of different social media platforms. As highlighted by the work of Bossetta (2018) and others, each social media website has its own unique set of features in place which do not allow a simple uniform effect. Research on social media and MPs by Jackson and Lilleker (2011), and Broersma and Graham (2012) both acknowledge that their results do not stretch to other social media communications. In addition, the technologies are distinct enough that comparisons between theories drawing from older internet technologies may not be transferable to SNS. The current body of research within the area of representation is aged, addressing older technology such as websites, blogs, email or previous iterations of social media (c.f. Coleman, 2005a; Williamson, 2009b; Jackson & Lilleker, 2011). While at the same time, there is a tendency within academic research to focus on Twitter due to methodological simplicity of the platform compared to the much stricter controls over data found on Facebook-owned platforms (Cihon & Yasserli, 2016). Most of the population can be found on Facebook, yet our understanding of how citizens and representatives interact is largely based on assumptions from Twitter. Quan-Hasse and Young (2010), and Mayr and Weller (2017:175) argue increasing the research sample from one to more social media websites is needed to understand how the unique features or cultures of each site has implications on communications, particularly if the purpose of the research is to understand the broader impact of social media on political representation. Studying just one social media site could erroneously suggest that a single analysis can be applied to all.

### *The theoretical divergence between representation and communication*

An oft missed point in the studies of political communication is the link with political representation theory, and the role of communication in the transference of popular political will. Unidirectional mass communication research on print, radio and television have left a historical legacy on the study of political communications. It is evident when looking at research from the late 20th and early 21st centuries such as Negrine (1994) and Johnson-Cartee & Coplend (2004; see also Ryfe, 2001) that there is little anticipation of having to amend communication theories for if citizens can use the same medium as the politician to reply. This purports a significant gap in the literature, due to the foundations of the study of political communication, rather than a lack of relevancy of a study of social media and representation (see Chapter 2). Much of this communication research has avoided the representative impacts of political messages or platforms. For instance, papers studying how politicians use of communication addresses what could be considered representative content, but often negate representative theory (see Ward & Lusoli, 2005; Coleman & Wright, 2008; Gibson, Lusoli, & Ward, 2008). Likewise, other research papers theorise types of representative communication as a concept but do not relate to the wider representative forms (see Coleman, 2005c; Karlsson, 2013). This expresses a need for additional analysis of the role communication has in representation.

### *1.7 Research Questions*

In this context, this thesis aims to contribute to a nuanced understanding of how this new, and powerful, communication platform has changed the relationship between representatives and their constituents. Social media has opened a realm of possibilities for how the two may communicate, and all the potential advantages this may have for democracy. However, the empirical evidence for how this communication happens, if at all, is lacking – particularly from the citizens perspective. Therefore, to understand the citizen-representative relationship, this thesis aims to understand social media communication from both perspectives: What MPs do, and why; but also, how is this communication is interpreted by citizens and what effects it has on them.

This understanding has been drawn out into four main research questions (table 1.2), which can be summarised as questions relating to the supply-side: the MPs themselves, what they are doing, why, and what does this say about the representative relationship. The second set of questions

relate to citizens themselves, or demand-side: why do they use social media, and what type of relationship do they seek with MPs. Finally, there is the linkage question, if the patterns of engagement by MPs and citizens themselves meet the criteria for representational activity? These questions when considered holistically will answer some of the broader theoretical questions many authors have raised, including Coleman, most importantly does social media hold the potential to fix representative democracy?

**Table 1.2.** Research Questions

Perspective	Research Question
Supply Side	RQ1) To what extent do MPs use social media, and for what purpose?
Demand Side	RQ2) What patterns of citizen-initiated contact can be found towards MPs on social media?
	RQ3) Does social media use suggest a model of Direct Representation?
Linkage	RQ4) What model explains citizen-representative communication, and does this communication fulfil representational duties?

To answer these questions, an original methodological approach was taken. While prior research on social media takes an approach based on how MPs use social media alone, these results do not seek to understand how this use is interpreted by citizens, or how they seek to use such platforms politically, if at all (c.f. Jackson & Lilleker, 2011). Many prior analyses of the uses of politics on social media make assumptions about citizens that are not tested – primarily, that they want more contact with their MP. In many ways, this thesis seeks to fill the void from the citizen perspective, while also asking new questions about the ways MPs use social media. This is done through a mixed-method approach: firstly by elite interviews with 12 MPs on how they use social media; secondly, through a survey on 373 social media users from the UK; and finally, through the analysis of social media data of representative-citizen communication taken from three different social networks. This approach provides a unique contribution, covering the representative relationship from both angles at the same time – the comparison of which allows



for a new level of understanding on the communication between them. Ultimately this thesis provides a nuanced and rounded perspective of representative communication.

### *1.8 Outline of the Thesis*

This thesis is structured into eight chapters. The first of which sets the context, justifies the research and outlines the structure. It provides a backdrop for why the analysis is prudent not just in the current political climate, but also its theoretical contribution.

Chapter 2 outlines the theoretical assumptions for the study of representation and social media. It provides an in-depth theoretical understanding of the two areas in which this thesis takes place, and it highlights the current dichotomy found between the disciplinary areas of representation theory and political communication. It concludes by suggesting a new lens, with which to study the impact social media on representation in the UK: Representative communication. The chapter firstly addresses existing literature on political representation, analysing the different concepts and forms, and their interaction with communication. Ultimately, it finds that while theoretical arguments on representation acknowledge the role communication has, most perspectives do little to explain this process. The chapter then switches to the literature within political communication, seeking to further understand processes of representation through communication. Synergies between these frames are identified and combined to create a more nuanced view of the linkage between these two concepts through the aforementioned perspective of representative communication.

Chapter 3 provides an overview of what the current literature on MPs and citizens use of online communication tools says about representative communication in the UK. It suggests a trend in how MPs have previously engaged in internet technologies, with initial hopes of new forms of interpersonal communication with constituents quashed by MPs broadcasting on each platform. Prior research on social media suggested representatives will also seek to use the platforms for unidirectional communication. It does find some uses of websites and blogs which had a limited impact on representative communication: increasing the accountability of MPs and frequency of contact between representatives and citizens. The chapter concludes by arguing there is a substantial void in the literature regarding the use of social media in representative communication, particularly from the perspective of citizens and MPs themselves.

The methodological approach is discussed in Chapter 4. It discusses the three data sources used in this thesis: elite interviews, surveys, and social media data. It finds that while social media has a significant level of academic interest, there are no standard methodological approaches. It argues that for this reason, every methodology in this area needs to be carefully designed to ensure that the correct data is being collected. It goes on to describe the three research designs to collect the data used in this thesis. Furthermore, it highlights some of the additional ethical considerations of social media research and how this thesis mitigates these concerns.

Chapter 5 is the first of the data chapters. Using data from elite interviews with 12 MPs, it discusses their perspective on social media for representative communication. It finds that while each MPs engages in social media differently, overall it has become a central part of their communication strategy, as these platforms have larger audiences than their websites. Both Twitter and Facebook have a place in facilitating the roles of an MP, however it appears that while social media websites are talked about as a homogeneous group of communication tools, each has a specific purpose. With Twitter being used by MPs to connect with a much larger national audience, and for elite communication; compared to Facebook which was used for communicating with their constituents. However, it seems MPs are less sure about the purpose of Instagram, other than for more visual communication to national audiences. However, it seems that MPs main use of social media is not for interpersonal communication; instead it is primarily for broadcasting messages *to* constituents – something which suggests that the usefulness of these platforms for direct representative communication is limited.

An analysis of social media data is the focus of Chapter 6 which considers the MPs who can be found on each of the platforms and what they post. This answers a number of interrelated representational questions by evaluating if social media has an impact on descriptive representation, and if MPs who may be ignored by the media can be found in greater numbers on the platforms. It finds very few demographic deviations, apart from Instagram, which evidences that social media is now ubiquitous amongst MPs. The chapter then moves to understand patterns of social media uses by representatives – the frequency and subjects of their content. This had two main purposes. Firstly, to create a baseline of how MPs engage with different social media websites for comparison with previous research. Secondly, to answer a number of representational questions: including if MPs are moving to new representative models and away from their parties; and if the style of communication suggest MPs are seeking to represent certain demographics of the population.

The penultimate chapter discusses the findings of the survey to analyse how citizens use social media, and how they interpret its uses by MPs. This section finds that some of the assumptions made about citizens use of social media might be misguided, in that while significant attention has been given to a lack of interaction by MPs, citizens might not want this type of engagement to begin with. It approaches the types of citizen-initiated contract, and the extent to which MPs have responded to citizens. Overall it suggests a model where voters follow MPs for information consumption above all else. However, while citizens might not be seeking interpersonal communication with their representatives, the act of following them has a number of beneficial effects, suggesting that social media might be fostering bonds of closeness, outside of the expected model of direct representation.

The final chapter brings together the analysis from the three data chapters to provide a nuanced overview of the representational relationship between citizens and MPs on social media. In comparing the findings and using evidence from existing literature, this chapter discusses how representative communication is conducted on social media. It considers how this might influence changes to the process of representation in the UK and discusses avenues for further study raised by the number of significant new findings from this research.

## 2 - Conceptualising the Linkage Between Representation & Communication

As discussed in the introductory chapter, there are some current and severe issues within democracy, with low levels of participation and low trust in UK democratic institutions. Many of the previously described works in this area turn to representation as both the cause (the lack of) and the solution (an increase in) to current issues. Some call for ‘more representation’ though citizen-representative communication, also referred to as direct representation later in this chapter, as one answer to the problem (Williamson, 2009b). However, without also understanding *what is political representation*, and *how it is manifested*, then how could one also seek to increase it? In what ways does more communication create more representation? These are all essential questions to consider when addressing the representative impacts of social media use in UK politics. This chapter contextualises calls to increase representation through new communicative platforms using a theoretical perspective. The concluding argument is that while much of the theory regarding representation and communication are separated by discipline, they are in fact intrinsically linked. One could go as far to say that communication is a key conduit for political representation. Using the framework of *representative communication*, the communication between citizens and MPs can be analysed as a representative action. This lens allows for the analysis of communication forms as representative outputs and seeks to understand how not only different platforms but also different methods of communications have for the transfer of citizens values to MPs.

### 2.1 *Concepts of Political Representation*

In its purest form, the Latin translation of representation (or *repraesentare*) means to ‘make present again’ (Pitkin, 1967:241). Yet, past this juncture, it is a concept with an immense level of complexity and an astonishing range of application. Accounts of representation can be found in art and aesthetics, to legal and formalistic contemplations, to a range of philosophical thoughts. The vast library of functions in so many settings has made defining ‘representation’ a contextually based challenge. Due to this, many academics steer clear of the subject, instead choosing to focus

on democratic politics (Vieria & Runciman, 2008:4). The ongoing open debate on the particulars of representation between Jane Mansbridge and Andrew Rehfeld suggest that any writing on the subject will inevitably face significant rebuttal. The quality of work was not the issue; however, the vast complexity of the subject matter means that no single paper could cover every facet of the complex area – leaving itself open to critique from various angles. Rehfelds’ 2011 paper, which is a critique of Mansbridge’s 2011 paper, which is a critique of a 2009 paper by Rehfeld, which in turn is a paper criticising Mansbridge’s 2003 paper. Therefore, perhaps it is best to eschew the subject in favour of a research area with a more stable foundation, such as frameworks of democracy. For example, Huber and Powell (1994) discuss important representative topics in terms of congruence between representatives and citizens yet frame their paper in democratic theory rather than the more obvious (and fitting) representative concepts. This thesis will not represent a systematic literature of all the writings on representation, which have been well covered in numerous other texts<sup>3</sup>. The focus will be on representative theories that place importance to the interactions between citizens and representatives rather than statehood.

Modern comprehensions of the term representation can be traced back to Hobbes’s *Leviathan* (1929[1651]). Set in the English Civil War, the book was an answer to the issues which were tearing the English state apart - with the summary that representation should be central to political apparatus in the creation of a stable state. Hobbes sought a solution to the political crisis in which the Leviathan, a strong and unified absolute sovereign, would make destructive political conflict impossible. However, for this to happen, the state of nature, a war of all against all, must be overcome through a social contract where the state is born. The process of this birth is through representation, where *the* people become *a* people:

A multitude of men are made one person, when they are by one man, or one person, represented; so that it be done with the consent of every one of that multitude in particular. For it is the unity of the represented, not the unity of the representers, that maketh the person one.

(Hobbes, 1929[1651]:126)

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<sup>3</sup> Extensive literature reviews on the theoretical concepts of representation can be found within the introductions of Pitkin (1967) and Sawford (2010). More historical perspectives of representation can be found within Shaprio *et al* (2010) and Pulzer (1975).

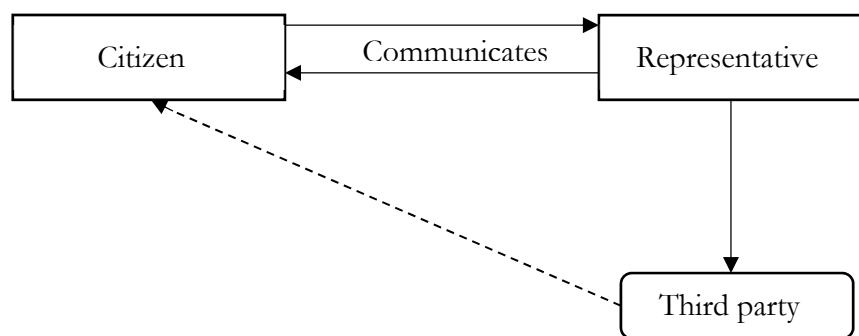
Set within the crisis of democracy, the perspective of Hobbes is a tempting theoretical angle: wherein both in 1651 and 2019 there is a crisis of the state: where the government is facing a declining lack of trust, and where citizens are starting to seek to express themselves politically outside the institutions of the state. However, tracing back the origins of the use of representation to Hobbes, does not describe modern perceptions of a true democratic style of representation. Hobbes' objective was not the creation of a democratic system, but of a strong state - a means to an end. Hobbes's state was not *by* the people, but *for* it paternalistically. To some extent, the state could decide who or what was to be represented, if it was in the best interests of the state (see Hobbes, 1929[1651]:125).

This entrenched the notion of a tyranny of the majority by marginalising those with political views contradictory to the central aggregate; preserving male dominancy and the status of the higher classes in political life – was justified by Hobbes using the notion of the creation of a strong state. Even the iconography used on the original book design, of the singular all-powerful autonomous being made up from the people but independent in mind, concludes the book's objective to create a strong state, not a representative democracy (Bredenkamp, 2007). The Leviathan does not state what representation is, but instead the result of it: a stable political system. Pitkin critiqued the use of the term representation by Hobbes, challenging Hobbes' idealised state as only needing *act for* the people without any further substance and with the state requiring no further input by citizens (Pitkin, 1967:4). Despite this, Hobbes sets a seminal framework which would lead political thought into the 21<sup>st</sup> century; which is that representation is the ultimate instrument of power.

The numerous interpretations of Hobbes' description of representation has created significant debate. Modern definitions of representation when applied to representative democracies attempt to stay in the middle-ground; riding the line that recognises the state as the ultimate power, yet the people as sovereign. Dahl defined representation as a system where 'a majority of citizens can induce the government 'to do what they want it to do and avoid doing what they most want it not to do' (1989:95). Other definitions focus on citizens, with the power of the state inferred. Schwartz's perspective sees political representatives as caretakers of the community, where citizens take greater responsibility in their local area (1988). Similarly, Pitkin's definition of a representative government is a system which acts 'in the interests of the represented, in a manner responsive to them' (1967:209). This shift from the concept being grounded in the state to one which grounds representation in citizens symbolises the dynamic shifts and the changing role of

the state. They fit the need for a citizen-led approach to representation in the wake of revolution, universal suffrage, and the subsequent waves of democratisation throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Vieira & Runciman, 2008:46-7, see also Huntington, 1991).

The above debate takes us back to the beginning of the section, can representation be defined? The answer, of course, is yes. Figure 2.1 shows representation in its simplest form: a relationship between three actors where Person A (citizen) has their views communicated to Person B (representative) who then represents this to a third party (the state). However, to assume that the representative relationship between any of these actors is straightforward would result in a fallacious argument, which would be highly reductive of the realities of representation. As shown in the above debate, what happens between these units lacks a single theoretical understanding



**Figure 2.1** Representative Democracy in its Simplest Form

### 2.1.1 Hanna Pitkins' foundations of representative theory

One of the many reasons why Hanna Pitkin's *The Concept of Representation* (1967) is considered a seminal text is because it is one of the first approaches to look past representation as a simple definition and sought to understand the constituent parts of the process. The book describes a need for such an approach and conceptualises four methods of representation: Formalistic (Institutional); Descriptive (Characteristics); Symbolic (Standing for); and Substantive (Acting for).

*Formalistic representation* (Pitkin, 1967, chap.3) is the systematic and institutional aspects of the state that induce and prescribe many liberal democracies official concept of representation. Formalistic representation takes two forms. The first is authorisation, the processes through which a representative derives power and legitimacy. This includes the rules that ‘defines representing in terms of a transaction that takes place at the outside, before the actual representing begins’ (Pitkin, 1967:39). The second is accountability, the rules that enable citizens to curtail the power of the representative (Pitkin, 1967:55). The forms of formalistic representation can be understood as two sides of the same coin; with one concerned with how the power to represent is granted (authorisation), and how it can be taken away (accountability). Combined formalistic representation are the rules regarding the legality of power. The most obvious example of this in liberal democracies is elections. While formalistic representation is the bedrock to many democracies, to say who is, and who is not a representative, it says nothing about ‘what goes on *during* representation’ [emphasis retained] (Pitkin, 1967:58). An election does not act as an indicator of citizen preference on issues, past whom they want to represent them. Yet, as shown in the first chapter of this thesis, the previous studies of social media have been set in formalistic contexts of representation (elections) which risks ignoring the three other forms of representation, as identified by Pitkin.

*Descriptive representation* (Pitkin, 1967, chap.4) comes from the literature related to the composition of legislative assemblies, and to what extent they reflect the population they represent. It is a reiteration of the vein of thought, perhaps best historically represented by former US President John Adams, who stated that a representative legislature ‘should be an exact portrait in miniature, of the people at large, as it should think, feel, reason and act like them’ (Adams, cited in Pitkin, 1967:60). In this sense, a legislative body that has a likeness to the overall population can claim to act for them and need no broader characteristic than composition.

Descriptive representation has frequently focussed on the lack of representation of women and ethnic minorities in legislatures; and later geographic regions (Phillips, 1991; Phillips, 1995; Hooghe & Marks, 1996; Mansbridge, 1999; Hughes, 2011). Several works have highlighted that when demographic groups feel underrepresented, they have lower levels of political participation and efficacy, and can even suffer due to discriminatory laws (Lovenduski & Norris, 2003; Ballington & Karam, 2005). Arguments for descriptive representation have manifested themselves in campaigns such as *50:50 Parliament* and *The Parliament Project* which campaign for gender-equal composition in the House of Commons, and for all-women shortlists. Age has also



been argued as part of the case for descriptive representation. Young people, who commonly feel dissociated from the political process, could be made more engaged in politics if political representatives reflected their age profile and interests. (Norris & Krook, 2008).

However, it is not without its critics. Pitkin argues that descriptive representation should be a more general aim, as a wholesale miniaturisation of the population is unworkable. Firstly, in terms of how to accurately represent such a vast body of citizens – Pitkin uses the analogy of a sequence of indefinite maps, each representing the map before it, but each somewhat less accurate as the duplication adds imperfections (Pitkin, 1967:87). Her analogy stresses the impossibility of perfectly representing a nation. Secondly, she argues that while a legislative body might be representative of the population demographically, it does not automatically also mean it is representative of the population's values. Reducing a citizen's political ideology to their gender, geography, or colour of their skin is highly reductive. This is an argument explored in the fictional political television drama *The West Wing*, where a homosexual politician argues that his demographic makeup does not run dichotomously with his Republican values (Sorkin, 2000).

Similarly, it was found that the election of women or minorities in legislatures does not automatically increase female or minority representation (Dovi, 2002; Childs & Krook, 2006). For example, only 19% of women representatives in the Canadian 35<sup>th</sup> parliament stated 'women's issues' was an area of interest (Temblay, 1998:450). Descriptive representation does not explain why people often elect 'men who are not representative (typical) of their district' (Pitkin, 1967:90). However, it could be argued that descriptive representation should be considered outside of legislatures and into all political spaces, as arguments about a lack of women in the media is fundamentally a descriptive one (Thornham, 2007). It follows that a descriptive analysis of the demographics of MPs who use social media could potentially reveal new insights from a representational perspective.

*Symbolic representation* (Pitkin, 1967, chap.5) is the representation that occurs when a representative *stands for* another person's views or ideal symbolically without themselves being of that view or idea. Pitkin asserts this is akin to how the British Monarchy or the Stars and Stripes represents the values of each state, no matter what these values may be (Pitkin, 1967:107). In symbolic representation, a person (passively) represents values by evoking feelings or attitudes which citizens align with (Pitkin, 1967:96-97). Later works have argued that symbolic representation has to be understood in the context to which people believe in the symbol (Stokke & Selboe, 2009).

For example, a white sheet is only turned into a flag of surrender when people attach symbolic meaning to it. In many ways, political representatives can also embody symbolic representation as a representative may stand on a stage at a rally for a campaign, taking no other political action within a legislative chamber, and still be a symbolic representative for that cause without acting on behalf of it.

In the next chapter, this thesis will consider where MPs may try to be seen as acting for constituents, while not actually acting for them. It could be that MPs who want to be seen as more receptive to new forms of communication might be trying to be seen as representing younger audiences (see Alan Johnson), or the use of social media to post selfies holding signs in support of a cause while not necessarily acting for the same cause.

*Substantive representation* (Pitkin, 1967: chap.6) is where representatives *act for* their constituents, contrasting with symbolic representation where the representative *stands for* their constituents. Substantive representation looks at ‘what the representative does and how he does it’ and if these actions are in preference to their constituents (Pitkin, 1967:143). The concept is more complicated than Person A acting for Person B, as it requires the action to best represent the wishes of B. Pitkin stipulates that substantive representation requires a representative-citizen relationship more heterogeneous than the act of voting; such as deliberation and communication to ensure that representatives are not acting on whim (Pitkin, 1967:119). It is for this reason that this type of representation is the hardest to quantify, being able to map a representative’s actions against the will of their population on aggregate is too complex of an undertaking (Pitkin, 1967:118). Concurrently, evidence for this form of representation can be found in the announcements made by MPs to their constituents, including statements for how they have voted within Parliament posted on social media.

While Pitkin certainly lays the groundwork for a greater understanding of representation, there are gaps within the context of this research. It could be argued that early adoption of social media by MPs could create a type of symbolic representation to other users also on the platform, for example, Tom Watson MP’s early adoption of certain technologies made him a symbol for ‘nerds’ (c.f O’Malley, 2015, 14 Sept). Pitkin’s work can also be used as a lens to understand SNS impact on under-represented groups as MPs’ could use their online presence to raise the profile of underrepresented groups, outside the legislative chamber.

However, Pitkin's framework leaves little space for understanding the impact of two-way dialogue between citizens and representatives on communications platforms, such as social media. Her perspective suggests a model where citizens are limited to picking their MP through formalistic rules; or citizens are inferred as being reactionary to what an MP does to represent them. In the only reference to two-way conversation, Pitkin does state that it is important to ask people if they are satisfied, or unsatisfied, with their representatives (Pitkin, 1967:110), the agency of this process remains in the hands of the representative, not the represented. This approach is likely a by-product of the book's age and the media landscape of when it was written. Furthermore, changes in the makeup of civic groups have also changed representation. Traditional models assumed that many citizens would be part of community groups or religious organisations that would act as a conduit in the citizen-representative relationship (see Putnam, 2000). In 2019, the relative importance of these groups has declined, creating a potential need to approach representation on a more individual basis. It is a possibility that if social media changes this relationship, giving agency over when citizens can state their satisfaction, publicly and to a higher degree, then there is a need for new explanations of the mechanics of representation.

### *2.1.2 Additional theories - Mansbridge (2003)*

While Pitkin was the first to consider what is political representation in-depth, she was by no means the last to do so. Other works have sought to build on the concept of representation, including Mansbridge's article: *Rethinking Representation* (2003) which presented an empirically calculable account of representation. Given the author's background as a positivist social researcher, representation is framed in the ways in which it can be empirically measured<sup>4</sup>. This stands in stark ontological opposition to the descriptive theoretical concepts of representation in Pitkin's work. Despite potential limitations, arising from descriptions of representation as only those which can be empirically observed, Mansbridge's perspective is useful. The perspective provides four additional accounts of representation (promissory, anticipatory, gyroscopic, and

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<sup>4</sup> see Table.1 in Mansbridge (2003:525).

surrogate) which can be applied to other accounts of representation or used as a comparison to forms of representation presented by Pitkin.

Out of the four forms of representation, it is anticipatory and surrogate types that potentially have the most significant impact in considering how social media might change representation in the UK. Anticipatory representation (Mansbridge, 2003:516-520) refers to when a representative anticipates the preferences of voters in the future. Anticipatory representation moves away from a traditional account to one which induces multiple concurrent lines of information that a representative must consider when choosing to act substantively. As a result, Mansbridge states that one empirical measurement that should be considered is the frequency of communication representatives have with their constituents, as without this, they are unlikely to anticipate their needs (2003:525). However, there needs to be evidence that citizen communication on social media leads to representatives acting on this communication - something which the frequency or method of communication does not reveal.

The second type of interest is surrogate representation (Mansbridge, 2003:522-525); this is where people are represented 'by a representative with whom one has no electoral relationship' (Mansbridge, 2003:522). This could be where citizens are represented by politicians whom they have no previous geographical, electoral, or other types of formalistic prior linkage. As a result, this type of representation is distinct from all others, in that it does not necessarily happen under state apparatus. This contrasts with Pitkin, as her forms of representation imply an electoral relationship pre-qualification throughout. In this type, a person could feel that an MP from outside of their constituency represents them on issues that their current representative does not. Mansbridge uses the example of Barney Frank, an openly gay US representative who spoke for gay and lesbian issues, and by doing so was representing people of this demographic across the US who lived in areas where their representative would not speak on these issues (Mansbridge, 2003:523). This type of representation has become more relevant in the age of social media. Whereby citizens often follow multiple representatives other than their own constituency representative, and the potential for this to lead to new forms of surrogate representation on sites such as Twitter and Facebook. Furthermore, it would be relevant to the main thesis question to see if MPs are willing to take on the values of their followers (even those outside of their constituency) on social media and act upon them, as this would be evidence of a shift within the strict constituency links MPs have with citizens.

### *2.1.3 Dynamic approaches to representation - Urbinati (2006) & Saward (2010)*

By the 2010s, many authors started to re-approach the subject of representation, opposing and contradicting Pitkin's four concepts. Two authors, Urbinati (2006) and Saward (2010), sought to provide alternative approaches to understanding representation. Saward argued that authors, including Mansbridge, did not go far enough in their critique of Pitkin's concept of representation and that so far people have added too rather than challenged the orthodoxy of Pitkin's representative concepts (Saward, 2010:9,23). Urbinati (2006), disagreed with Pitkin's view of the leadership role that a political representative should have. Saward (2010) presents a challenge to the notion of representation as an orderly and categorical concept, arguing that in practice, representation is more dynamic, happening through a series of 'claims', which extend beyond the formalities of constituency and the state apparatus (Saward, 2010).

The conception of advocacy is the centrepiece of Urbinati's conceptualisation of representation. However, to first understand this viewpoint, it is necessary to see where Urbinati diverges from Pitkin. While Pitkin's concept of representation is derived from linguistic analysis, Urbinati's takes a more normative perspective, creating a different foundation for their understanding of representation (Pitkin, 1967; Urbinati, 2006:5). Firstly, Urbinati views representation as not prescriptive but more dynamic. Judicial and institutional representation systems are no more than 'yes/no politics' where citizen's power is limited to set options during an election, 'restricting participation to a procedural minimum'. However, political representation expands the role of citizens dramatically, stating that while 'elections "make" representation, they do not make representatives (Urbinati, 2006:25,21,224). Instead, representation is a process where the general will is refined, filtered, and mediated (Urbinati, 2006:6). This changes the perception of representation in a significant way: Urbinati's political representation has a greater emphasis on deliberation as part of the political process. Moving past elections, sovereignty is something that is worked out as part of the representative-citizen relationship on an ongoing basis (Urbinati, 2006:227). While elections are still an essential feature within democracies, there is a role for the presence of dialogue between citizens and representatives (Urbinati, 2006:5). This challenges the unidirectional relationship of representation presented by Pitkin, as representation goes past elections and has a higher degree of fluidity.

Similarly, Saward also argues that representation is a bi-directional process, and sought to create a dynamic concept of representation, but argues that Urbinati's understanding does not go far

enough (Saward, 2010:30). Saward asserts that most writers on the subject are preoccupied with forms of representation, rather than creating any alternative core concepts (Saward, 2010:32). Instead, it is less about pinning down representation to a specific instance or practice, but to find out how the meanings within representation are generated (Saward, 2010:39).

Saward argues that representation is less of a physical embodiment or a thing, but instead is best articulated as a series of claim makings, where a political representative stands for another body with a claim. This claim could be a claim to represent/stand for, to embody, or a claim to define the values of the body/group that they seek to represent.

A maker of representations ('M') put forward a subject ('S') which stands for an object ('O') that is related to a referent ('R') and is offered to an audience ('A').

(Saward, 2010:36)

A practical application of Saward's proposal is an MP (maker) who offers themselves (subject) as the embodiment of their constituent interest (object) to that constituency (audience) (2010:37,53). However, the concept of claim-making goes further into every action. For example, if an MP was to argue that his/ her 'hard-working family' constituents would disagree with a policy proposal: the MP is also making a claim that their constituents stand for values that align with the assumptions and types of rhetoric that surround 'hard-working families'. This claim is a bidirectional, as it requires both the claim maker to make the representative claim, but also the object to accept it (Saward, 2010: 47). Saward asserts that claim-making is a prerequisite of representation itself, as, without the claim, there is no subject of an object to be represented (2010: 47).

Saward diverges from Urbanti and Pitkin as he claims that representation as a concept, while attached to legalistic institutions, does not require state apparatus; as representation can be linked to, but also separated from, the state entirely. For example, actors that work within the state can produce claims that are rejected (Saward, 2010: 46). Yet, at the same time actors outside of the state, such as non-governmental organisations or even representatives from another country may make a claim that is accepted, even if the acceptors of this claim were not the initial intended audience, and thus feel represented in some regard (Saward, 2010:86). In summary, Saward rejects that representation has any specific meaning past its core definition of 'making something present that is absent', but instead focuses of what makes representation: the claim (Saward, 2010:39). He

refutes that representation is somehow a specific thing past representative actions of claim creation, claim defence and claim contestation.

These two dynamic forms of representation by Urbinati and Saward can be argued to better reflect the communication realities of 2019, with citizens seeking more direct communication, providing more opportunities to accept and reject representative claims or for the general will to be filtered (see Chapter 3). However, neither Urbinati or Saward question how representation is affected by different forms of communication even though communication is how representation is transferred. For instance, what if a representative claim is made through iconography in a selfie, or through a tweet? It goes back to a similar issue found within the work of Pitkin, that representative theory overlooks the role of communication. However, they do add that representation is not solely linked to elections and can happen outside of the formal institutions of the state. There is a gap in the literature within what representation happens in-between elections. The next section will review what limited literature does exist and the role that communication has.

## 2.2 *In-between Election Democracy*

The forms of representation presented by both Urbinati and Saward suggest that representation happens on a more dynamic day-to-day basis, outside of the well-recognised traditions of electoral participation. This form of representation links with the literature surrounding in-between election democracy (See Esaiasson & Narud, 2013). These are the forms and actions taken by citizens after election day, such as petitions, protests, boycotting and other participatory activity intended to get a representative to do what citizens want them to do, and avoid what they do not want them to do. This literature is built upon the attempts to understand and operationalise *responsiveness* – where representation is achieved when representatives act upon public demand or are otherwise responsive to them (Stimson *et al.* 1995). This literature was influenced by attempts to operationalise parts of Pitkin’s definition of representation: ‘acting in the interest of the represented, in a manner *responsive to them*’ (Pitkin, 1967:209). Eulau & Karp state that while the definition is understandable, it is conceptually difficult to unpack (1977:237). One form of this responsive representation is *deliberative democracy* – decisions are collectively made, through a conversation between representatives and citizens, with legitimacy stemming from the

central notion that those who will be affected by the decision have been consulted (Smith, 2009; Dryzek, 2010). It could be argued that a much greater focus is required in the understanding of non-electoral representation; with the growing use of deliberative projects to increase this type of democratic process. Academic arguments suggest that this style of democracy can lead to better-informed policy and be more inclusive of the wider population (Estlund, 1997; Parkinson, 2006; Dryzek, 2010). Some go as far as to state that deliberative democracy is not a second-best but should be intrinsically seen as a ‘modern way to intertwine participation, political judgement’ and a population capable of self-rule (Urbinati & Warren, 2008:402). The shift towards popular notions of deliberation have moved past these arguments, as a growing trend towards legislative projects which include more citizens can be observed through invitations to community meetings, online debates to enhance deliberation or social media polls ran by MPs themselves (Nabatchi *et al.* 2012).

Arguments against this type of representative process argue that deliberation is messy and weak due to a lack of rules about its implementation in political life. There are concerns that the decisions from deliberation are not based on judgments from ‘substantive or empirical’ arguments, but rather the opinions of certain groups (Sanders, 1997:348). While the representativeness is in question, as deliberation benefits those who engage the most, arguments have been made that in democracy, no premium should be placed on participation (Sunstein, 1988). Deliberative projects might appeal to those with elitist perceptions of political decision making (Sanders, 1997:354). However, many functions within representation are already no longer tied to standard representative mechanisms. Bohan argues that the current system is infiltrated by powerful interests that shape citizens perceptions, including the media, which has a broader role in opinion formation (2012:75). Furthermore, Bohan states that *good* forms of deliberation can overcome many of the above obstacles (*ibid*, 2012).

A theme within deliberative forms of in-between election democracy is that it is a two-way representative process, where citizens (in theory) tell their representative what they want to happen and what they do not want to happen. In this way, deliberative forms empower, and provide more agency to citizens compared to other representative mechanisms. Yet the current definitions of what *is* deliberation is not well defined. If dynamic forms are to be taken at face value, then is any form of communication viable for deliberative representation? This is the crux of the problem when addressing this research. Esaiasson *et al.* approached this problem yet failed to define the issue within representative theory past the statement that responsiveness can be



found in ‘all ways in which citizens communicate their preferences’ (2013:20). This perspective, while limited, opens a range of issues regarding the intersection of representational and communication theory. It raises questions regarding who is listened to, who actually speaks, and if their voice is equal, amongst other questions raised on this chapter (Verba *et al.* 1995; Bartels, 2008; Enns & Wlezien, 2011).

The response to the above question regarding deliberative democracy has been approached from two perspectives in the literature. Either, the literature seeks to formalise deliberative spaces to official institutions such as courts or legislatures (c.f. Cohen, 2007; Fishkin, 2009), or those who state that deliberative democracy is much broader, and can be found within the public sphere where ideas are then processed by those empowered to make decisions (Habermas, 1996; Dryzek, 2010). It appears that the crux of deliberative democracy rests on an effective link between representatives and citizens (Parkinson, 2012; Hendriks & Lees Marshment, 2019:599).

Current research on the effectiveness of social media as a platform for deliberative democracy is underdeveloped. Furthermore, as shown on in the next chapter, findings regarding the effectiveness of websites and blogs for deliberative democracy do not translate to social media. (see also Coleman, 2005c). More recent developments in communication research that suggest that social media might be hosting the previously theorised direct representation and political dialogue. Arguments have been made that social media has provided a platform for a plethora of political discussion, which MPs are unlikely to ignore (Dennis, 2019). However, the extent that representatives listen to more than a few, loud, instances of social media deliberation is questionable. Social media’s propensity to cause communication to be less civil, shorter and more emotive, and the ability of foreign governments of campaigners to influence online discussion puts into question how representative or useful social media communication is for deliberative purposes (Parkinson, 2012:165). Others have argued that while it is well understood how citizens and representatives talk, the real question is if they are heard. Research from 51 senior national ministers from the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the US found that politicians do place a value on public deliberation (Hendriks & Lees-Marshment, 2019) but it is less clear, with little evidence to suggest action is taken from deliberative discussions by politicians (*ibid*, 2019).

### *2.3 Problems with Theories of Representation*

To understand how representation happens, it must have observable effects which could be measured by considering the impact and actions taken by citizens and representatives. This can be discovered by asking questions to consider the impact, feeling and frequency of representation as well as how often MPs participate. Representatives could also be asked to consider the frequency of using constituents' views in the creation of policy or if they take action upon them. Considering both the citizen and representative, the questions seek to understand the transference of political information and consent within the political system.

However, much like how Pitkin aimed to understand the concept of representation past a simple definition of the word, there is a need to consider how the process of transference between citizens and representatives happens, past the vague notion of communication. Therefore, a more nuanced understanding of representative communication, the process of transference, is necessary. Within existing theory, other than elections and brief mentions of the importance of deliberation there is little attention given about how this citizen-representative relationship is developed. This creates two major issues within representation theory: a lack of focus on communication and that there is idealised portraiture of political deliberation.

#### *Lack of focus on communication*

Many forms of representation infer a need for communication, but seldom go further, or do not explain what types of communication are representational. The lack of focus or interest in communication is somewhat surprising since communication is a fundamental step of the representative process (see figure 2.1). The gap could be understood as representative theory has been focussed on notions of power transference, rather than information. However, the failure to engage political communication theory in the role of representation causes specific theoretical weaknesses. Additionally, analysing representative theory through political communication highlights some important distinctions between the different works of literature on the subject. One example of this is when considering the relationship between descriptive representation and communication: a citizen from a minority background who lives in a state where the national legislature has a demographic ethnically proportionate to the overall state – yet due to the poor, or infrequent, communication received by the citizen, they are unaware. Using Pitkin's concepts, if a national assembly represents the demographics of the population, then regardless of if the

citizen knows it or not, they are descriptively represented. However, Saward would indicate that the citizen has not accepted the claim that they are descriptively represented, as they do not know the claim has been made to begin with. Using the claim model, due to the lack of communication the citizen would not be represented. The result of which is that while citizens may have representatives acting for them, they might not feel represented; making effective representative-constituent communication vital.

*Idealised portrayures of (mass) political deliberation:*

The lack of definition on what is representative communication leads to the inferences made throughout the literature that rely on traditional, idealised descriptions of deliberation. Pitkin wrote that deliberation and communication are an essential part of the process of substantive representation. Similarly, Esaiasson discussed how responsiveness is conducted through communication (Esaiasson *et al.* 2013). However, this raises additional questions not addressed in representative theory: what is deliberation, and what are the qualifiers that make this type of communication representatively conducive? Theorists in deliberative democracy describe political discussion as a group of politically diverse citizens in a room having an informed debate (Coleman, 2005b). But questions have to be asked if this description is too narrow and unachievable, especially when considering that the majority of evidence from the field of communication suggests this ideal political discussion is not a frequent occurrence (Chapter 3). The internet facilitates a very different type of conversation, with online spaces that host political talk often containing polarised or even hostile forms of communication. Instead, it is non-political spaces such as community lifestyle forums where sporadic, but ultimately more useful discussion happens, which is more likely to foster conducive political action (Wright, 2012; Highfield, 2016; Graham, Jackson & Wright, 2016).

Furthermore, it could be suggested that idealised forms of deliberation have blinded academics limiting their search for perfect deliberation, rather than looking for the deliberation that actually happens. For instance, while political communication between groups, or as groups have been well approached within representative theory, such as petitions, mass-communications, and even tweet-bombs, little has been spoken about regarding individual, one-to-one forms of communicative representation. This suggests that some representation theory relies on an idealised description of deliberation in non-individualised political action, political communication and representation. If representation theory is based on an idealised picture of

political communication and deliberation which does not exist, further attention needs to be given to the links between the realities and function of political and representative communications.

To show how representation does take place within the theories set out above, representation would need to be observed: testing where interactions between citizens and representatives take place. To address the above questions, the next section discusses political communication and its role in the communication of representation.

#### *2.4 Political Communication*

During times of crisis, apt use of political communication has united communities, defined political careers, and sometimes ruined them (Teten, 2007). The influence of political communication is evident in the research on campaigns; however, this section will argue, there is also clear evidence that political communication has a significant impact on the conduct of political representation. This section will also discuss how citizens and representatives interact. Initial definitions of political communication are expansive – including how spoken, textual, visual, and newer digital methods of communication are used politically (Kavanagh, 1995; McChesney, 2015). Effective political communication is essential for democracy; as it allows the public to properly judge their representatives (such as through accountability), brings important political debates to a greater audience through deliberation, and allows MPs to state their case as an advocate (Alexander, 1969). Political communication connects representatives and citizens, creates social cohesion, increases accountability in politics, and aids in the formation of an overall well-informed citizenry. To incorporate all the above, McNair created a definition of political communication which encompasses all types of communication, provided the topic of conversation is somehow political:

1. All forms of communication undertaken by politicians and other political actors for the purpose of achieving specific objectives.
2. Communication addressed to these actors by non-politicians such as voters and activists.
3. Communication about these actors and their activities, as contained in news reports, editorials and other forms of media discussion of politics, such as blogs and social media posts.

(McNair, 2018:4).

In practice, political communication can be through a range of means, across a variety of platforms and on diverse subjects, ranging from Brexit to potholes. This means that political communication has impact and currency in many areas of political research. However, in the subsection of this area that relates to citizen-elite communication, it can be seen that there are four key recurring questions within political communication research that this chapter will engage with through a review of existing literature:

*Who is communicating, and where?* This addresses both who and where the audiences and contributors to political discussions are and if they are representative of the greater political sphere. In addition, the communicative platforms chosen by political representatives and on which platform they are most active will have a distinct impact on where they listen to constituent's views, and which constituents are most knowledgeable about their representative.

*The effect of mediated vs unmediated communication:* Different communication platforms have their own communication styles. A key distinction is whether communication is mediated through a third party, such as a newspaper, or is direct between the participants. For example, broadcast television is a highly unidirectional one-to-many communication platform, mediated by a third party. This format allows for very little or no, conversational interaction, but is a good way to get a message to many people. On the other hand, face-to-face communication before the internet has a much more limited audience, but the personal style of communication could bring individuals to a greater level of understanding and closeness (Larsen & Hill, 1954).

*The direction of communication:* Studies often analyse the direction of communication, examining the role of linearity: where vertical communication from political elites to citizens, is generally top-down, one-way broadcasting; or horizontal communication, where conversations between different actors in on a level field. Horizontal communication is described as more conversational, and results in a different, more engaged, style of political communication. In a report to UK MPs, titled 'Open Up!', MPs were encouraged to be more horizontal in their communication style as it could encourage citizen participation (Digital Democracy Commission, 2015).

*The impact of political communication:* The last recurring question found within the literature on political communication concerns the impact of communication. Research on the 'crisis of democracy' suggests that specific styles of political communication should be encouraged in order to increase political efficacy of citizens (Richards and Smith, 2015:50). Political communication

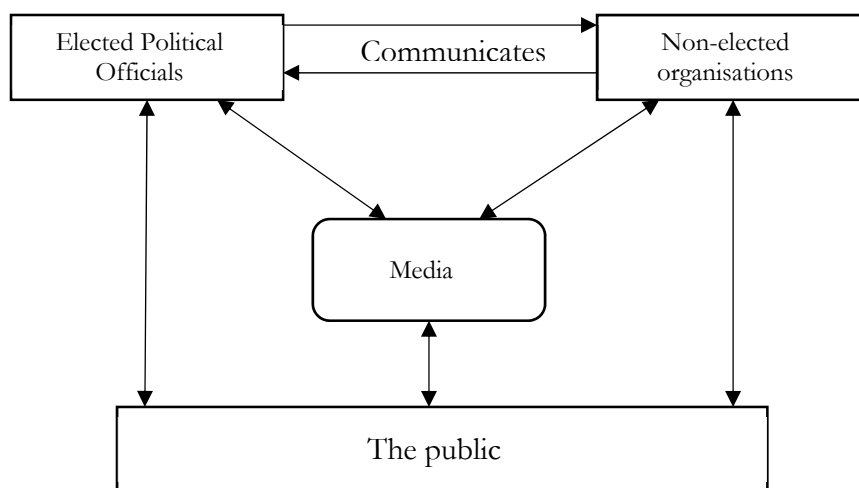
is promoted as a tool to persuade people into political and civic action which they would not have otherwise taken (Blumler & McQuail 1968; Norris *et al.* 1999). Further questions remain on the impact of social media, relationships that increase efficacy, and the methods of communication used by citizens to raise their issues. For example; do citizens feel that messaging an MP on social media gives them more or less agency or impact when compared to letters or email? Concerning this thesis, are questions regarding the extent which citizens have control in these representative relationships.

#### *2.4.1 Actors and formats of political communication*

Political communication literature focuses on three actors found to be involved in the communication process which Lilleker described as: the political sphere; non-state actors; and media outlets (2006). This was supported by McNair who similarly described the three elements of political communication as political organisations, the media, and citizens (2018). The interaction between these three is visible in figure 2.2. The first actor, the political sphere or political organisations, are the political elites which can mean state institutions, individual representatives or non-state groups. These actors are perceived as having significant political 'weight' and a responsibility to ensure all other actors are aware of their activity to maintain legitimacy and/or support. The second group are non-state actors, or citizens. In a democracy, this is who political elites gain their authority from. The third grouping are media outlets. Media actors have significant control over the transference of political information, between political elites to citizens, and reverse. The political sphere, non-state actors and the media communicate independently and synergistically with each other (McNair, 2018) in a series of complex models of communication.

For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the focus of political communication literature has been on the media (*mediated communication*), as much of the communication between political elites and citizens was conducted through broadcast or print (Bennet & Entman, 2001; Seymore-Ure, 1989:308). Over time, this has evolved to include and encompass newspapers, radio and television which dominated the informational intake of most citizens (Bennet & Entman, 2001; Jackson, 2008:5). These media channels substantially affected how communication, or news was framed and even spun (Goffman, 1974; Scheufele, 1999). So, while politicians can choose what to say, media

editors control how their statement is framed, which picture or stock-footage is put next to it, whether to present a counter-argument, or to attack the politician. News titles can use their platform to present a biased account of events to their audience, wielding significant political power as opinion formers and agenda setters (Mutz, 2001; Ries & Ries, 2002; Couldry, 2010; Smith, 2017, March 6). To many, some political editors and journalists are political actors themselves (Neilson & Kuhn, 2014). For example, Rupert Murdoch has long since been considered a significant political player as owner of *Fox News* in the US, and several UK news titles such as *The Times*, *The Sun* and the now-defunct *News of the World* (Arsenault & Castells, 2008). This led to an expansion in literature which sought to understand political communication in the mediated context, however the current context of social media has led to some deficiencies of knowledge.



**Figure 2.2.** Multi-level model of political communication adapted from Lilleker (2006:6)

From the perspective of social media, two forms of communication from the literature can be used to analyse how citizens and representatives connect: *interpersonal*, where the conversations happen between people through conversation; and *unmediated*, where the communication is one way but without an intermediary. To distinguish interpersonal and unmediated communication, this thesis will understand interpersonal communication as direct communication between people, where the communication flows in both directions. This contrasts with unmediated

communication, which allows for broadcasting of messages to an audience without a third party, and with no expectation of a two-way flow of information.

The very nature of interpersonal communication means it is often hidden from analysis as it takes place in spaces not always open to research. This partially explains the concentration of literature on mass media, despite interpersonal political communication being considered vital for political engagement (McNair, 2018:18). This is because interpersonal communication forms part of citizen's personal political attitudes, built from part of everyday conversation and socialisations (Lenart, 1994, Lilleker, 2006:53). Furthermore, the uses and gratification approach does suggest that the form and direction of communication influence its impact (Himmelboim *et al.* 2012). This suggests an approach that discusses how citizens seek out communication for specific purposes; such as following news titles to receive news or following an MP on social media to communicate with them. This perspective of communication claims that interpersonal communication is the type in which most people will engage with on social media (Lilleker, 2006:116; Chen, 2011). Applying the uses and gratification approach finds that people's influencers are more likely to be those whom they have had interpersonal communication with, as they feel more gratification due to their previous interactions (Keller & Berry, 2003; Schmitt-Beck, 2008:349). Interpersonal communication is an essential dimension in understanding political trust, and the encouragement of political participation (Himmelboim *et al.* 2012). This area of research has developed as the internet has enabled political representatives to connect with citizens on a personal level by using new technologies including websites and social media (Blumler & Gurevitch, 2001; Ward & Gibson, 2003; Biddix and Park, 2008:875; Golbeck *et al.* 2010; Posetti, 2010; Parmlee & Birchard, 2011). The growing area of interpersonal communication between citizen and representative has significant implications for representation. It suggests an opportunity for a new, direct, form of representation through more deliberative means.

However, previous research on the use of internet communications by MPs (see Chapter 3) suggests that their use of new internet technologies has largely been broadcast in style. This implies that research on MPs use of social media might see similar impacts on representation as previous prior internet technologies. The use of social media closely follows the use of other unmediated communication platforms rather than interpersonal ones: potentially mitigating the suggested benefits.



While prior research has concerned itself with forms of communication through mediated broadcast, recent events have readjusted the focus of the subject area and more attention is now being given to the role of unmediated political communication through social media. For instance, the election of President Donald Trump and the EU referendum campaign have highlighted the impact that unmediated communication through social media can have in political campaigns (See Kreiss, 2016; Mullen, 2016; Gibson *et al.*, 2016). In both examples, the interpersonal potential of social media seldom held importance within the strategy of these campaigns. Instead, social media was used as a broadcast platform with a large audience unmediated by more traditional media gate-keepers or editors. Using social media in this way, MPs can replicate the communication style of broadcasters, but without a third party by sharing news or creating editorial-style content. It has been found that the content on MPs websites tended to be content originally written as press releases but reposted online as a blog or website item (Jackson & Lilleker, 2009). This suggests that MPs use unmediated communication to publish similar content to what they had previously pushed through the media, but without editors ‘spinning’ the story; while at the same time overcoming restrictions in contacting audiences through media gatekeepers (Kotler & Armstrong, 2005; Samuel-Azran *et al.* 2015). Social media has enabled political voices, usually marginalised within the media, such as candidates from smaller parties, an outlet to communicate directly to their constituents (Graham *et al.* 2013b:700; McNair, 2018:117). A clear distinction is needed in understanding use of social media by MPs for interpersonal and unmediated communications as it could be theorised that these two approaches will result in different forms of representational communication.

### *2.5 The Interlinkage Between Political Representation and Political Communication*

This chapter has attempted to highlight that communication is a core component of representation, acting as a bridge between the different actors within the representative relationship. As stated by Coleman, ‘representation is an essentially communicative activity’ (2005a:178). However, the two are theoretically distant; despite the literature on representation strongly highlighting the indispensable role of communication. It seems while representative theory takes communication for granted, communication theory is strongly focussed on other areas of the political sphere such as elections. However, this section will argue that communication is the glue which holds representative concepts together. Without

communication, citizens would not be able to voice their opinions, values, and depending on how the definition of communication is understood, vote. Without political dialogue, citizens would not be able to collectively debate issues of the day or come together as a political force to combine their political influence on specific matters to representatives (Finkel & Muller, 1998; Kim & Kim, 2008). Coleman further argued the importance of the link between communication and representation:

Citizens need information before they can make sensible choices about who will represent them [...] Representatives need information from individual citizen and groups about those issues of local or national importance that they are expected to follow up [...] citizens need information from and about their representatives so that politicians can be evaluated on the basis of their record and so that representatives institutions are transparent in their activities. ... It is not fanciful to suggest that, without information democracy in any of its forms could not exist. Indeed, information coupled to effective communication provides the lifeblood of a democracy.

(Coleman, 1999a:365).

The quote highlights the importance of communication in democracy, however, one could argue that the point Coleman is making is less about democracy, and more about representation with mentions of information transference between the represented and those who seek to represent them. This section seeks to unpack this concept of communicative representation, focusing on two key aspects, what role does communication have in representative process, and how communication in itself can be viewed as a form of representation.

### *2.5.1 The role of communication in representation*

Historical perspectives on how representatives should act argue that in UK politics, there is little engagement to be had from citizens outside of elections. For instance, those who believe MPs should be elites, or trustee representatives claimed that representatives should use their experience and knowledge to decide what is best for their constituents (Burke, 1770[1968]:115; Weber, 1922[1968]; Schumpeter, 1944). They do not need to consider the views of their constituents during their term; although they may send out communications for reasons of accountability (Judge, 1999a). However, it seems developments in representative practices have made these perspectives outdated. From the 1700s, it has become more acceptable for citizens

to make their views known outside of elections, with activities such as petitions, letter-writing campaigns, and the formation of societies (Parssinen, 1973; Stephenson, 1989; Knights, 2009:38). MPs have become more receptive to this type of communication; especially following increases in suffrage, as ignoring citizens could lead them losing their seat in the next election (Rush, 2001). Over time, it has become career-damaging for a UK MP not to consider the views of their constituents before voting in important issues (Cain, Ferejohn, & Fiorina, 1987; Judge, 1999:31).

Changes in communication styles and platforms have altered how political representatives act on citizen's desires. Internet technologies have had an impact on the way elected representatives conduct their duties, and the role of the job itself (Lusoli, Ward, & Gibson, 2006:32; Russel & Bradbury, 2006; Williamson, 2009a). MPs are under more pressure to be more contactable than ever, with many MPs operating a multitude of communication channels in which citizens can contact them such as letters, emails, telephones and social media. This change is unidirectional as citizens seek to contact MPs using similar platforms. Representatives are keener than ever to open up what they are doing in Westminster and beyond to their citizens, often to highlight how hard working they are, but also to allow citizens to pass comment (Lusoli & Ward, 2005; Jackson & Lilleker, 2011). The internet has enabled MPs to be more inventive with how they seek to represent citizens, for instance Jeremy Corbyn MP, Leader of the Labour Party, asked citizens to email their concerns, which he would directly readout as questions during Prime Ministers Question Time (Watt, Mason & Paerruadin, 2015, 16 Sept).

Representation and communication are two distinct principles, with communication research focussed on the structures of informational transference, and representation on how citizens values are re-presented to state institutions. However, is this a false dichotomy as the two concepts are so intrinsically linked? If not, can a framework be created that considers the concepts as concurrent and connected? This chapter proposes a theoretical lens that can be used to understand this intersection called *representative communication*.

Representative communication can be defined as the communication between representatives and citizens that carries alongside it a representative function. Karlsson (2013:1211) used a matrix to demonstrate how the two are connected, from which they derived communicative forms of representation as: *Accountability*, *Inquiry*, and *Connectivity* (called closeness by Coleman, 2005b). The three forms can be used to understand the impact of representative communication (see Table 2.3). Through this framework (or matrix), representative outputs can be analysed through the

communication that acts as a medium for it. As a result, a new importance can be found on the platform of communication and the impact this can have on representation in terms of the transference of citizens values to representatives, and how representatives can provide constituents with the information needed for them to make representative judgements (such as claims) from MPs.

**Figure 2.3.** Representative communication matrix

Communication Style	Representative function		
	Accountability	Inquiry	Connectivity/Closeness
Interpersonal:	Dialogue with citizens about the MPs actions	Dialogue with citizens about their values/priorities	Communication with citizens regarding similarities
Unmediated:	Informing citizens about prior actions or announcements of convictions on Social media/newsletters or through letters	Asking Citizens to provide information about their values through messages; or through the promotion of online polls.	Impression management towards citizens, information regarding why MPs are similar to citizens or why they are a good representative
Mediated:	Informing citizens about prior actions or announcements of convictions on through the media	Announcement of inquiry, calls to contact MP	Impression management through the media to give the impression of being a good representative

Based on a top-down model of communication

The above table amalgamates the theoretical perspectives of both Karlsson (2013) and Coleman (2006) who address the role communication has in the representative relationship. Above all, Coleman stressed the importance of connectivity. He argued that connectedness could be explained through four key emotions that are generated when citizens and representatives communicate. The first of which is *Closeness*: when people communicate regularly, this results in greater feelings of closeness and a reduction of distance in regard to unreachability ‘in the sense of not being approachable, or capable of communicating’ (Coleman, 2005b:200). The second is

the notion of *Mutuality*; through communication, people create bonds of connections. These bonds relate to the feelings that ‘if I am connected to you, then you must be connected to me’ (Coleman, 2005b:200). The result of this mutuality is that representatives, by communicating with citizens, become more connected to those they wish to represent. The third role is *Coherence*, where communication leads to common understanding of their constituents, and a better ability to represent them as a single voice to many separate lives. The last of these roles that communication has is to give political representatives greater *Empathy*, by making representatives aware of ‘what it means to be someone else’ they will be in a better position to represent them (Goodin, 2003; Coleman, 2005b:200).

Karlsson (2013) provides an alternative perspective on the role that communication has within representation. Karlsson presents a view of how interactive communication has three functions: Accountability; Inquiry, and Connectivity. *Accountability* is understood as the communication from representatives to citizens which informs their constituents of their actions and therefore makes themselves more accountable (Karlsson, 2013:1206). By allowing citizens to understand better how they are being represented it holds an important function within Pitkin’s theory of representation:

[the political representative] must not be found persistently at odds with the wishes of the represented without good reason in terms of their interest, without a good explanation of why their wishes are not in accord with their interest’

(Pitkin, 1967:209-10).

The second type, *Inquiry*, relates to the role of consultation, where representatives use communication to uncover the views, sentiments, and information of their constituents (Karlsson, 2013:1207). Some theories of representation dispute the need for representatives to seek out the views of their constituents on any matter, compromising the ideology of trustee styles of representation or removes the scope for representatives to act as an advocate (Judge, 1999a:18; Urbinati, 2006). Karlsson argues that the role of political representatives as the legal vote holder is not lost when constituents are consulted (2013). This viewpoint aligns to the argument made by both Pitkin (1967:214) and Nelbo *et al.* (2010:8) when discussing the retention of voting rights in the legislature when representatives ask for their citizens' views. Similarly, Knights argued that a political representative’s sovereignty in the legislature does not mean they should be voting on policy without also being informed by the attitudes and preferences of the

citizenry (2009). Comparatively, Huber and Powell argue that liberal democracies are most quantifiably successful when the sentiments of citizens and the policy implemented are congruent (1994). This results in a perspective that the ideal metric for successful representation in a liberal democracy is when citizen's values are convergent to policy.

The third aspect is *Connectivity*, where communication fosters trusting relationships between constituents and representatives (Karlsson, 2013:1218). This aspect incorporates the points made by Coleman's (2006) roles of communication. The foundation of connectivity also relates to Blumler and Coleman's framework that indicates that communication (or the perceived availability of communication) between representatives and their constituents produces enhanced feelings of being represented (Blumler & Coleman, 2009:69). Putnam found a linkage between the perceived feeling of being represented and a healthy democracy, as feelings of representativeness foster a sense of network through reciprocal social relationships, or social capital, as opposed to a society of isolated individuals (Putnam, 2000:19).

## 2.6 *A Framework to Understand the Implications Communication on Representation*

The above section demonstrates one approach to link representation through communication via the output measures of accountability, inquiry, and closeness. However, an analysis of representation through these measures tells us the result of representative interaction (an ontological approach), not *how* this representation happens (a more epistemological approach). Reviewing the above literature, and the specific studies of authors such as Coleman (2005a;2005c) and Zittel (2003), this section contributes a framework to understand the mechanism of representation by online communication which can be summarised into *Direct Representation*, *Indirect Representation*, and *Networked representation*.

### 2.6.1 *Direct Representation*

Direct representation is where interpersonal dialogue between representatives and citizens is used to transfer the popular will, while also allowing the MP to act as an advocate (Coleman, 2005b:211). Furthermore, it requires that the MP does more than talk to citizens, it stipulates that

citizens are closely listened to, and are made to feel as such (Coleman, 2005c). It is not direct democracy, in contrast, direct representation utilises an understanding of how messages are conveyed between citizens and representatives, rather than between citizens and state apparatus. Direct representation does not mean that citizens are put into the House of Commons or seek to make MPs into delegates. However, the increase of direct representation does have potential repercussions on the actions political representatives undertake within legislative chambers due to a greater and more nuanced understanding of their constituents.

Starting in the late 1990s, academic focus shifted to considerations of the impact one-way or two-way communication has on representation alongside predictions that new communication technologies would make politics less responsive to political organisations, but more responsive to a broader base of citizens acting as individuals (Becker & Slaton, 2000:81). The projected growth in the use of communicative methods supported by the internet: email, websites, Voice Over IP (VOIP)/telephone, social media, and even face-to-face through webcams all supported greater forms of one-to-one communication. The growth of this type of direct representation has supposedly led to decline of party politics, resulting in a more decentralised party system and increased focus on individual political representatives. (Zittel, 2003). Zittel goes on to argue that representatives will supposedly become more accessible and responsive to their constituents as a result of this communication (Zittel, 2003).

However, empirical evidence on the use of communication technologies found that the practise and its impact on communication were very different. New technologies emerged that could facilitate increased levels of direct communication, actual patterns of use suggest that politicians instead opted for a parasocialistic approach to online communication, using blogs and other internet communication technologies to broadcast rather than interact (Porter, 2009; Small, 2011). Representatives' use of one-way methods while using supposedly two-way communication technologies, including websites and email, significantly reduced the prospect of direct representation (Coleman & Spiller, 2003). Thus, when it came to the introduction of social media, there has been some renewed interest in the possibilities of direct representation. Social media sites, such as Twitter and Facebook, had a greater emphasis on open two-way dialogue and presented a new set of technologies which may fulfil the possibility of direct forms of representation (see Chapter 3). For example, speaking in a BBC interview in 2017, James Heapey MP, stated that his Facebook page was not just for citizens to find out what he is doing, but also as a tool for him to know what his citizens want:

Social media ... a better way for keeping people in touch with what I'm up to and *making sure I know what [constituents] priorities are...* Facebook, I think, sort of, probably where half my constituents are likely to be... so it seems to me to be the right platform to do that. [emphasis added]

(Heapey, 2017).

This quote goes some way to suggest MPs have started to consider more interpersonal approaches to online communication than they had previously for other online communication forms (c.f. Judge, 1999b; Coleman & Spiller, 2003). Robert Dale, former Office Manager for Andy Saward MP, states that social media is becoming the 'norm' in how representatives collate and understand the views of their constituents in a similar way to the expectation that MPs should have websites and be contactable via email (Dale, 2015). However, early research into the use of social media by MPs suggests that they typically use the platforms for broadcasting, with only limited indications of genuine two-way dialogue (Larson *et al.*, 2015). There could be a disparity between how MPs intend to use social platforms and how they are using it. Alternatively, researchers might not be seeing the whole picture of how representatives and constituents are communicating on social media. There are several challenges presented for researching online communications, as not all messages between representatives and citizens are available publicly visible, which could result in under-reporting of communication between citizens and representatives on SNS. Therefore, research should not only categorise the type of communication but attempt to understand the perspectives of both actors in a direct representative relationship. Further research should consider how direct communication is processed by representatives themselves, and whether this impacts on legislation - an area not fully explored by empirical evidence.

### 2.6.2 Indirect Representation

By stating that representation can be through direct means, it stands to reason that indirect representation must also exist (Coleman, 2005b). Indirect representation occurs when citizen's views are made known to their political representative mediated by a third party; such as through advocacy groups, single-issue campaigns, surrogate representatives, or broadcasters. Third parties, including the media, have important democratic functions; acting as a watchdog or a role



in reflecting the diversity of views within society (Müller, 2014). Without third-parties in place, democracy suffers. In a comparison of 47 countries, it was found that states with functioning media institutions correlated with elected representatives that better reflected the preferences in citizens (Müller, 2014). Similarly, a report by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) found that one of the most significant issues for unrepresented people, such as those in poverty, in democracies is their exclusion from the media (UNDP, 2014). The media have a significant role within democracies as facilitators of indirect representation.

Representative third parties, acting as intermediaries, also have other functions, such as a public forum to test the viability or aggregation of citizen values before these are implemented as policy (Livingstone & Lunt, 1994). These values can then be used by political representatives to evaluate the demands and wishes of the citizens they represent. Other groups aside from the media can also act as indirect representatives: petition sites including *Avaaž* and *38 Degrees*, collect signatures by citizens in support of causes, while also acting as advocates on signatories' behalf, making press adverts, and meeting with representatives (Fenton, 2016:189; Dennis, 2019). Other representative third parties, include social leaders and celebrities, who can act as surrogate representatives. During the 2015 General Election, outspoken remarks made by comedian Russell Brand, could be perceived as a form of surrogate representation for his predominantly young fan base (Arthurs & Shaw, 2016). In doing so, he was acting as an advocate to his fans while also highlighting these messages to the political elite, acting as a representative third party.

Indirect representation is where ideas are communicated through relays between citizens and their representatives. While idealised types of representation adopt direct communication as the best form of communication within the citizen-representative relationship, this does not reflect mass media realities. Indirect representation is still the most present in society; so, a lot of research in this area addresses how representative communication can be twisted, distorted by intermediaries (McNair, 2018:61). However, third parties can also have substantial positive effects for representation. Representatives and citizens may not always have the resources or influence to make their views known or be able to respond to all communication sent to them (Jackson, 2004; Howard, 2014, Sept 24). Third parties simplify the process by aggregating the views of the people making known the general issues which are important to them (Müller, 2014). In addition, third parties can also ensure that citizens' views are presented in the most effective way possible (Dale, 2015). A mass of a thousand messages, each different in nature, and discussing different points on the same subject is a less effective depiction of an issue than a single stream of

communication that presents the whole range of arguments coherently. Urbinati noted that advocacy has a significant role in politics, advocate organisations can act as surrogate third parties in the representative-citizen link (2006). Third parties, acting as advocates, can have an important role, representing people who are unable to do so themselves, either through a lack of knowledge, skills, or resources (Maddison & Denniss, 2005). Therefore, third parties who indirectly represent those without the skills to do so themselves increase the number of people represented as part of the political system. This may explain why the research presented above suggests that a greater number of bodies who act as indirect representatives in a political system correlates with politicians and legislatures that are more representative of their populations overall.

There is considerable evidence for the role of third parties in the representative process, performing a range of functions, including transmitting an aggregation of political messages, increasing visibility of group values, or to simplify the political process. However, the role of third parties in representation can be critiqued on several grounds: they may not be established organisations and they may strategically amplify specific voices, while ‘othering’<sup>5</sup> competing propositions, in order to progress their own goals. The methods and platforms chosen by third parties to re-transmit representative messages is a key research area within political communication. However, these are issues that have not been sufficiently discussed in representative theory as of yet.

### *2.6.3 Networked Representation*

The emergence of platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram have influenced the creation of a third form of communicative representation; *Networked Representation*. This form of representation is where representative communication is transmitted within grouped networked systems with no visible third actor. An alternative description could be where a collective of citizens communicate between themselves, this can be analysed to understand the overall political opinions of the group by representatives. Online communications are not always explicitly

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<sup>5</sup> Othering is a process of discrimination, whereby people or values are strategically placed or presented as separate to the norm. This generates the view that these people or values are interoperated as ‘not one of us’, foreign, or of lesser value (see Mountz, 2009:328).

political, or between actors who intend to make their views known but it can still lead to the development of collective groups who demonstrate shared social-political values. For instance, it has been found that young people often make use of communication and online entertainment to express a general feeling about politics – albeit not ‘straightforwardly’ in non-political spaces (Street, Inthron & Scott, 2011). This type of political communication, called everyday political talk by Highfield, can be used to devise consensus from within a networked group of citizens (2016). As these groups grow, they may shape their own group identity, with collective values within oft-quoted subjects, or even memes (Chen, 2012). On the social media site Reddit, the website often refers to different sub-reddits (or site sections) community traits, while other subreddits (such as /r/circlejerk or /r/4chanhivemind) exist solely to critique each group’s collective conscience through satire. These values can be manifested through comment sections, or even which news stories receive upvotes, which is linked to the internal values of the community, rather than the quality of the link (Munhnik, Aral & Taylor, 2013). Similar behaviours are also found on Twitter with groups of users that use specific hashtags often displaying a political opinion through a networked consensus amongst its members (Moorley & Chinn, 2014). For instance, users of the #FBPE (follow back, pro-EU) hashtag use has created their own online unstructured network on Twitter to support the UK remaining in the within the EU, so their general political opinion is easily understood by commentators and representatives alike (Galsworthy, 2018, Feb 9).

**Figure 2.4.** Representative Communication Types

	Actors involved	Format	Model of communication	Presentation of opinions/values
Direct Representation	Representatives, Constituents	Interpersonal	Simple, flat-networked	Direct
Indirect Representation	Representatives, media/third parties, constituents	Mediated	Lilleker’s multi-level model	Re-presented, aggregated, framed, highlighted, or advocated
Networked Representation	Representatives, grouped networks	Mediated & Unmediated Mix	Networked Communication	Displayed as debate, community conscience, values voted

The structure of these networks can be chaotic; while some online groups, such as on Facebook or Reddit will have formal community moderators, these people might not necessarily be leaders of community opinion. An example of this behaviour was the online networked group involved with the Occupy Movement. It seemed to have a more dynamic form of leadership based on which member has the most Facebook ‘likes’ during any given period (Sutherland, Land & Bohm,

2014; Agarwal *et al.* 2014). This leadership structure co-existed with the formal leadership, who provided the organisational backing, while dynamic spokespeople represented the groups' values to a wider audience. Bennet and Sergerberg found evidence of these structures in the study of networked protest groups; which range from flat-structured protest groups without leadership, to organisationally assisted networks that work in partnership with the other organisations in hybrid-power structures (2012). Leaders have no set tenure, they may remain in place as long as their communication is central to the overall network. A user's leadership might only last as long as a message they posted remains vital – a post which may represent a well agreed upon political value within that specific online community (Pancer & Poole, 2016; Highfield, 2016).

Communication within online networks and the outward values they project have significant representative implications. However, there is a gap in the literature in understanding how politicians interact and understand the values in networked representation. Social media sites have often been viewed as either a one-to-one communication tool or a broadcasting mechanism for politicians. To date, no study has researched the representative impact of online communities and the values they project. Particular attention could be given to how political representatives interpret, interact, and represent values demonstrated in viral tweets or memes. Some evidence suggests UK MPs are interacting with these groups, for example Jess Phillips MP is active on the #everywoman hashtag supporting feminist causes, and the former MP for Cambridge, Julian Huppert<sup>6</sup> was previously active on the UK politics section of Reddit while as an MP.

## *2.7 Conclusion: The Theoretical Linkage between Social Media Communication & Representation*

This chapter sought to understand the extent to which current literature on representation and communication explain how representation is transferred through online platforms, specifically social media. It finds that while theories on representation and communication are very much intertwined, the extent to which they have been directly linked together is limited. This could explain the limited amount of literature on the effect of MPs use of social media or online communication has on representation. However, there are some notable ideas that can be

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<sup>6</sup> Julian Huppert's Reddit profile can be found at <https://www.reddit.com/user/julianhuppert>

extrapolated from both areas of the literature. The notion of *representative communication*, is useful where communication can contain or fulfil some type of representative function – from providing political opinions from citizens to MPs to broadcasts that furnish voters with information which can be used to hold their MP to account. How these messages are transferred was also disclosed finding direct, indirect and networked mechanisms. Within these mechanisms is a range of representative types, such as Saward’s representative claims, Pitkin’s four concepts and other types of representation discussed by Mansbridge and Urbinati.

However, the methodological argument for how these are tested through empirical measurements of communication is not clear in their texts. The research suggests no empirical frameworks to understand how communication on social media can be used to conduct representation. In the case of Saward’s claim-making, an argument could be made that testing if a citizen agrees or disagrees with a claim is too simplistic. Instead, one can test representation through Coleman & Karlsson’s literature, that summarises representative impacts into Accountability, Inquiry, and Connectivity/Closeness. However, little of the theoretical developments were written in the context of the impact of social media. These new platforms have substantially changed the nature of political communication, and can be expected to influence how communicative representation is conducted. The next chapter will discuss existing literature that covers direct and indirect forms of communication, but little has been written about networked communication and the impact it has on representational transference. Additionally, questions remain about how much direct and indirect representation be observed between MPs and citizens in the UK. A theoretical perspective might be able to suggest what type of representation happens online and through social media, it is empirical evidence which tells the extent this happens.

### 3 - Representative Communication in UK Politics, MPs & Citizens

MPs in the 1950s were significantly less responsive to the demands or letters from their constituents than their current contemporaries (Norton & Wood, 1993; Norton, 2002:8). Even before Edmond Burke's speech, politicians considered themselves as trustees, using their expertise, experience, and supposed better judgement as representatives to decide what would be in the best interest for their citizens (Burke, 1770[1968]; Judge, 1999b). This elite model of representation limited citizen involvement to elections and the decisions of what candidate they want to represent them, but after that would have little input into the political system until the next election. However, in the 21st century, the elite model of representation is no longer illustrative of political reality. Instead MPs have grown steadily more responsive to their constituents, even to the extent that ratings have been developed (for example, WriteToThem, 2015). More recent increases in the responsiveness of representatives have been argued to be due to the internet, which significantly increased the efficiency and transparency of MPs communication (Scullion *et al.* 2013:4). However, this has been against the backdrop of more systemic changes in the role of the MP which can also be used to explain this change, as we shall see. Despite the causes of this increased receptiveness, it seems that it has been accelerated in recent years, has been argued to be an internet-related effect (Coleman & Moss, 2008; Urbinati & Warren, 2008:392). Others argue that while the internet brings opportunity for increased representativeness in the UK, the platforms that would enable this are seldom used by MPs (Ward & Lusoli, 2005; Norton, 2013:151). Yet with the introduction of each new communication platform, there have been changes to how representational communication is conducted, and this is expected to expand to each new internet technology (Gunther & Diamond, 2003, see also chap.1).

It is in the above context that this chapter seeks to explore the communicative relationship between UK political representatives and their constituents and the growth of computer-mediated communication. Overall, this chapter highlights the changes in communication styles by MPs online, particularly in regards to growing personalisation and use of impression management. However the overall literature suggests that the internet does not pressure MPs to

become more responsive; instead there seems to be a pattern of MPs using new platforms to continue their previous communication platforms of broadcasting to citizens. Overall it suggests that the potential for more direct forms of representation has not yet been facilitated by new media forms. This chapter also highlights a significant gap in the literature on representative-citizen communication due to the primary focus in this area being on focuses on the MP themselves, or top-down perspectives. Yet social media is primarily a two-way flow of information. Therefore, this argues that there are some significant gaps within the bottom-up perspective.

### *3.1 Members of Parliament: Their Roles and Who They Act For*

The House of Commons in the UK is made up by 650 members, one for each constituency, who are elected during a general election. While the House of Commons is only one chamber in a bicameral legislature, it is considered the most important as its membership is directly elected and the executive is formed by members of the party with the most seats (Pulzer 1975:29; Erskine May, 2019:chapt.11). Furthermore, the Parliament Act 1911 established the primacy of the Commons over the Lords. This was supplemented by the House of Lords Act 1999 which gave the Commons control of the membership of the Lords. While there are many legislative bodies within the UK (for example, local councils, and devolved institutions ), Parliament is considered sovereign as it retains the formal ability to abolish devolved institutions by law and as such, it is the highest legislative body within the UK. Jones (2016) asserted this made MPs, the most important representative for many citizens.

As MPs are considered the primary formal representative for constituents, it may be a surprise to find out they do not have a defined set of roles or responsibilities. MPs have no job description other than that they are considered to have the specific purpose of representing the constituents in which they are elected (House of Commons Modernisation Committee, 2007:3). MPs fulfil this role by participating in activities including contributing in debates within the House; voting on legislation; scrutinising legislation as part of a committee; and overseeing the work of government departments. This situation can be explained through historical context – UK political history is characterised as evolutionary, relatively stable and has seemingly avoided the sharp and quick political change that typically bought in formal constitutional roles for

representatives. In comparison to many of its European neighbours, the UK has endured changes to the political system, universal suffrage, and rights movements since the 18<sup>th</sup> century without the need for significant revolutionary transformation (Wright, 2003; Jones, 2016). In comparison, France is on its' Fifth Republic, and Germany its third constitution. Meanwhile, relative stability has meant that the British Parliamentary system has escaped the need any written constitution. Instead, the political system has evolved through Acts of Parliament and legal decisions. Therefore, the formal systems of representation are not codified within a single constitution, but in numerous Acts of Parliament such as the forty-two Acts titled the *Representation of the People Act*, dating back to 1918 which are still in force today, alongside associated acts such as the *Fixed-term Parliament Act 2011* that deals with how elections are called. Overall this has led to a complexity in the method and systems and representation and a role for MPs which has evolved without exact description, excepting the assumption that their role is to represent the people who elected them.

Despite this, there is an unwritten set of assumptions of the duties that MPs can fulfil. For instance, in addition to their role as a legislative member, MPs also have more specific constituency roles, acting on behalf of constituents, either within Parliament, as a powerful friend, or as a local figurehead to champion local causes (Norton & Wood, 1993). The literature goes on to propose three distinct mindsets for which an MP operates: as a representative (acting for constituents); as an opinion-former (advocating); and as a decision-maker (passage of law) (Esaiasson & Holmberg, 1996; Urbinati, 2006). While acting as a representative, they have a specific purpose to transmit the opinions of the constituency to the wider political nation and the executive (Judge, 1999b:27). As an advocate, MPs champion specific causes, which while not at the command of their constituents, do so on behalf of them (Urbinati, 2006). As a decision-maker, they act in a way which allows for the system of politics to continue. They can take roles within the executive as a minister, or a spokesperson for the opposition, which while outside the scope of this thesis's focus (MP-Constituent representation) is worthwhile remembering (UK Parliament, 2010).

Research has sought to develop theoretical categories for the roles that MPs assume: Searing (1994), Norton (1994), and Andeweg (2014) all give perspectives on the role an MP can undertake. These groups are not exclusive, as MPs may fulfil one or more of these roles, but it remains a useful heuristic for explaining MPs actions:



- *The Partisan*: These are MPs who act as party cheerleaders and promotes the ideals and image of their party (see also, Rush, 2001).
- *Ministerial Aspirant*: Who seeks to make themselves suitable for a position within the executive or shadow government.
- *Policy/Issue specialist*: MPs who have specialised in a particular issue and seek to represent it within Parliament, and putting their stamp on relevant legislation.
- *Professional Parliamentarian*: MPs who identify with Parliament, Searing categorised these people into status seekers; Spectators and club men. They often consider themselves expert scrutinisers of legislation.
- *Constituency Member*: This role was previously seen as a negative as MPs who had failed to enter the executive would often become constituency members (Norton, 1981). However, serving constituents has become a significant duty, and many MPs now consider themselves as constituency members (Jackson, 2006). MPs who fall under this category specialise as welfare officers, solving constituents personal problems, and as a local promoter, acting as an ambassador to the local area and ensuring local collective interest.

(Searing, 1994; Norton, 1994; Rush, 2001; Andeweg, 2014).

These roles can be used in the analysis of MPs communicative behaviours, for instance, an MP who tweets more about their party could be argued to be more of a partisan than any other style of MP. This raises a question, if an MP can be found to be more closely associated with one or more of these types, does this signify a change in *who* an MP represents? Some have previously tried to explain the linkage between political actions and whom a representative is trying to represent. Campbell *et al.* found that overall MPs can be found to represent one of four main groups: their *constituency*, who elected them; the *party platform*, to which they were elected; *Parliament* itself, to which they stand; and the *nation* (Campbell, Harrop & Thompson, 1999). Above all of these, arguments have been made that first and foremost MPs, are responsive to their political party – and thus their role as a partisan. Politics in the UK has been dominated since the 19th century by party-centred politics, and during elections, the public often refers to the party, rather than the candidate to whom they wish to elect (Cox, 1987; Jones & Norton, 2013:124). Furthermore, it has long since been considered that in Western European democracies, it is parties, rather than single representatives who are the principal actors in legislatures (Thomassen,

1994:259). One could even argue that legislatures have structurally evolved to accommodate party politics, with the 'role of the House of Commons is to *represent the political parties* [emphasis added] for whom the voters have voted at general elections, and so to determine the political complexion of the government' (Criddle, 2013:159). This type of analysis indicates that a representatives' duty is first and foremost to their political party, as citizens voted for a party rather than the MP themselves. From this perspective an argument could be made that there is little use in studying political representation directly between citizens and representatives and that instead the focus should be on party models of representation and how MPs communicate as a partisan.

However, the literature seems to disagree with this approach. Norton & Wood (amongst others) have argued that research should focus less on single aspects of the representational system, but approach it as a whole (Norton & Wood, 1993). Ultimately, they argue that the structure of representation in the UK is 'triadic' in nature with, representation happening between citizens, MPs, and parties (*ibid*, 1993:28; see also Judge, 1999a). The significance of parties in Westminster does not necessarily translate into parties being the most crucial figure in politics to citizens; as they do not think of parties as their main point of contact for representation, especially those outside of the political party their MP represents (Carman, 2006). Instead, citizens view MPs to be their main point of contact as a representative, while at the same time understanding that their representative will seldom vote against the party (Norton & Wood, 1993). Nevertheless, it seems MPs are eager to appear primarily as a constituency focussed representative. To be seen as an MP who does not act *for* constituents also comes with electoral consequences. As such MPs will rarely ignore constituents and will act for them if the opportunity arises; so long as it is the general will of the constituency, and that the action does not go against an MP's own ideology (Rush, 2001;2004). While they rarely go against the party whip and rebel, MPs can act in other ways for citizens through their constituency role (Cowley & Childs, 2003; Ceron, 2015). Therefore, while MPs may be acting on behalf of a party, the nation, or Parliament, they will also significantly consider their constituents and their representational duty when undertaking various roles. This is to ensure they avoid the potential backlash they could receive by doing the opposite of what the constituents want, without good reason.

It is therefore in the role of constituency MP that representatives have the largest amount of communication with their constituents according to Jackson (2006). He argues that six changes throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries increased levels of communication between MPs and

citizens, explaining why citizens might see MPs as their first point of contact into the political system, these include:

- 1 Expansion of the state and its roles means that the level of contact citizens have with state apparatus has increased significantly, meaning that MPs are more in contact with citizens than ever before.
- 2 It has become an electoral strategy to increase the amount of contact with constituents with the hope of garnishing more support (see also Kam, 2009:207)
- 3 MPs have more time on their hands to undertake constituent matters due to changes in Parliament procedures, technology, and greater available resources.
- 4 The demand from citizens has increased, and their expectations must be met.
- 5 Parties themselves have put pressure on MPs to become more responsive to citizens and to be seen as a 'service' to which they use.
- 6 The growth of certain demographics, such as those within urban areas, whose concerns relate to those found within casework rather than legislation.

(Jackson, 2006).

It is from this perspective that, representationally, we can expect MPs to have more communication with constituents through this role above all else. Furthermore, we can see that while parties are important within Westminster when it comes to communicating with political institutions, it's MPs that citizens turn to. However, theories on the roles that MPs adopt do not discuss how role choice influences the types of communication activity undertaken by an MP.

### *3.2 Communication Between MPs & Citizens*

In all research on representation in Parliamentary systems, creating a direct communicative link between citizens and representatives is considered as the most promising method for ensuring that MPs are aware of their citizen's desires (Saalfeld, 2002; Coleman, 2009; Zittel, 2010). Direct communication of this type is considered representationally beneficial as it conveys information, without mediatisation, and creates increased levels of connectedness compared to voting (Verba *et al.* 1995:48). In addition, direct communication is one of the infrequent occasions where citizens set the agenda (Verba *et al.* 1972:52). Communication has democratic functions, allowing

constituents to voice their views and opinions (Cain *et al.* 1987:52); allows constituents to seek help or information (Rawlings, 1990); and it allows MPs to inquire and find the effects of policy or as a source of expert information (Barker *et al.* 1970; Elling, 1979; Norton, 2002; Karlsson, 2013). It also fulfils the representative functions as accountability, inquiry, and connectedness as described in Chapter Two. Furthermore, it could also be considered that casework has a broader effect too as while helping constituents with welfare issues, important national issues may be highlighted, affected a higher number of citizens than a single constituent's issue (Rawlings, 1990:30; Searing, 1994:122).

Communication with citizens also has important strategic effects. MPs often use letters from constituents to gain political capital in debate, such as stating the volume of letters in support or disdain for a policy issue (Barker *et al.* 1970:53). The numbers of letters sent can also prove useful to MPs as a method of displaying how responsive they are to constituents during election time as a strategy to win votes (Norton, 2007:358). MPs are also under pressure to become more responsive to citizens, to be seen as working harder for them, and providing higher standards of representation as citizens expectations of officeholders has increased throughout the years. Indeed, overall perception of the UK political system by citizens has decreased - suggesting MPs are under pressure to be seen working harder for them. Satisfaction with the way Parliament works is at 36%, six points lower than in 2004, at the same time more citizens want MPs to represent local people (47%) and citizens also want MPs to communicate with constituents more (Hansard Society, 2017). This was confirmed in a study which tested what citizens want from UK representatives, with an overwhelming indication that citizens want a 'strong-minded' constituency-based MP who will work hard and be responsive to them (Vivyan & Wagner, 2015). It can be considered that as a response to the above evidence, MPs will seek to increase overall levels of communication as strategic method to retain or increase their electoral standing.

Increasing levels of direct communication with constituents can have an impact on policy. An early example of this can be seen in the run-up to the 1966 General Election. The Conservative Party planned to write their opposition of the comprehensive school system into their election manifesto. However, following letters from constituents and opinion polls, they made a U-turn on the policy after seeing the support for the schools (Pulzer, 1975:88). More recent examples include the 2008 *Gurkha Justice Campaign* which campaigned for Gurkha soldiers to have the right to abode. Additionally, research based on six developing countries found that the increased communication between citizens and representatives, accelerated by technological change,

brought significant and real policy change in governments as politicians became more representative (NDI, 2013). However, there are situations where political representatives have voted against their citizens' wishes. This is done with justifications ranging from arguing that their expertise puts them in a better position to make judgement, to secure a position of favourability with non-constituent interest groups, or even to secure funds for their re-election campaign (Mezey, 2008). However, as discussed above, this could alienate their constituency.

The foundation of the study of political communication rests within the literature addressing mass media communications. McNair stated that direct communication is often ignored by the subject area, as interpersonal communication was not the main way politicians communicated with their citizens (2018). Historically, MPs wished to limit direct communication, in favour of more valuable voice projection in newspapers or broadcast, which has significantly larger audiences, and more impact (Negine, 1994). Research by Ipsos MORI found that press and broadcast media platforms remain the most impactful method to influence MPs (Phillips, 2014). Likewise, a cross-national study of seven European countries found that politicians seek to cultivate a particular image and wish to be seen as responsive to issues, particularly to issues projected loudly (Midtbø *et al.* 2014). It can be expected that the issues presented the loudest will be those found within press headlines, which MPs will want to be present within (hopefully, in a positive light). Therefore, despite the supposed increase of direct interpersonal communication, the traditional structures of representation in mediated forms still exist and prevalent throughout political communication – and are therefore important to MPs.

### *3.2.1 Trends in Political Communication between MPs & Citizens*

Throughout the literature within political communication there has been a focus on how the style and form of communication have shifted. From this, several main themes can be found that directly relate to citizen-representative communication. Altogether, these relate to how the direction of communication has changed and increased in frequency; the perceived increase in more personalised forms of political communication, and changes in the way citizens access media, current affairs, and how they seek to contact representatives.

### *The increase of direct communication*

The scope of direct and interpersonal communication between representatives and constituents has increased dramatically, and this is partly due to the ease of communication through the internet. Traditionally, MPs found communication with their constituents was through written communication including postal mail, with constituency surgeries and telephone being lesser utilised methods of communication (Dowse, 1972:49; Rawlings, 1990:29). However, in more recent times, MPs have argued that they have started to become overwhelmed by the amount of contact they have with citizens; as email contact has increased while letter communication has remained stable (Dai, 2007:470). This could explain the lack of response by some politicians, in one test, only 49% of political candidates in the 2010 election responded to an email from a hypothetical constituent, and from this, only 27% provided a directly relevant answer to the email (Southern & Purdam, 2016). The result suggested that while political representation could be changed by new technology, giving more scope for politicians to explain themselves and take input from citizens, the systems in place do not necessarily allow this to happen automatically (Southern & Purdam, 2016).

This increase in direct communication goes somewhat against the media trends of the 20th century, where MPs became reliant on mediated communication platforms to reach citizens (Negrine, 1994; Ofcom, 2017a). However, while direct forms of communication have grown significantly, it is important to consider that indirect communication is still the main form of political communication. With direct communication limited in its audience compared to indirect or mediated forms and thus often of smaller concern for politicians (McNair, 2018).

### *Personalisation of politicians*

Recent trends within the use of the media by representatives suggests a shift of focus away from political parties and a focus on the politicians themselves (Adam & Maier, 2010). This follows a long-standing trend for the media to report on a more dramatised version of events, focusing on crimes, conflict, death, disasters and the presentation of the personal side of the story (Negrine, 1994:12). Political stories followed this trend with the personal views of MPs becoming news. New technology has also been a driver for the personalisation of politics (Tumasjan, *et al.* 2010; Parmelee & Birchard, 2011); as a lack of editorial control has allowed representatives to control the image given to constituents, demonstrating personality, flair and relatability to the voting

public (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011). Based on findings in the last chapter, increased personalisation could bring representative benefit by increasing the levels of connectedness felt between citizens and representatives.

### *Shifting media patterns by citizens*

The way citizens consume political content, and overall media habits have changed since the introduction of the internet. A yearly report created by Ofcom shows that there has been year-on-year decreases in the amount of time citizens, especially younger people, spend watching television, as the citizens prefer to consume content over the internet and social media (Ofcom, 2017b). As shown with the rise of the printing press, radio, television, and now the internet, each new communication platform comes with dramatic changes to the business and conduct of political communication (Gunther & Diamond, 2003). The impact the internet has had on British politics, and representation will be discussed in the following sections.

### *3.3 MPs and the Internet*

The internet is regularly used a catch-all term for a series of online communication platforms, such as websites, blogs, e-newsletters and email. While each of these technologies differs considerably, the analysis of the changes they have had on political representation follow a broadly similar pattern, as we shall see. The overall trend suggests that despite initial optimism regarding the potential of the internet to drastically change representation and undo some of the trends found with decreasing levels of public participation, this has largely not been realised (Norton, 2013). Much like Parliament as an institution, MPs have been traditionally reluctant to adopt to new technology and lag behind the UK public when it comes to the use of new communication platforms (Williamson, 2009a). This section seeks to highlight the trends of uptake and use of websites, blogs, e-newsletters and email, and the impact this has on representation. This analysis is part of the context through which social media use by political representatives could be understood.

### 3.3.1 MPs & Websites

Since the first website created for UK politician, Anne Campbell MP in 1994, they have become an essential platform for MPs (Jackson & Lillker, 2012). While the initial uptake of websites was slow, in 2005 only 42% of MPs had active websites, this is no longer the case as a majority of MPs now have at least a basic website (Ward & Lusoli, 2005:67; Auel & Umit, 2018). Indeed, going through the directory of MPs on the *Parliament.UK* website, it is rare to encounter a biographic profile without a link to an MP's personal website. MPs have come to recognise the benefits that having a website brings, leading to their use being somewhat pervasive (Ward & Lusoli, 2005; Norton, 2007). As with almost all new communication platforms, customary claims were made over the potential of MPs websites. Early optimism suggested that MPs' websites would increase communication between citizens and representatives and prove a vital source of information about politicians, government, and policy (Coleman, Taylor, & van de Donk, 1999). While many websites do not necessarily encourage two-way interaction, they have increased the amount of information available and make MPs easier to contact.

Despite initial optimism, the content of MPs websites was far from revolutionary. In a study of the content of MPs websites in 2005, it was found that the information available was mostly about the representative themselves, their actions, biographic information, contact information, with few interactive features: essentially an online brochure (Ward & Lusoli, 2005:71-71). The content was mostly aimed at the dissemination of information to constituents, rather than to encourage two-way communication (Norton, 2007). Information on websites was habitually a replication of content MPs have made or presented elsewhere, such as speeches and press releases; branded 'shovel-ware' (Jackson, 2003; Ward & Lusoli, 2005:62). Thus, websites repeated the strategies used by MPs in mass-media platforms - where the goal was to broadcast their message out to as many people as possible. As a result, while the technology was considered new, the presentation lacked innovation. The reasons for this can be explained through a lack of time, money, and skills. As with the implementation of technology by Parliament, MPs were originally beset with poor resources, poor facilities, and a lack of skills at a time when MPs were becoming increasingly stretched due to increasing workloads (Ward & Lusoli, 2005; Dai, 2007). In addition, the traditional communication strategy for MPs is for interactive communication with a smaller selection of the public through meetings, letters and telephones, and a one-way approach to when dealing with a larger audience (Allan, 2006). MPs (at least at the time) were not equipped to interact with large virtual audiences. Despite not fulfilling their potential, websites did still prove



useful by providing citizens with an easier way to access information of their MPs. As citizens could use internet searches on their MPs name to find contact details, thus helping MPs with their constituency role. Making it easier, at least with the more technologically skilled citizens, to communicate with their representatives (Mossberger, Tolbert, & McNeal, 2008; Escher, 2012). However, with the stipulation that participation by citizens remained an individual decision which was dependant on motivation, and the resources available to citizens to engage in communication (Norris, 2001).

### *3.3.2 MPs & Blogs*

Blogs are webpages that allowed MPs to regularly journal their activities and thoughts. The promise of blogs is that they would host a more interactive space which would allow for debate between representatives and citizens and create open communication between the two (Ferguson & Howell, 2004; Francoli & Ward, 2008). The result of which would be to close the distance between MPs and citizens (Coleman & Wright, 2008). The more informal setting, expectation of regular updates from a personal perspective, and the option built into most blog platforms to allow for comments heralded a major change from static, unchanging, one-way websites. It signalled the first type of political communication which was both open to a large audience and interactive at the same time, challenging the primacy of one-way communication in the communication to large audiences (Coleman & Wright, 2008). In many instances MPs would reply to comments on their blog from members of Parliament - the first real instance of open two-way dialogue. (Norton, 2007).

The first instances of blog usage by MPs was by Richard Allan MP, quickly followed by Tom Watson MP, who were praised for allowing citizens to see them as more personable, or 'real' people (Coleman, 2005c; Coleman & Moss, 2008:19). However, uptake was somewhat slow; by 2005, only eight MPs could be found with blogs (Auty, 2005). While there was initial excitement about the platform, no evidence suggested that blogs made it into any type of mainstream acceptance by the public. While blogs were interesting to the media, academics and technologists, it ultimately failed to excite the wider public (Ferguson & Griffiths, 2006). This was largely a result of MPs seeking the attention of a wider body of the public, but only posting the type of content which appealed to the already politically engaged (Auty, 2005:342). Due to the lack of

public readership MPs who were reluctant to start a blog did not feel pressured into the service, to the same extent to which they were with social media (Williamson, 2009b). Meanwhile the MPs who did blog started to engage with them less, and many blogs have been left unattended, such as David Davies MP which has not been updated since 2007, removed (see also Kate Hoey MP & Jeremy Hunt MP), or the format changed considerably to new platforms without comment sections (Tom Watson's and Rosie Winterton's). Many blogs slowly became news sections. Despite this, blogs were a milestone, and while the technology and usage failed to live up to the hype, significant academic contributions regarding the potential for open and transparent communication platforms should be reappraised through social media. Stephen Coleman's contribution to deliberative democracies, which will be discussed later in this review, while never realised in blogs, might be applicable to newer Web 2.0 technologies.

### *3.3.3 MPs & Emails*

The use of emails by MPs has been one of the most observable, but at the same time lacklustre, changes to how citizens and MPs interact. Emails are a method for exchanging messages between people on internet-connected devices. Usually these emails mostly contain just text between two people, but sometimes can include attached images or other documents. Compared to letters they provide a cheaper, instantaneous, communication platform. Initial hopes for the email suggested that it could be used to bring MPs and citizens closer together through more technological means (Coleman, 1999a). Despite the initial reaction and scepticism by MPs the service soon became normalised and emails are used extensively by political representatives and their staff – mostly as a replacement for postal mail as opposed to a new form of communication (Coleman, 2002; Dai, 2007:466; Norton, 2007). The initial reception following widescale use suggested that emails did increase the frequency of communication that MPs have with constituents (Williamson, 2009a).

However, the experience of email also shows the issues with increased communication with constituents for MPs, especially regarding time management. Emails have allowed those who would not have contacted an MP otherwise to do so due to lower resource costs when compared to postal or telephone communication, drastically increasing the frequency of communication received by MPs (Coleman & Spiller, 2003:7; Tobias, 2012). This is generally positive, however,

MPs have struggled due to the ever-increasing workloads as a result. Former MP, Andrew George, stated in 2014 that the rise in email led to significant time constraints, stating ‘if MPs provided meticulous, personalised responses to every communication they received, they would achieve nothing else nor ever have time to’ (James, 2014, Jan 22). Academics have referred to this as email overload, with MPs having to spread resources thinner, leading to a lower quality of responses (Dai, 2007:470; Tobias, 2012). At the same time as the quantity of emails has increased, MPs resources most importantly staff, have not proportionately increased alongside (Dai, 2007). It is not uncommon for MPs to receive over 300 emails a day (after removing spam), which some MPs, particularly those in marginal seats, feel compelled to respond to (Crew, 2015:4). This experience may explain MPs response patterns on social media to date, as found within this research, MPs receive hundreds of messages per day on social media, while at the same time not having adequate resources to respond. Simply increasing communication without also accounting for the need for additional resources will cause MPs to either not respond, or do so poorly.

### *3.4 Explaining the Uptake of Internet Communication Platforms by MPs*

The uptake and use of websites, blogs, and e-newsletters by MPs follow similar paths (Jackson, 2006). Firstly, the early adopters of the new technology are generally politicians or parties from the political left. Analysis of websites by parties in the UK, United States, and Australia from 1994 showed a pattern of left-wing adoption, followed quickly by right-wing parties following suit (Gibson & Ward, 2002:167). With a trend of left of centre progressives becoming early adopters of internet technologies for the purpose of creating a stronger democracy, and centre to right-wing parties quickly following soon after not wanting to be left behind (Loader & Mercea, 2011). This follows patterns of uptake from other internet services, such as USENET and BBS<sup>7</sup> groups in the United States, where the first groups were created by left-leaning Democrats, which was followed later by USENET groups supportive of Republican values (Davies, 2005). In the UK, we find a similar pattern with the first website for an MP belonging to former Labour MP, Anne Campbell, while the first to blog were Richard Allen (Liberal Democrat) and Tom Watson

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<sup>7</sup> USENET & BBS groups was an early form of internet discussions created in the early 1980s and offered many rudimentary functions such as messaging boards, and direct chats.

(Labour). The first MP to join Twitter was also from the political left – Alan Johnson in 2007 in support of his deputy leadership bid (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011:86). Alternative perspectives of the characteristics of early uptake look at age and cohort, Ward and Lusoli in 2005 found that younger MPs and those from newer cohorts tended to have a website (Ward & Lusoli, 2005:69). Conversely, age and cohort can also indicate which MPs do not have a website, rather than who does as the widespread adoption of the internet service increased. From the pre-study of this research, the characteristics of users who did not have a Twitter account were older MPs who have sat in the House for a long time. This builds on the findings by Jackson & Lilleker who found that the demographics who first adapt to new technology often lose this benefit upon widespread adoption (2011). After a technology starts to become widespread, there are three common factors found within the literature which influence the uptake of a new communications platform: *Bandwagon theory*; *Circumvention of the media*; & *Electioneering*.

#### *Bandwagon Theory*

Uptake of new technologies can be explained by MPs choosing to use a new service because of their perceptions of other representatives use of the platform. For example, MPs began to see their contemporaries or competitors using a service, they too will sign up, so not to be left behind or to avoid being perceived as behind the times (Ward & Gibson, 1998; Gibson & Ward, 2002; Jackson, 2003; Ward & Lusoli, 2005). This factor can also be used to explain the uptake and rise of the use of e-newsletters and blogs (Francoli & Ward, 2008). This mentality of waiting until others have trialled it does seem to be logical. Political representatives have limited resources, and new technologies come and go daily. Social media websites such as *ello*, or *Google+* both received significant hype at their launch, however have seen very little use thereafter. Therefore, by waiting until other representatives' use the service and consequently testing its usefulness can be a logical explanation for politician's hesitancy to become early adopters (Evans & Oleszek, 2003).

#### *Circumvention of the media*

The circumvention of the media another factor frequently used to explain the uptake of internet communication throughout the literature. Politicians regularly seek communicative spaces which give a beneficial perspective of themselves (McNair, 2018). In doing so, they often attempt to find ways to communicate with the electorate without mediation from a third party that may

distort their intended message. Before the internet, direct audience communication was limited to resource-intensive platforms, such as letters, advertising, and face-to-face communication. The introduction of the internet offered MPs a low-cost solution to directly talk to their audience. This has proven popular with political representatives for this purpose, which has been well documented within the literature (Blumler & Gurevitch, 2001; Döring, 2002:9; Ward & Gibson, 2003; Gitlin, 2003; Westling, 2007; Biddix & Park, 2008:875; Golbeck, Grimes & Rodgers, 2010; Parmlee & Birchard, 2011; Kruikemeir, 2014). Internet communication allows a political representative to spread their messages to a large audience, circumventing the media. At the same time, it allows MPs to cultivate themselves a personal audience which empowers the representative and, in some instances, has risen them to celebrity status. For example, Jess Phillips MP can partially attribute her high profile due to her following on Twitter.

The impact of MPs desire to circumvent the internet can also explain the early adoption of internet communication by third party politics. Often ignored by the traditional media, these parties and politicians seek out ways to present their message to a wider audience as possible and counter media focus on major parties and politicians (Stanyer, 2008; Lassen & Brown, 2010). This explanation has been used in the analysis of early uptake of internet technologies by the Liberal Democrats, Green, and UKIP parties and their representatives (Baxter, Mercella & Varifs, 2011).

### *Electioneering*

The third factor which can explain uptake is electioneering. Previous research has found that MPs who are elected on a small majority, have specific traits different from other MPs. This is because of increased pressure to be seen as a ‘good’ MP by their constituents, so to help them win more votes at upcoming elections. Marginality has expressed different trends amongst MPs as marginal politicians spend more on postage and attempted communication with their constituents (Bale, Reilly & Witt, 2008). Marginality can also be used to explain the uptake of internet services (Ward & Lusoli, 2005; Ward, Lusoli & Gibson, 2007; Norton, 2007). It was also found that marginal MPs with websites also kept them more updated (Williamson, 2009b). In Sweden it was found that marginality had a large effect on Twitter uptake by politicians, but this relationship was less prominent amongst UK MPs (Jackson & Lillker, 2011; Enli & Skrogerbø, 2013). This can be explained as MPs in marginal seats will therefore seek to connect more with constituents, through a greater number of channels, and on platforms that display little hostility towards themselves.

While the literature focuses on the strategic aims for explaining the uptake of internet technology, there is one additional explanation seldom explored, MPs seeking interaction with voters. There has been plenty of research on new media that has found that political representatives often claim that the reason they are on internet communication services, is a genuine desire to interact with constituents (Gibson, Lusoli & Ward, 2008:112; Grant, Moon & Grant, 2010). While politicians have given reasons for using technology based around engagement, this motive could be a rhetorical device.

### *3.5 The Impact of Websites, Blogs & Emails on Representation*

As each new communicative technology has developed, the initial literature on its use politically speaks positively of the possibilities the technology can have for representation. However, as the realities of the technological platform are realised, gradually disappointment creeps into the literature (see Norton 2013). This follows a similar path to that of the *Garner Hype Cycle*, where an innovation generates excitement over its potential, followed by disillusionment, until its actual use can be determined (Garner, n.d). This cycle can be seen by the introduction of websites, as the initial hope of online agoras and online public spheres was never met, leading to initial disappointment in the performance, until websites limitations were finally realised, and MPs sites became accepted as mainly a source of easily accessible information (Coleman, 1999a, Norton, 2013). This cycle can also be seen with the introduction of social media, as will be described later in this chapter. The purpose of this section is to analyse the impact of internet communication in perspective of their normalisation of use by MPs and the established uses of them. In reviewing the research for this section, the majority of literature on the use of new technologies by MPs focussed on how they are used, or why they are used, as opposed to their impact on representation. This finding echoed by Leston-Banderia *et al.* when looking at how Parliaments have adapted to new technologies (2008).

When looking at the rise of technology, Ward & Lusoli theorised that technology often has three effects (2005:61). The first effect seen is modernisation, where the technology allows for efficiency gains, often in reference in allowing communication to be quicker, cheaper, and easier to access. For example, the introduction of email modernised and began to replace postal mail allowing for little to no cost communication, instantly, and to anyone who can access an email

account. The second effect is reinvigoration. This is where the new technology strengthens existing political systems, for example by increasing citizen engagement with politics through internet platforms in new ways, or by the introduction of technology which somehow improves on previous processes. The third is erosion; this is where traditional systems are replaced or removed due to technology. For example, it was thought that the internet would personalise politics to the extent that MPs could circumvent traditional party structures (Ward & Lusoli, 2005:61). The empirical evidence below will suggest that the majority of internet communication falls under the modernisation category; as email has replaced letters; websites are used by MPs to repost content from elsewhere; and e-newsletters are often replacements for leaflets or reposts of press releases. The majority of internet technology usage is often replicating what MP were doing elsewhere.

Despite this, there have been some significant impacts on representation. The most important of which is the increased number of people becoming politically active, and thus have their voices represented. The evidence for this starts with initial findings that websites and email have significantly increased the ease of which political representatives can be contacted (Anduiza *et al.* 2010). This results in a growth in the number of people getting in contact with their MP (Gibson, Lusoli & Ward, 2005). In many instances, online contact rates have increased significantly, while offline contract rates have not decreased (Gibson, Lusoli & Ward, 2005; di Gennaro & Dutton, 2006:306). Perhaps more relevant for this thesis is the impact of the increased the frequency in citizen-initiated contact by citizens who were not previously politically active (Gibson, Lusoli & Ward, 2005:578; Cantijoch *et al.* 2015). Similar findings were found by Escher who found that contact facilitation platforms such as WriteToThem have increased the number of people who had not previously written to their MP or had taken other political activities such as party membership (2012:300). However, Escher did find that young people were unlikely to use contact facilitation platforms (2012:276). Despite this, the increase of mobilisation is particularly important when the logic of Mansbridge's argument for descriptive representation is used. As the variety of political opinion is heard, not only does this go some way to solve the representation of previously unrepresented groups in legislatures, but the range of arguments and debates leads to a better democracy overall (Mansbridge, 1999). These effects may increase, as according to Cantijoch *et al.* participatory ladder model, citizens that take some political action will often go on to take further actions later on (Cantijoch *et al.* 2015).

The secondary effect of the internet is to challenge the traditional definition of a constituency. Rehfeld predicted that the internet could challenge the tradition that MPs only represent constituents within a select geographic area, with the introduction of (e-)representation of online constituencies built from on specific subject areas and common interest (Rehfeld, 2005). MPs can act as a surrogate representative to citizens from other areas by becoming issue specialists (Rush, 2001). Similarly, the logic of the example given in the last chapter, of a representative speaks on gay issues they are also representing citizens outside their constituency, would open the door for MPs to use the internet to represent online groups. The prospect of e-constituencies was reappraised by Jackson & Lilleker (2009; 2012), who found there was some evidence of MPs interacting and representing online interest groups. However, their analysis does not go far enough and warrants further exploration.

There continue to be questions about the unfulfilled promises of the internet. While MPs use of online communication has some positive effects for representation, there are still areas in which they could improve (Norton, 2013). Most notably, the failure of MPs to engage in interactive functions available of websites, blogs & e-newsletters (Ward & Lusoli, 2005; Norton, 2007). While this behaviour has previously been explained, the potential of social media does raise interesting prospects for increasing dialogue. For instance, unlike other online platforms, MPs have little control over the platform itself, and unlike blogs where MPs could turn comment sections off, MPs have no control over the share, like, and comment buttons on social media websites – which could effectively force MPs to engage.

### *3.6 MPs & Social Media*

In 2007, the first MP signed up to the social media site, Twitter, this began one of the quickest rates of increased usage of any new internet platform by MP (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011). In 2009, less than ten per cent of MPs used Twitter, by 2011, it was just over forty per cent, this increased substantially again, and by 2017, eighty-eighty per cent of MPs (573) had a Twitter account (Jackson & Lillker, 2012; Harrison, 2011, July 30; McLoughlin & Ward, 2017). While social media websites were originally conceived as an online platform for sharing updates and pictures, it quickly evolved into a political space (Zimmer & Proferes, 2014). It became a place of political news sharing, a space where elections can be won or lost, a hall for debating, it has fostered



grassroots movements, and even has been claimed to have brought governments to their knees (Maireder & Schwarzenegger, 2011; Juris, 2012; Bruns, Highfield & Burgess, 2013; Kruikemeir, 2014). As social media has evolved into a deeply political space, MPs have used it to post about what they are doing; providing a ringside view of Parliament and keep their audiences updated on their actions (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011). These messages often find themselves reposted outside of social media and are highlighted in news reports. One of the most famous examples of this was the selfie taken by then US President, Barack Obama, David Cameron, UK Prime Minister, and Helle Thorning-Schmidt, Danish Prime Minister at Nelson Mandela's funeral which made international news (Miltner & Baym, 2015). Much like the internet, it seems social media has successfully become part of politics itself.

Social media excited many political researchers. After the failure of blogs to provide interactive dialogue between MPs and citizens, social media opened up the revitalisation of these ideas but in a new form. As 'there is a need for a legitimate online space in which political representatives and represented citizen can exchange views and seek clarification from each other' (Coleman, 2009:97). By 2009, it was claimed that social media had the potential to be a simple way for representatives to seek out the views of their constituents and increase access of representatives to citizens (Jackson & Lilleker, 2009:248; see also Parmlee & Birchard, 2011). Social media could provide these services on a large scale with significant uptake - which blogs never had. Indeed, social media is regularly used by sixty-one per cent of the British public (Ofcom, 2017:186). Twitter alone has a larger audience than some newspaper titles with twenty-one million users in 2017 (Ofcom, 2017b:190). With social media having a captive audience of UK citizens, it would be almost inevitable that MPs would seek to use the sites to contact voters.

### *3.6.1 Explaining the uptake and use of social media*

The pattern of uptake on social media websites seems to have followed a somewhat similar path to other internet communication technologies, continuing the trend found in above. In an analysis of first fifty-one MPs who had become early adopters of Twitter in 2011, it was found patterns of uptake that replicated bandwagon traits (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011). Meanwhile, the familiar demographic traits in early adopters could be found: with an over-representation of young MPs, and those from newer Parliament cohorts on Twitter (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011). In

addition, while the Conservative party had the most amount of seats in the House of Commons, the majority of MPs on Twitter were from the Labour party who only had 54.2% of MPs, but 66.7% of users; at the same time, the Liberal Democrats found themselves over-represented on Twitter, making 9.8% of the house, but 17.6% of all MPs on Twitter (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011:95). Marginality, however, was not trend which was followed onto social media, as the vote share of the last election had less impact in uptake when compared to other technologies (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011:98). Nevertheless, the role of marginality did have an impact on the type of content, as MPs had different styles of communication based on their electoral return, as described later. While the overall number of MPs on Twitter and Facebook has increased dramatically, it has yet to be understood how the demographic makeup of social media has changed. Although, much like websites and emails, the users of social media by MPs is expected to have normalised amongst members of the House – with MPs having signed up to at least one SNS (chapter 6). To some extent, having a social media account is now considered as expected and mundane as politicians having a website, a telephone, and an office, and not having any social media profiles is considered the exception rather than the norm (Highfield, 2016:123).

The first reason for social media use by MPs is partly due to its prominence in many citizen's daily lives. As entertainment is taking more and more of citizens screen time, at the reduction of current affairs content, MPs have found themselves fighting for the attention of citizens, and thus can often be found in spaces which have a significant citizen audience (Ross & Bürger, 2014). Put simply, MPs will go where citizens are to communicate with them. It is also a service which citizens have come to demand representatives use and to meet citizen expectations many MPs have used the services as a result (Tromble, 2016). In a survey of New Zealand MPs, it was found that the reasons why MPs use social media follow similar patterns as described above: circumvention of the media, citizen interaction, electioneering, and because MPs see other politicians using it (Ross & Bürger, 2014). However, MPs highlighted the information role of social media, as MPs and their offices used it to stay up-to-date to events and news which they previously were unaware, or which was not reported in other media (Ross & Bürger, 2014).

However, unlike other services, MPs have also come to see social media as a significant risk. Social media platforms present an online environment where MPs often have very little control compared to traditional media platforms to which they are used to (Highfield, 2016). In some situations, the speed of which information can spread can create its own issues. Off the cuff remarks, which social media encourages, can be misinterpreted, or politicians can make ill-advised

comments while on the move. Such as the previously mentioned tweet by Emily Thornberry MP in 2014 (Chapter 1; see also BBC, 2014, November 21). Alternatively, when US Congressman Anthony Weiner's misunderstanding of technology led to the accidental publication of explicit photos of his genitals, alongside suggestive messages to somebody who was not his wife, the pictures spread quickly before he had chance to delete them (Oravec, 2012). The same processes that give potential of the social media for favourable dissemination of information can also cause significant issues for politicians, which may put them off the use of the service. The increased access to MPs has resulted in undesirable effects. There has been significant attention in the media regarding the levels of abuse and harassment UK MPs have received, particularly on Twitter, which has discouraged some from the service (Crew, 2015:175; McLoughlin & Ward, 2017). New Zealand MPs have even been discontinued their use of Twitter due to levels of (often anonymous) abuse, and instead only use social media sites that give them a greater level of control over who can contact them (Ross & Bürger, 2014:58).

### *3.6.2 The direction and content of communication*

The use of social media by MPs is hugely diverse; dependant on factors such as personality, the social media site used, or position/role within government. However, throughout the literature there are general trends which can be found, some of which have an impact on the quality of representative communication. The first of which is the direction of communication. As found in the first and second chapters, the direction of communication is important in determining the types of conversation between representatives and citizens, and if the communication could be considered representationally advantageous. The literature for website and blogs shows MPs have opted for a broadcasting approach, and this limited the representational benefit of online communication. However, MPs use of social media shows a mixed picture in the analysis of the direction of communication. Initial research suggested that representatives simply replicated what they were doing elsewhere, and used social media to broadcast messages (Grant, Moon & Grant, 2010; Jackson & Lilleker, 2011:96; Enli & Skogerbø, 2013). In some situations Swedish politicians had attempted to be perceived as being interactive on social media, but their actual usage remained broadcast in style, in which this approach was described as parasocialism (Larsson & Moe, 2012). This is despite the interactive features on social media, and the ability to foster closer interpersonal links with their constituents (Otterbach *et al.* 2012). Twitter, in particular, was used

by politicians to disperse information, linking to news content about themselves posted elsewhere (Highfield, 2016:125). Williamson described this usage pattern as MPs attempting to take the advantages of social media, with little consideration or understanding about its purpose (Williamson, 2009b). Instead of adopting new tools in ways they were designed to be used, MPs attempted to co-opt the service into their pre-existing media strategies.

A 2016 study into the Twitter habits of Danish, UK, and US politicians, found that Danish representatives encouraged and engaged with interactive communication the most, with UK MPs following closely behind, and US politicians being last in interactive dialogue (Thromble, 2016). This is a finding that parallels that of Broersma & Graham, who found that UK MPs were more likely to broadcast than their Dutch equivalents, but there was still evidence of interaction (2012, see also Kruikmeir, 2014:132). In 2013, it was found that thirty-one per cent of tweets by UK MPs were interactive in nature (Graham, Broersma, & Hazelhoff, 2013a). Therefore, while there is still a large amount of broadcasting, there is evidence to suggest that broadcasting was not the only type of communication between MPs and citizens. It was found that communications or brief exchanges often took place, where questions were asked, opinions exchanged, and information clarifications provided (Thromble, 2016). The author later commented that while this was not an idealised public sphere, the fact that MPs and citizens were interacting together in an open space online, is of major significance (Thromble, 2016). Indeed, if this research could be substantiated, it would go at least some way to realising the online communication discussed by Coleman and his ideal of direct deliberation. This finding suggests a significant change to previous studies and provokes interesting questions for further study. Such as the changes that have happened to MPs communication styles within the six years between Jackson & Lilleker's and Thromble's analysis. Avenues for this analysis could seek to understand if MPs have listened to advice from Williamson (2009a), and the Speakers Commission on Digital Democracy (2015) to use the full potential of social media to interact more. Alternatively, have pressures from citizens for more interactive political connections to their representatives, and declining current affairs content led to change (Broersma, & Hazelhoff, 2013:74). As these pressures could have manifested into MPs changing their style of online communication to better reflect the wants of citizens. Highfield suggested that the use of selfies, emoji's and memes by politicians is evidence that they are starting to be more understanding and reflective of how citizens use the platforms (2016:128). However, an encompassing understanding of the relationship between citizens and

representative's communication styles has not yet been fully understood, and additional research is required to determine the interlinkage of all the above-presented factors.

In addition to this, while much of the research presented in this area is based on Twitter, there are factors which suggest the direction of communication by MPs varies dramatically between each social media website. Highfield suggested that Facebook was actually a stronger option for interactive political dialogue, while Twitter is better for broadcasting due to systematic elements (2016:126). This could be explained as Twitter allows for asymmetric networks where one user can be followed by many without the need to reciprocate, while Facebook can be described as symmetrical network, where both parties need to accept each other as friends to form a relationship (Porter, 2009). This finding is echoed in research into MPs in New Zealand which found the environment on Facebook fostered better relationships with constituents than on Twitter (Ross & Bürger, 2014). However, as shown before, as the majority of research is based on Twitter, the Facebook element to the online communication between MPs and citizens has yet to be thoroughly analysed. This presents a significant gap in the research that needs much closer attention.

From the research that has looked at the impact of social media on how MPs communicate, there is a clear trend that communication has shifted towards more personalised content by MP, or content about the MPs self-image. This is through an increase in content which highlights who they are, what they are doing, or creating a type of post which gives a particular impression about themselves to their audience. Highfield's analysis on the use of social media by Australian MPs suggested that they regularly attempt to show off their personality by mixing in their everyday practices with their political image (2016:128). For example, Kevin Rudd used selfies in the context of what he was doing in an attempt to personalise his politics, making him more relatable to citizens (Highfield, 2016:128, see also Manning & Phiddian, 2015). These types of actions give the impression that representatives are ordinary, and thus reduces the distance between representatives and citizens (Ross & Bürger, 2014:60). Jackson and Lilleker looked at this type of Twitter usage and analysed it through the framework of impression management (2011, for impression management, see Goffman, 1959). This is where media interactions are carefully strategised to give a chosen impression of the MP. In the instance of many social media interactions, through personalisation, MPs wish to be seen as working hard for their constituents (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011:97). This is somewhat collaborated by Golbeck *et al.* who found many

social media posts by MPs dispersed information about the MP, what they are doing, and where they had written to promote themselves (2010:1612)

### *3.7 Citizens' communication to MPs*

The above debate highlights the current focus on the ways in which MPs have sought to contact citizens. This literature demonstrates that the majority of MPs, in some form or another, have made communicative attempts towards citizens through the internet and social media. However, significantly less focus has been given to how citizens attempt to contact MPs. While it has been argued that decreasing forms of participation such as voting have made representative communication much more important as a means for constituents to in act political change (Aars & Strømsnes, 2007; Hooghe & Marien, 2012). This lack of research on citizens could be due to the small minority of citizens who choose to participate in this way (Escher, 2012). Much of the research which aims to understand citizen participation heavily focusses on more 'traditional' methods, such as voting and party membership. As a result, limited attention has been given on this bottom-up perspective of citizen-representative interaction. This section seeks to understand the availability of literature from a bottom-up perspective and, if any, can be found in the context of social media. Furthermore, this section will seek to understand what drives citizens to contact MPs, and if it could be expected that similar influences can be found in the use of social media.

Previous communication from citizens towards MPs was primarily through postal mail (Rawlings, 1990; Searing, 1994). Historically, this was due to a lack of other communicative options. Most constituents would struggle to get airtime on a broadcast platform or space within newspapers in which their MP might see, as this was an option only open for those with significant resources (Negrine, 1994). Other options open to citizens before the internet were in-person surgeries or telephone, both somewhat more resource-intensive compared to latter communication technologies (Williamson, 2010). During the 1980s citizen-initiated contact started to increase in the UK, without any significant technological change in how citizens contacted their representatives (Parry *et al.* 1992). This increase was attributed to the growing role of the MP, rather than any new communication platform. With MPs having more constituency responsibilities in which constituents sought to contact them regarding (Searing, 1994). Also, there has been a growth in the expectations citizens have from political representatives, with

voters asking for MPs to take more actions on their behalf while at the same time expecting MPs to be more responsive (Rush, 2001). This suggests that subsequent increases in communication could be down to changing political roles, rather than any new technological reasons.

While there have been general increases in the frequency of citizen-initiated contact, more recent increases in contact rates between citizens and representatives suggest that new technology, including email, is the likely cause. For instance, see section 3.3.3 where MPs blamed the increased use of email from constituents for overloading their offices with correspondence. The simultaneous rise in citizen-initiated interaction, and a lowering of the resources needed to message can explain the more recent increases in communication. Indeed, seventy per cent of citizens said that the internet has made it easier for them to participate politically, while forty per cent also said they now participate because of the internet (Williamson, 2010:6, see also Ofcom, 2009). The report suggested that the internet has made it easier for citizens, and therefore made them more likely to contact their representatives. However, socio-economic status still mattered, with those from a higher social class also having the highest uptake of internet technologies to contact their MP (Williamson, 2010:8). This suggests a pattern where general increases in communication due to the increase of the constituency role of MPs has been compounded by the ease of new technology platforms. Escher found that while contact rates by citizens towards MPs are up, the literature does not provide evidence that it is technology alone that is the main driver of change (2012:105). He goes on to find that the two effects; *motivation* to contact a representative alongside the capability and *ease* of communication with an MP can be used to predict levels of communication (Escher, 2012:254). Therefore, while internet technologies are increasing citizen-representative interaction, there still must be the motivation to do so. However, overall levels of contact remain low with only twelve per cent of citizens in the UK saying they have contacted a local representative within the last 12 months (Blackwell, Fowler & Fox, 2019:38). Technological change is only part of the story – a finding supported by previous research that found that the effects of internet communications are often muted without political change as well (Lusioli, Ward & Gibson, 2006). The argument could be made that making MPs easier to contact will only go so far, and instead, looking at the participation motivations of citizens might create a better understanding of contact rates between representatives and citizens.

### 3.7.1 Explanations for citizens participation and citizen initiated-contact

While internet technologies and the changing roles of MPs can explain the increase of indirect communication, this does little to explain the overall low levels of citizen interaction with MPs. Within this literature are several competing theories that seek to explain the current levels of participation by citizens in western liberal democracies. These theories, when assessed can be used to make assumptions regarding why citizens may choose, or choose not to contact their local representative. What can be agreed upon by research in this area is that trends in political participation do not automatically mean there is a reduction in political interest in citizens, instead that citizens are not participating as they had previously.

The first models of political participation look into a citizen's circumstance. The classic works of Verba & Nie (1972) and Verba *et al.* (1995), find that gender, age, employment, income, education level and class, are factors to explain participation. This perspective suggests that citizens with more at stake financially and socially seek to exert higher levels of political influence, and those with the skills to do so (education) will also be more inclined to act politically. However, this perspective has been challenged in recent years as somewhat simplistic, as political participation has dropped across all citizens, which cannot be explained through socio-economic perspectives alone. Fiorina argues that while the above models can predict who is more likely to participate, they do not explain why many who have the resources to participate do not (Fiorina, 2002:258). Instead, models need to look further into why people are motivated to participate, rather than factors which allow them to participate (*ibid*, 2002:530).

Other explanations for current levels of participation address societal and political changes as factors for change. Putnam argues that community structures which encouraged civic action have broken down, leaving many citizens less inclined to pursue traditional forms of participation (Putnam, 2000; Putnam, 2002). An example of this is decreasing party affiliation. However, Fox finds that citizens simply have moved away from parties as being the primary source of having their views transferred into policy, as they no longer feel that parties are the most effective mechanism (Fox, 2009). Instead, citizens have opted to move away from some more demanding forms of participation towards newer, postmodernist, and more accessible forms that focus on issues that more closely resonate with individuals own views (Norris, 2002; Stolle and Hooghe, 2005; Esaiasson, 2010; Stolle and Micheletti, 2013). From this, Norris argues that while citizens might still be participating, their participation and engagement in politics should be measured



through political interest, rather than traditional participatory activities (1999). However, Norris later amends this assumption with a word of warning; while citizens might still be participating, they are doing so in ways which distance themselves from the political sphere and influence (2011, see also Esaiasson, 2010).

An alternative perspective put forward by Michael Schudson, argues that citizens have not become disinterested in politics, or that they have necessarily started participating in new ways, but they now represent what he calls a *monitorial citizen*. This is where citizens have distanced themselves from seeking to guide politics, but continue to seek information on the political arena and will intervene when they consider it necessary (Schudson, 1996;1998). The implications of this are that citizens, rather than being disinterested in politics and unengaged, are more optimistically monitoring the situation through the intake of political information, content with the current situation until events make them act: making participation a rational choice. To Schudson, the monitorial citizen is not passive, but active when they feel action is needed (Schudson, 1998). There is some (limited) examples of this type of model in the UK, with twelve per cent of citizens in 2019 saying they have contacted a local political representative, while thirty-seven per cent said they would contact their local representative if they felt strongly enough about an issue (Blackwell, Fowler & Fox, 2019:38-39). This is supplemented by existing research from the UK which suggests that ‘feeling strongly’ about an issue accounted for eighty-one per cent of when a citizen contacts an elected representative (Williamson, 2010:5). In comparative Nordic countries, more robust analysis has found stronger evidence of monitorial citizens, especially in those who have strong postmaterialistic values (Hooge & Dejaeghere, 2007).

Yet, how do these shifting forms of participation compare to citizen-initiated contact? Aars & Strømsnes find that while forms of participation are diverse, ranging from political consumerism to civil disobedience, the factors behind what motivates citizens to take action remains consistent (2007). Those who feel motivated to protest will also feel motivated to contact their MP for the same reason, although some high-cost political activities require increased levels of motivation (*ibid*, 2007). Further evidence suggests that unlike other forms of political participation, contacting did not have the same socio-economic model (Verba & Nie, 1972:132). Multiple papers have found that the significance of motivational needs of the citizen are much higher than socio-economic variables (Herlinger, 1992; Thomas & Melkers, 1999). To explain this, one might look into the nature of the constituency role, many citizens contact MPs as a last resort, needing a

friendly advocate to help in attaining welfare or government services. This makes it more likely that citizens who need help might come from a wider socio-demographic background.

Oppositely, studies by Vedlitz *et al.* (1980) suggests that citizen-initiated contact is a unique form of citizen participation, where it is an individual act outside of traditional forms of participation. It is an action a citizen takes by themselves and not as collective, making it somewhat uncommon. Furthermore, in citizen-initiated communication, the topics are frequently narrow or a personal issue that the representative needs to either act or respond to (Aars and Strømsnes, 2007:96). Furthermore, contacting a representative also suggests a level of confidence in the political institutions, and that the representative will be able to help or act upon the citizen's communication (*ibid*, 2007:96). One could argue that citizens may be contacting MPs more, as they feel more confident that their MP will act, or at least feel that it is better than alternative action. Previous work has suggested that political efficacy is linked to participation which suggests the above assumption to be correct (Sharp, 1982).

However, it is unknown how these theories of contact apply to the use of social media. Letters and emails make up the bulk of what the above theories on citizen-initiated contact are based on, and primarily take place in a private space through long textual forms of communication (Putnam, 1993:99). Yet hypothesis can be made based on prior research. For instance, research by Reddick found that citizens will use more resource costly communication forms depending on how serious of a matter they are writing about (2005). For instance, a constituent might write an MP a letter when the matter is related to something important to them, while using email for lesser matters. From this, it could be suggested that citizens may use social media for communicating with MPs when the issue is not deemed serious, while they will use a more tried and tested communication platform to ensure a response for important matters. Empirical research in this area is somewhat illusive, as the private nature of this communication makes it difficult to study. On the other hand, social media is open to the public, and the style and tone of communication are different and has more features than emails, and to a greater extent, letters. For instance, will citizens be less likely to contact their MP in the knowledge that what they write will be placed into the public eye? Alternatively, will they be emboldened in the knowledge that other people who have similar issues or are interested in the topic could see the message or tweet?

Initial research suggests that there are differences in citizen-initiated contact on social media than when compared to letters or email. Research on citizens use of social media for following MPs

suggests the online relationship between the two is less about contact and more about news. Fisher *et al.* (2019) find that citizen's patterns of online interaction with representatives from six countries provide evidence for a model that people are simply seeking to get news directly from the source, and unfiltered by journalists - with other explanations including to show partisan support. Williamson also proposed that the way MPs use social media is changing the relationship away from dialogue and communication, and towards news, and that the lack of engagement on part of political representatives is causing citizens not to think of social media as a place to talk to their MP (Williamson, 2010:16). However, there is much more research to be done in this area, with these results not backed up by studies that cover a wider range of social media sites or seek to look at social media data itself. What can be assumed from the literature is that questions regarding significance socioeconomic status, and the role political efficacy has yet to be tested for how citizens use social media.

### *3.7.2 New forms of collective civic participation?*

While there is little research regarding participation in citizen-initiated communication with their political representatives, in recent times much more attention has been given to citizens participation in online political collective acts and social activism through social media (c.f. Bennet & Segerberg, 2012; Bruns, Highfield & Burgess, 2013; Wolfsfeld, Segev, & Sheaffer, 2013; Castells, 2015; Howard & Hussain, 2013; Hensby, 2017). The growth of this type of participation can be explained through the ease of use, and that social media allows for causes to spread more rapidly through online networks, alongside the general trend towards postmodern forms of activism (Islin & Ruppert, 2015; Penny, 2017). However, the causes and topics raised through this type of activism are very different from the ones found in citizen-initiated communications. For instance, while citizens use letters and emails to talk about personally important issues, citizens use social media activism to promote more postmodern, or global concerns such as environmental campaigns, social justice, or even simply causes that amuse them (Penny, 2017:97; Dennis, 2019). However, it has been argued that this type of participation means very little to the citizens undertaking them, with citizens joining in collective action without 'any real consideration of their meaning or democratic value' (Dennis, 2019:167). Furthermore, it appears that rather than acting because it is important to the citizen, some citizens join in for impression management, or show group membership (Penny, 2017:179; Dennis, 2019). For example, joining

a campaign to signal to others that it is a cause that they believe in, rather than expecting any political effects. However, there is little knowledge about how MPs interact with these types of campaigns, and if collective action is a form of networked representation of which they might take notice.

### *3.8 Conclusion: The Impact of Internet Communications on Representation in the United Kingdom, a new hope in social media?*

This chapter has demonstrated some of the general trends found within citizen-representative interactions that can have impacts on representative communication. It has shown that the ways in which MPs use social media to personalise politics and the presentation of their self-image. MPs frequently post content which highlights who they are, what they are doing, or creating a type of post which gives an impression about themselves to their audience. Highfield's analysis on the use of social media by Australian MPs suggested that they regularly attempt to show off their personality by mixing in their everyday practices with their political image (2016:128). These types of actions give the impression that they are ordinary, and thus have an important function of reducing the distance between representatives and citizens (Ross & Bürger, 2014:60). Jackson and Lilleker looked at this type of Twitter usage and analysed it through the framework of impression management (2011, for impression management see Goffman, 1959). This is where media interactions are carefully strategised to give a chosen impression of the MP. In the instance of many social media interactions, through personalisation, MPs wish to be seen as working hard for their constituents (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011:97). This is somewhat collaborated by Golbeck *et al* who found many social media posts by politicians dispersed information about themselves, what they are doing, and where they had written to promote themselves (2010:1612). However, while the above research suggests the personalisation, there are significant gaps within the research that need addressing: Particularly the need to update research in the area following significant increases in social media audiences and changes in the platforms; requirements for a bottom-up perspective; and the need to understand how social media is changing representative communication.

## 4 - Methodology

### *4.1 Introduction and justification for the methodological approach*

The incorporation of social media into the daily lives of citizens and MPs alike has generated tremendous quantities of data. Each post, comment, reaction and share creates a trail of communicative interactions which can be analysed by academics. At the same time, every additional communication platform adopted into political use brings significant implications on the conduct of representative-citizen interaction (see Bimber, 1999). It seems that from the evidence presented in Chapters 2 and 3, social media is no exception. Websites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have changed the way people communicate from changing uses of the English language, to how communication is distributed, and even what political issues are present in the minds of the public. A consequence of these changes is that previous methodological approaches are insufficient to understand these communication forms (Quan-Haase & McCay-Peet, 2017). Therefore, there is an urgent need for new methodological approaches to analyse the vast quantities of data that can be extracted from them. However, as this chapter will argue, data alone does not deliver the whole picture of why and how people use social media platforms to communicate with their MPs, or why MPs choose to use the platforms. It does not capture what people think about the representative communication they may have had on social media. As discussed in the previous chapter, much of the research in this area has been conducted on the analysis of social media data (mostly from Twitter) alone, and not from the perspective of users themselves. As a result, there is a multiplicity of questions that are yet to be answered, specifically those from a bottom-up perspective. With an awareness of context, this chapter explains a methodological approach that seeks to understand representative communication from three perspectives: the representative; citizens; and the data that they create through interactions between them.

To create an analysis based on these three perspectives an original mixed-methodology approach is required. This chapter outlines the approach taken by this thesis combining interviews with MPs, surveys with citizens, and from the collection and analysis of social media data. This data

can be used to provide both supply-side (MPs) and demand-side (citizens) perspectives on the use of social media for representative communication. This approach allows for a richer analysis to understand how the two interact on social media, how each side benefits from the use of the platforms and to posit explanations for the type of online communication between them. Using social media is advantageous because it grounds perspectives from lived, observable communication. As of yet, few studies on social media have asked in-depth questions to UK citizens regarding the interactions they have with MPs. The closest was by Fisher *et al.* which explored why people follow MPs across six countries but did not ask what type of communication happens, or if this has representative benefits (2019). In response to the gaps in the literature, this methodology asks citizens these questions and makes an original contribution to this growing research area. At the same time, research that asks why MPs use social media is also in need addressing: as either the study is dated, from another country, or does not cover areas relevant to this thesis. Both Ross & Bürger (2014) and Kelm *et al.* (2019) conducted recent research that asked MPs perceptions of social media but based on data from New Zealand and German political contexts. Meanwhile, the research by Jackson & Lilleker used data from social media rather than interviews with MPs and can be considered dated (2011). There is undoubtedly scope for analysis from an alternative methodological perspective. Consequently, there is a need for a detailed analysis of representative communication from the standpoint of both UK MPs and citizens. In response, this thesis asks five main research questions that seek to develop a nuanced understanding of this subject matter (see table 1.2). This chapter will justify how the data will be collected to answer these research questions.

#### *4.1.1 Case study selection: The United Kingdom*

Firstly, the context of which the data is being collected, and if this setting is appropriate to be able to devise models of representative communication needs to be understood. For this research, this means to understand both the political *and* communication landscapes in which representative communication is conducted on social media within the UK. This thesis has already justified the study of the three platforms, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, within the first chapter; however, this thesis has not yet explained why the UK was chosen as for the study of representative communication on social media. The research being based on UK MPs was not an indiscriminate choice, as not only was it a country with a lack of data in the area of political

communication on social media (see chapter 3), but it also has particular qualities which are beneficial for analysing the representative-relationship.

Historical factors make the UK an excellent case study for this research; as there is a comprehensive academic library in the areas of representation and media based on empirical evidence from the UK. Works which include Coleman *et al*'s 'Parliament in the age of the Internet' (1999), Street's 'Politics and the Mass Media in Britain' (1992), Judge's 'Representation: Theory and Practice in the British Politics' (1999b), and Pulzer's 'Political Representation and Elections in Britain' (1975), and a vast library of literature on British politics by Norton (2010;2013; see also Norton & Wood, 1993), amongst other contributions discussed in previous chapters. This literature provides an abundant degree of historical context for analysis. Comparative studies can also be used on the rise of other technological advancements and their effects on representation within the UK (see examples: Wright, 2009; Coleman, 2005b; Coleman & Spiller, 2006; Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2013). This backdrop of previous enquiry provides a framework for the study of social media's effect on representation, especially so within the context of the UK.

There are also systematic factors that make the UK a reasonable basis for the study. The elected chamber of the legislature, the House of Commons, is made up of 650 MPs, each representing a single constituency. In this system, *de jure*, means that people vote for an individual, not a party, to represent them. While in *de facto*, people often vote on other factors such as party lines. The First Past The Post (FPTP) voting system provides a stronger representative-citizen relationship in comparison to proportional representation systems where citizens vote for a party; which previous research has concluded results in weaker individual connections and stronger partisan relationships (Karp & Banducci, 2008; Leston-Banderia, 2012). It has long been argued that the current political system within the UK, with the voting system and political structure leads to deeper bonds of attachment between representatives and their constituents than can be found in other states (Hansard, 1976). As such the UK provides a context where significant interaction between the two main actors of this study can be observed; and there is an increased volume of researchable content.

Furthermore, the UK's system is favourable for this type of research when compared to other states in terms of the number of national-level representatives a citizen has. Outside of devolved areas, a UK citizen only votes for one national representative. In contrast, other countries such as the US have multi-member districts, with multiple points of national representation.

Meanwhile in states with party-list proportional representation, a citizen has numerous representatives that can represent one region based along with party vote share. The lack of multidimensional representative links within the UK simplifies areas of this research and allows for a clearer picture of the impacts that social media might have to representative communication.

In addition to electoral factors, UK political representatives have roles supplementary to their legislative activities. Searing (1994) and Norton (2002) identified other functions MPs are answerable for; such as welfare officers, constituency champions, or responsibilities which assist with matters outside their immediate legislative activities (see Chapter Three). These additional roles put UK MPs in closer contact with their citizens than when compared to representatives of other states. For example, German national representatives see their primary function as legislators, watchdogs of the executive and policymakers (Patzelt, 2007). As a result, German citizens have a reduced number of subjects for which a legislative member will entertain communication and is found to be an explanation for the reduced citizen-representative communication at this level (Escher, 2012). For these reasons, one can expect that this will lead to an increased frequency of contact between representatives and citizens in the UK in comparison, creating a more comprehensive range of researchable data, alongside an expanded potential survey sample.

Technological contexts and internet penetration are an additional systemic advantage to the use of the UK as the basis for the study. The study of citizens and representatives in an online environment requires a significant proportion of citizens and MPs to be present on the internet and social media; otherwise, the research could be based on interaction which is atypical of the broader communicative landscape. In the selection of a case study, it was necessary for the focus of research to be a demographic with a normalised use of the internet, and in particular social media and there is significant evidence that the UK meets these criteria (Dutton *et al.* 2009; Ofcom, 2017b). The growth in the use of internet services increased significantly after the introduction of broadband products in 2001, and the internet became a 'normalised' service after 2005, when over 70% of the population had an internet connection, with the total number of internet users levelling out at around 87.9% in 2016, and 88% in 2018 (ONS, 2016; Ofcom, 2018b). Similarly, it appears that social media has also been normalised by UK citizens, with around 40 million users of Facebook (Table 1.1).



All these factors suggest that the UK context is one with an ample amount of historical perspectives of the representative-citizen relationship. With a political system that indicates a high degree of communication between the two, and where both actors can be found on social media. Overall, this indicates that the UK context is well suited for this area of study. The next section will move past the justification, to see how social media research has been conducted previously, and what methods would answer the research questions within the thesis.

#### *4.1.2 Previous approaches to social media research*

From 2010, there has been a relatively sharp increase in the amount of research based on social media or using it as an empirical variable (Jungherr, 2016). This trend is also found in political analysis: ranging from the study of social media as a political campaigning or communication platform (c.f. Lilleker & Jackson, 2011; Enli & Skogerbo, 2013) to attempts to predict elections and test public opinion on policy (c.f. Burnap *et al.* 2016). It is easy to understand the causes behind the significant rise of academic interest in this field. The internet has long been considered as a convenient solution to the issues and challenges facing liberal democracies through the facilitation of public spheres, increasing citizen efficacy, and even as a platform for a new type of democracy (Coleman, 2004; Gibson, 2009). Currently, social media is attracting similar academic attention to that of the internet after its mainstream implementation into public life. Websites including Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are seen as the forefront of a new political changes, with social movements originating from SNS alongside concurrent changes to politics and widespread adoption (Bartlett *et al.* 2013). There is a significant backdrop of previous methodologies employed to research the effects of social media.

However, the methodologies used in social media research commonly use approaches from the perspective of computer-aided quantitative analysis with large-scale datasets, also referred to as 'Big Data' (Highfield & Leaver, 2015:3). A review of 130 studies on social media found 104 had used 'digital trace data'; however, the paper suggested that this approach has significant restrictions (Jungherr, 2016:81-82). Boyd & Crawford described that 'Big data enabled the practice of apophenia: seeing patterns where none actually exist, simply because enormous quantities of data can offer connections that radiate in all directions' (2012:668). In short, metrics alone can be misleading, do not explain events, or in the case of social media, ignore factors

which indicate its use when only quantitative approaches are taken. No more telling of this is the previously mentioned search into how to use social media to predict the outcome of elections. Burnap *et al.* (2016) mention six previous attempts to use Twitter to predict elections, all ultimately producing unreliable models, before releasing their own, which also inaccurately predicted the 2015 UK General Election (*ibid*, 2016). It appears that the research was taking an approach that looked for patterns within data, without understanding the variables that influenced outcomes. Obviously, this thesis does not seek to discredit this approach to research entirely. A model that proves successful would offer significant increases in our predictive abilities, while reducing overall costs of polling. Nor does this one specific use wholly discount the use of large-dataset based social media analysis. Some research using large-scale social media data has provided valuable insights into particular areas, predominantly when the limitations of such data are acknowledged, and when theoretical assumptions are not transplanted outside the social media sphere (c.f. Bartlett & Krasodonski-Jones, 2016; Varari, 2012;).

There is less literature which approaches social media research from a purely qualitative or normative methodology. These are frequently researched through either a discourse/content analysis of online communication or uses a survey methodology of social media users. Examples of this approach are visible through research which addresses the connection between traditional and social media (Chadwick, 2011; Anstead & O'Loughlin, 2014; Kreiss, 2016), to the content analysis of UK MPs tweets (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011; Graham *et al.* 2013b). However, a purely qualitative approach misses out on the biggest affordances of social media – easily assessable large-scale datasets. Overall, it seems research in social media replicates the issues in political methodologies found by Halperin & Heath; who argue that politics is an area of research where many observable things happen which cannot be explained solely through either a quantifiable or qualitative approach (2012). Despite this they find that the majority of research is split between these two methodologies, suggesting that more research should take a mixed-methods approach (Halperin & Heath, 2012).

There is one characteristic which the social media studies above share – a focus on textual analysis as a method. While the majority of posts on sites such as Facebook and Twitter are text-based, there is a significant amount of both image and video content hosted on both (Laird, 2012). Meanwhile, other social media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube primarily host video or image-based content. Audiovisual content poses issues for quantitative research, as it would be too resource-intensive to code posts individually. Computational methods of

automated coding such as Google's *Cloud Platform Vision API* have yet to progress enough to reliably machine code of visual content. This leaves current computational research methods based on the available metadata from these services and not the actual content. A mixed-method approach would be more suitable for understanding these platforms, for instance, the use of content analysis would supplement broader scale metadata analysis, as proposed in Highfield & Leaver's methodology for researching Instagram (2015). However, so far, the political analysis of these visually based social media networks in the humanities has been based on either a normative analysis of these actions such as the analysis of selfies in feminist politics (Barnard, 2016), or from understanding iconography such as research on the use of selfies by members of the Israeli military (Kuntsman & Stein, 2015). Additional perspectives focus on sociology or the mediatisation of politics (c.f Ekman & Widholm, 2015; Routh, 2016). These are areas which would benefit from a mixed-methods approach to enhance the understanding of the implications of audiovisual communications on social networks.

It seems that current methodological approaches into social media and politics demonstrate an overall trend towards big data research using quantitative means, or through smaller-scale content analysis. However, it could be argued that when mixed methods approaches have been used, they have provided better results (Snelson, 2016). The next section examines and justifies why this thesis benefits from a mixed approach.

#### *4.1.3 Mixed-method and convergent design methodology*

In light of the above debate about current methodologies used in social media research, a mixed-methods approach may be best to understand not only the frequency of social media use for representative communication, and also the content of this communication. Mixed-methodology approaches were initially developed in response to the problems found when devising a research strategy for when 'the nature of the phenomenon may not be suited to quantitative measures' and an approach to the issue is the addition of qualitative data forming a triangulation of results (Morse, 1991:120-123). Although Morse's research background was a medical one – the idea of bringing in triangulation from a mixture of data sources and methodological collection provided a solution to many issues within the social sciences, and the notion was particularly helpful in breaking down the perceived dichotomy between qualitative and quantitative methods. The

definition used by many in explaining mixed methods is one which emphasise a methodology that uses a pluralistic approach, where one or more data collection methods are used, resulting in both qualitative and quantitative analysis in a single project (Bryman, 2015: 635). It is a notion which has gained a level of momentum within the social sciences, spawning its own journal, *The Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, alongside books, chapters, and demonstrations in methodology research (Greene, 2007; Creswell, 2014; Flick, 2017:46). Other researchers have considered mixed-methods necessary to understand multi-layered and complex data involved in social media research (Lewis *et al.* 2013; Quan-Haase *et al.* 2015). Using mixed-methods in this thesis, as the above evidence suggests, will increase the scope of inquiry, especially when answering some questions that require both a quantitative approach, such as statistical analysis to see patterns in contact rates and demographics; alongside qualitative approach through content analysis which will provide the context of these messages. Mixed methods would result in a more thorough explanation of the use of social media and its impact on representation than either method would provide alone.

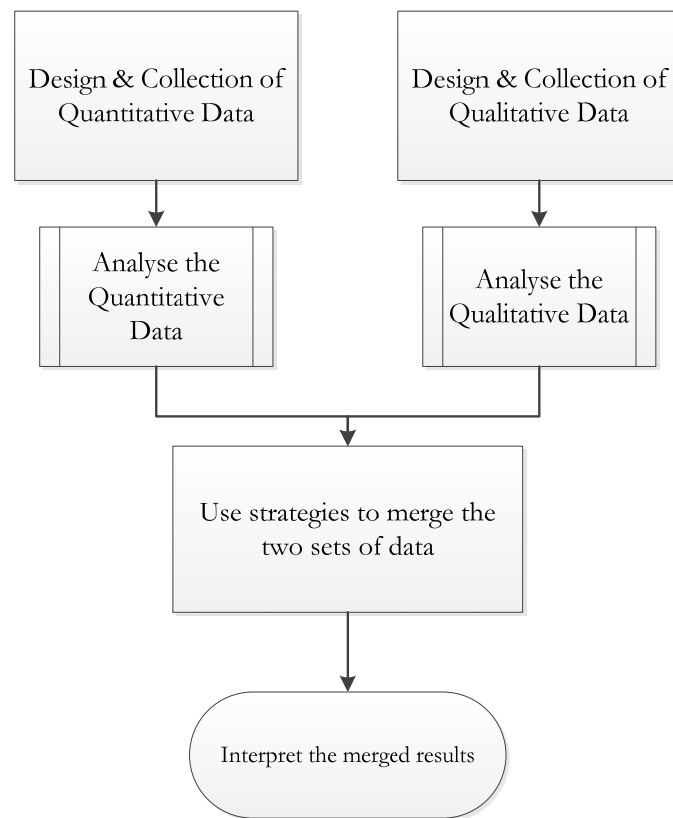
The advantages of mixed methods are multi-faceted but revolve mostly around the additional insight and weight that the methods add to the analysis. Proponents of this approach highlight the ability to make the best use of both methods to offset the weakness of the other resulting in an increased nuance within the analysis (Bryman, 2006; Sloane & Quan-Haase, 2017:897). The use of mixed-methods has several significant benefits compared to the level of analysis available compared to a single method approach. For instance, analysis is available on a multitude of different levels, from the perspectives of politicians and citizens, and can be contrasted to the reality of the levels of interactions on social media. Furthermore, results that can be triangulated hold significantly more weight while at the same time vastly expand understanding of the results as a whole (Olsen, 2004). An additional argument posed by Halperin & Health (2012) is that politics is an area where many observable things happen, but often cannot be analysed through a solely positivist (or quantitative) approach. This is because unlike the traditional sciences, politics cannot be explained through a set of laws (Halperin & Health, 2012). Concerning this thesis, the study of representation requires a more refined approach than that available through data gathered from social media alone. For example, the concept of connectedness (see Chapter Two) could be measured by how much two people communicate. However, this approach would not disclose if either party feels connected to another through these messages. Politics is also far too unpredictable and multi-faceted to be approached from one angle alone, and there is no single

control variable that accurately captures a system in a constant state of flux – such as day-to-day representation. Therefore, data from multiple collection points enables a more sophisticated analysis, matching the complex reality of UK politics.

Despite a growing awareness that mixed methods should be seen as best practise, its application has been limited. A study reviewing 2,649 articles from eight communication/journalism journals found that only 60 (or 2%) of articles used a mixed-methods approach (Trumbo, 2004: 421). This suggests that there is some doubt, hesitancy or lack of resources that inhibit the use of this methodological approach (at least in 2004). Despite the obvious answer that a mixed approach requires significantly more resources, authors have shown scepticism, citing issues within epistemology. One claim is that a mixture of quantitative and qualitative results in ambiguity within analysis due to the two methods involved being ‘incompatible’ (Sarantakos, 2004:48). Bryman elaborates on this point to argue that the roots of either research method can result in two different analyses being drawn on the same subject based on either positivism or interpretivism, as the two or more methods are grounded in irreconcilable views about how social reality should be studied (2015; see also Smith, 1983:12-13). This viewpoint does discount the idea that the same analysis can result from two methodologies, or that the two analyses, and the comparison between them, can provide insight into itself. However, Smith and Sarantakos’ argument does not go unchallenged. King, Keohane, and Verba directly contradict them, stating that the difficulties of a mixed-method approach have been overestimated, and that ‘the differences between quantitative and qualitative traditions are only stylistic and are methodologically and substantially unimportant’ (1994:4). It seems the context of the authors’ comments should be considered as many supporters of the mixed approach credit its explanatory potential, such as new areas of research, while arguments against mixed-methods focus mainly on specific and numerically-led research areas such as electoral calculus.

Researching a question through a mixed-methods approach requires more thought than merely combining different data types into a single analysis. Creswell *et al.* (2011) identify seven methodological designs that can be used to make the best use of a mixed-methods approach. Each design describes the way the method should be used, for what purpose, and considers the disadvantages of each one. The methods described are Prototypical Characteristics, Convergent Design, Explanatory Design, Exploratory Design, Embedded Design, Transformative Design, and Multiphase Design (Creswell & Planto, 2011:76). Of these, it is Convergent Design which is best suited for the research questions presented in this thesis. This is due to the design’s aim of

obtaining ‘different but complementary data on the same topic’ and well-suited to the issue of researching phenomena within social media environments (Morse, 1991:122). As mentioned before, social media is one of these areas where there is a mass of communication to be studied, alongside communication statistics. Additionally, in the context of this thesis and representation, there are several outside factors, such as personal opinion, which also have to be considered. This results in a large mixture of different types of data that must be analysed concurrently. As each data type is related to each other -they cannot be understood in the same analytical model. Additionally, the philosophical assumptions of convergent design do not try to ‘mix’ the data, but instead gives equal importance to each type (Creswell & Plano, 2011:78).



**Figure 4.1** - Flowchart of the basic procedures in implementing a convergent design, summarised from Creswell & Clarke (2011:79).

Given this debate, it seems that a suitable way to understand representative communication is through a mixed-method approach (see figure 4.1). In this context, this means an analysis of

social media data, but also qualitative methods undertaking research between citizens and MPs themselves. This chapter will first describe how social media data was collected before moving on to demonstrate the interview and survey methodologies.

#### *4.2 Social Media Data Collection*

To answer the questions within this thesis through social media data, this research attempted to collect and store the conversations happening between MPs and citizens directly from Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. This aided in understanding the frequency of representative communication, collecting profile data on MPs, and the types of political messaging across each platform. However, the collection of social media is not defined or standardised in theory, practice, and methodologically (Mayr & Weller, 2017:173). The variety of collection methods used in existing research suggests a lack of agreement over which method is most appropriate or suggests that a lack of standard process is not what matters, but rather the data collected. However, this lack of overall standardisation means that any methodological approach should be well-considered (Mayr & Weller, 2017:173).

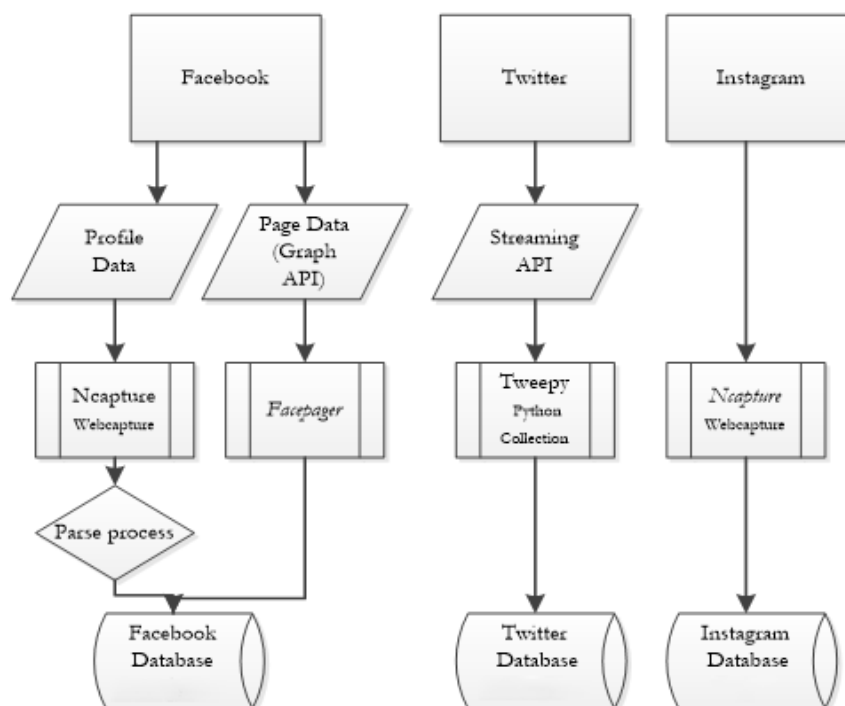
The scope of available methodologies has increased the depth of research in the area of social media, as before the widespread use of API's and automated collection tools, researchers were limited to ethnography or survey methodologies (see Kendal, 2002; Hine, 2000; Caers *et al.* 2013). The first type of studies revolved around participating in online communities directly, friending particular people or joining online groups for access to the conversations in order to study them. However, the ethnographic approach has specific issues when it comes to researching social media<sup>8</sup>. Firstly, due to the mass of communications happening online, this approach could miss the sizeable amount of communications happening between MPs and citizens and may represent one area of a very complex system. Secondly, social media websites use algorithms to choose which content to show to users on the front page. In this instance, what a researcher observes may not be an accurate representation of the online community. Furthermore, while survey-based methods are useful to understand online behaviours, particularly for creating explanations on

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<sup>8</sup> Such an approach might, however, be better suited to understand citizen-representative communication in smaller settings, like within specific Facebook Groups or communities.

observed phenomena, surveys do not study the actual behaviour of people online (Bechmann & Vahlstrup, 2015).

The aim of this data collection process is to help answer the questions of how representation happens online. Using computationally collected and analysed data, it is possible to examine communications on social media to a wider extent when compared to previous methods. The aims were to collect all publicly available messages and metadata sent between UK MPs and citizens. This included content in the form of text, images, video, and audio. Due to the sheer amount of data required to answer the research questions, the only feasible way was to apply computational methods. As described in Chapter One, each social media site has a distinct structure, requiring specific approaches to data collection. Figure 4.2 demonstrates the four separate data collection methods used, across four different data gathering tools to develop the dataset.



**Figure 4.2.** Visual demonstration of the concurrent nature of the social media data collection



#### *4.2.1 Scope and timeframe of the data collection*

As stated previously, the scope of this area of the data collection was to focus on the most popularly used social media sites; Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, with each platform having distinctive qualities worthy of independent study. However, due to the differences in the platform, particularly in how messages are passed between users, data from each SNS was collected into independent databases. In scoping the study, consideration was also given to how much data needed to be collected in order to create assumptions about overall use. Some studies take a 'bigger is better' approach, collecting as many social media posts as possible, however time and computational resource limitations meant this approach was outside the scope of this study. Furthermore, other research has demonstrated that accurate results can be gained in limited time schemes of a fortnight (c.f. Southern & Harmer, 2019). Therefore, a suitable data collection period was chosen which collects enough data to provide a fair and accurate representation of political communication, but not too much to overload current resources. Based on the availability of hardware and computational power, the data was limited to one month from 11<sup>th</sup> September 2018 to 11<sup>th</sup> October 2018.

#### *4.2.2 Data Collection Process: Facebook*

Unlike Twitter, Facebook does not provide APIs which allow for large-scale data acquisition (Gjoka, 2010). Raw data which would be preferable for this research is often only granted to employees of the social media website themselves, or with institutions with pre-established collaboration projects (see Kramer, 2012; Margetts, 2017:204). While previous tools such as *NetVizx* allowed for a significant level of automated data extraction, Facebook has since closed off parts of the API which allowed for the programs key features to function (Rieder, 2013). *NetVizx* closed entirely in 2018 due to Facebook's increased API restrictions (Hotham, 2018, Aug 17). This created the need for a multi-tiered data analysis based on individual data collection points for the different aspects of Facebook's functionality, in particular the collection of Facebook profile and pages data.

The data collection process is further compounded by the network structures on the website. Unlike Twitter's asymmetric network, Facebook is mostly symmetrical with only some messages between users based on asymmetrical connections. This is because people can create posts with

no particular direction to a general audience, create posts directed at designated users, or comment on other user's posts. This means the structure of the data collected was necessarily more complicated compared to other platforms addressed in this research. To collect data on the Facebook pages of UK MPs this research used Facebook's graph API through the *Facepuger* interface (Till & Jünger, 2016). This collected the profile information of 544 MPs pages. For the collection of communication to and from MPs' profile accounts, this data was collected using web scrapers due to the lack of API access. Web-scrapers collect data from the HTML code displayed in internet browsers from individual Facebook pages and saves this in an analysable format. This process used Nvivo's *Ncapture* tool, which was designed partly for the retrieval and analysis of Facebook data. This data collection stored 13,607 posts by MPs.

#### 4.2.3 Data collection process: Twitter

Unlike Facebook, Twitter is an asymmetric social network with only one type of account, and the network does not host 'groups' or 'pages'. Furthermore, Twitter also allows for a more straightforward way to access the data from the site which for this very reason has increased the number of academics papers based on the network, particularly within politics (see previous). The process for collecting Twitter data is less time consuming and did not need breaking up into a multitude of data collection methods.

Twitter data was collected through Twitter's public streaming and search APIs using the Python package *Tweepy* (Roesslein, 2016). Tweepy has been used to collect Twitter data for a range of academic studies, proving it to be a reliable collection tool (Nonia & Bandyopadhyay, 2016; Haughton *et al.*, 2015). This data was collected used the Public API, a method which has been used in other research projects, but one which has also been criticised for sampling issues. Twitter limits the data available through Public APIs to 1% of the total amount of tweets made during the time of the request (Neuhaus & Webmoor, 2012). Twitter does have a paid option to deliver data through an expanded API. However, it is expected the scope of this research will not reach this threshold, as previous research using public APIs provided an accurate adequate data-set (McLoughlin & Ward, 2017).

For this data collection, Tweepy was set to collect data relating to two search strings for each of MPs on the list database. The two commands used Twitter's search syntax:

“From:@’MPsTwitterHandle”

“To:@’MPsTwitterHandle”

These two searches collected all tweets by and to MPs; this includes all tweets where an MP was mentioned, all meta-data associated with the Tweet, and visual content over the month-long collection period. This data was then collated into the document database in human-readable format. Throughout the collection 346,880 tweets were captured. This dataset was then filtered to remove tweets that had been collected multiple times, tweets that contained only @handles, accounts which are obviously fake, or promotes spam. This left a database containing 78,366 number of tweets by MPs, 44,338 of which were retweets.

#### *4.2.4 Data collection process: Instagram*

Like Facebook profiles, aspects of the Instagram network are not open to API calls for much of their data. Furthermore, their terms of service strictly prohibit the use of web-crawling. (Sloan & Quan-Haase, 2017). These limitations required a more manual approach. Similar to Facebook profiles, this collection was made through Nvivo's NCapture which was also useful in the analysis of the visual content and capturing the comments of each post. The Instagram profile of every MP was visited with this software, which then collected information on posts made, comments received, and by whom. This data was parsed into a format for input into a database. The final Instagram database collected 1,846 posts by MPs. This approach, although time-consuming was mediated as fewer MPs use the platform.

#### *4.2.5 Coding of the data*

Coding is the process of categorising qualitative data into a quantifiable format. This was done by taking text or images found within MPs posts and assigning tags or indexing them. While many of the posts collected across Facebook, Twitter and Instagram contained meta-data to be

analysed, there were a number of elements within the research questions that required attentional processing of the data through content analysis. While the process of coding is time consuming, it is often the only way of being able to undertake content analysis due to some of the significant issues when taking an automated coding approach (cf. Batrinca & Treleaven, 2014; Murphy, 2017:781) Posts by MPs were coded through a detailed schema which can be found in Appendix C. These codes generally tagged each post by type, the locality of the subject the MP talked about, the subject of the post, and what was the focus of the post.

#### *4.2.6 Limitations of social media data collection*

Social media has grown as a source of data and inquiry. Issues regarding the use of the data should remain in the background of any analysis. Firstly, it is well known that many publicly available APIs have limitations on their use. For example, restrictions on the number of calls and the cap of data (Voss, Lvov, & Thomson, 2017:244). Twitter's streaming API only contains a percentage of the overall data stream while limitations on data-calls to Facebook's Graph API will lead to some data omitted from the larger datasets. The second limitation with social media is that the data covers social media users and there remains a significant amount of the UK population who do not have a profile or do not use it to communicate with MPs, whose contributions will not be reflected in the data. Thirdly, while this data is indicative of what happens on social media, it does not provide context to what has happened outside social media. For example, there is no indication of outside factors, such as news content or the current political climate, which influence social media habits. This study seeks to mitigate these limitations by applying a mixed-methods approach.

#### *4.2.7 Ethics of Social Media Research*

Concerns arising from researching online communications are not new, however, with the expansion of use and changes in online behaviour, it is essential to re-approach the subject of social media ethics (Bruckman *et al.*, 2010:1). Ethical issues in the use of social media for research are twofold. Firstly, there are concerns regarding the nature of consent, while most social media comments are public, and often stated to be so, there is evidence to suggest that some online

users deem it to be private (Zimmer & Proferes, 2014:258). Secondly, there are questions about the appropriateness of archiving public messages at all – especially in consideration that research indicates that social media users are uneasy about their posts being collected (NatCen, 2014). These two points introduce a legal-moral dichotomy to consent, as while the posts are legally public and therefore consent is not necessarily required; morally, there is the argument that people would expect content to be private, and therefore requiring consent. As with all forms of research, it is necessary to ensure that rigorous ethical standards are in place when conducting social media research.

Despite some evidence suggesting that users expect to be asked for consent, there are different perspectives. One survey of 564 Twitter users found that 79% of respondents expected to be asked for informed consent if their social media data is used in research (Williams, 2015:13). At the same time, 69% of users have not read, but have agreed to Twitter’s terms of service (Williams, 2015:9). These terms allow for people to access and use publicly posted tweets, and in some circumstances to broadcast these posts as long as they follow Twitter’s agreed format (Twitter, n.d a [Display Requirements]).

“When using any of our Services you consent to the collection, transfer, storage, disclosure, and use of your information as described in this Privacy Policy.”

“Twitter broadly and instantly disseminates your public information to a wide range of users, customers, and services, including search engines, developers, and publishers that integrate Twitter content into their services, and organizations such as universities, public health agencies, and market research firms that analyze the information for trends and insights.”

(Twitter, n.d B).

Other social media sites in this study use similar policy statements. Facebook states user information is shared to “vendors, service providers, and other partners who globally support our business, such as... conducting academic research and surveys.” (Facebook, 2016). In addition to terms of services, each of these social media websites has privacy information pages for users who have not fully read the terms of service, which allow users to increase the privacy

on their account and ensure that only individuals they deem relevant can see their content. Legally, this provides researchers with the right to collect, store, and in some instances, publish people's social media posts.

However, academic research has a higher ethical standard than the typical protections given to users through a site's terms of service. This is of particular importance when considering that some posts on social media by users, which if re-distributed to a broader audience than intended, could cause offence or embarrassment. Furthermore, whilst political figures are expected to be in the public's attention, average citizens often do not expect their social media posts to reach a position of national attention, something which should be respected (NatCen, 2014). Consequently, due respect should be given to how citizens feel their data should be handled. In addition, there are ethical challenges around the behavioural trait that users agree to terms of service yet few read them; while providing adequate legal record to use data, it gives a dubious ethical basis when it comes to the publication of user's data (Lomborg & Bechmann, 2014; Bechmann & Vahlstrup, 2015).

For these reasons, this research will apply ethical codes of conduct taken from both the AoIR (Association of Internet Researchers) ethical guidelines and from NatCen on what users expect to be done with their content as well as additional papers which discuss the ethics of social media research (NatCen, 2012; AoIR, 2012; see also Moreno *et al.* 2008; Zimmer, 2010; Monreno *et al.* 2013). To resolve the issues of consent using citizens data, it was found that while users are concerned with their data, this is due to worries about how it will be used rather than consent (AoIR,2012:7). NatCen found that users are happier knowing that if their data is to be used, it remains anonymous (2012). They state that if the data is publicly accessible, with a legal pathway, and all data remains anonymous, then explicit consent is not necessary if users have already agreed to their data being collected within the terms of the service (NatCen, 2012). Similarly, AoIR argued that when there is a debate regarding the public or private nature of data, the precedent is that data should be aggregated if there is any reason to suspect any participant does not deem their online messages public and consent should be sought to republish without aggregation (AoIR,2012:6).

To mitigate for any potential ethical concerns this research will not disclose citizens names or user handles. Furthermore, not only should names and user handles remain anonymous, but also that users' content is anonymised or only displayed as an aggregation. This avoids the de-

anonymisation of user data as some search engines index social media sites, which allows content to be easily de-anonymised through reidentification scripts. This is based on the previous experience of the ‘Tastes, Ties, and Time’ data-set where an entire Harvard class was de-anonymised through a web search of the content, allowing social media posts to be attributable to individual participants (Zimmer, 2010:314). With most content on social media being indexed by Google, it would not be appropriate to republish content which can be discovered. Although current technology for images and video content is in its infancy, the advancement of video and image search platforms such as Google Images and TinyEye could make visual content discoverable in similar ways in the future. As such, it would also be inappropriate to rebroadcast image content too. In addition, the primary focus of the data collection was to analyse to what extent MPs used social media, and how they responded, as a result citizens social media data only make up a small proportion of this thesis overall dataset.

By keeping this anonymity in terms of both the users' name and content, this research will keep within the expectations of most users as per Beninger's survey; where they stated that they expect their online content to be used (Beninger 2017:125). At the same time, this does not mitigate the researcher's role to ensure participants are in no way harmed through research. Additionally, as many social media sites have terms and conditions on the use of data for research that stipulates that if a user goes on to delete their social media data after the data collection, this must also be deleted from the research database (see Meeks, 2016). As a result, raw data used by this research will be deleted after the analysis has been made and the results aggregated. Overall, for the computational data-collection side of this research, this thesis keeps within both ethical and legal boundaries.

However, while the above ethical considerations hold true for collecting social media posts for general members of the public, the situation for elected representatives is different. MPs have different expectations of privacy and are more understanding that the statements they make will be analysed in the public domain (Deacon, 2004; Stanyer, 2013:7). On such public and open social media platforms, it is likely that politicians understand that their data will be considered in the public domain. Jackson and Lilleker's (2011) study which found MPs primarily use social media for outreach purposes, therefore, ethically posts by MPs can be identified and analysed within the legal constraints each platforms terms of service.

### 4.3 Survey Data Collection (Citizens)

During the development of the methodology, it was evident that social media alone would not provide the information required to answer the research questions. In academic terms, social media data can understand what the phenomena is, however, to understand the basis of opinions, beliefs, and reasonings behind why people take particular actions online, another data source is required. This thesis makes use of both online questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to provide both a comparative element to the analysis and a greater understanding between the link of what people think and the actions they take.

#### 4.3.1 Online Surveys

The methodology of surveys for data collection has been well established, with their early use traced back to centuries ago and their particular application to the social sciences highly regarded (Smith, 1975; de Leeuw, 2005). They are particularly useful in two ways; firstly, they are incredibly efficient in the collection of data, and, secondly, they often also allow for a higher level of control in the sample of participants (Shuman & Presser, 1996:1). At the same time, their format allows for both quantitative and qualitative analysis based on the questionnaire format, an approach which fits the mixed methods approach of this research. For this research, surveys were used to gather the opinions of citizens on the use of social media for representative purposes.

While the use of surveys has been well considered throughout methodological literature, the use of online surveys comes with a number of considerations. While their ease of creation and distribution has made research more accessible, these same habits have also allowed for a mass of online survey creation by people with little methodological experience or consideration; significantly reducing the legitimacy of their use (Vehovar & Manfreda, 2008:187). This can be displayed on the survey community (/r/samplesize) on the social media website Reddit, where the majority of surveys posted are deemed as 'casual' with 'marketing' being the second most common above 'academic surveys'. Furthermore, a meta-analysis has found that online surveys suffer from lower recruitment rates than other formats, a reduction of up to 11%, due to differences in participant recruitment but one which can be overcome through larger participant pools (Manfreda, *et al.*, 2008).

Further consideration should be given to the impact an online survey will have on participants. Placing the survey online automatically bars people without internet access, limiting the response



pool to people who have access and the ability to use the internet. Vehovar and Manfreda found that when a survey is online, one has to consider respondents ‘motivation, computer literacy, abilities, privacy concerns and many other factors’ which influence completion’ (Vehovar & Manfreda, 2008:183). However, for this research, the focus will be citizens who have had pre-existing relationships with MPs online, which would indicate a level of computational ability and internet access.

#### *4.3.2 Participant Selection & Recruitment*

This research would be best serviced by gathering a sample of social media users, not just those who follow MPs, to avoid bias. To gather this sample, a small marketing campaign was conducted to advertise the survey to social media users, using Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Reddit and to citizens from the UK. The survey was further promoted using *CallForParticipants.com*. This advertising campaign opened in June 2018, and the survey was accessible for two months. People who saw the advert were invited to take part in the survey directly through an advert which contained a URL to the survey information page. The information page provided information about the research, why they were contacted, who the research was conducted by, and an explanation of how their data will be used.

Participant incentives were offered in the form of a prize draw that consisted of five £20 Amazon vouchers that were later handed out randomly once the survey had closed. While the discussion regarding survey incentives is fierce, especially regarding the effect of financial coercion on participant recruitment and how this effects results – prize draws do significantly increase survey responses (Ethics Research Guidebook, n.d). One limitation of this approach is the lack of control over the response when the URL invitation is made public (Vehovar & Manfreda, 2008:181). To halt unwanted survey responses of people outside the sample pool, the visibility of the URL to the survey was limited to those who could see the advert. Furthermore, the URL was changed periodically.

#### *4.3.3 Questionnaire Design*

The survey was hosted on the Google Forms platform, a free to use data capture service that can be used for survey creation and response collection. The service was chosen above its competitors

such as Survey Monkey, Qualtrics, or a self-built platform based on several qualifiers. Firstly, while other services do charge, these are based on additional features such as analysis tools, which are not required. Secondly, Google Forms is mobile-enabled – as people often use social media on their mobiles, this is expected to increase overall responses. Furthermore, evidence has suggested that the graphical interface and visual, plays an important factor in survey completion (Vehovar & Manfreda, 2008:183). Google Forms, has simple, yet customisable, visual elements which reduce the probability of respondents being distracted away from the subject matter. It has been used successfully in several research projects including those within the social sciences (Singer, 2014; Sloane & Quan-Haase, 2017). Additionally, Google Forms has enhanced security, including two-step verification, giving additional protection to the data before downloading.

The questions asked on the survey were separated into five sections with questions worded using guidance from Pasek and Krosnick (2010). The first section asked participants about their demographics for comparative analysis based on traditional political participation indicators. This included age, gender, education, location (region), and patterns of internet use. The second section was based on the relationship they have with MPs online. Thirdly, respondents were asked about why they partake in political communication online. The fourth section asked questions about how participants felt towards politics in general. The final section asked about questions based on representation. The full questions can be found in Appendix B.

#### *4.3.4 Survey sample*

The survey was completed by 373 respondents. In terms of understanding how representative this sample is, we can use data from both the Office of National Statistics (ONS) and Ofcom to estimate the population of social media users in the UK. It was found in the 2018 Communications Market Report by Ofcom that three-quarters of the UK population has a social media account at the time of the survey (Ofcom, 2018a:72). In the same period, the ONS estimated that there are 66,435,600 people within the UK (ONS, 2018). Based on these numbers, we can assume that there are, very roughly, 49,826,700 social media users in the UK. While it is certainly not an accurate methodology for finding out the total number of social media users – it provides a useful ballpark in understanding the representativeness of the survey sample. Using

the standard sample size margin of error calculation gives the results a 5.07% margin of error with a 95% confidence level. This is deemed satisfactory in delivering accurate results.

**Table 4.1** Demographic distribution of survey participants

	Number	%
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	176	47.2
Female	192	51.5
other	5	1.3
<b>Age</b>		
18-24	114	30.6
25-34	99	26.5
35-44	58	15.5
45-54	58	15.5
55-64	31	8.3
65+	10	2.7
Don't want to say	3	0.8
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
Asian/British Asian (Bangladeshi, Chinese, Indian, Pakistani, others)	28	7.5
Black (African, Caribbean)	10	2.7
Mixed/other	10	2.7
White (English, Welsh, Scottish, Irish, British, Other)	322	86.3
Don't want to say	3	0.8
<b>Education</b>		
A-Level or Equivalent (=NVQ4)	99	26.5
Bachelor's degree or Equivalent	111	29.8
GCSE/ O-LEVEL / CSE	63	16.9
Masters/PhD	88	23.6
No formal qualifications	3	0.8
Vocational Qualifications (=NVQ1+2)	9	2.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>373</b>	<b>100</b>

#### 4.4 Elite Interviews

Elite interviews are used for gathering information not available to the public, or to confirm theories from those whom it concerns (Halperin & Heath, 2012:272). In particular, interviews with MPs can provide useful insights into the political process or explanations into particular phenomena (Richards, 1996). Elite interviews, especially those with MPs, are often conducted in the semi-structured format, which has better participation rates with this particular cohort (Auerbach & Rockman, 2002). In this research, interviews were conducted with MPs to create a

greater understanding of their perceptions of social media, their role as a representative, and their communication with citizens.

It has been noted that while elite interviews are often commonplace in research, their use has limitations. As described by van Schendelen (1984), while MPs make up the legislature, often many individuals have little influence on government policy or will not be able to speak on behalf of the broader body of MPs. Therefore, elite interviews must be conducted on the managed expectation of what information is available for the MP to give, and also to consider the impact an MP will have on the actual subject of discussion. In this thesis, elite interviews were fundamentally important to the research, as the focus was on the MPs actions, and not those of the overall legislature or executive as a whole. Furthermore, part of the analysis within this research is the measurement between the expectations and actions of MPs on social media, the realities of what happens on social media. This can then be used in the analysis in the effect their use has on citizens, which can be judged by the comparisons between what they say, what they do, and how citizens interpret an MPs actions. This allows for the results of the interviews to be triangulated with other data collected elsewhere in the research.

The second consideration is on the ability to discern the factuality or the MPs real views on particular matters. This is partly due to the issue that MPs tone of voice has been shaped by their interactions with constituents, journalists, or lobbyists, and, what they say could be based on politics rather than fact or genuine opinions (Williams, 1980: 310). Before and following their election, MPs are often schooled in media relations, or given direction on what their statements should be from their party or press secretaries (Dale, 2015). This can cause methodological issues as there is no control variable accessible while conducting interviews. Lilleker faced a similar issue during research on MPs and their websites, from this experience the author noted that due to the possibility of exaggeration or untruthfulness in MP interviews, they should not be the sole data point (Lilleker, 2004: 208). However, the mixed-method approach in this research mitigates some of these factors.

The interviews with MPs were semi-structured format, which Halperin and Heath described as the collection of 'detailed, often specialised information from a single individual' (Halperin & Heath, 2012: 254). Unlike surveys or structured-interviews, which collect standardised data from a broad range of people, semi-structured interviews work as a flowing conversation based on a set of subjects. This format is often used when speaking to elites as it allows for information not

yet considered by the researcher to be collected – often due to a lack of experience or previous research on the subject. This approach was particularly important, as while research has been conducted on MPs use of social media, little has been understood of their motives (see: Jackson & Lilleker, 2011; Grant *et al.* 2010). This approach gave MPs the ability to speak about issues that are important to them and could new topics of discussion.

#### *4.4.1 MP Recruitment*

The biggest concern when conducting this research was the recruitment of MPs willing to be interviewed. Previous experiences of interviewing MPs have shown that the initial recruitment was the biggest struggle (Hertz & Imber, 1995; Williams, 1980; Richards, 1996; Puwar, 1997; Lilleker, 2003). MPs, for example, are extremely busy, and research had indicated that their workload is in the region of 67 hours per week with an additional 10 hours travel (Korris, 2011:5). Additionally, MPs due to their role are invited to numerous interviews and engagements, of which academic research may not be at the forefront of perceived importance. One researcher's experience found that while there was limited research on feminist issues for women MPs, the MPs had already had a significant amount of interview invitations on the subject from journalists - due to its topical nature (Puwar, 1997). Hence, it is expected that MPs have time-benefit considerations when choosing which invitations to accept. The logical argument could be made that MPs may focus their time on reporters or with media engagement, whose time will end in media attention for the MP to their constituents.

As part of the recruitment process, an email was sent out to all 650 MPs, which invited them, or a knowledgeable member of their team such as their press officer, to an interview in early January 2018. The letter introduced what the subject of the research was, the potential impact it may have, and the format of the proposed interview. This response generated 12 acceptances, 26 of declines, and 324 auto-response emails. This number could be considered low; however, many MPs cited busy diaries, particularly regarding Brexit, as their primary reason for declining an interview. This seems to confirm research by both Puwar (1997) and Lilleker (2003) which found that MPs are increasingly turning down academic requests for interviews based on time constraints, questions over potential benefits or potential negative consequences, and if they feel it was a topic that did not interest them. However, as the sample of MPs interviewed covered a range of genders,

geographic locations, parliamentary roles, and political parties it is expected that the interview data will provide a range of views from political representatives that can be analysed.

**Figure 4.2** List of MPs Interviewed

MP Interviewed	Role	Party	Form of Interview	Date
Ben Bradley	Backbench	Conservative	Telephone Interview	10 <sup>th</sup> May 2018
Hannah Bardell	Backbench	SNP	Telephone Interview	9 <sup>th</sup> April 2018
Annalise Dodds	Backbench	Labour	Telephone Interview	29 <sup>th</sup> January 2018
Phillip Davies	Backbench	Conservative	Telephone Interview	29 <sup>th</sup> January 2018
Paul Flynn	Backbench	Labour	Email Interview	28 <sup>th</sup> January 2018
Tim Farron	Former Party Leader	Liberal Democrats	Email Interview	2 <sup>nd</sup> March 2018
Sir Graham Brady	Leader of the 1922 Committee	Conservative	Email Interview	25 <sup>th</sup> January 2018
Rt Hon Matt Hancock	Secretary of State, (DCMS)	Conservative	Official Response	9 <sup>th</sup> April 2018
Ian Lavery	Chair of the Labour Party	Labour	In-person	21 <sup>st</sup> February 2018
Jo Platt	Backbench	Labour	In-person	2 <sup>nd</sup> February 2018
Chris Williamson	Backbench	Labour	Email Interview	19 <sup>th</sup> February 2018
David Warburton	Backbench	Conservative	Email Interview	11 <sup>th</sup> January 2018

Note: MPs role and party is recorded at the time of interview. Some of these MPs have changed job description or party since. One MP, Paul Flynn has sadly passed away since the interview was conducted.

#### 4.4.2 Interview format & Questions

As noted previously, there are intrinsic difficulties with interviewing MPs, a busy parliamentary schedule and priority given to political matters which reduces the time they have for academic researchers. As a result, the research design was flexible, allowing MPs to participate in whichever way would suit them best. While there was a preference to interview MPs face-to-face or via a telephone, five MPs decided that an email interview would suit them best, while one, Matt Hancock MP would only respond as part of an official response from his department. The interview format was designed as a semi-structured interview, as MPs seem willing to participate

in interviews using this format and the expectation of the higher value of the responses received (see, Auerbach and Rockman, 2002:674). The questions used the general format of Halperin & Heath (2012), which used the following of introduction, warm-up, primary questions, followed by cool off/closure questions. The full list of questions can be found in Appendix A but are summarised into three sections here. The first section revolved around MPs usage of social media, and their interpretation of the reasons for why they engage in it. MPs were also asked more generally about the types of messages they receive from members of the public, and an explanation for why they receive each different type of message. These questions aim to understand how MPs usage patterns compare with patterns of uptake on both sides. Responses on the content of the messages received are useful for creating a comparison with MPs version of events alongside reality. The second section revolved around the nature of political representation in the UK, in terms of how it means for them. This understanding can be used to test the hypothesis that MPs with particular views on the role of an MP and understanding of what representation means to them has an impact on how they engage in social media. This can be used to create further testable predictors, not only on the uptake and frequency of use of social media by MPs but also the types of content they post and the discussions they engage with. The third section focussed on MP-citizen relations. That is, the format (if at all) MPs wish to communicate with citizens, using methods including social media. These questions will help balance the role of social media against other platforms and mechanisms for communication. Throughout the interview, respondents were asked further probing questions, either to clarify points and positions if the response was incomplete or as a way to direct the interview if the respondent had diverged away from the main subject matter.

#### *4.2.3 Ethical considerations for Surveys & Interviews*

While many of the ethical concerns of this methodology have been previously covered, it should be noted the additional ethical rules set in place concerning survey and interview data. In line with ethical guidelines, all identifiable data was kept only as long as needed until it can be anonymised. This includes all audio files from interviews until they can be transcribed or survey answers. All data was kept on a securely located and encrypted hard disk only accessible by the researcher. Any data on paper was be shredded upon inputting on a computer database. Raw social media data, even in its anonymised format, will not be shared in line with the social media

websites terms and conditions. All data will be handled within the SRA (2003), AoIR guidelines (2012), and the Data Protection Act 1998 and General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). For the surveys & interviews: ethical issues, informed consent was sought before the survey could be started, which made clear the participant could quit at any time in line with the additional ethical considerations of online surveys (Vehovar & Manfreda, 2008:187). The research for this thesis was overseen by the University of Salford's Research, Innovation and Academic Engagement Approval Panel, with ethics application number AMR1617-29.



## 5 – Political Representatives' Explanations for Their Social Media Use

*"Going on Twitter was probably the worst thing I did in my entire life."*  
Phillip Davies MP, Conservative

Brabham contends that the study of everyday social media is vitally important, even more so that the current preoccupation with its use by representatives for elections (2015). Later expanding on this point by saying that while the majority of everyday communication on social media is unremarkable and dull, it deserves further research as opposed to the focus on extraordinary political events (*ibid*, 2015; see also Larsson & Kalsnes, 2014; Highfield, 2016). Prior chapters in this thesis have already highlighted the significant gaps in understanding in the case of everyday representative communication (2 & 3). In that current works draw their conclusions from assumptions of what they are doing, rather than their intentions (c.f. Jackson & Lilleker, 2011; Graham *et al.*, 2014). Without the perspective from MP's, several questions about their aim in using the platform go unanswered, for instance; are MPs seeking to engage in more interpersonal forms of communication with citizens through social media but are facing issues in doing so?

This chapter details how MPs engage with each of the social media sites discussed, what they use them for, and some of the concerns that representatives have with these platforms. The evidence suggests that politicians find social media an increasingly important tool for reaching out to citizens, and in some cases, it is more important than their websites. Meanwhile, their approach to communicating with the citizens has changed little with an emphasis on communicating *to* citizens rather than *with* them. Explanations for patterns of engagement can be found within resource constraints, and a tendency to stick with trusted media strategies. However, representatives' actions on social media are not uniform across the three social media sites, or by each MP. Some viewed Twitter as a way to communicate national news to a national audience, and Facebook for constituency matters to their constituents. The implications of which suggest prior research on Twitter alone cannot be translated into explanations for how MPs use Facebook or Instagram.

### *5.1 How central has social media become to MPs communication strategies?*

After email and websites became widespread in their use by citizens, it was not soon after until they became an essential cornerstone to MPs communication strategies (Jackson, 2006). Findings from this research suggest that social media has followed a similar path after its use became normalised by citizens and representatives. The majority of MPs interviewed considered social media a non-negotiable part of their overall communication strategies. Only two MPs interviewed, Sir Graham Brady MP and David Warburton MP did not think social media had a significant role in their parliamentary duties. However, Sir Graham Brady MP did think it is 'getting more so', and that there is potential in it for the future. Alternatively, David Warburton MP thought the platform of social media was inherently broken and by its very nature 'the poorest possible vehicle for constituent-representative communication'. Despite this opinion, the other non-user on social media, Phillip Davies MP, stated that while he disliked social media and did not use any social media platforms, he still thought it was essential for some MPs even though such platforms held little value to himself.

I'm sure it's a great use for some people, it's not just got any use for me, I don't decry it, because I'm sure for some people it's very useful for them. And good luck to them. I know lots of businesses who say, that social media is really good for them if they use it properly, I don't decry that. If I had a business I would probably use social media for all it is worth...It's horses for courses. But as far as I'm concerned, personally, it's doesn't add a very great deal to me

Phillip Davies MP, Conservative, Shipley, 29<sup>th</sup> Jan 2018

When asked why social media is important to MPs, two key themes emerged. Firstly, for connecting with constituents and secondly, for raising their profile on a local or national stage. MPs differentiated between how they used different social media sites and were more in-depth when discussing them, compared to general responses when discussing social media as a whole.

[social media is] key for engaging with a wider audience on a regular basis and allows me to connect with people who may not otherwise reach out to me as their MP for help.

Tim Farron MP, Lib Dem, Westmorland and Lonsdale, 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2018

In discussing connectedness, MPs also raised points about the increasing personalisation of politics. Some stated that social media provided a place to blur the boundaries between their

professional and private life in a way which could not be done through other platforms including email, newspapers or broadcast. As part of this, social media offered a very different and advantageous relationship with constituents. The comparison made by Ian Lavery MP was between being an outsider knocking on peoples' doors, and a friendlier type of communication on social media where 'you get in their bedroom, you get in their sitting room, or you get in their kitchen without irritating them'. The comments by MPs resonated with previous literature surrounding parasocial relationships (see Schartel-Dunn & Nisbett, 2014; Tsiotsou, 2015). There are good reasons to suggest a more personalised approach is an advantageous way for MPs to conduct their online communication. Lee *et al.* (2018) found that a more personal approach increased a politician's perception of likability in voters, and while it may appear MPs are making mundane disclosures about their personal life, it acts to increase relatability with their constituents in a more personable and frequent way than available through email or websites.

It's the personal side of it, if you email my office – you get my office initially, and they might forward it to me and they might not. If you go via my website, the messages go to my emails ... whatever it maybe, you get gatekeepers, with the volume of communication you have, you have to have that. Whereas, Facebook particularly, it's nice when constituents are surprised by it, because they message you with something and you come back a couple of minutes later and actually have a conversation where you can go backwards and forwards ... and you can have a much more productive and personal conversation.

Ben Bradley MP, Conservative, Mansfield, 10<sup>th</sup> May 2018.

Social media provides a way for MPs to not only communicate on a personal level but also to increase the frequency of communication – but only if the constituent sought it out. There is a concern that if an MP contacted constituents through email or letters more than they currently did, it would risk annoying them. Social media then becomes a way of allowing MPs to send more messages to those who seek it out.

There also seemed to be demographic factors within how MPs view social media. MPs who have entered Parliament more recently seem to place greater importance on social media as part of their representative duties. Both Hannah Bardell MP and Ben Bradley MP stated how vital using social media was to their role, but for two different reasons. Bardell said social media was 'massively important, like 70% important ...'; this was partly because her constituency is so far away from Westminster and social media made communication easier. She also cited her time

while working for another Scottish MP (Alex Salmond) who did not use social media, and the difficulties she faced with constituency communication then. Meanwhile Bradley highlighted that its importance lies not in its advantages, but the disadvantages of not using it, claiming that his predecessors (the former Labour MP for Mansfield, Alan Meale) non-use of social media created a situation where his constituents thought he was inactive in his role.

Other uses of social media, outside of connectivity with constituents and profile-raising, were somewhat limited when MPs spoke generally about social media. However, it was interesting that several MPs thought there was a role for social media in encouraging constituents to send in casework when they need assistance from their representative. Especially considering many MPs have previously stated that they already receive too much correspondence from citizens (Chapter 3). Respondents stated that profile-raising helped constituents who were unaware of who their MP was, or in what ways their local representative can assist them. However, as demonstrated later, MPs will often ensure that matters of casework are quickly taken off social media and onto more private communication forms, primarily email.

### *5.1.1 How MPs compare social media with other communication platforms*

During the interviews, MPs were asked how they would compare social media platforms against other communication mechanisms. Several recurring themes emerged from their responses. Firstly, was the instantaneous nature of social media. MPs commented on how quickly the communication happened on social media, but also the speed of change that happened in between topics. MPs who had previously been used to a daily news cycle have found the news cycle switched to a much faster timeframe, with the topic of discussion changing often on an hourly basis in some instances. Jo Platt MP commented that ‘it’s faster-paced in the sense that it’s instantaneous ... you get dizzy just looking at it’. As a result, MPs have adapted to be quicker with their responses before the subject becomes ‘old’ (comparatively speaking) and loses its topicality in the eyes of citizens. However, this pace of change and the pressure to be quicker causes MPs several problems. The need to respond quickly can disrupt other work currently being undertaken by the MP and their staff, and it can often lead to mistakes. One MP mentioned that because of the necessity to post social media content promptly, messages to the public are no

longer copy-checked by staff before being sent out, sometimes having to quickly delete the tweet, but still end up with it on *politwoops.co.uk*<sup>9</sup>.

It's got to be timely. Otherwise it's pointless. What's the point in tweeting about something you did yesterday. So it's got to be more immediate and shorter.

Anneliese Dodds, Labour, Oxford East, 29<sup>th</sup> January 2018.

As noted above, MPs have found social media to be more personal than other methods of communication. Social media does not follow the same formal letter writing conventions as found in letters or emails. Nor do messages on social media have to be logged into a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system. Instead, MPs consider social media a platform in which they can be more personable – much more like a face-to-face meeting in a café. Interrelated to the personal nature of social media, MPs also found that social media had a different style of communication altogether. However, the impact of this was more divisive between MPs. Some thought that the style of communication on social media was more detrimental to politics than beneficial; arguing that messages are too limited in the information they could convey, and that conversation chains were too short. As a result, they found two-way communication harder, particularly on Twitter. “You can have a sensible exchange via email, or in person, or on the phone, you certainly cannot on social media” (Phillip Davies MP, 29<sup>th</sup> Jan 2018). Alternatively, other MPs enjoyed the social media communication format, stating that it serves a different purpose to other methods, which was part of the fun of the service.

The difference is how people interact with them ... if people are going on blogs or websites they spend more time on them, whereas, social media is much more instantaneous, people are looking for content which is short, sharp, funny, engaging, you know. I also believe there is a space for longer discussion pieces, but all the evidence points in the, you know, direction of shorter pieces.

Hannah Bardell, SNP, Livingstone, 9<sup>th</sup> April 2018.

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<sup>9</sup> Politwoops is a website that archives and then publicises tweets that were made then deleted by politicians Twitter accounts.

Another aspect of social media use by representatives not anticipated in this research is the analytics provided by social media websites about their audience. Particularly in terms of who their audience is, what they engage with, and how this is used to shape content that better resonates with what their audience wants. Hannah Bardell MP even commented that these analytics were useful in justifying the time and effort they had put into social platforms. Furthermore, analytics have allowed MPs to understand the size of their social media audience – which has astounded many of them when they compare it to their local newspaper readership. MPs often found that their social media audience was much higher than the number of people they see accessing their website or blog, something which also entices them to post more. At the same time, some MPs suggested that figures helped reevaluate which platforms were most important - suggesting it was one reason why social media was more important than their websites. However, it was found that MPs did not consider the quality or amount of times citizens spent reading their content, suggesting that while they have access to analytics, they are using it as a purely statistical measure of exposure rather than effects; such as how many citizens engaged with their content, or how many were convinced by the perspectives put out by MPs.

### *5.1.2 Differences in use between Facebook, Twitter, & Instagram*

One crucial factor highlighted in the literature review is that using social media as an overarching generic term often results in misleading findings. While each social media has defining characteristics, which makes them similar in some ways, they also have significant structural differences that shape user behaviour or encourages particular usage patterns. For instance, in the 2016 US Election, campaigners had found key differences in Facebook's and Twitter's algorithms which decide the content shown to a user's feed. As a result, political campaigners optimised both the format and the message to gain maximum visibility (Bossetta, 2018). Similar results were observed in the 2013 Federal Elections in Germany, where researchers found a shift in message topic – with Twitter having more content geared towards national issues, and Facebook considered more local ones (Stier *et al.* 2018). However, the two studies both cover an electoral context; therefore, it would be prudent to understand if the differences could be observed by UK MPs and if they are an apparent aspect of everyday politics.

During interviews with MPs it was found that they vary their use of social media sites according to each platform's sociotechnical properties. MPs were often quick to differentiate the key users and uses of Facebook and Twitter. The results of which have implications for the representative relationship. MPs assume Facebook is the platform most important for communicating with their constituents; as most MPs found that their audience on Facebook is a much more local, and adjust the content they post their accordingly.

[Facebook is] important for communications with constituents...letting people give me their opinion on what I'm doing, and maybe things I'm not doing that they think I should be doing. Kind of local campaigns, it's quite helpful. Alerting people to events that are coming up as well'

Annelise Dodds MP, Labour, Oxford East, 29<sup>th</sup> January 2018.

Some MPs thought it was important that Facebook was an online space reserved for local matters. Ben Bradley MP said: "Facebook, I try to keep much more local ... there is a bit of a national creep more [with vice-chair role]... I target things and messages relevant to my constituents". From this, it seems that MPs use Facebook for talking directly about local and constituency issues and for interacting with local community groups. A further indication is how MPs were more likely to post information about advice surgeries to Facebook than they were to on Twitter. This was attributed to the audience, and as a result of MP's monitoring what works on each social network in terms of audience engagement. For Jo Platt MP, she initially posted the same content on both Twitter and Facebook, but after a while, she found that local information is more engaged with on Facebook compared to other types of content and started to focus on that – linking with the use of analytics on the platforms. Due to this smaller, and more local audience, MPs found it easier to communicate with constituents on the platform than they do on Twitter. This study found that MPs who consider themselves as primarily constituency MPs considered Facebook a more important channel.

There's a better case for Facebook than Twitter. But Twitter is a complete waste of time for candidates because most of the people who follow you aren't going be your constituents even. It's a waste.

Phillip Davies MP, Con, Shipley, 29<sup>th</sup> January 2018.

Twitter was seen more as a national platform to MPs, both in terms of the audience, and also the issues MPs comment about, or are matters they contacted on. When asked, MPs considered Facebook as a platform to connect with their constituency, but Twitter as a space for Westminster and national political debate. MPs found their primary audience on Twitter to be politico's, journalists, party members, NGOs, and issue specialists. MPs also considered Twitter a broadcast platform when compared to Facebook. This finding is significant when considering how previous research, which has mainly focussed on Twitter, suggests MPs primarily broadcast on social media. When empirically, MPs might be found to be more interpersonally communicative on other social platforms. For example, Ian Lavery MP, who only uses Twitter said that he never replied to people on the platform. Ben Bradley MP used Twitter a platform to broadcast messages about what he is doing, to promote policy, or to share relevant news, rather than to engage in interpersonal communication. MPs also found Twitter more partisan than Facebook, with the audience related to the MPs own political stance rather than their constituency. For instance, Jo Platt MP mentioned how most of her followers supported remain in the 2016 EU referendum and sees significant growth in Twitter followers when she makes tweets arguing against Brexit. However, unlike Facebook, Twitter was found to have functions outside of communication with citizens. MPs interviewed also used Twitter for keeping up-to-date with the latest news headlines as its social feed provided them with a quick and condensed summary of news, and provided MPs with an indication of what news items were trending at the time. However, this relationship with news content was not one-way, and MPs commented on how Twitter was useful for getting the attention of journalists.

MPs were more unsure about the purpose of Instagram as a social media website, and how it related to their role as an MP. Most MPs agreed that it was useful for building national profile rather than a constituency one. They also stated how they found the platform to be a lot friendlier in comparison with the other platforms. One MP, Hannah Bardell, mentioned how she used Instagram for recreation and kept many of the posts extraneous to her political role, posting things that she liked or what she was doing socially, often in the form of selfies. Many of the MPs spoken to did not consider posting on Instagram as having a political purpose, but a social one. One respondent even admitted that they only used the service when they were bored. This approach makes sense with the platform still being considered as emergent, with no set standard of best practice.



### *5.1.3 Evidence of social media use as part of a permanent electoral campaign*

Previous arguments have discussed how new communication platforms have pressured MPs to have a continuous communication strategy that focuses on the next election. For instance, with the rise of cable news, also came more frequent references to subsequent elections leading to MPs to start their election campaigns earlier, or to change their communication to focus on re-election (Krasno, 1994). In their 2012 book, Elmer *et al.* argue that new communication platforms have intensified the concept of permanent campaigns – with many of these being in the form of ‘movement’ campaigns out of the confines of central leadership and into the control of the grassroots. In response to this MPs have also joined in, and often led, these campaign movements (Highfield, 2016). There has been evidence from UK MPs that their use of new services previously had less to do with genuine interaction but more to do with vote-winning (see Jackson & Lilleker, 2004). Therefore, it is within the scope of this research to understand to what extent MP’s conduct their social media communication in relation to upcoming elections.

When asked, most of the MPs questioned were keen to demonstrate that their use of social media was primarily driven in attempting to increase levels of communication with constituents – often skirting around potential benefits of social media for elections. However, some were more forthcoming about their use of social media as a campaign tool. For instance, Chris Williamson MP said that social media has significant importance in this regard: ‘electorally, of course, it helps to maintain a profile’ (19<sup>th</sup> February 2018). Similarly, Ian Lavery MP mentioned how he thought social media had an important role in elections - highlighting his role working with Labour’s digital team to prepare Labour for the next General Election on social media, which included actions to be taken before the next election is announced. Furthermore, it could be argued that MPs actions in raising their profile, an activity considered a vital function of social media, could be part of a broader campaign strategy, aligning to the statements by Ian Lavery MP and Chris Williamson MP. Overall, it seems that MPs are aware that social media, ultimately, can have an electoral benefit but this has a minimal impact on their everyday conduct when using the platforms.

#### 5.1.4 *Are Social Media pages more important than MPs websites?*

While websites were traditionally the part of the internet most closely associated with UK MPs (Jackson, 2008:81), arguably there has been a shift which would suggest that social media is now the primary home for MPs online communication - at least from the perspective of citizens. Recently, there have been a number of developments which support this proposition. The latest of which is the 2017 General Election, where social media sites had a dual role; a vote-winning campaign platform for candidates, and a news source for citizens (Bright *et al.* 2017; Lilleker, 2017). During the election, it was found that more of the UK citizens sourced their news of candidates from social media than from political or news websites. More than 21% of the public used social media as a source of news compared to 17% of people who had received election-related news from online campaign activity from parties (Hansard Society, 2018:63). This increase builds on findings from 2016 where online news sources (including social media) overtook television and print as citizens primary source of current affairs content (Nielsen, 2017). The growth in the importance of social media during elections is a trend that has also been observed in other comparable elections. Case studies from Australia, the US, and South Korea have all highlighted the growing importance of social media from the eyes of voters (Burns & Moon, 2018; Dimitrova & Matthes, 2018; Lee *et al.* 2018). This is not a sudden development as the growth of political campaigning on social media can be traced back to at least 2006 (Utz, 2006). Nevertheless, the above research would suggest that more emphasis is now placed on social media in campaigns than candidate websites.

The second development has been the central role of social media use amongst MPs in their communication strategies. MPs are aware that their social media comments can gain substantial journalistic attention, increasing their reach beyond their followers (Newman, 2011; Broersma, 2012; Broersma & Graham, 2012; Broersma & Graham, 2013; Broersma & Graham, 201). This sometimes is not for good reasons as for example after Ben Bradley MP tweeted a defamatory statement suggesting Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn MP, was a Czech spy which landed the MP with a potential legal case (BBC News, February 25, 2018, see also Parsons & Rowling, 2018). This increased level of media attention on MPs social media profiles rather than their websites would suggest that if a citizen was to see the presence of a politician, there is a higher chance it would be through a politician's social media presence. Similar findings are replicated in the US, where outside of party branding, the name recognition of political candidates is best conveyed through a social media profile (Kreiss *et al.* 2018:13).

Social media could be seen as the most important online platform for MPs due to the frequency of its use. Unlike websites which are often seen as a “fire and forget”, and ignored following elections, social media accounts require consistent updates to be relevant (Jackson & Lilleker, 2004; Bucher, 2012). Furthermore, social media has overtaken MPs websites as the platform with the most significant potential audience. This gives MPs a greater incentive to keep the page updated, compared to a website (Newman, 2011). MPs will also consider the effects of social media such as accidental exposure, and the ways in which social media content is shared, giving them a much bigger potential audience than websites or even blogs (Weeks *et al.* 2017). Due to changes in the way Google displays its search information, links to social media profiles are prominently displayed when users type an MPs name into the search bar (Google, 2017). More often than not, an MPs social media profiles rank higher than the MPs own website in the search results.

When directly asked MPs’, answers seemed to corroborate with the above findings, with most respondents stating that the audience of their social media channels is much larger compared to their websites or blogs. Jo Platt MP argued that ‘websites do not have the same impact’ and that social media provides her with a ‘bigger voice’. Often this is due to the interactive nature of the platforms, which enable citizens to share the MPs posts, increasing coverage. Posts by MPs will often find themselves in social feeds of citizens, without users having to actively search for their content. Despite this, email still remained vitally important to MPs, however, not so much for outreach but for conducting everyday communication with their constituents.

#### *5.1.5 MPs that do not use social media*

Amongst the MPs interviewed, it was found the MPs who did not use social media at all are those who are older, male, Conservative, and representing constituencies with substantial majorities. They concluded that some of the issues of social media, particularly abuse, and quality of debate, do not overcome its potential advantages. MPs who previously engaged with social media felt like they were not getting much out of it anyway, nor did they find social media representative of their constituents. In the interviews, both Phillip Davies MP and David Warburton MP who had previously used social media, commented on how they felt social media was a poor place for political dialogue, and as a result, refused to use the service anymore.

It's very difficult for any MP to get a handle on what the silent majority think. Cause these people are silent. They don't feel the need to tell everyone what they are thinking all the time...Those groups of people [who comment on social media], by definition, are at the extremes of the debate. So it's difficult to, I don't, I can't, ever imagine you're going to get a social media site that will be actually representative of the views of your constituents.

Philip Davies MP, Conservatives, Shipley, 29<sup>th</sup> January 2018.

Amongst MPs who did not or had stopped using social media, they tended to represent areas with lower than average internet and social media penetration (Ofcom, 2016). Moreover, the use of some services such as Twitter is thought to be significantly lower in rural populations than urban ones (*ibid*, 2016). This would suggest that the MPs who quit the service were those who benefited the least from using social media due to demographic and audience reasons.

There is the potential that the above comments are the result of generational effects in regard to social media use, with younger MPs using social media more. Ben Bradley MP stated how he felt that younger MPs use social media sites like many in similar age demographics, having been trained to check social media and their phone regularly. MPs who had used social media anyway, before they became an MP, would also use it as part of their representative duties. Bradley went on to suggest that those who did not use the platform were in a privileged position where they did not have to worry about the consequences of not attempting to communicate with their constituents on social platforms.

#### 5.1.6 Use of third-level social media sites

While the study of smaller or third-level social media websites was not the focus of this research, during the interviews, several MPs mentioned their use of other platforms including *YouTube*, *LinkedIn*, and *Snapchat*. From the previous analysis (chapter 1) it was found these platforms often have niche audiences or uses: LinkedIn is often used for business, and YouTube is used to host videos that be embedded in websites or linked to on social media. It was expected that MPs would use these services in a similar pattern – not treating them as social media websites *per se*, but rather as services to aid communication efforts elsewhere. This assumption was partially correct as Chris Williamson MP, Ben Bradley MP, and Hannah Bardell MP often shared social media posts linking to videos they have posted onto YouTube. However, the actual social

network they have on the service is somewhat limited (150, 30, 0 and subscribers respectively). Meanwhile, the actual number of views would suggest they rely on other platforms to promote the videos they produce. Similarly, it was found that at least 69 MPs could be found on LinkedIn (chapt. 6), when asked Bardell, stated her presence on the website was to maintain professional relationships with influential people in business rather than a communication tool in itself.

A further finding is that while many MPs do have an account on these third-level services, they do not consider them as social media on the same level as the top three platforms. It seems if the account is directly not under the MPs control, for instance, their office manages it for them, or it was for campaigning purposes, they do not refer to it when questioned. For instance, MPs; Hannah Bardell, Chris Williamson, Ian Lavery, and Ben Bradley did not mention their YouTube accounts when asked what social media networks they used. This could be that either MPs do not see YouTube as a social media site, or they are less aware of the activity on these platforms posted in their name. Furthermore, many MPs have their staff run their social profiles for them and might not keep track what sites are used by their office (see below). An alternative explanation given is that some MPs will sign-up to a third-level platform to act as a directory page that will show up when people search for them there, or to deter fake or parody accounts. Given the influence of social media in search results this is a perfectly logical approach to take and is found with some MP accounts on Twitter where the MP is technically present but has not engaged with the platform like Steve Brine MP. Instead, the profile will link to another website or social profile.

There are a number of MPs who used other social media platforms, but that this use was limited to election periods or a specific campaign. Tim Farron MP, while as Leader of the Liberal Democrats during the 2017 General Election, used Snapchat to keep his audience updated to where he was on the campaign trail. Similarly, Hannah Bardell MP joined Snapchat during the election but rarely used it afterwards. A further example of MPs selective use of these services for specific goals can be seen by MPs use of the social media website Reddit. MPs who have signed up to the social media website, have signed up with the intention of conducting an 'ask me anything' or AMA<sup>10</sup> as a promotion of a campaign and then never use the site again. Stella Creasy MP used the site publicly for a day during her deputy leadership campaign likewise,

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<sup>10</sup> "Ask me anything" or AMA are specific posts on Reddit where persons of interest such as celebrities and politicians can answer questions direct from the Reddit community (see Anderson, 2015).

previous MPs Julian Huppert and Nick de Bois joined as part of their 2015 General Election campaigns<sup>11</sup>. This follows findings from other studies which found that political candidates often will start to use YouTube during election campaigns, only to disregard the platform soon after (Carlson & Strandberg, 2008; Vesnic-Alujevic, & Van Bauwel, 2014). During the 2016 US election, candidates usage of Snapchat and Youtube was mainly done so by “so-called body men, lower-level staffers who travel with the candidate, [that] took photos and video” rather than the candidate (Kreiss *et al.* 2018:23). Many of those interviewed for the research suggested that third-level social media accounts added value during a campaign, but were not significant or useful for everyday representative-citizen communication after that (*ibid*, 2018). There are several examples of MPs who can be found to have signed up for YouTube for electoral purposes only to disengage soon after. Accounts by Paul Girvan MP, Stephen Kerr MP, David Lammy MP, Ian Liddell-Grainger MP, and Martin Vickers MP all display similar behaviours, engaging during the election campaign and then abandoning soon after.

Alternatively, some MPs have initially heard of a social media platform and signed up to investigate its potential. Signing up with little or no expectations and with no intention of using it. Other MPs have signed up to social media platform as a way to keep in touch with family members. For instance, Jo Platt MP signed up to Snapchat as a way to keep in contact with her daughter while she is in Westminster:

I'm on it [Snapchat]. I'm not very good at it to be honest. I probably just mess about with the filters with my daughter to be honest.

Jo Platt MP, Labour, Leigh, 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2018

Therefore, from the above analysis, the uses of third-level social media platforms by MPs could be summarised within the four following use cases:

- 1) Use as a service to aid communication efforts elsewhere

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<sup>11</sup> See <https://www.reddit.com/r/UKPoliticsAMA/>

- 2) Niche or particular uses outside of communication, such as professional relationships or using the platform as a directory
- 3) Campaigning or promotion tool
- 4) Curiosity or family relationships

These uses, however, have little impact in everyday communication with constituents as they are rarely used outside of elections. This effectively relegates tertiary social media websites as broadcast and not two-way communicative platforms. Therefore, the patterns of use by MPs limits the potential of these sites as a platform for representative communication.

#### *5.1.7 The degree that MPs engage in interpersonal communication with citizens on social media*

One of Coleman's proposals to fix democracy is to increase interpersonal communication between citizens and representatives, allowing a more direct form of representation. For this to happen, MPs need to be receptive to two-way dialogue with their constituents. Therefore, to see if this was a possibility, MPs were asked about what type of communication they had with citizens on social media. In the majority of cases, it seems MPs treated social media as a broadcast tool, to connect *to* constituents, rather than *with them*, limiting the possibilities of interpersonal communication. For instance, Ian Lavery MP, stated that he used social media 'to get out there, to people, on what I'm doing on their behalf, but [but I do] not engage in discussions'. Similarly, MPs from across the political spectrum, Jo Platt, Hannah Bardell, Sir Graham Brady, and Tim Farron, spoke more about using the tool to show constituents what they were doing, or to attract attention to what the MP is doing to a wider audience - with very little said about the use of the platform to inquire about the perspective of their constituents.

Only a few MPs spoke about the use of social media for two-way communication, Ben Bradley and Chris Williamson spoke about welcoming communication from citizens to themselves. Primarily it was driven by a need to be seen as good constituency MPs. 'As a constituency MP it's also important. Many people contact me on Facebook, which I welcome' (Chris Williamson, 19<sup>th</sup> Feb 2018). Annelise Dodds MP gave a more nuanced answer, suggesting Twitter was more for self-promotion and engaging with members of the press, while Facebook was used to enter in dialogue with citizens. This implies that while MPs gave their responses to the question generally, that there might be differences between each social media platform.

## *5.2 Technical considerations of social media management by MPs*

### *5.2.1 Do MPs have a communication strategy?*

A recurring feature of social media use by government departments, third sector, and companies is the deployment of a focussed strategy (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012; Floreddu & Cabiddu, 2016). A social media strategy is a formal plan that details what you want to achieve on social media and how you seek to attain these goals. They are used by account holders as mission statements to guide what to post, how, and in what tone. This is somewhat comparable to how each government department has a core brief which is used to guide its actions and responsibilities (Stanley, 2004). If MPs were to use these, it would present a clear demonstration of what they use social media for, and how they seek to benefit from it. However, when asked, MPs said they had strategic uses for social media, but this was only in the general sense, and they did not formalise this into something which could be considered a social media strategy. Instead, when asked, MPs treated social media as having more of a general purpose, and from there, anything which is posted or done on social media is on an ad-hoc basis either internally or with their staff. Most MPs did not mention a social media strategy at all. The exception to this was Ian Lavery MP, who as Chairman of the Labour Party, had been speaking to the parties digital team about the strategic use of social media for campaigning and elections. This would suggest that in politics, formal social media strategies are not common at the individual level, and is more evident at the party level.

### *5.2.2 Themselves or their staff?*

The public demand for greater communication and more immediate responses has put a constraint on MPs time and resources. In order to manage this MPs have put systems in place which has resulted in a significant proportion of an MPs communication is delivered directly to and responded to by an MPs staff rather than the MP themselves (Dale, 2015). This has had a significant impact on the dynamics of MP-constituent communication. Rather than this relationship being directly between the represented and representative, it is instead mediated by members of the MPs office. This suggests that many direct forms of communication might not be as direct as citizens are led to believe, which could have significant implications for representation. If MPs do not monitor their own email or letters then the following



representational question should be considered: if MPs staff deal with the majority of constituent's communication, are they acting as unofficial and unelected representatives?

One perspective can be found using Maggetti's analysis of EU representation and governance (2010, 2012). Maggetti argues that while many EU agencies have directly accountable representatives, they ultimately are generally staffed by autonomous policymakers who manage the day-to-day operations, and thus there is a failure of accountability and representation. When this perspective is applied to MPs and their offices: if an MP has elements of their role operated autonomously by their staff, there is scope for a reduction in representation. Alternatively, one could argue that while staff are acting in the employment of, and accountable to, their employer, and aren't acting independently. This means MPs are merely enhancing their capacity to represent constituents through top-down controls, similar to the perspective of governance (c.f. Bell & Hindmoor, 2009). In some of the representational theory, it could be argued that gatekeeping by MPs staff has increased the distance between representatives and citizens and has made the two less mutually empathetic and close. Therefore, depending on the perspective, it might be imperative to understand who exactly is responding to constituent's communication. Hence why, MPs were asked of their level of involvement in the day-to-day operation of their social media accounts.

It was found that there was a significant difference between social media websites. Activity on Twitter and Instagram has a higher direct level of involvement by the MP, with staff more involved in the day-to-day operation of Facebook page. Four distinct categories of involvement could be discerned, even though each MP had a different level of involvement. The first is MPs who explicitly managed social media by themselves with no assistance from staff. This group is more limited in numbers but take a high level of pride in managing their social media accounts. Some considered it vitally important that they do so - in this category were Paul Flynn MP, Ben Bradley MP and while currently not on social media, Phillip Davies MP when he was active.

For me personally I do my own...it's quite time consuming, probably drives my wife up the wall, but yeah, particularly Facebook, I think that the great benefit is being able to target your constituents and have a real personal two-way engagement, and that is definitely not as effective if they are not talking to me.

Ben Bradley MP, Conservative, Mansfield, 10<sup>th</sup> May 2018.

I couldn't think of anything worse, if someone else is doing it, it's not from me, is it?

Phillip Davies MP, Conservative, Shipley, 29<sup>th</sup> January, 2018

MPs from this group have mentioned that they find social media communication with constituents as a direct gateway to themselves personally, and as such, it is the most valuable to them even if the conversation is short and is the MP simply introducing the constituent to a staff member who will be managing the casework on their behalf through another communication medium (usually email).

Into the second category fall MPs who manage their Twitter themselves, but often have help managing their Facebook page. This is explained through the differences in social media purposes, as Twitter is used for broadcasting and sharing news, while Facebook pages are used for two-way communication. Due to this difference, MPs receive more constituency casework through Facebook. For instance, Ian Lavery MP, Annelise Dodds MP and Hannah Bardell MP mentioned the high degree of casework they got through Facebook compared to all other social media websites. In response, these MPs give their staff access to their Facebook page to pick up this type of communication on their behalf.

The third and largest category of those interviewed is where MPs have a mixed approach, using social media in conjunction with their staff. MPs in this category included Sir Graham Brady, Chris Williamson, Jo Platt, and Tim Farron who have members of staff to post on their behalf some of the time, and they might choose to post for themselves in other circumstances. This provides the quickest response times or allows social media feeds to remain active while the MP is indisposed. An example of this application is where an MP's office take a live video clip of the MP speaking in the House and post it online instantly.

It was a 100% me even up to a few months ago. It was and, [but] the pace down in Westminster is just ... one debate after another, and I'm like, "can you tweet out". But I do give out that instruction so. Do you know what I mean? I don't think I've completely let go because I'd be too frightened to do that. I do have that 'will you tweet out such and such a message' only because maybe I can't get signal in the palace.

Jo Platt MP, Labour, Leigh, 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2018

The fourth group is MPs who post by proxy either due to lack of technological competence, or a belief that they do not have the time to use social media personally and may instruct their staff to post and manage their social profiles on their behalf.

### 5.2.3 How MPs access social media

Since the introduction of smart devices and tablet computers, many functions previously tied to less portable desktop computers can now be done on the move. For instance, many phones have email clients built-in as standard. However, there is evidence to suggest that the way people conduct communication on mobiles is different to that of desktops. For instance, in Japan, there are studies which look at the rise of new mobile social cultures, or *Keitai* culture, and the introduction of mobile-only vernaculars and distant forms of writing (Miyata, Boase & Wellman, 2008). Studies of the impact of mobile communication have also shown that people are more inclined to have more addictive response behaviours on smartphones compared to desktops due to more inherent needs to respond immediately (Turkle, 2008; Salehan & Negahban, 2013). A study on the interpretation of media also found that users have different perceptions of the usefulness, quality, emotion, and usage intention of information on mobiles compared to desktop (Heinrichs, Lim & Lim, 2011). Other studies found several important differentiators between the use of portable and non-portable platforms, an example could be research which found that web searches on mobile devices are more related to a user's personal circumstances, extending their 'personal information space' (Baeza-Yates, *et al.* 2007; Cui & Roto, 2008). The focus on a person's more immediate surroundings and self while on a mobile device also apply to what they post online. On social media, it was found that content created on mobiles was statistically different from that on desktops. Content made on mobile is more likely to report on an author's surroundings, thoughts, feelings and immediate news (Murthy *et al.* 2015). In addition, there was a change of an author's linguistic styles on mobile compared to desktop (Murthy *et al.* 2015:833).

The above research suggests that the way MPs engage in representative communication on social media could be significantly affected by the medium of access. For instance, it could suggest that while on their smartphones, MPs will be more focussed on themselves, their environment, while on desktops the content they post will be related to other matters. It could imply that they prefer social communication while mobile and business communication on desktops (Kim, *et al.* 2007;

Kaikkonen, 2008; Heinrichs, Lim & Lim, 2011). MPs who are using social media on mobile could be expected to post content regarding the MPs personal situation, environment, or actions. Furthermore, MPs will avoid accessing emails on their mobiles, and instead prefer more informal communication through social media.

When asked about their usage habits, many MPs were open about their preference to use social media on their mobiles. Hannah Bardell MP goes as far to say that she rarely used any social network on her desktop; explaining that she used social media more while in the House of Commons. This could explain some of the usage patterns for MPs. As seen above, people will post more about what is going on immediately around them – explaining MPs use of the platform to update where and what they are doing (Chapter 6). The use of devices could also provide an explanation to why, and when, MPs are so active on social media: time management. MPs may be more active on social media because they are in an environment which does not allow them to conduct official business such as emails while in Westminster or travelling around. Instead, they use this time more effectively by communicating on social media.

I rarely use any of them on my desktop or laptop. I'm much more mobile based. To be fair I sometimes use my iPad, around ten per cent of the time... The truth is I probably access it [social media] more on a parliamentary day because I might be sitting in the chamber in a debate for six or seven hours whilst that... When I'm in the constituency I tend to be more out and about talking to people so I'm on social media less. So in a parliamentary day I'm on twenty plus, twenty to thirty [times], and in the constituency, five to fifteen.

Hannah Bardell MP, SNP, Livingstone, 9<sup>th</sup> April 2018.

There was a significant difference between the range of social media channels. Many MPs claimed they preferred to use Twitter and Instagram on their mobiles while favouring Facebook on their desktop. For example, Annelise Dodds MP preferred to use Facebook on her Desktop while other MPs such as Tim Farron MP claimed to use more mobile-friendly social media sites such as Twitter more than Facebook.

### 5.3 MPs Social Media Concerns

#### 5.3.1 Abuse of Politicians

In recent years, the abuse towards politicians on social media has made numerous headlines. In December 2017, the Committee on Standards in Public Life reported that the abuse of politicians ‘poses a real risk to our representative democracy’ by limiting the diversity in Parliament, putting off potential candidates, and at the minimum discouraging politicians from engaging with higher levels of discourse with their constituents (2017:24). MPs in the report suggested the levels of abuse had made them consider if it is worth being an elected representative, never mind having a social media account (*ibid*, 2017; see also Cohen, February 19, 2017; Saner, June 18, 2016). The issue of abuse has been debated in the House of Commons (HC Deb, vol. 627, cols. 152HW, July 12, 2016). However, the overall levels of abuse are limited and do not make up a large amount of the overall messages they receive. Three similar studies have reported similar results on the rate of abuse of MPs on Twitter, ranging from 2.57% to 4% (DEMOS, 2014; Gorrell *et al.* 2017; McLoughlin & Ward, 2017). However, it was found individual levels of abuse are highly dependent on certain factors. An MP’s race, gender, or politics have all been identified as potential factors leading to abuse (McLoughlin & Ward, 2017). Doubts over the use of social media, as a result of abuse may inhibit its potential as a space for representative communications. If MPs are finding that the platform is too hostile, they disengage, reducing the potential for representative communication. Despite the levels of abuse, it appears many MPs interviewed considered that currently, the advantages outweighed the disadvantages.

From the interviewees two MPs, Phillip Davies and David Warburton, both male Conservative MPs had said they had stopped using social media websites due to the levels of abuse they had received. Both MPs claimed that social media websites, with an emphasis on Twitter, are a poor medium for communication with constituents due to the hostility they receive. This follows several rural Conservative male MPs who have also publicly quit the service, such as Andrew Percy MP (BBC News, July 3, 2018). Neither of these MPs interviewed mentioned abuse explicitly. However, both said they had encountered issues with the lack of civility in online dialogue which they claimed made the platform effectively useless for them.

You can have a sensible exchange via email, a sensible exchange in person, but in my experience, you can't have a sensible exchange on Twitter... Twitter has given a platform to people to spout off who otherwise nobody would take any notice of - largely for a very good reason.

Phillip Davies MP, Con, Shipley, 29<sup>th</sup> January 2018

When asked, most of the MPs revealed they had received some level of abuse. Some of these claimed that their staff removed or waded through the abuse on their behalf, while others claimed it had changed the way they responded to constituents. Several of those interviewed said they use social media less or have reduced responsiveness to citizens on social media as a result.

It [abuse] does pose some challenges, to actually respond, or kind of being active online because, well I would want to, if I've been on telly, if there has been discussion about something and I would want to comment on that, and obviously I would want to see if someone has said something else about it and if I agree with that and I can retweet it. But I then have to wade through a huge amount of really aggressive, vile [messages], it means I'm less likely to do that. So, it kind of has a bit of a chilling effect, particularly on women, because we do get more [abuse], more like, appearance directed stuff, you know it's a shame really, but you just have to put up with it... I don't mind people arguing with points that I'm making, but it's a bit silly if it's all kind of nasty.

Annelise Dodds MP, Labour, Oxford East, 29<sup>th</sup> January 2018

This is of concern when considering the potential of social media for representative communication. Abuse might not be forcing MPs off the platform but it could be making MPs less responsive on social media (c.f. Morse, Dec 18, 2015; Dhrodia, Sept 5, 2017). If abuse is damaging the citizen-representative relationship on social media, then any claimed benefits of social media for repairing issues within democracy are being eroded. Despite this, MPs still generally consider being on social media more beneficial than not. Hannah Bardell MP mentioned how she would not stop using social media as a result of abuse, as that would be giving in. However, abuse may have changed the way they engage with social media. With MPs switching from using social media directly, to having their staff act as an intermediary to protect themselves from the results of this abuse.

### *5.3.2 Concerns over the representativeness of MPs audiences*

A small number of MPs raised concerns about their audience. Previous research has highlighted that many MPs lack the resources or skills to understand who their audience is - in particular, who is, and who is not, a constituent. (Krasodonski-Jones, 2017; Coldicutt, 2016). The two interrelated concerns raised by interviewees relate to the representativeness of their online audience, and secondly if their audience were their constituents. The first issue concerns MPs who wonder how representative the people on social media are in comparison to their constituents. If they use a communication method which skews or distorts the overall opinion of their constituents, then they may suffer significantly at the next election – as they could be taking action that a vocal minority want, but a quiet majority do not. Some MPs said that while they may entertain the idea of inquiry on social media, they would not assume this is the opinion of the whole of the constituency. Several went further, and it is important that they do not rely on Twitter or Facebook as a barometer of constituency opinion.

The second related issue is one of only communicating with an MP's constituency audience. MPs quoted a long-standing tradition or 'strict parliamentary protocol' of only interacting with their constituents unless the matter is related to their party or to do with an MP's executive or shadow executive position (Kelly, 2015). Consequently, some MPs are simply transferring these rules to social media, but with the worry of not being able to guarantee a person's residency. There could also be electoral reasons for MPs' wariness as a longstanding aspect of constituency communication has been with re-election in mind (Cain, Ferejohn, & Fiorina, 1979). Therefore, MPs might not waste resources on communication with non-constituents who cannot vote for them at elections. In comparison, to other forms of communication, MPs already have systems in place to identify if a citizen contacting them is a constituent – something which they do not have on social media.

However, those MPs who had a better understanding of their audience saw a critical distinction between the audiences they have on Twitter and Facebook. This would suggest this issue is dependent on an MP's technical ability to assess their audience with several claiming that they had a good grasp of this. Annelise Dodds MP mentioned she was not bothered by communication from non-constituents, provided the messages received were relevant. In some circumstances she welcomed messages from non-constituents when they related to a single-issue topic or campaign that she was involved in. Obviously, in situations where people sent her messages relating to

casework Dodds would make sure to follow Parliamentary protocol and direct them to their local MP. This suggests an informal divide between MPs perspectives when it came to concerns over audience. MPs who translate the logic of responding to emails or letters direct to social media were more likely to consider audience an issue. Whereas others who had a more nuanced understanding of their audience of social media adapted their communication strategies to match. This thesis found that some MPs are willing to be surrogate representatives to citizens outside their constituency on policy issues, but not matters that require a constituency function of the MP.

### *5.3.3 Data protection & privacy of constituents*

A further issue related to the data protection and privacy of constituents. It was found that many constituents try to publicly contact MPs to ask for help. However, by doing so in a public setting risked exposing potentially sensitive details. The culture of airing complaints and raising issues is longstanding on social media. Many companies have had to adapt their complaints procedure considering the new ways customers are seeking to publicly contact them (Einwiller & Steilen, 2015). Therefore, it follows that MPs will also have to adapt. The first way MPs have adapted is to encourage constituents to email them rather than message them on social media if they are raising casework. This allows them to deal with the casework in a conventional sense through pre-existing CRM systems such as *Caseworker.mp*, *CFL Caseworker*, or *CMITS*. This also ensures that constituents communication can be tracked and monitored so a response can be assured. The second approach is to get constituents to communicate off social media as quickly as possible, with responses that they will take up the issue if emailed.

We do pick up a bit of case work through Facebook, all be it .. urm.. because we use a caseworker system, we tend to, and because we are worried about people revealing information about themselves that they might not necessarily want to be public and that kind of thing. We try and to take it off Facebook, or encourage people to communicate to us through email once they flag something up to us through Facebook just for their sake really, so its all going to be secure and properly logged in our system.

Annelise Dodds MP, Labour, Oxford East, 29<sup>th</sup> January 2018





**Figure 6.1.** Example of MPs attempts to direct constituents to more conventional contact mechanisms

### 5.3.4 Resources & Time management

A major consideration for MPs is time management. On the initial implementation of emails into UK politics, many researchers (Coleman, 1999; Campbell *et al*, 1999) outlined the potential for email overload. This was where the reduced resource cost to contact representatives, afforded by email technology, would be reduced to such an amount that MPs and their offices would not be able to cope with the influx of messages. However, MPs from several parliaments did indeed find an increase in constituent communication, but these were in reasonable limits (Zittel, 2003; Leston-Bandeira, 2007). In the UK, MPs chose to designate more staff to manage constituent communications, since most letters and telephone messages were already pre-screened or often replied to by staff members (Dale, 2015:212). However, while interviews with MPs and their staff suggest the impact of emails has significant positive impacts for the communication with constituents and has been manageable, it is not without its issues (Williamson, 2009:249). Most notably, many offices have felt swamped, and several MPs suggesting that emails have created ‘unrealistic expectations about response times’ (Williamson, 2009a:250). Considering the pace of social media is often faster than email, and it could be argued has a lower resource cost, this could leave MPs with problematic resource issues if they start using social media.

Several reports on social media have shown that the worries about social media and time management has become a concern. A UN report on the changing nature of parliaments found that many MPs said social media had increased the pressure on an already over-encumbered

representative, with one Iraqi MP claiming “I need to get on Facebook tonight. If I do not post anything for more than a couple of days, then I get loads of messages asking where I am what and I’m up to” (Power, 2012:56). To see if this was relevant to the UK experience, MPs were asked about the impact of social media on their resources and their time.

Similar to the findings in the UK report, some MPs found that because social media posts are publicly viewable, it put them under an increased level of pressure on them to keep their pages up-to-date:

In this day and age, if you don’t tell people what you’re doing, with the level of scepticism about politics and politicians, they’ll assume you’re doing nothing... it’s probably what my predecessor came across as, in that nobody ever heard of him, or what he was doing even though he was probably very busy.

Ben Bradley MP, Conservative, Mansfield, 10<sup>th</sup> May 2018

Other MPs felt that they did not have the resources to fully commit to using social media in the way they feel they should. Jo Platt MP stated how one of staff who was initially tasked with social media, is often pre-occupied with casework as that takes priority. This was not the case with all MPs. Elected representatives who are more established and often older, did not find any pressure from social media at all. This seemed to coincide with an increased use of broadcast focussed social media, in particular Twitter, by the MP. Paul Flynn MP stated that he used Twitter to attract interest from the press and found replying to people on the medium ‘tedious’. Similarly, Sir Graham Brady MP, said it was important not to be pressured by social media, and felt that due to its unrepresentative nature, it was not a medium that he should feel accountable to his constituents. Yet, despite the supposed issues with time management and resources, MPs continue to engage with social media. Suggesting that for many MPs, the advantages of social media is worth the additional resources spent on it. In some instances, the additional pressure on MPs by citizens expectations of social media motivated them to engage with the platforms than to not use it.

However, there is another argument to why social media might be less of a time management issue than expected. As seen above, the times and places where an MP access social media are also periods where it would be difficult to conduct work or reply to emails. For example, many MPs prefer to use social media on their mobiles, rarely using a desktop computer to access it.

This means while in the House of Commons, walking on the campaign trail, or while travelling – they are unable to respond to an email but, they can be responding to constituents on social media.

#### *5.4 Discussion: How the use of Social Media by MPs impacts representative communication*

Similar to the introduction of emails, it seems that social media has increased the level of communication MPs receive from citizens. However, unlike where email simply increased styles of communication representatives previously had through letters, social media presents a new form of communication, alongside a series of new complexities that have to be considered such as the audience, abuse and resources. MPs spoke about how the platforms in many ways were more demanding. Social media required them to be more responsive to topical issues and to keep their profiles frequently updated. Overall, while there are some negative implications, for the most part MP's had a positive outlook on social media, finding value in either Facebook, Twitter or Instagram in one way or another. It also seems MPs have found ways of mitigating issues when they arise, for instance having staff post on their behalf occasionally, filtering out abuse, or using the platforms during periods where they could not be doing any other work. It could also be argued that MPs have found social media channels to be more important than other online forms of outreach such as websites and blogs. Twitter was found to be useful for communicating to a national audience, raising national issues, Facebook for speaking to their constituents, with the use of Instagram more ambivalent and non-political to MPs.

However, it seems MPs are not using social media in ways which many hoped, to revitalise representative communication; they tend to use it to broadcast messages to citizens or to draw media attention to an issue. Explanations for this can be the resources it would take for MPs to respond to every message received on the platform, and concerns over the audience. As interviewees mentioned how they do not have time to read every notification on Twitter, and that they want to avoid spending time on members of the public who are not their constituents or are not talking about issues that matter to the MPs personally. While there were suggestions that some interpersonal communication with citizens could be found on Facebook; this was somewhat limited, and the extent of how much this happens has yet to be uncovered.

Chapter 8 will discuss these points in relation to representative communication. It seems that while MPs are concerned about their audience on matters relating to casework or their constituency, they were far more receptive to communication about national policy, especially on Twitter, even if the citizen was not a constituent. This provides some evidence that MPs could be acting as surrogate representative, in a limited way. While the majority of MPs stated that while their emails are dealt with and responded to by their staff, their social media presence is at least done by themselves in some shape or form. MPs have stated how this platform provides citizens with a communication form without a gatekeeper, which might provide a level of closeness between MPs and citizens that other communication platforms do not provide. While direct representation through communication might not be prevalent on social media, it may deliver other bonds that might ultimately increase feelings of representation in citizens.

## 6 – Understanding Representatives Social Media Communication Through Data

*“FB appears to be purely a PR outlet.” [for the mp]*

Commenter on an MPs Facebook page

Chapter Five revealed the ways in which UK MPs utilise social media is neither uniform in their approach, or in the way representatives interpret such communication platforms as useful. This chapter seeks to build on the interview findings of the last chapter through triangulating with social media data. In addition, it will also expand the analysis of what representational functions can be found on social media. Therefore, concerning itself with research questions 1 and 4. This will be done by firstly, seeking to understand the types of MPs that are most represented across various social media websites in terms of demographics, party, and parliamentary experience. Testing the notion that some demographics are better descriptively represented on social media. Secondly, this chapter will analyse how MPs use social media websites: what functions MPs’ posts have, and the areas of policy that are most exposed to citizens online. This is done to explore the extent to which MPs utilise social media and its functions, and also to understand which of the four roles (see Campbell *et al.* 1999) MPs represent on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

The context of this analysis can be found within Chapter 3, and the patterns in how MPs adopt and participate in new digital technologies to aid with their longstanding motivations to communicate with citizens (c.f Lilleker, 2010; Chadwick, 2017). While MPs seek to use new platforms to communicate *with* citizens, their usage suggests that they also seek to maintain the vertical communication style found in other broadcast mediums (Kruikemeier, 2014; Jackson & Lilleker, 2014). Other similarities between social medial and other technologies is also tested in this chapter. Relationships between an MPs position in the media and patterns of uptake has often been found within the research. Previous studies have suggested that MPs adoption of new technologies are driven by desire for MPs who are ignored by the traditional media to gain an audience (for example see Ward & Lusoli, 2005). As representatives from third parties, or a

minimal profile had high uptake of email, blogs and websites generally. Likewise, political representatives from often marginalised groups within politics, particularly backbench, third party, women, and MPs from an ethnic background were seen as those most likely to seek online connection with their constituents (Lassen & Brown, 2010; Bailey *et al.* 2013). This chapter addresses existing gaps in the literature including the move away from an electoral context (Jungherr, 2016a) and the previous focus on Twitter as the sole data source due to the difficulties in researching other social media websites (see chapter 4).

This chapter tests the hypothesis that while many MPs will seek to be present across the social media platforms, they will use these sites as a way to communicate *to* constituents but will not seek reciprocal two-way communication. Some exceptions may be found with fringe MPs who seek to avoid the traditional media gate-keeping. Largely, the primary research presented in this chapter supports this view and posits that the way MPs communicate should be viewed as an attempt at marketing, rather than representative communication. However, this is not to say that their communication on social media is devoid of representational benefits as it can increase MPs accountability, and foster parasocial relationships that could still help citizens feel closer to their representative.

### *6.1 Revisiting Uptake and Usage of Social Media by MPs*

To begin understanding communication from MPs, this chapter starts with an analysis of the number of representatives on social media and a snapshot of their demographics. This enables insights into different MPs uptake which will be used to understand the descriptive representation of MPs across the platforms. As of yet, no quantitative data is available that covers the membership of all three social media sites by UK MPs in one place. The statistics that do exist are often in silo and dated (see chapter 3). Binary logistic regression was applied to test social media membership against gender, age, years in office, party, and electoral majority. The findings suggest that two of the social media websites, Facebook and Twitter can now be considered ‘normalised’ services, that is, their uptake has become expected by MPs rather than the exception. However, Instagram is a social media website that remains on the fringes. This social network has limited uptake amongst MPs and suggests some of the theories of uptake seen for new communication services from the late 2000s and early 2010s could be applied to Instagram today.

### 6.1.1 Facebook Pages

Of all MPs, 544 out of 650 MPs (83.7%) had a Facebook page, making Facebook the second most popular type of social media by MPs. This is similar to other findings across liberal democracies which suggest that Facebook has become a normalised service for elected representatives, and is something that is expected of them, rather than exception (Ross & Bürger, 2014:52). When testing for statistical relationships between MPs demographics and Facebook page uptake it was found that age of the MP (Exp(B) .953;  $p < 0.05$ ), years in office (Exp(B) .956;  $p < 0.07$ ), and electoral majority of the MP (Exp(B) .968; Sig  $p < 0.00$ ) all influenced whether an MP had a Facebook page or not (see also, tables 6.2, 6.4, & 6.5). This suggests that UK MPs who are under 44 years old, have been in office the least amount of time, and with small majorities are those with the highest uptake of Facebook. The party membership of an MP also had a small relationship with page uptake, however with a diminished statistical significance. It can also be found that MPs from the Liberal Democrats, Scottish National Party, Greens, and Plaid Cymru had higher uptake of Facebook in comparison to the others (table 6.3). However, this result did not extend to all third parties, and independent MPs did not also have a statistical relationship with Facebook page uptake. This decreased uptake was also found in political parties based in Northern Ireland including the DUP and Sinn Fein; potentially due to the different political culture in the region.

**Table 6.1.** Uptake of social media websites by MPs

Social media website	N	%
Facebook	544	83.7
Twitter	582	89.3
Instagram	234	36

Another aspect of uptake relates to the descriptive representation of political minorities. When talking about representation, several scholars have suggested that not only should all demographics be represented in legislatures, they should also be seen to be doing so too (c.f. Norris & Lovenduski, 1995; Mansbridge, 1999). Of relevance are a number of examples that

show that the presence of compelling women representatives in the spotlight correlates with an increase in female participation in politics (Atkeson, 2002; Reingold & Harrell, 2009). Similar patterns can be found in the US as a study of feelings of political empowerment in Latino communities, only modest increases of empowerment followed more Latino elected representatives in legislatures; instead, Latino representatives appearing in the media led to more significant increases of feelings of empowerment (Patoja & Sergura, 2003). It is important to study the uptake of social media amongst women and ethnic minority MPs in particular.

From the descriptive statistics (Tables 6.6 and 6.7), it was found that both women and ethnic minority MPs have a higher degree of uptake compared to their male or non-ethnic counterparts across all social media websites (uptake 10.6% higher for women & 11.4% higher for ethnic MPs). These findings challenge previous studies of social media uptake that shows ethnic minorities have a smaller degree of uptake (Hargittai, 2007). Instead, this would support the theory that women and ethnic representatives, who often face discrimination (or perceived discrimination) in media appearances (Celis & Wauters, 2010:389; Asumadu, July 8, 2013), will seek other avenues of media exposure (Jackson & Lilleker, 2014). However, this is not to say that these MPs will feel that their voice is interpreted equally when compared to other MPs. As previous research suggests that MPs from an ethnic background feel that their media appearances are limited to issues related to their ethnicity, rather than their views on the politics of the nation generally (Saalfeld & Kyriakopoulou, 2011).

### *6.1.2 Twitter*

With 89.3% of all MPs, Twitter is the most popular social media website amongst MPs in terms of uptake. Due to its increased use amongst MPs many of the demographic correlations with Twitter use are less significant; years in office, majority, and party were all found to be non-significant relationships with Twitter uptake. The only significant relationship was with age (sig. 0.03, Exp(b) .945) where the older the MP the less likely they are to use the service (see also table 6.2). In terms of gender and ethnicity, both females and ethnic minority MPs use the service more than their male and white counterparts. With women's uptake of Twitter being 8.3% higher than males, and ethnic minority MPs uptake of Twitter being 5.2% higher (tables 6.6 & 6.7). However, this effect is smaller than can be seen with Facebook.



**Table 6.2.** Uptake of Facebook, Twitter, & Instagram by Age of MP

Age of MP	No. MPs	Facebook Page		Twitter		Instagram	
		Number of MPs with Facebook page	Percentage Uptake Facebook (%)	Number of MPs with Twitter	Percentage Uptake Twitter (%)	Number of MPs with Instagram	Percentage Uptake Instagram (%)
18-24	2	2	100	2	100	1	50
25-34	40	39	97.5	38	95	15	37.5
35-44	124	116	93.5	116	93.5	59	47.6
45-54	204	181	88.7	192	94.1	89	43.62
55-64	200	156	79	175	87.5	57	28.5
65-74	66	44	66.7	50	75.6	12	18.2
75+	14	6	42.9	9	64.3	1	7.1
Total	650	544	83.7	582	89.3	234	36

**Table 6.3.** Uptake of Facebook, Twitter, & Instagram by Party

Party of MP	No. MPs	Facebook Page		Twitter		Instagram	
		Number of MPs with Facebook page	Percentage Uptake Facebook (%)	Number of MPs with Twitter	Percentage Uptake Twitter (%)	Number of MPs with Instagram	Percentage Uptake Instagram (%)
Conservative	317	252	79.5	265	83.6	118	37.2
Labour	262	227	86.6	249	95	87	33.2
LibDems	12	12	100	12	100	9	75
SNP	35	35	100	35	100	13	37.1
Plaid Cymru	4	4	100	4	100	3	75
Green	1	1	100	1	100	1	100
DUP	10	5	50	9	90	1	10
Sinn Fein	7	7	100	7	100	2	28.8
Independent/Other	2	1	50	0	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>650</b>	<b>544</b>	<b>83.7</b>	<b>582</b>	<b>89.3</b>	<b>234</b>	<b>36</b>

**Table 6.4 .** Uptake of Facebook, Twitter, & Instagram by Electoral Marginality

Majority of MP (%)	No. MPs	Facebook Page		Twitter		Instagram	
		Number of MPs with Facebook page	Percentage Uptake Facebook (%)	Number of MPs with Twitter	Percentage Uptake Twitter (%)	Number of MPs with Instagram	Percentage Uptake Instagram (%)
0-4	79	78	98.7	70	88.6	37	46.8
5-9	90	83	92.2	86	95.5	34	37.8
10-14	54	49	90.7	49	90.7	20	37
15-19	57	52	91.2	55	96.5	20	35.1
20-24	66	58	87.9	57	86.4	21	31.8
25-29	75	54	72	63	84	22	29.3
30-34	71	50	70.4	63	88.7	22	31
35-39	51	42	82.3	47	92.1	20	39.2
40-44	43	29	67.4	35	81.4	17	39.5
45-49	29	22	75.9	23	79.3	5	17.2
50+	35	27	77.1	34	97.1	16	45.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>650</b>	<b>544</b>	<b>83.7</b>	<b>582</b>	<b>89.3</b>	<b>234</b>	<b>36</b>

**Table 6.5.** Uptake of Facebook, Twitter, & Instagram by Years In Office

Years in Office	No. MPs	Facebook Page		Twitter		Instagram	
		Number of MPs with Facebook page	Percentage Uptake Facebook (%)	Number of MPs with Twitter	Percentage Uptake Twitter (%)	Number of MPs with Instagram	Percentage Uptake Instagram (%)
0-4	258	245	95	246	95.3	107	41.5
5-9	173	152	87.9	157	90.8	71	41
10-14	75	57	76	67	89.3	19	25.3
15-19	40	27	67.5	30	75	12	30
20-24	56	34	60.7	45	80.4	14	25
25-29	23	19	82.6	20	87	7	30.4
30-34	10	3	30	7	70	1	10
35-39	11	5	45.5	8	72.7	2	18.2
40-44	2	2	100	2	100	1	50
45-49	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>650</b>	<b>544</b>	<b>83.7</b>	<b>582</b>	<b>89.3</b>	<b>234</b>	<b>36</b>

**Table 6.6.** Uptake of Facebook, Twitter, & Instagram by Ethnicity

Ethnicity	No. MPs	Facebook Page		Twitter		Instagram	
		Number of MPs with Facebook page	Percentage Uptake Facebook (%)	Number of MPs with Twitter	Percentage Uptake Twitter (%)	Number of MPs with Instagram	Percentage Uptake Instagram (%)
Ethnic	52	45	86.5	49	94.2	24	46.2
Non-Ethnic	598	449	75.1	533	89.1	210	35.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>650</b>	<b>544</b>	<b>83.7</b>	<b>582</b>	<b>89.3</b>	<b>234</b>	<b>36</b>

**Table 6.7.** Uptake of Facebook, Twitter, & Instagram by Gender

Gender	No. MPs	Facebook Page		Twitter		Instagram	
		Number of MPs with Facebook page	Percentage Uptake Facebook (%)	Number of MPs with Twitter	Percentage Uptake Twitter (%)	Number of MPs with Instagram	Percentage Uptake Instagram (%)
Male	442	355	80.3	384	86.9	152	34.4
Female	208	189	90.9	198	95.2	82	39.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>650</b>	<b>544</b>	<b>83.7</b>	<b>582</b>	<b>89.3</b>	<b>234</b>	<b>36</b>

The finding that Twitter is a more established (and normalised) service by MPs could be considered surprising. After all, Facebook is considered the dominant social media website, with the largest audience in the UK (Ofcom, 2017b). One report by the Department of Culture Media and Sport (DCMS) found Facebook had 2.6 times more users than Twitter in the UK (DCMS, 2016:5). One would assume that MPs would seek to use the platform with the biggest audience, and therefore, talk to and influence more of the electorate. There is also some evidence to suggest that platforms such as Facebook and Instagram are friendlier to MPs with features that are said to lead to less abusive messaging such as policies that force people to disclose their real names on the platform (McLoughlin & Ward, 2017).

However, factors which explain the greater use of Twitter by MPs, conclude that Twitter is simply more politically valuable, or at least perceived to be, than Facebook. Firstly, while Facebook has a larger audience than Twitter, it is the opinion of many that Twitter has a more professional audience (c.f Parmlee & Birchard, 2011:12). The social networking site has more journalists, and as found in the last chapter, MPs find it a better tool to get noticed by elite audiences – that ultimately leads to more exposure, even off social media altogether. There is also the perception built by the media that Twitter is more of a political space; often using tweets as vox pops, while ignoring other platforms for the same purpose (Beckers & Harder, 2016). Finally, there are also technological reasons, such as Twitter being the first social network to verify members in 2009, and the layout of the platform that allows communication to be avoided by simply not responding, as comments to an MP's tweets are not shown to the MP's audience by default. These explanations go some way to explain why MPs found Twitter more useful in some ways for broadcasting during the interviews. It can be argued, that MP's propensity to broadcast more than interact is why they choose to use Twitter more than Facebook.

### *6.1.3 Instagram*

Of the three social media websites in the study, Instagram is the social media site with the smallest level of uptake amongst MPs (only 36% of MPs have an account). Based on previous experiences with newly introduced communication platforms to the political sphere, it could be expected that Instagram uptake would be highest amongst third parties, younger MPs, and those with small majorities (Chapter 3). However, the binary logistic regression found that the only significant

correlation was with age (sig. .000, exp(b) .960) as Instagram usage remains more consistent by MPs aged up to 54, but then decreases rapidly after that.

It was surprising to find that Instagram uptake did not correlate with gender considering the general perception across the media that the service is female-dominated (Seligson, June 7, 2016; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). Yet, women MPs only had a 5% higher amount of uptake compared to men. This correlates more closely to gender distribution amongst the general public rather than the media perception. In the UK, 34% of females use the platform compared to 28% of males – a 6% difference (Ofcom, 2018a:60). This suggests that MPs uptake of Instagram reflects how the wider public use the service. However, the descriptive statistic for ethnicity was much more significant, with ethnic MPs having a higher amount of uptake of Instagram compared to their non-ethnic colleagues by 11.1% (46.2% uptake compared to 35.1% uptake). This a similar difference to that seen on Facebook. An explanation for this could be that ethnic MPs are more likely to have seats in urban areas due to the concentration of some ethnic communities (Campbell & McLean, 2002). In addition, it was previously found uptake for social media, especially newer platforms was higher in urban areas. As a result, these MPs may face increased pressure to be on these services by their constituents, providing an additional explanation for the higher uptake of Facebook amongst ethnic MPs.

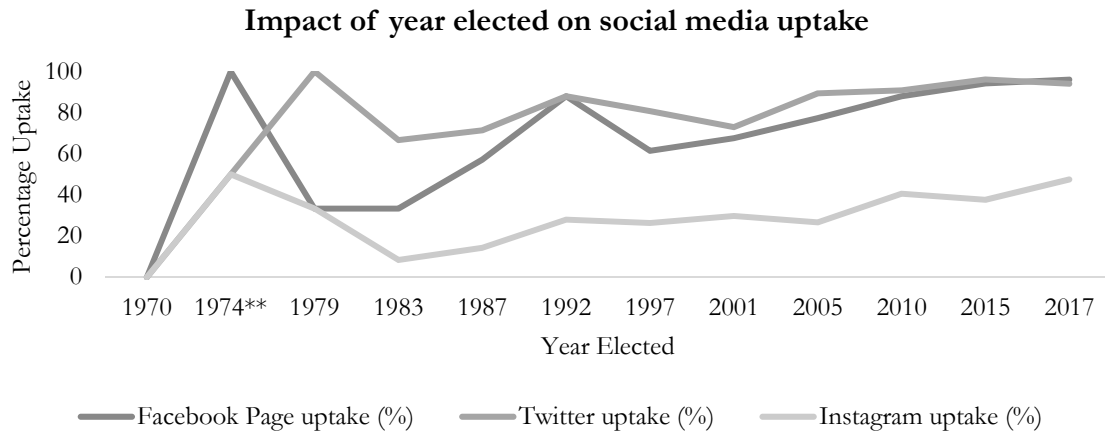
This study found distinctive differences in uptake by party. Instagram is the only platform whereby Conservative MPs have a higher degree of uptake compared to Labour; with 37% of Conservative MPs have an Instagram profile compared to 33.7% of Labour MPs. To explain this, one could consider reports of the guidance issued by Conservative HQ (Maidment, May 11 2018; Wilkins, May 11, 2018; Ben Bradley MP Interview, 2018). There have been multiple news reports that the leadership team of the Conservatives have made efforts to entice their MPs onto the service to make their MPs appear more personable and likeable – while also taking advantage of Labour's relatively small dominance on the platform in comparison to Twitter or Facebook (D'Urso, May 11, 2018; Maidment, May 11, 2018). While it is uncommon for MPs to be instructed by their parties' central leadership team on how to use social media, as seen from the last chapter, this concerted effort could be responsible for this increase, and deviation from the expected norm. However, as shown by the later section, this increased uptake does not necessarily mean an increase in use by Conservative MPs.

#### *6.1.4 MPs with no social media accounts*

It has now become a rarity for an MP to have no single social media account across either Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram. Out of all MPs, only 27, or 4.2% do not have a social media page. Out of this group, 19 of them are Conservative MPs, 7 of them Labour members, and 1 is the speaker John Bercow. This group also have higher than index majorities; 24 of them had a majority over 20 per cent and only one MP had a majority under 10 per cent. Only one of this group is female: Colleen Fletcher MP (Labour, Coventry). Age might also be a factor as the group had a mean age of 63 years old, almost twelve years older than the mean of all MPs (51 years old). Finally, this group also was elected earlier than the whole group of MPs. The mean date of the MPs first election into the House of this group was 1997, compared to the main groups mean election date of 2008 (see also figure 6.2). 35% of this small group was elected in 1992 or earlier, compared to only 7.5% of all MPs.

#### *6.1.5 Normalisation of social media websites*

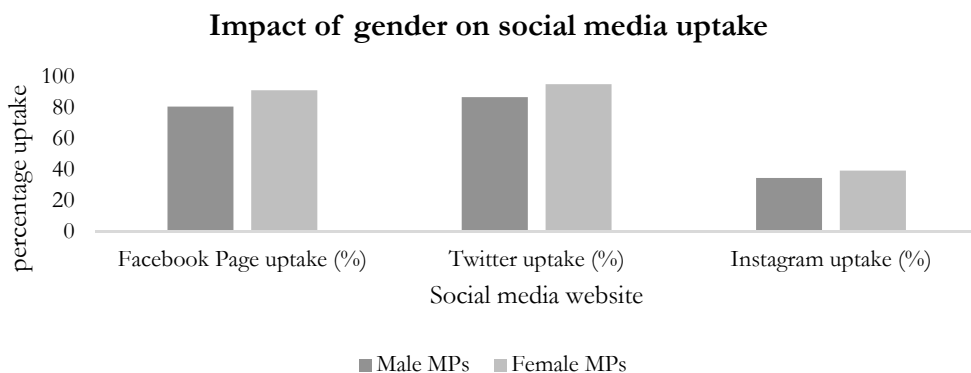
There is a familiar pattern on the implementation of new communication platforms by representatives and the study of the demographics that uses them. For early internet studies, research focussed was on early adopters, mostly young, male and educated and what the impact this had on politics and participation (Johnson & Kaye, 2004; Uslaner, 2004; Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005; Gibson *et al.* 2005; Zúñiga, *et al.* 2009). However, after normalisation whereby online demographics started to more closely resemble the general population, the focus shifted towards who is not using the technology rather than who is (Reisdorf, Axelsson, & Söderholm, 2012; Yates, Kriby & Lockley, 2015); or scrutiny is placed on the different uses of the technology amongst particular demographics (Fenton, 2015). This is a pattern which can also be found in the research of MPs and their social media use; for instance, within the two earliest examples of academic research on the use of Twitter by MPs by Williamson (2009) and Jackson & Lilleker (2011). However, as this thesis has found, the levels of MPs use of social media has increased significantly. As a result research should shift away from patterns of uptake and towards those who do not use the service, or how MPs use the platforms. However, for Instagram a different approach is needed due to its relatively low usage and MPs apparent lack of confidence in their approach to the platform (chapter 5).



**Figure 6.2:** Graph displaying uptake of Facebook, Instagram and Twitter by year elected

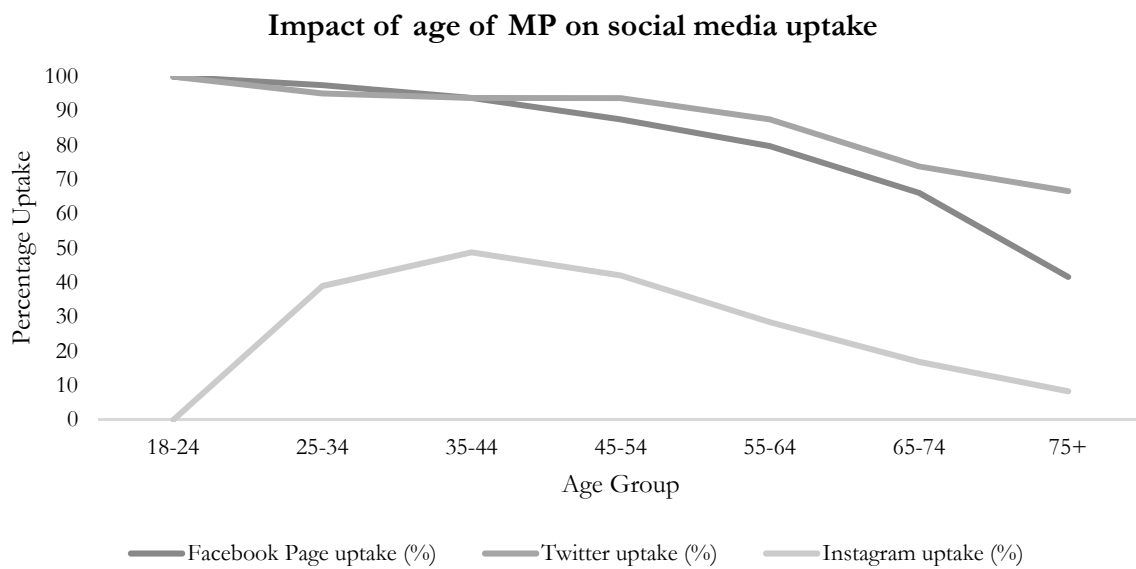
### 6.1.6 Overall Demographic trends across social media

Overall, this section suggests that some of the predictions regarding the representation of women and ethnic minority MPs hold true with an increased uptake across all three social media platforms from these demographics. However, these findings are found to be not statistically significant in the point biserial correlations. Suggesting that there are other, more important, factors of uptake. Nevertheless, this result still has an impact on the perception of these MPs as more active on the three platforms. This is important in the arguments that underrepresented segments of society could seek descriptive representation by following MPs of a similar demographic background, an area to be explored in the next chapter.



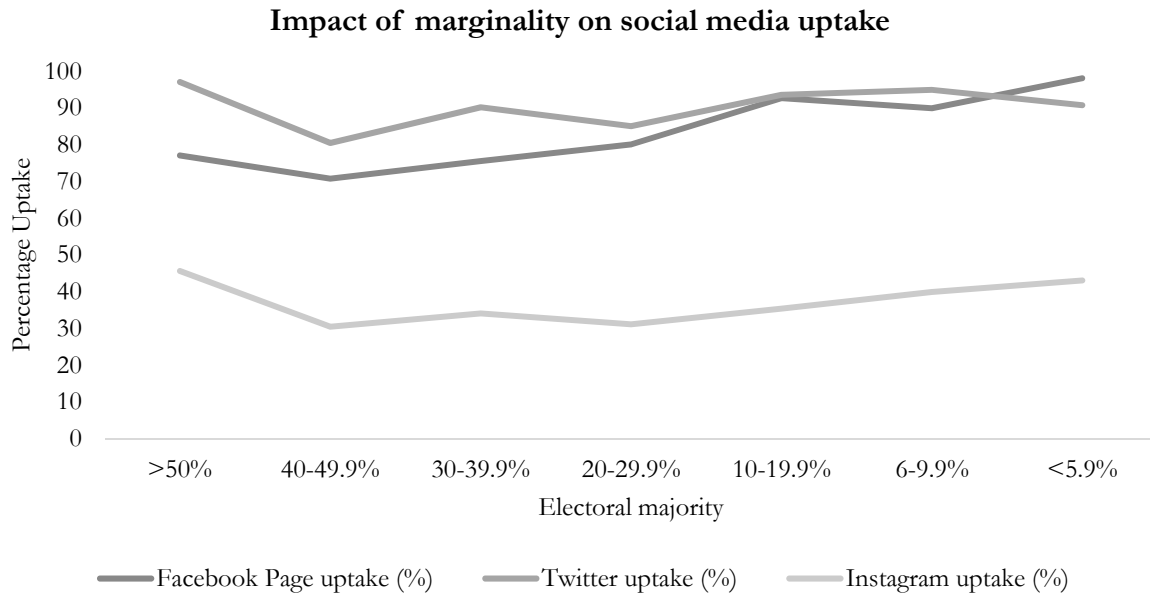
**Figure 6.3.** Graph displaying uptake of Facebook, Instagram and Twitter by gender of MP

Age was the most significant predictor of social media uptake across all three social media platforms. Findings suggest that younger MPs feel more confident and inclined to use the platforms. In this way, it seems MPs uptake of social media reflects the patterns of uptake by the general population. Finally, the major social media websites (particularly Twitter) have become normalised in their use. As a platform becomes more normalised, factors that could be used to previously predict uptake become less important (such as party). However, the same factors, to a lesser degree, can be seen on smaller social media websites such as Instagram, especially in terms of majority status of the MP. Yet, statistics for this platform appear to be affected by edicts from Conservative Party HQ to convince their MPs to use the service and gain ground here as a tactical move to avoid being seen as “behind the times” (see chapter 5).



**Figure 6.4.** Graph displaying uptake of Facebook, Instagram and Twitter by each age group.





**Figure 6.5.** Graph displaying uptake of Facebook, Instagram and Twitter by year electoral majority

### 6.2 What patterns can be found in how MPs use social media?

The rest of this chapter's results use the variables from the coding of MPs social media activity (see chapter 4). Primarily, the output of this coding provides data on the medium of how MPs post, such as if they chose to employ image or video elements; the subject they post about; the purpose of the post; if there was an identifiable policy area; and the sentiment of the post itself. This section provides an overview of what MPs use social media for. It finds that there are significant differences in how MPs use each social media platform; for example, Twitter is used predominantly for national news and elite level communication; Facebook for posts focussed on the local level; and Instagram as a platform to show an MPs more personal side and document their activities. However, the predominant mode of communication throughout is broadcast, with only small elements of MPs attempting to inquire what their constituents think. Representationally, this means that overall social media use by MPs best fits the accountability function.

### *6.2.1 Frequency of MPs' social media posts*

The first measure was to test the level of engagement with social media. From the 544 MPs with Facebook pages, 56 MPs (10.2%) had not used their Facebook account during the collection period. Similarly of the 234 MPs on Instagram, 77 (or 32.9%) had not used their Instagram account. It appears that a number of these Facebook pages, such as that for Adam Afriyie MP, had their last post made during the 2017 General Election, while other MPs, such as Rosie Cooper post so infrequently that they made no posts during the collection period. These types of cases are classified as MPs with Facebook presence, but inactive. This group consisted of: MPs who appear to have previously explored using Facebook to communicate with citizens but did not see the results as expected; those who sought to reserve their names on the platforms; used social media so infrequently they appear uncommitted; or MPs who only saw Facebook as a campaigning medium, and not a day-to-day communication platform. Evidence suggests that this pattern of engagement is the least effective for speaking to the largest possible number of citizens. As the frequency of posting has an impact on the post placement on users' social walls and the overall number of people who might encounter an MPs' content (Marmer, 2017). On Instagram, the reasoning behind why they stopped using the platform appeared to differ. Thirty-seven of the non-users either had little-to-no activity on the account with the largest group of the 27 being from the Conservative Party. This would support the idea that although there is pressure from their party to use the service, they did not necessarily engage with it.

The MPs who did post during the data period made a collective total of 13,607 Facebook posts. However, the number of posts made by each MP varied massively. With a range of 1 to 124 posts, and an average of 21 posts each (or 0.7 posts per day). The 157 MPs that had been active on Instagram during the collection period had posted a total of 1,846 times, with an average of 11 posts each. The range significantly varied by each MP, with a range of 1 to 94 posts over the same period. Meanwhile, the total number of tweets by MPs was significantly higher than both other social networking sites, with a total of 78,366 tweets with a high proportion in the form of retweets (44,338). However, even removing retweets, Twitter is by far the most actively used social media site by MPs.

### 6.2.2 *Media-type*

Many social media websites allow the use of images or video to accompany their posts, this allows for selfies, campaign posters, and infographics to be shown alongside text. Facebook and Twitter have allowed, and actively encouraged, the use of images on their platforms (Taylor, June 1, 2011). However, in the past MPs have been perceived to be inept when it comes to the effective use of social media features (D'Urso, October 5, 2018). This perspective might stem from MPs early use of social media, with MPs low engagement with the visual elements of the internet, with only 4% of MPs uploading photographs and 12% uploading some type of video or audio to the internet (Williamson, 2009a:12). Other have argued that the internet has moved past 'words on screen' (Turkle, 1995) and towards visual components that can better transmit certain messages to the user. Pearson (2010) argues that the use of images on social media has become a core component of creating a 'virtual identity' to users, presenting a more authentic, and positive image of the poster in the eyes of their audience. So, if an MP is to engage with social media to its best potential, MPs would be best advised to post content alongside photos and videos. More audiovisual content could bring MPs and citizens together, as it is seen to be more personable and relatable, compared to text alone, especially if it shows the MPs themselves. A change in content might support the notion that social media fosters bonds of connectiveness between representatives and citizens.

Using audiovisual content could suggest that MPs are less 'behind with the times' than previously presented, being far more engaged with the visual aspects of social media than expected. On Facebook, 91% of posts come with some type of media be it an image, video, or a link (41% contained an image, 18% contained a video, and 32% contained a link). Only 7% of posts contained text only on Facebook. (2% of posts contained links or video shares that has been removed). Instagram posts are structurally image or video led, as the platform does not allow for text-only posts. MPs use of Twitter was very proactive when it came to audiovisual content, with 50.4% of tweets directly containing video or photos, 23.4% containing some type of link, and 26.2% containing text only. This provides support for a later claim in this chapter that Twitter is a more immediate reaction tool for MPs. As there are resource costs to creating content with images or video when compared to text alone. So MPs who are outside of their offices, or want to post a message quickly might not have time to create a photo or video at the given moment when they choose to tweet.

One might also expect that there would be a distinct difference in how backbench MPs and those with access to greater resources through an executive or shadow executive role would use images or video. While ministers might not have direct increased support through the civil service for managing their role as an MP, they will have access to greater support through party HQ communication units or through special advisers (Hutton & Lewis, 2014). For instance, MPs with more resources might also have access to video and image editing software and staff with skills to edit content on their behalf so it appears more professional. Conversely, backbencher MPs would typically have less refined content or have the appearance of being images or videos straight from their cameras without any graphic design work or editing.



Figure 6.6 Images shared by Colin Clarke MP & Matt Hancock MP

However this was not the case. Comparing backbenchers to MPs with executive positions found that both appear to share the type of content that could be expected of a backbench MP. That is, images straight from a camera with no or little editing. For example, both images shared by Colin Clarke MP, and by Matt Hancock MP, Secretary of State for Health & Social Care, when posting about their local appearances in at educational establishments in their constituency use simple group shots. This suggests that MPs with executive roles might not be receiving additional

help with their general social media content from party HQ or through their executive roles. Where this trend did differ was through party created content, or when the MP was speaking in a ministerial capacity. In these instances, it appears that the communication was more refined, or would link to their activity through sharing content from official government channels. One explanation for this could be how MPs manage their social media presence. As stated in the previous chapter, MPs do want to manage their own social media platforms, however, face difficulties with time constraints and resources. As a result, they will often use the visually adept communication teams available to them, but only for party related content and those relating to a ministerial role. For issues relating to their constituency role MPs, regardless of any executive function, would use social media personally or their constituency office to post on their behalf.

Regardless of their technological capabilities, it appears that MPs have noticed the importance of taking a visual approach on social media and will often furnish their posts with relevant pictures or videos. They would use visuals to document where they are, for instance visiting a school in their constituency, or being an active MP, to show their constituents that they are busy. For instance, 22% of Facebook posts were dedicated to documenting the MPs actions (Table 6.8). This supports comments in the previous chapter from Ben Bradley MP who used social media to show that he was active, on the assumption that if he did not, constituents would otherwise assume he was an inactive representative.

### *6.2.3 The functions of MPs' posts*

#### *What MPs Post on Facebook*

The frequency and type of posts give a partial picture of an MPs activities on social media, further analysis can uncover insights about its intended function. To do this, the content analysis coded for the function of the post, using 23 different coding options. Each code related to a specific action that the MP could take with a post. A post could perform roles like: signalling that they are actively doing something (such as visiting a school), supporting a policy, or if they are asking for their audience to take a specific action.

Overall, the most substantial functions of posts related to policy (15.4%): either supporting (6.7%), announcing (4%), updating (3.1%), or criticising a policy (1.6%). Other posts also

contained some policy information, such as attacks on the opposition, but as the focus of the post was the opposition rather than the policy, this was coded differently. This function is representationally important within the role of accountability. Chapter 2 referenced how it is vital for citizens to be provided with information which they can judge their representative by. However, this is caveated as MPs are their own gatekeepers, using impression management to ensure only that content that shows them in a good light to voters will be posted. Most MPs have shut off the ability for other citizens to post directly on the page. Nevertheless, MPs telling their audience, (and potentially their voters) what policies they support and disagree with will alert them to their values, which helps citizens to make more informed electoral choices.

**Table 6.8.** *Functions of Facebook posts by Percentage*

Function of post	% of posts		
'I'm doing/ at'	22.4	Selfie	2.6
Calling out, or attacking opposition	13.0	Links to news	2.3
Promoting 3 <sup>rd</sup> organisation	11.9	Asking for citizens opinions/ inquiry	2.1
Providing information or facts	8.7	Links to self-written news	1.9
Showing support for a policy	6.7	Showing negativity towards a policy	1.6
Service information	4.8	Political outcome	1.5
Providing their opinion	4.8	Political poster /campaign media	1.3
Asking to support	4.0	Personal update	1.3
Policy announcement	4.0	Photography	1.1
Updating on policy progress	3.1	Other – N/A	0.7

This research also found that 22.4% of MPs Facebook posts focus on demonstrating they are active which are often accompanied by photos of the MP (see figure 6.8). This focus links to earlier arguments posited by Jackson and Lilleker about personalisation of politics online (2009). It is relevant, that while the initial research based on MySpace, comparable results can be found on Facebook. MPs often use social media images to focus on and represent what they are doing, rather than using photos or video to primarily highlight the subject the MP is talking about.

A further type of frequently occurring posts were political callouts - attacking an opposition party or their MPs. These feature posts that attack MPs from different parties, highlight their failures, or to otherwise challenge them. These posts are often framed to appeal to their audiences pre-existing opinions or party affiliation (Groeling, 2010:138). 13% of Facebook posts collected during the data collection period, attacked the opposition. When comparing the two largest parties, 20% of posts by Labour were attacking the government or the Conservative Party, compared to 4% of Conservative posts spent attacking Labour or other parties. This correlates with traditional political behaviour, where the party in government will spend more time talking about the success of their policies or attempt to keep the agenda on strongly performing policy areas (Hesmondhalgh, 2005, McNair, 2018:148); while the opposition will spend more of their media time attacking the government (Thesen, 2012). It appears that this type of activity has carried over to a new medium. However, the unfiltered nature of social media provides the potential for more intensified name-calling, no watershed, and more immediate, personal and emotive attacks, especially by opposition MPs.



**Figure 6.7.** – Tom Brake MP using a Facebook post to call out (then) Home Secretary Sajid Javid.

Facebook was also used by MPs to promote the work of third party organisations, including charities, local businesses, advertising local events or the work of local public-sector establishments. The majority of this type of activity is local, with 65.2% of posts promoting entities within their constituency. In some way, this activity could be an attempt by the MP not only to support the local area but also as a signal to citizens that they are ‘hard-working members’

for the local constituency. This fits into some of the impression management activities of MPs online through their websites and Twitter profiles (Stanyer, 2008; Jackson & Lilleker, 2014).

Finally, the last relevant function focusses on providing non-political information including funding opportunities, local service information or promoting world days. For example, many MPs advertised the Aviva Community Fund, or the Big Lottery Fund, with a suggestion that their constituents could access these. Similarly, information was shared promoting international awareness days, such as World Suicide Prevention Day. MPs also often shared posts by service providers announcing the temporary closure of roads in their constituency. These posts provided little in the way of political activity but served to provide information to a local audience. Overall, MPs posts on Facebook function as a platform to inform or convince their audience. Either through the promotion of what the MP is doing or believes, or to provide information about subjects that are relevant to the policies an MP specialises in, or the local area.

#### *What MPs Post on Twitter*

Twitter is by far the most actively used social media site by MPs. During the data collection period, MPs created 78,366 posts on the platform (retweets accounted for 44,338 of these). However, the use of this platform was once again distinct as Twitter functioned as a space for high-level, or elite-level communication. To this end, MPs focus on the 'here and now' of politics, current events, opinion, supporting or attacking other MPs in the news. It is questionable whether the use of Twitter by MPs does much for constituent-representative communications, though it does demonstrate an MPs values and opinions.

There are some similarities regarding the function of posts with other platforms. Over a fifth, (21%) of Twitter posts were dedicated to highlighting and documenting their actions. Arguably, MPs could be said to be making themselves more accountable to the public, by telling the public what and where they are. However, as Jackson and Lilleker (2014) found previously, these posts are heavily influenced by impression management; with MPs aiming to create an air of likeability. MPs are often keen to highlight successes or to be shown being active in ways that will promote good-will. MPs with photos of themselves at local charities or working in support of them is one common means of an MP seeking to manage their identity. Another way MPs have sought to create an impression of themselves is to interlink or associate themselves with non-partisan



organisations such as a local playgroup, prominent charity workers or companies – and by doing so they connect themselves with popular causes.

**Table 6.9.** *Functions of Twitter posts by Percentage (excluding Retweets)*

Function of post	% of posts	
'I'm doing/ at'	21.0	Links to news 3.4
Calling out, or Attacking opposition	17.1	News Links with Opinion 10.6
Promoting 3 <sup>rd</sup> organisation	7.7	Opinion (current affairs/politics) 8.7
Providing information or facts	1.8	Opinion (non-political) 2.6
Showing support for a policy	4.7	Asking for citizens opinions/ inquiry 0.9
Service information	0.9	Links to self-written news 2.6
Asking to support	0.4	Political outcome 1.7
Policy announcement	0.9	Political poster /campaign media 4.3
Updating on policy progress	1.3	Photography 1.3
Selfie	0.1	Other – N/A 0.2
Personal update	4.1	

The most common use of Twitter was for the dissemination and commentary on current affairs. Out of all tweets sent (excluding retweets) 24.6% of tweets were by made MPs who shared or commented on news. By sharing news, MPs can attach their own framing or supplementary opinion to the news article itself. This is to either agree, disagree, add their own expertise, or to iterate how this might impact their constituency or a group they claimed to represent.

The content analysis also found that MP's tended to avoid conversations with constituents. Based on how MPs use the platform, there are several features of Twitter which suggest it is not useful for constituent-representative communication. While it was out of scope for this research to look at each MP's Twitter biography, many request that citizens should use email to receive a response (figure 6.8). In addition, it was found that out of all tweets MPs sent only 5.14% are comment replies. Suggesting the majority of MPs content is broadcasting. When an MP did respond, it was more often to 'elite' users, such as other MPs, journalists, or prominent Twitter accounts with a high level of followers. This follows findings discussed in the next chapter that found MPs only respond to a select number of citizens based on education and partisanship (Chapter 7).

Additionally, Twitter was also infrequently used to ask for the opinions of constituents (or followers), with only 0.8% of tweets showing this type of activity – significantly lower than Facebook. This further underlines that the use of Twitter for MPs is not for direct communication with constituents, but rather dissemination of information.



**Figure 6.8.** Twitter Biographies for Huw Merriman MP (& Jon Trickett MP showing a discouragement for policy or casework questions over Twitter

A further indication of which users an MPs seek to communicate with can be seen through who they choose to retweet. These are dominated by fellow MPs or elected officials from the same party (26.8%). This is an indication that MPs use retweets as a way to show agreement or support for other politicians. This concurs with general communication research that shows Twitter users often use retweets as a sign of trust, agreement with the message and the originator (Metaxas *et al.* 2014). MPs also have a high propensity to retweet party accounts (8.2%) or the accounts of their party leader (9.5%). It is notable that MPs choose to retweet their party leader more than the party, a small suggestion that MPs prefer to share messages with a personal connection than simply from the party.

Overall, this paints a picture of Twitter being a representationally useful tool for understanding the opinions of MPs at any given time. MPs use the platform to share news that they think is relevant, that is consistent with their values, or news that they think they can comment upon. For citizens, Twitter is useful in allowing them to understand their MPs values on a story-by-news

story basis. What Twitter does not do is break the patterns of top-down communication by MPs. Instead, one could argue that it mostly reinforces patterns of broadcast communication. One could go as far to argue that asymmetrical social networks do little to increase representative communication. While there is an increase in the overall numbers of posts by MPs, only small amounts of this is in dialogue with citizens suggesting MPs are not engaging with communication from their constituents: and therefore, not hearing what citizens have to say.

**Table 6.10.** *Who MPs Retweet*

Account Owner	% of posts		
Elected Official from same party	26.8	News Website	4.0
Journalist	12.8	Government department	4.0
Party Leader	9.5	Academics	3.4
Campaigners	9.4	Elected Official from opposition party	2.7
Famous (non-political)	9.1	EU body	2.0
Party Accounts	8.2	Normal Citizen	3.1
Campaign Group/Charity/Non-profit	6.7	Non-UK Politician	0.7

### *What MPs post on Instagram*

The use of Instagram by MPs is much more distinctive compared to Facebook and Twitter. Instagram is still used primarily to broadcast, but with a significant proportion of posts focussed on their actions documenting what they are currently doing. Posts coded as “I’m doing/at” take up 41.3% of MPs posts on the service. This is nearly double that of Facebook. These posts often serve to document the MPs’ activities with visual proof such as a shot of the MP on location talking to a local charity, or visiting a school, or taking some action on behalf of constituents. In many instances, the focus of the post is to highlight that the MP is active in the constituency community, rather than promoting policy or whomever they might be supporting at any given time. One explanation for this can be found in socio-technological factors. Instagram’s platform and layout promotes the use of images and video over text, and so its use by MPs focussed on activities suited to audiovisual content – such as constituency visits. A previous study by Sheldon and Bryant seems to confirm this hypothesis, suggesting that the platform natively promotes

users to document their daily lives through their activities captures with images or videos (2016). They also found a correlation with the increased frequency of Instagram posts and users' levels of social activity. Overall, this suggests that MPs are influenced by the same factors as everyday users in how they post.



**Figure 6.9.** Example of an 'I'm Doing/at' post by Laura Pidcock MP. It shows the MP active at a local hospice event.

From another perspective, the way MPs are using Instagram is familiar to how citizens are becoming more narcissistic or 'me' focussed content on the platform due socio-technological factors found across social media websites (c.f Weiser, 2015). For instance, a number of posts by MPs could be classified as increasingly 'me' focussed, including "doing" posts (see above), selfies (6.3% of all posts), and posts about their life (food/pets, 1.5%; and personal updates 8.4%). Other aspects of MPs Instagram use are also personalised to a higher degree than on other social networks. For instance, MPs posting about Westminster processes typically include a shot or video of the MP speaking in Parliament or present a version of events which includes themselves. In many ways, the approach taken by MPs, agrees with prior research on how citizens use Instagram. Schroeder (2016), suggests that Instagram promotes users to self-brand themselves with personal activities through more visual, and immediate means. In addition, these same factors of immediacy often lead people to reveal more about their personal lives, than they would have done, or by stating news in a way that frames the author as being central to the event. This, does not necessarily mean that MPs are becoming more narcissistic in themselves. It could also be an indication that Instagram is a platform that is more limited in its functionality and lends

itself more to these types of posts. Images limit the amount of policy information that can be contained within them. Previous research has highlighted that while images on social media can successfully translate emotion, and generalities, they are a poor communication method to disseminate policy, as seen in the 2017 UK General Election (Schroeder, 2016; see also McLoughlin & Southern, 2017). It seems that in the context of politics and policy, the old idiom relating to the value of a picture over text does not translate. The methodology and coding used had to be adapted to Instagram due to the reduced functionality of the platform. Overall, it seems that regardless of the reasoning, the most prominent function of Instagram is to update their audience on what the MP is doing at any given moment, both professionally and personally to a greater degree than on other platforms.

**Table 6.11.** *Functions of Instagram posts by Percentage*

Function of post	% of posts		
'I'm doing/ at'	41.3	Selfies	6.3
Calling out, or Attacking opposition	2.0	News	1.1
Promoting 3 <sup>rd</sup> organisation	9.3	Asking for citizens opinions/ inquiry	0.1
Providing information or facts	2.4	Political Poster/ Campaign media	3.6
Showing support for a policy	5.4	Personal Update	8.4
Service information	1.6	Photography	6.6
Asking to support	0.7	Food/Pets	1.5
Policy announcement	1.2	Westminster	1.4
Political outcome	0.3	Campaigning	7.0

MPs use Instagram to show their audience a more personalised version of themselves than seen on Facebook or Twitter. This is indicated, not through the larger number of selfies or personal updates, but in how MPs talk about party politics. Initially, the amount of content for party campaigning appears high (7%), however most of these posts are related to documenting their own campaigns, rather than for a local or party issue. This finding mirrors that of other research papers that find that when MPs become more personal, they do so at the expense of communication about their respective parties (Rahat & Sheaffer, 2007; Balmas *et al.* 2012).

Discussions of personalisation are often complemented by the theory of depoliticisation. Lanancette and Raynauld described this as where politicians are using new media forms, predominantly images and video, to move themselves away from being a “political being” to focus on fundamental qualities in which they feel voters place more emphasis upon (2017). These qualities include honesty, friendliness, intelligence and sincerity (*ibid*, 2017). When analysing MPs posts on Instagram, it seems MPs use of the platform has accelerated this process of depoliticisation, with images by MPs that seek to highlight their family values, local connections, and other qualities that they think voters might value.

Overall, it appears that the function of Instagram to MPs is to display visual aspects of their online presence, but also as a platform to focus on themselves and what they do as an MP. In some ways, this is similar to how citizens use Instagram, with some techno-sociological effects seen by use of the platform, also present in posts by MPs. Behaviours include the incessant need to document what they are doing or to show their social activities which are something done by citizens to a wide degree on social media (Barker, 2017). The platform is less about politics, politics and party, but about the politician themselves. In this way, we can understand its use by political representatives as a way to show their more authentic side– without the rhetoric that could otherwise cloud the fundamental qualities that they want to display.

A significant question in light of the above findings and prior research therefore presents itself: what are the representative implications for the use of Instagram by MPs? It certainly does not appear to be a promising avenue for policy discussion as only a small proportion (6.6% of posts) could be said to show an MP showing support or announcing a policy. Instagram does not seem to be a platform of conversation that fulfils the requirement of communicative representation. MPs seldom ask for citizen values on the platform, as the level of inquiry posts sits at 0.1%. It does however seem to be a place of limited information accountability – letting citizens know what their MP is doing for them. Yet this is not the largest type representation activity. Considering Pitkin’s four concepts of representation, it can be found that it is symbolic representative activity that MP’s undertake on Instagram. Little of the actions MPs showed that they were doing equated to policy change – digging holes, sitting in tractors, wearing hard hats, or holding a sign showing support for a cause. Instead, MPs appear to be using images and posts on Instagram to suggest or show group membership. MPs use Instagram to show that they are part of the local community and understand their constituents – and are thus representing them, without the need for policy discussion. This is not to say that their constituents accept the claim

MPs are symbolically making (see Saward's representative claim, chapter 2). However, it does show that behind actions taken on the platform, MPs may still be performing a representative function, however little or effective it may be.

### *6.3 Who do MPs represent on Social Media?*

#### *6.3.1 MPs representing at the National or Constituency level on social media*

One of the current debates in representation, and whom MPs stand for, is the constituency vs national debate. While MPs stand for the local area, they are also representatives for the UK as a whole (Searing, 1985; Rehfeld, 2005:10). A constituency MP is one that will focus their time on the needs of the local area and people that they represent. Norton (1994) expanded on this notion further, creating seven types of constituency service MPs could undertake (see also chapter 2). However, for the purposes of this research, a simple binary was used to test if an MP's post focussed on the local area or primarily on national issues. Each post was coded if it focussed on a national issue, a constituency issue, party political, devolution, Westminster (for example procedure or political reform issues), themselves (such as personal posts), or if they were posting as part of the executive or shadow executive. Posts that talked about an obvious national issue, Westminster proceedings, or when the MP was speaking as a minister are labelled as national, while constituency and devolved area are self-defined. Party was put into a separate category and split between local party and national party issues as necessary.

As seen by table 6.12, MPs posts on Facebook are split evenly between national and constituency related posts. This suggests that MPs try split their time between topics of importance between their constituency issues and national ones. Some SNP MPs also spent their time talking about the devolved parliament, often promoting their party's role at Holyrood. 52% of Facebook posts about a devolved area were made by SNP MPs. MPs on Twitter were much more nationally focussed. tweets (excluding re-tweets) by MPs with a national focus accounted for 63.6% of posts, compared to 27.2% for posts relating to their constituency. Instagram's amended coding scheme did not measure its geographical focus. This finding aligns to the points raised by MPs during interviews – that is they use Twitter for nationally related content and Facebook for local issues.

**Table 6.12.** *Facebook & Twitter posts by Geographical Focus*

Focus	Facebook (%)	Twitter (%)
<b>National Total</b>	<b>49.1</b>	<b>63.6</b>
<i>National</i>	32.1	38.9
<i>Westminster</i>	2.4	6.9
<i>Minister (or shadow)</i>	2.7	4.2
<i>Party (national)</i>	11.8	13.6
<b>Constituency total</b>	<b>41.3</b>	<b>27.2</b>
<i>Constituency</i>	41.0	18.9
<i>Party (local)</i>	0.2	8.3
Devolved area	2.9	4.0
Themselves	6.7	5.2
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

### 6.3.2 Does MPs use of social media signify a move away from the party?

Previous research into MP's online communication behaviours has considered if it has made MP's less party focussed (see chapter 3). MPs may become less reliant on the internal party machine to get their message out to the public, so their focus shifts to less on the party, and more about themselves or their constituencies. However, existing studies have been inconclusive such as a study of Swedish MPs found that representatives continue to focus on party promotion (Karlsson, 2018). To test in the UK context, posts were measured for their degree of party related content.

The number of posts about party-related content was similar on each platform as posts related to party matters were 21.9% and 12.0% for Twitter and Facebook respectively, and 10.62% for Instagram. There are also posts that are not directly about the party, but those that support it, such as posts that attack the opposition (2.0% Instagram; 17.1% Twitter; 13% Facebook). Notwithstanding, adding in the additional types of posts, those directly about the party still make up a limited number of MPs overall posts, suggesting that to some degree social media is encouraging MPs to focus on other areas. However, this is not enough to confirm that MPs are making an active decision to be less party focussed. After all, social media promotes people to



speak as themselves, and not as a party machine. Those MPs who speak only as a party mouthpiece might risk becoming seen as inauthentic and losing the benefits of impression management on social media (see Gaden & Dumitrica, 2015; Lanancette, & Raynauld, 2017). The data also suggested that although MPs might tweet less about their party – they retain strong links to them as 44.5% of MPs retweets are from elected officials from the same party, party leaders, or official party accounts. This suggests that rather than MPs seeking to become more independent from parties, they focus their social media content to present a more personable and relatable side of politics.

### *6.3.3 The subjects and policies MPs focus on*

This chapter also sought to understand if there was a difference in the policies that MPs post about. To measure this, each post made by an MP was coded with one of 50 subject areas or tied to representative functions. For instance, the ‘representing’ code was used when an MP’s post contains a claim of an MP representing their local constituents, meanwhile, content which specifically mentioned defence were coded as such. Instagram was removed from this analysis due to the small number of posts about policy, so it only applies to Facebook and Twitter. The findings reaffirm earlier conclusions about the geographic focus of each social media website. It also uncovers new findings in how MPs use each platform, for instance Twitter is more about current political topics, while Facebook is about issues that they know matter to local citizens.

The subject of an MP’s post replicates the differences in geographic focus discussed earlier. Posts relating to an MP’s local area or local issues are much more prevalent on Facebook than they are on Twitter. Posts about local issues represent 16.6% of all posts on Facebook but only 4.6% on Twitter (table 6.13). This triangulates with earlier findings in this chapter and from the interviews with MPs.

Differences in the use of Facebook and Twitter suggest that MPs are responding to perceived differences in the audiences and amending what they post. Posts created by representatives on Twitter are more reflective of current national affairs whereas content on Facebook is much more related to perceived areas of importance by their constituents. The only difference was Brexit as posts relating to the topic were reasonably similar on both platforms (6.8% on Twitter and 5.8% on Facebook). Other topics were more divergent with a higher percentage of posts focussed on

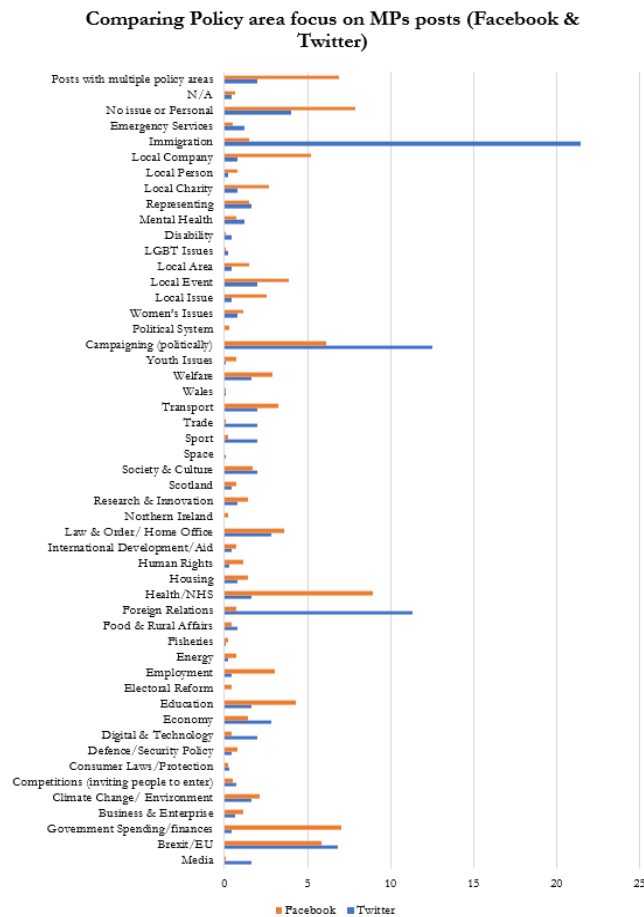
immigration issues on Twitter, as the Windrush Scandal was topically relevant during the data collection period. Similarly, there was a higher proportion of Twitter posts on areas of national importance rather than local including foreign relations, trade, and the economy. Issues which could be said to impact citizens directly were the subject of a larger number of MPs Facebook posts, such as healthcare/NHS, transport, education, employment, law & order, and welfare (table 6.13; figure 6.10). An explanation for this being that these issues are more likely to impact citizens in a direct way or play a prominent role in local politics than national.

While MPs post more about local matters on Facebook, there is also evidence that the tone of communication is also different. MPs posts on Facebook are found to be more personable on the platform than on Twitter. A greater number of posts on Facebook (7.9%) concerned the MP themselves or personal matters, compared to 4% of similar posts to Twitter. This correlates with some of the previous findings that MPs may be displaying personality to their constituents for electoral purposes. As Twitter has a more national audience and MPs might be less concerned with giving this impression to citizens who are not their constituents, or to more 'political' spaces.

A further difference was the number of campaigning posts with MPs posting a higher proportion of posts about this subject on Twitter than Facebook (12.5% vs 6.1%). These types of posts were popular with Labour MPs who often posted on the subject with the adjoining hashtag of #labourdoorstep, particularly on weekends. Overall, many of the policy area questions validate the findings of other sections of this chapter, particularly regarding the more local nature of Facebook.

**Table 6.13.** *The policy Focuses of MPs' Twitter (ex. retweets) and Facebook Posts*

Policy	Twitter (%)	Facebook (%)		Twitter (%)	Facebook (%)
Media	1.6	0.1	Society & Culture	2.0	1.7
Brexit/EU	6.8	5.8	Space	0.1	0.0
Government			Sport	2.0	0.2
Spending/finances	0.4	7.0	Trade	2.0	0.1
Business & Enterprise	0.6	1.1	Transport	2.0	3.2
Climate Change/ Environment	1.6	2.1	Wales	0.1	0.1
Competitions (inviting people to enter)	0.7	0.5	Welfare	1.6	2.9
Consumer Laws/Protection	0.3	0.2	Youth Issues	0.1	0.7
			Campaigning (politically)	12.5	6.1
Defence/Security Policy	0.4	0.8	Political System	0.0	0.3
Digital & Technology	2.0	0.4	Women's Issues	0.8	1.1
Economy	2.8	1.4	Local Issue	0.4	2.5
Education	1.6	4.3	Local Event	2.0	3.9
Electoral Reform	0.0	0.4	Local Area	0.4	1.5
Employment	0.4	3.0	LGBT Issues	0.2	0.1
Energy	0.2	0.7	Disability	0.4	0.1
Fisheries	0.1	0.2	Mental Health	1.2	0.7
Food & Rural Affairs	0.8	0.4	Representing	1.6	1.5
Foreign Relations	11.3	0.7	Local Charity	0.8	2.7
Health/NHS	1.6	8.9	Local Person	0.2	0.8
Housing	0.8	1.4	Local Company	0.8	5.2
Human Rights	0.3	1.1	Immigration	21.4	1.5
International			Emergency Services	1.2	0.5
Development/Aid	0.4	0.7			
Law & Order/ Home Office	2.8	3.6			
Northern Ireland	0.0	0.2	No issue or Personal	4.0	7.9
Research & Innovation	0.8	1.4	N/A	0.4	0.6
Scotland	0.4	0.7	Posts with multiple policy areas	2.0	6.9
<b>TOTAL</b>				<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>



**Figure 6.10.** A comparison of policy area focuses on MPs Twitter and Facebook posts

*6.4 Discussion: what can be understood of MPs representative strategy through their Social Media?*

In many ways, each of the 650 MPs offices operates as though they were individual small businesses, with their own target audience, policies, resources, and goals. However, as the analysis above demonstrates, MPs have similarities in how they approach each social networking site; from how often they post, to the types of content, and the style of communication they use. From this, we can extrapolate these actions to understand MPs’ aims and representative strategy for using social media. Evidence from this chapter helps both clarify some of the statements by MPs in previous sections of this thesis and provide additional insights into how MPs use social media to communicate with citizens. From the results above, four key findings focus on representative communication: social media’s impact on descriptive representation; how MPs frame their content, and what this means for party representation; how different social media

websites are used to represent different segments of society; and an assessment of the feasibility of Coleman's Direct Representation on social media.

### *Uptake and descriptive representation*

The uptake of social media by MPs suggests that websites such as Twitter and Facebook are no longer 'new' platforms but are now established parts of an MP's communication strategy, and can be considered a normalised service. Account ownership on these two SNS is above 80% with the majority of MPs having accounts on the sites. This means that the patterns of uptake such as bandwagon theory (see Ward & Gibson, 1998; Ward & Lusoli, 2005); circumvention of the media (Baxter, 2011); and marginality (see Enli & Skrogerbo, 2013), are now less relevant in explaining which MPs use social media. Instead, the limited MPs not on either of these two platforms are more easily explained by age and cohort effects.

Instagram, however, displays a different pattern of uptake. On the analysis, the lower level of uptake mirrors the early days of MPs using Twitter and Facebook in terms of demographics, most notably, MPs who are younger. This suggests a pattern of early adoption of online services by younger representatives and digital pioneers. This is then followed by a stream of MPs who have seen fellow MPs use the service (bandwagon); those who see it as a tool in elections and campaigning (especially by minority MPs); and those members from third parties seeking greater attention. This shows that while the three traditional theories of uptake may not apply to established services, they still do to newer, fledgling, platforms.

One aspect of MPs uptake is that of descriptive representation, and if MPs from underrepresented demographics make themselves more visible through the use of social media. Using data on the ethnicity and gender of MPs, it was found that gender was not an essential factor in MPs uptake across the three platforms. There was some evidence to suggest that ethnic minority MPs have a higher degree of uptake – but not significantly so and it could be due to other contextual factors such as representing urban constituencies who have higher expectations of how they can contact their MP. Patterns of uptake seem most likely to be a result of the regular factors that dictate citizens use of the service, transferring to MPs also. Through the analysis of uptake, no claims could be made that MPs are actively using social media to counter the imbalances of descriptive representation through other media forms.

*Representative communication is framed through personalities, not parties*

Throughout the data, and from evidence in the last chapter, it is evident that MPs are using social media to provide information framed through their personalities. Often their posts seek present a more personable and relatable side of politics to their audience. For instance, when talking about a campaign, the MP will speak about what they have done in support of the campaign; documenting their activities; or through the use of selfies to show support to a 3<sup>rd</sup> party organisation or policy initiative. When talking about party policy, it will often be through shares of the leader's account, rather than the main party ones, putting a personal approach to party communication. Often this approach to political communication blurs the line between the personal and party. This type of activity can be argued to have an effect on party positions (as explained in the final chapter) making policy more about which individual MPs are announcing, supporting, or opposing policy rather than which parties they belong to.

*Different platform to represent different groups.*

Each social media website has its own audience and communication styles, as Twitter has shown to be a network more news based, while Facebook and Instagram have shown themselves as a platform based on offline networks. It seems that the differences within the network have translated to different geographic groups being represented on each platform. With the data from Facebook and Twitter confirming what MPs had previously claimed during the interviews: that Facebook is more focussed on local issues, with more constituency focussed content, or on policy matters which might matter to constituents; whereas Twitter had a more national focus. Twitter was used for elite-level communication with other MPs, journalists, or high-profile campaigners. This suggests that MPs represent different groups, and their interests, dependant on the audience of the platform. If this is the case, this is evidence of MPs being more responsive to their audiences through the topic of communication – however, not necessarily in their actions.

*Evidence opposing notions of Direct Representation:*

One of the main representational questions from the literature review was the extent to which MPs communication on social media can fulfil what Coleman described as Direct Representation (2005c). He proposed there was a shift in the way representation happens due to an increase in the level of communication between representatives and constituents, as they become more aware of the values belonging to citizens and in turn, they are more politically educated. This

thesis sought to test this theory through a number of interrelated questions. It seems that MPs are continuing the trend towards top-down broadcast communication across the three social media channels. Many of the posts studied did not incentivise citizen-initiated contact or give the perception that the MP wanted citizen input. On Twitter and Instagram, inquiry posts only accounted for 0.9% and 0.1% respectively. MPs on Facebook had a slightly higher percentage of inquiry posts, at 2.1%; however, this is still far below what would be needed for a semblance of direct representation to take place – something that would require more direct communication. Furthermore, evidence from MPs' Twitter data found that only 5.14% of MPs' tweets are in the forms of replies (and most of these are to elite accounts). Additionally some of the features that would allow for a more communicative relationship are often turned off on MPs' Facebook pages. These findings suggest that direct representation through social media is unlikely. Instead, one could argue that MPs are merely doing what they did elsewhere such as sharing news; giving opinions; and creating an impression of themselves (chapter 3) through the faster, more visual, medium of social media.

## 7 – Citizens Use of Social Media in Following & Communicating with MPs

‘Make a difference in 140 characters’ was the message of a tweet posted by actor, Emma Watson, to promote *TweetYourMP.com*, a service which allows citizens to easily tweet at their MP (Watson [@emmawatson], Dec 13, 2016). This website, alongside others such as *MPsonTwitter.co.uk*, is an example of several web services that promote the politicisation of social media by encouraging citizens to initiate contact with their representatives. Implicit, is a suggestive optimism that through the use of social media, citizens can have their voices heard by MPs, and can be better represented through more direct forms (Direct Representation, Coleman 2005b; 2005c). This theory works on the concept that communication between citizens and representatives leads to a healthier democracy (Barber, 1984:174). Proceeding theories that follow this notion further suggest that by reducing the distance within the citizen-representative relationship, though reducing the cost of communication (both monetary and other resources), could lead to the enhancement of dialogue between the two with a perception of conversational reciprocity (Coleman & Wright, 2008). Generally speaking, many academics agree that enhanced dialogue, potentially through social media, could lead to an increase in representative communications facilitated by quicker, cheaper, and easier communication: which would ultimately be good for democracy (Chapter 2, see also Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Williamson, 2009b:309).

Yet the evidence to support such a notion is sparse. Early research on MPs use of social media suggests they use the platform for top-down, outreach, and impression management (Chapter 3, see also Jackson & Lilleker, 2011; Graham *et al.* 2013a; Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2013). Research in this thesis has found similar results as interviews and content analysis of social media data found that MPs view the platform as a tool for sending out messages, with little space for genuine dialogue with those they claim to represent. However, as discussed in Chapter 3, this perception works on assumptions on how citizens perceive and interact with MPs on social media – and importantly that citizens want this contact to begin with their representative. As the use of social media has become normalised, we know a lot about how MP’s tweet but relatively little about the actions of citizens, or how they then interpret representative’s social media activity.



This chapter seeks to extend the focus of existing research by focusing on a citizen perspective of the MP-public nexus. Using survey data from 373 social media users (see Chapter 4), this chapter examines how citizens use social media for representative communication, and if they feel more represented as a result. It considers the inter-relationships between why they follow MPs, how they interact with them and their perceptions of the relationship. The overarching finding asserts that despite the lack of interaction from MPs, citizens interpret social media use by politicians positively and accordingly, feel more represented. This suggests that perceptions of representation are independent of having citizens views transferred through representative communication. Indeed, it might surprise some that many citizens are not actively seeking interaction from their MP. Instead, the way citizens use social media suggest that the relationship citizens are seeking with MPs has its base in partisanship support and the consumption of current affairs content.

### *7.1 Who Engages in Representative Communication with MPs?*

If representative communication is a solution to revitalise democracy, we need to understand which citizens potentially engage in it and who will reap any representative benefits. If only certain groups of citizens are engaging, this could lead to the over or underrepresentation of them. This section analyses who follows MPs as a proxy for who is communicating with them as it could be assumed that those who follow are more able to communicate, especially on Facebook, where network relationships are more synchronous. The analysis of survey data suggests that those who engage with MPs on social media are the ones who are already politically interested.

The survey sample indicates that the majority of UK social media users follow at least one MP across the three social media platforms as only 21.4% (n=80) said that they did not follow either their local MP or any other MP. This is somewhat contradictory to previous research, as a recent report by Hansard (2019:28) *Audit of Political Engagement* report found that 87% of those surveyed did not follow a politician or political party on social media. This is potentially explained due to methodological differences, including nonresponse bias and because the survey polled active social media users, rather than random members of the public. Finally, research has found that longer, more detailed questions may give respondents more aided recall (Kosicki, 2008:14). This research asked citizens to recall if they followed a local MP, other MP, both, or none at all

compared to a more simplified question in the Hansard audit that asked if the user followed a politician or party. Overall, this research finds that more citizens who use social media follow more MPs on social media than previously thought.

The next stage was to consider the demographic background of those who follow an MP. Political participation models propose that those with a higher socioeconomic status, resources (time, money, education, civic skills), and political interest are most likely to engage in political acts such as follow an MP online (Chapter 3, see also: Brady, Verba, & Schlozman, 1995; Norris, 2001:219; Ancu & Cozma, 2009:576; Schreiter *et al.* 2018). Similarly, age, gender, and race have been considered important factors in predicting political activity, which has been perceived as overrepresenting older, white males (see also Verba, Nie, & Kim, 1979). However more recent research has highlighted that these divisions may not be as clear cut. The gender gap in participation has been seen as closing after the 1990s but still with differences depending on the specific type of political activity (Pattie, Seyd & Whiteley, 2004). In addition, there is evidence that younger age groups, who have been previously turned off traditional politics, have turned to new media forms for political information (Kaye & Johnson, 2004:217; Fisher *et al.* 2019). Therefore, statistical tests were conducted to find out if any demographic variables had a relationship with patterns of following MPs on social media.

The survey respondents defied expectations in terms of what demographics are most likely to follow an MP as no correlations could be found between users who followed at least one MP on social media (either local or other) with age, ethnicity, and education. The Chi-Square statistical test<sup>12</sup> was applied for these demographics which found no statistical significance for either any age group, ethnicity, or education level. Similarly, no significant relationship could be found across different employment types, with the exception of the unemployed, who had a small correlation with following an MP. These results imply that traditional demographic expectations from previous technological forms (see Norris, 2001:219) with regard to who is most likely to follow an MP are no longer present and that followers are far more diverse than previously thought.

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<sup>12</sup> See Field (2014).

Gender was the only demographic of significance as men were slightly more likely to follow an MP than women, when tested with a bivariate correlation test ( $R=0.208, p<.001$ ). In this survey, only 69.3% of women (122) reportedly followed an MP, compared to 86.5% of men (166). This has implications for representation as if women are less engaged in political spaces, or if there are few places they can participate, they are less likely to have their voice heard. This could link to recent research which has found the harassment that women face on social media is disproportionate or sexual in nature (Winkelman *et al.* 2015; Eckert, 2017). Krook concluded that women avoid political spaces online where they may face hostility (2018). This is a concern because in the comment section at the end of the survey, two female respondents made comments that indicate they thought social media was an abusive environment and did not use it as a result. This is not enough data to make a judgement, but it does suggest the need for a comprehensive study to test the notion.

Citizens who reported themselves as more interested in politics were most likely to follow an MP ( $R=.219, p<.05$ ). Likewise, respondents who judged themselves as having a high degree of political knowledge were more likely to follow at least one MP on social media, albeit to a slightly lower extent than the 'interested' group ( $R=.196, p<.05$ ). Other variables that can be used to indicate a citizen's general political interest such as political efficacy ( $R=.179, p<.001$ ), voting in the last election ( $R=.173, p<.001$ ), party membership ( $R=.242, p<.001$ ), and increased current affairs intake ( $R=.156, p<.003$ ) also correlated with following an MP. Conversely, people who reported no prior political participation negatively correlated with following an MP on any social media website ( $R=.157, p<.001$ ) a finding that supports the notion that those who follow at least one MP are more interested and active within the political sphere, while disinterested parties are least likely to follow an MP. Level of interest is an effect dissociated with age, educational level, and employment status.

User's previous exposure to communication from an MP, outside of social media, is also a factor which determines the follower relationship. There is a positive relationship between not seeing any communication from an MP, and not following a single MP on social media ( $R=.130, p<.05$ ). However, it seems the type of contact a citizen has with MPs is significant as people who had spoken to their MP (or representatives of) were more likely to follow MPs on Facebook ( $R=.118, p=.023$ ), but not on Twitter or Instagram. Meanwhile, citizens who had received or seen communication from MPs through letters, television, or newspapers had strong positive relationships with following MPs on Twitter and Instagram.

### *7.1.1 Platform differences*

Next further analysis was undertaken to consider how they follow MPs generally and on each platform. There was no statistical variation when comparing each social media website against the general (age, gender, socioeconomic status) trends above. However, there were some notable findings. The first of which is in regard to Instagram. In previous findings, it was found there are gender differences in use, with women more likely to use the service. One could therefore expect that more women would use the platform to follow MPs more so than men. Yet, no significant relationship was found; meaning that gender is not a variable in the prediction of how citizens followed an MP on the platform. Suggesting that gender differences in the everyday use of a social media website might not translate to how citizens use it politically. This is an important finding for those who suggest social media could be a solution for connecting to underrepresented groups. As going onto a site with a higher proportion of a target demographic does not mean that that demographic will engage politically. Instead, it might merely attract more of the same (already politically interested citizens) but on a new platform.

Overall, these figures suggest two observable patterns. The first is that, other than gender, some of the previous demographic measures in which political activity could be predicted (age, ethnicity, employment, education) do not translate into understanding who follows MPs on social media. This could be interpreted as a result of the growing ubiquity of social media which has rendered demographic differences less important. Particular attention should be given to gender in understanding who follows MPs due to its implications for descriptive representation (Chapter 2). However, this finding is muted as MPs have stated that they find social media a poor method of understanding their constituents (see chapter 5). This potentially indicates that MPs understand these issues, or do not use social media as a tool for understanding their constituents. The second pattern is that those who follow MPs online are, perhaps not surprisingly, those who are already interested in politics. Increases in political knowledge, efficacy, interest, participation, and current affairs all have positive relationships with following MPs online. Furthermore, this is a group of citizens who are also more likely to have some contact with politicians – another indication of following an MP on social media.

### 7.1.2 *The discovery of MPs social media accounts*

From the data, it seems that most citizens find MPs' social media accounts through prior contact or knowledge of an MP. Table 7.1, indicates that the top two methods of finding MPs on social media are either through awareness stimulated by mainstream media appearances, or pre-existing name recognition. This interaction can be explained through the development of hybrid media where no media platform is truly independent, and activity on one platform leads to audiences on another (Chadwick, 2017). This suggests that MPs who can successfully leverage their presence in other media environments can use it to their advantage in gaining followers on their social platforms. This effect is bidirectional as an MP with a sizable social media presence will also be noticed by mainstream media (Broersma, 2012). Only 7% of respondents claimed that they had not come across an MP's social media page, and this group generally had a negative relationship with current affairs content and political knowledge. This suggests that a portion of people who do not follow MPs are in social media spaces with little interaction on political matters or MPs themselves.

There is a role for social media sites themselves in how citizens come to discover a representative's account. A fifth of respondents had discovered an MP's page either through someone else in their network sharing an MP's post, or because the site suggested they should follow them. This suggests that social media websites themselves are partly responsible for which MPs citizens follow. However, as discussed in Chapter 3, the method through which social media curates a user's feed or how they provide suggestions is algorithmically generated and often not publicly available. Building on wider concerns surrounding the role of social media in politics, this raises further questions about the growing power of platforms to promote particular MPs into the public conscience.

How citizens found an MP on social media varied across platforms. On Twitter, those who follow MPs were most likely to have done so after already knowing of the MP and searching for them ( $R=.223, p<.001$ ), or seeing them in the media ( $R=.166, p<.001$ ), a higher correlation than with other platforms. On Facebook, there is a comparatively smaller relationship between people already knowing about an MP and searching for them following them ( $R=.109, p=.036$ ), and no statistical significance between users who saw them in the media. However, citizens reported that those who followed MPs on Facebook had a higher correlation with being suggested to follow the MP's page than on Twitter ( $R=.231, p>.000$ ; compared to  $R=.110, p=.001$ ). This could be

explained as Facebook either promotes political representatives more to citizens, has more advanced algorithms to show MPs' profiles to citizens most likely to follow them, or citizens do not think to use the platform to find MPs.<sup>13</sup>

**Table 7.1** How Citizens Find An MP's Account On Social Media (multiple choice)

<i>Explanation</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
I saw them in the media and searched for them	133	35.66
I knew about the MP previously and searched for them	126	33.78
A friend shared something they posted	77	20.64
It was suggested to me by the social media website	76	20.38
Through a keyword/#hashtag I follow	39	10.46
It was suggested to me by friend	30	8.04
Haven't come across an MP's social media page	26	6.97
Don't Know	14	3.75
Avoids MPs	10	2.68
I was asked to follow by the MP	10	2.68
Google/Web search	8	2.14
I met the MP in person and followed them after	6	1.61

### *7.2 The type of relationship citizens seek with political representatives*

Demographic data does not indicate the types of communication or conversations sought by citizens with MPs. This section puts forward the view that citizens are seeking to connect with their MP on social media for the purposes of information consumption and membership identification rather than connect with them. In Table 7.2, 41.5% and 34.7% of citizens followed

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<sup>13</sup> Instagram use had no relationship with people knowing the MP beforehand or if the profile was suggested by the site. Instead, this was the only platform where an MP's page was suggested to users by friends or family directly ( $R=.146, p=.005$ ). However, an explanation for this could not be found within the data.

MPs for either national or local news respectively. Showing support is the second reason, either because they share the same political values (30.9%), as a person (19.4%), or the party the MP belongs to (16.67%). Only 2.38% of citizens said they follow MPs to get a different opinion from their own –citizens follow MPs whose opinion they agree with.

**Table 7.2.** Why Citizens Follow MPs On Social Media (multiple choice)

<i>Explanation</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
To hear about national issues and news	122	41.50
To hear about local issues and news	102	34.69
I share the same political values	91	30.95
They are my local MP	83	28.23
I like them as a person/ I like what they say	61	20.75
To show my support for them	57	19.39
To show support for the party I like	49	16.67
To message them	17	5.78
To follow different opinion	7	2.38
To hear their views but not necessarily to support them.	5	1.70
Don't know	72	24.49
<b>Total N</b>	<b>294</b>	<b>100</b>
Don't follow an MP	80	

What stands-out is that only 5.78% of citizens said they followed an MP to message or converse with them. This fits with the preferred broadcast model of how MPs use social media to communicate (see chapter 5 and 6). Citizens, rather than viewing social media connections with MPs as a communicative tool, are using social media to subscribe to the MP, much like a citizen would subscribe to a newspaper account on social media. In qualitative comments, respondents indicated a desire to hear news about the MP direct from the source, rather than through a news website. One respondent stated that they did not agree with the way some news titles put a spin on what an MP's statements. This has consequences for the model of participation for how we can understand citizens interaction with MPs online, as will be discussed later.

This did vary slightly by platform, dependent on the focus of news to the platforms overall content. There was a stronger relationship between those who follow MPs on Facebook, and the desire to hear about local rather than national news, ( $R=.208, p<.001$ , compared to  $R=.179, p<.001$ ). This pattern is reversed on Twitter, where there is a stronger relationship with following an MP on Twitter and seeking to hear about national issues and news than local ( $R=.308, p<.001$ , compared to  $R=.214, p<.001$ ). This affirms audience insight outlined by the MP respondents in Chapter 5 where they viewed Facebook as a local platform, and Twitter was for more national issues. The picture is not quite as clear-cut because positive relationships, albeit weaker ones, also existed for Facebook with national news, and Twitter for local. There was no similar relationship with Instagram, as correlations with both national and local news were similar.

A clear trend was found by those who said that they followed an MP to message them, which had a higher correlation with following an MP on Facebook than any other platform ( $R=.125, p<.05$ ). This would support the idea that Facebook is viewed by citizens as an easier way to communicate with MPs. Partisanship again also plays a role in explaining why citizens follow MPs across different platforms. There was a higher correlation with users following an MP on Twitter because they share the same political values ( $R=.199, p<.01$ ) or because the MP is a member of the party they support when compared to other platforms ( $R=.248, p<.01$ ).

The results here echo previous research regarding citizens' choice in following political representatives online. Parmelee and Bichard found that a key reason why people followed US representatives on Twitter was political ideology (2011), although the rates of citizens following as a statement of self-expression were lower than the results found here (*ibid*, 2011:57). Fisher *et al's* more up to date analysis of follower relationships with UK political representatives on social media found similar patterns of engagement. With 58% of followers saying they do so because they like the politician/party; 59% because they prefer to hear directly from the politician themselves (Fisher *et al.* 2019). Similarly, DEMOS research established that following MPs on Twitter is an important area of political activism, with the act being used as a signal party allegiance and could be understood as a new method of political party membership (Bartlett *et al.* 2013).

The study by Fisher *et al* also found that of the 59% who followed MPs to hear directly from them, 37% believed that the media do not accurately represent them. In addition, 32% feel that the party they support is ignored in the media; 45% because they can get more detailed



information, and 25% to show political support. (2019:243). The research also indicated that UK citizens are becoming frustrated with political reporting due to the overload of Brexit news, so seek other sources or avoid news entirely (*ibid*, 2019:244). This led the researcher to conclude that citizens follow MPs in order to access information unfiltered by media as the primary motivation; with partisan support being a secondary factor.

An explanation for this behaviour can be found in Bennett (2003) that questioned whom the media represents, and what happens if it fails to speak for the people. Ultimately Bennett predicts that people will start to seek new sources of current affairs content that represent them if their current news sources do not. Alongside the research presented in this thesis underpinned by existing research from Fisher and Bennett, suggest a growing distrust in the media, so people turn to social media to get news from direct sources. This pattern of citizens following MPs for news, potentially to get their news direct from the source and without spin, suggests a disintermediation effect (see Katz & Dayan, 1992). MPs are more effective in their use of social platforms to circumvent the media.

The uses and gratification perspective offers an alternative explanation for following MPs online. This suggests that citizens follow political representatives on social media with the expectation that they receive something in return, typically reciprocal communication (Parmelee & Birchard, 2011; Hoffman *et al.* 2019). Survey findings in this thesis suggest many citizens follow an MP to receive information, and not to communicate or interact with them. In this, citizens treat the platform akin to a subscription service or news aggregator, changing the uses and perspective (see Jackson & Lilleker, 2007). This overall follows a pattern of citizens engagement with MPs online, with heavy content consumers seeking more news by directly following MPs (see also chapter 3). Alternative explanations are that citizens have started to seek alternative news sources that either align to their world view or are seeking sources of information outside of media outlets they disagree with. While this research can only highlight patterns in citizens following MPs for news, the above theories do provide credible explanations for citizen behaviours.

### *7.2.1 Comparing how citizens follow MPs across different media types*

With the increasing ubiquity of the internet amongst citizens, with it has come a paralleled expectation that MPs should also use these same services. (Jackson, 2003; Jackson & Lilleker, 2004; Auel & Umit, 2018). Results in this thesis found that social media has similarly become an

expected communication platform for MPs. Over two-thirds of respondents (67.6%) expected MPs to have a Twitter account, and 48.8% expected MPs to be on Facebook (table 7.3). The much higher ranking for Twitter reiterates findings that citizens see Twitter as a more politicised arena compared to Facebook as there was a positive correlation between daily users of Twitter and their expectation that an MP should use the platform ( $R=.145, p<.05$ ). There was not a similar correlation between daily users of Facebook or Instagram and the expectation that an MP should use these same platforms. In addition, participants who said they used social media overall to follow MPs correlated with the expectation that an MP is on Twitter ( $R=.136, p<.05$ ), while this was not true for other SNS. This affirms the finding that MPs and citizens perceive Twitter as a political space.

Table 7.4 shows citizens prefer to follow MPs on Twitter more than they do on Facebook or Instagram. In comparison, those who said they used social media to follow celebrities, had an inverse relationship with expecting MPs to be on Facebook ( $R=-.107, p<.05$ ). This suggests that some citizens wish to use Twitter for politics, and keep their other social media sites more focussed on entertainment-driven content. The expected use of Twitter is second only to that of websites and well ahead of previously more important methods of communication, including blogs, letters, columns in the local paper, and television appearances (c.f. Negrine & Lilleker, 2002).

The research above indicates that just because a large number of citizens use a platform, it does not also mean that citizens wish it to be filled with MPs. Essentially, people sign up to services depending on the type of content (or people to follow). This is an argument which aligns with the previous findings from the last section. Just because site has a usership base who are interested in politics, it does not mean they wish to discuss politics there. This paints a picture of citizen participation that just because an MP is on a service, does not mean that citizens will seek to connect to them. Table 7.6 shows that there are much stronger correlations for using Facebook and Instagram for talking to friends and posting images and videos, whereas higher correlations exist between Twitter use and current affairs intake, (e.g. following MPs, experts, and debating with others). Overall, this again underlines that Twitter is seen more of a space for politics by users, where Facebook is more for communicating with friends and family. Earlier research by Dennis found that users perceive some online spaces as more political than others (2019:173). Table 7.5 nuances this position and posits that the use of Facebook for communication with friends, leads to a platform more centred around a user's local geographic network which may

encourage more communication on local issues. This could explain why Facebook is more focussed on local rather than national issues. This challenges the notion that MPs should expect to simply log on to online spaces with a broad audience of citizens and assume to enter representative communication with a majority of them.

**Table 7.3.** What Methods/Platforms of Communication Do Citizens Expect MPs To Be Active On (multiple choice)

<i>Platform of Communication</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Website	311	83.4
Twitter	252	67.6
Facebook	182	48.8
e-newsletter	171	45.8
Blog	134	35.9
Letter/leaflets	96	25.7
Local paper	95	25.5
Television	57	15.3
Be on another social media site (reddit, snapchat etc)	33	8.8
Instagram	19	5.1
Vlogs/YouTube	18	4.8

**Table 7.4.** ‘What Social Media Sites Do You Use To Follow MPs?’

<i>Social Media website</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Facebook	102	27.3
Twitter	150	40.21
Instagram	34	9.11
Others (Google+, YouTube, Snapchat, LinkedIn)	11	2.9
Don't Know/None	166	44.5

### *7.3 Evidence of a disparity between what MPs post, and what citizens see on social media*

Recent research has speculated that representatives have turned to social media as a way of making themselves appear more personable and hardworking (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011; Terry, 2018, Feb 5; D’Urso, 2018). In the previous chapter, it was found that the top posts from MPs across the three platforms are those that functioned as a public diary, highlighting where an MP has been. In this section, we will address findings from the survey which indicate that this is not the content citizens see from MPs. This disparity is partly explained by the way social media works – in that it shows what the users most want to see which leads to difficult questions over the role of social media platforms have themselves in influencing communication between citizens and MPs.

When asked, the majority of citizens remember seeing content from MPs regarding local and national news (63.8% and 54.4%), this was followed by party related content (45.6%). This is a disparity when compared majority of content MPs post; which is general information about themselves and what they are doing (chapter 6). How social media platforms operate offers a potential answer as algorithms determine what content should be shown to citizens. This process is not transparent, having previously been described as ‘surprisingly inelegant, maddeningly mercurial, and stubbornly opaque’ (Oremus, Jan 3, 2016). The algorithm seems to influence what users see based off their data to deliver a more personal experience and to keep them on the site longer. DeVito found evidence that Facebook, in 2016, used at least nine separate data points to determine what to show users, these include friend relationships, explicitly expressed user interests, prior user engagement, implicitly expressed user preferences, post age, platform priorities, page relationships, negatively expressed preferences, and content quality (DeVito, 2016).

Other research from the World Wide Web Foundation has found that Facebook social feeds hide roughly 82% of content a user would have otherwise seen from friends, pages, or groups the user follows in favour of content Facebook deems more suitable (Ávila *et al.* 2018:14). How this system works has more impact than just changing what news users see. A team of Facebook researchers found that they could change the social wall algorithm to change users emotions either positively

or negatively<sup>14</sup> (c.f. Kramer *et al.*, 2014). This research raises additional concerns regarding how social media sites like Facebook might be altering the issues that are represented in the platform.

**Table 7.5.** “What Type Of Content Do You See MPs Posting About On Social Media? (select all that apply)”

<i>What content from MPs citizens see</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
National News & Issues	238	63.8
Local News & Issues	203	54.4
Party Related Content	170	45.6
Single Issue campaigns	109	29.2
Updates on their current activity	100	26.8
Images/videos (political)	81	21.7
Sharing statistics	44	11.8
Personal posts	43	11.5
Other	31	8.3
Comedy/funny	26	7.0
Non-political	26	7.0
Selfies	18	4.8

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<sup>14</sup> This research has since been widely criticised for the disregard of research ethics. The research was conducted with no ethical oversight, and the unwitting participants had no knowledge that their online habits were being altered - see Shaw, 2016.

**Table 7.6** The Relationship Between Social Media Uses By Social Media Accounts

Citizen has an account with	Use of social media for	Opinion sharing	Fill spare Time	Talking to friends	Political News/Current Affairs	Other news/current affairs	Follow funny accounts	Making new friends	Talking to likeminded people	Follow politicians	Follow experts	Following issues	Following celebrities	Debating politics with strangers	Follow campaign accounts	Sharing news/ links
Facebook	Correlation	<b>.171**</b>	<b>-.148**</b>	<b>.402**</b>	<b>.166**</b>	-0.093	0.095	0.083	<b>.135**</b>	0.090	0.095	<b>.129*</b>	0.051	0.097	0.099	<b>.188**</b>
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.001	0.004	0.000	0.001	0.073	0.067	0.109	0.009	0.084	0.067	0.012	0.325	0.061	0.057	0.000
	N	373	373	373	373	373	373	373	373	373	373	373	373	373	373	373
Twitter	Correlation	<b>.208**</b>	-0.028	0.089	<b>.259**</b>	<b>.205**</b>	0.009	-0.040	0.019	<b>.167**</b>	<b>.189**</b>	<b>.122*</b>	<b>.107*</b>	<b>.184**</b>	<b>.145**</b>	-0.031
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.594	0.086	0.000	0.000	0.868	0.437	0.714	0.001	0.000	0.018	0.038	0.000	0.005	0.548
	N	373	373	373	373	373	373	373	373	373	373	373	373	373	373	373
Instagram	Correlation	<b>.150**</b>	<b>-.163**</b>	<b>.237**</b>	<b>.199**</b>	<b>.205**</b>	0.040	0.016	-0.037	<b>.150**</b>	<b>.115*</b>	0.071	<b>.183**</b>	0.045	0.034	-0.019
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.004	0.002	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.444	0.753	0.474	0.004	0.026	0.173	0.000	0.388	0.516	0.710
	N	373	373	373	373	373	373	373	373	373	373	373	373	373	373	373
YouTube	Correlation	<b>.224**</b>	0.066	<b>.200**</b>	0.040	<b>.142**</b>	<b>.308**</b>	<b>.116*</b>	-0.020	<b>.153**</b>	0.090	<b>.161**</b>	<b>.151**</b>	<b>.201**</b>	<b>.147**</b>	<b>.238**</b>
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.202	0.000	0.436	0.006	0.000	0.026	0.701	0.003	0.083	0.002	0.003	0.000	0.004	0.000
	N	373	373	373	373	373	373	373	373	373	373	373	373	373	373	373
Reddit	Correlation	-0.065	<b>.130*</b>	-0.031	<b>.164**</b>	<b>.124*</b>	<b>.175**</b>	-0.003	<b>.111*</b>	<b>.191**</b>	<b>.122*</b>	-0.027	<b>-.177**</b>	<b>.326**</b>	0.013	-0.024
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.212	0.012	0.555	0.002	0.017	0.001	0.957	0.032	0.000	0.018	0.601	0.001	0.000	0.804	0.645
	N	373	373	373	373	373	373	373	373	373	373	373	373	373	373	373
other	Correlation	0.059	0.080	<b>.120*</b>	-0.045	<b>.115*</b>	<b>.176**</b>	0.004	0.058	-0.016	<b>.244**</b>	<b>.253**</b>	0.069	-0.015	-0.043	<b>.246**</b>
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.259	0.123	0.020	0.383	0.027	0.001	0.946	0.265	0.761	0.000	0.000	0.183	0.772	0.407	0.000
	N	373	373	373	373	373	373	373	373	373	373	373	373	373	373	373

If algorithms are determining what political issues are being shown to citizens, and therefore creating a disparity between what MPs post and what is seen, then further research is needed into its implications for politics. There is a risk that social media sites could only show content from MPs that citizens like, interact, agree, or in some instances, negatively react to. This could result in social media not fully representing what MPs stand for, instead only showing elements users might agree with. This thesis does not provide conclusive evidence, but there are some indications that this is what is happening. In the survey, 36.9% of users voiced a strong preference for using social media as a news source for political issues, while 44.2% use it for non-political news. In addition, 75.1% of participants said that they use social media for finding current affairs or political news. The high numbers of citizens who use social media for their current affairs, mixed with evidence of a disparity between what MPs post and citizens might be extremely concerning for many. As it suggests there is significant scope for social media websites to shape the world views of citizens in a way which has no overarching accountability.

The types of content citizens see from MPs also underlines an important change to the intake of current affairs content. Previous explanations for the consumption of news content have highlighted the rise of social media (Kwak *et al.* 2010; McNair, 2017:37). Within this trend, evidence has also been presented above that citizens have become less loyal to select news titles and instead consume current affairs from a broader range of sources. Newman *et al.* (2019) found that there has been an increase in citizens selecting news from preferred journalists, or groups pages within social media sites (Newman *et al.* 2019). These news trends, alongside the high number of citizens claiming they follow MPs for news content, suggests that the relationship between citizens and their representatives might not be founded on concepts of representation. Instead citizens are viewing select MPs as reliable curators of news, particularly from MPs who share similar values.

#### *7.4 Citizen-initiated contact and social media*

While most citizens did not use social media to contact their MP (94.4%), there are still important findings regarding how social media is changing political contact with their representatives. Several survey questions were aimed at understanding how, and to what extent, citizens initiate contact with political representatives. From this sample, it was found that social media users are

more likely to have contacted an MP when compared to data taken from the last Audit of Political Engagement by the Hansard Society (2019). Table 7.7, shows that 27.8% of people had in some way contacted their MP, this compared with the survey by Hansard that found 12% had contacted an MP, Members of the Scottish Parliament, local Councillor, or Welsh Assembly Member (Hansard, 2019:38). Part of this variation can be explained by differences in the methodology. However, it was found that only a handful of social media users used the medium to proactively contact MPs. Most of those claimed they had contacted an MP did so through email, suggesting the previous transition from letter to email in MP-Citizen communication has not shifted much since the web 1.0 era (c.f. Jackson, 2005). Social media, however, still proved more popular for contacting than some other communication platforms, such as letters, telephone or surgery appointments.

One might have supposed that the same behaviours that led citizens to adopt email to communicate with MPs (ease of use, finances, and most importantly speed of communication) would apply to social media also. However, MPs will often seek to make their constituents aware that policy inquiries or casework will not be handled on social media, and asking for citizens to email them instead (See Chapters 5 and 6). Moreover, it was found that many citizens do not actually receive a response from MPs when they contact them on social media, so they turn to other communication methods.

**Table 7.7.** 'If You Have Contacted your Local MP About An Issue How Did You? (multiple choice)'

	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
None/Haven't contacted	269	57.1
Had contacted their local MP	104	27.8
Email	88	23.5
Telephone	16	4.3
Letter	9	2.4
Social media	21	5.6
Office meeting/surgery/in person	14	3.7



Two survey questions were asked to understand what actions citizens had taken towards MPs on social media (see Table 7.7 and 7.8). Both questions are related, but worded differently, to measure if citizens considered some actions on social media as *contact*, as to convey a message to MPs, and *actions* to see if citizens considered some social media functions as likes, shares, or social media comments as a method of informational transference. The results do suggest that there are certain types of communication, which citizens consider as having different levels of importance. The first of this is the discrepancy between those who have ‘contacted’ MPs on social media, against citizens who had said they had made ‘actions’ towards an MP such as either commenting on an MP’s post (21.4%) or messaging them (privately – 5.6% or publicly -11.8%). This can be compared to the 5.6% of citizens who had considered the messages they had sent to MPs as contacting. Citizens see a clear difference between contacting or making actions towards an MP. This data supports the notion that citizens have three levels of contact with MPs. The first tier is non-communicative social actions such as likes (undertaken by 48.8% of citizens), or shares (26%). This is low effort, reactive and allows citizens to quickly show agreement or negativity towards something an MP has said or posted. The second is social media communication, such as comments or public posts, which is slightly more resource-intensive. Users may use this method to quickly highlight an opinion or question an MP. The third is what citizens consider communication or contact; this is a message that the citizen will want a response to, and may use more formal communication routes.

**Table 7.8.** Actions Citizens Have Made Towards MPs On Social Media

	N	%
None	116	31.1
Liked their posts	182	48.8
I have commented on their content	80	21.4
Shared/retweeted them	97	26.0
I have messaged them directly (publicly)	44	11.8
Messaged (privately)	21	5.6

However, there were some differences in how citizens tried to contact MPs and the user's demographics. When testing for education it was found that there was a positive relationship between a citizen's highest education qualification, and the propensity to have attended a meeting at an MP's office ( $R=.135, p<.05$ ). This can be explained through resource models of participation, with the more resource-intensive communication methods are undertaken by citizens that possess the necessary skills and resources. However, no correlation could be found with education and any other of the communication platforms used to contact MPs. This suggests that for those who are already on social media, no particular method of communication provides a barrier that can be measured through this variable. Political knowledge was found to be a particular barrier to contacting MPs. Those with the least amount of political knowledge contacted MPs less ( $R=.119, p<.05$ ), this effect had a slightly higher correlation with not contacting MPs via social media ( $R=-.139, p<.05$ ). However, there was no correlation found between political knowledge and contact via email. In addition, users who also reported a lower intake of current affairs were also least likely to contact an MP using social media ( $R=.129, p<.05$ ), but not for any other method of communication. This suggests that contacting MPs via social media has several potential barriers for citizens – raising the issue of the representativeness of social media audiences.

The relationship between social media actions and citizen demographics was considered. It was found that there was no significance between different actions towards MPs and education, political knowledge, or political interest. Those who said they had not voted within the last 12-months correlated with liking an MP's post, ( $R=.129, p<.001$ ), but an inverse relationship with leaving a comment ( $R=.108, p<.05$ ). This implies that those with low prior political participation will undertake low resource activities.

In addition, a relationship was found between how much time a user spends on social media and increasing the chance of making an action towards an MP. The frequency of time users spent on social media had a positive relationship with leaving a comment on an MP's post on Twitter or Instagram ( $R=.110, p<.05$  on Twitter;  $R=.101, p<.05$  on Instagram), however, no correlation was found for Facebook. Users who had seen previous content from MPs on social media had a higher correlation with taking actions towards MPs ( $R=.204, p<.01$ ) suggesting there is a relationship between spending time on social media, seeing MPs content and reacting towards it.

The social media platform itself also seems to be a variable in what actions a citizen is willing to make towards an MP. Users who followed an MP on Twitter or Facebook have a higher correlation with taking actions towards MP ( $R=.152$ ,  $p<.05$  for Facebook;  $R=.256$ ,  $p<.001$  for Twitter). This resonates with the findings above showing how Twitter is seen as a more political space than other SNS. Similarly, there is also a news-based relationship between why citizens are on a platform and correlations with the actions they make towards MPs. Citizens who use social media for local or national news have strong correlations with sharing content from MPs ( $R=.313$ ,  $p<.01$  for local;  $R=.320$ ,  $p<.01$  for national); liking content from MPs ( $R=.178$ ,  $p<.01$  for local;  $R=.217$ ,  $p<.01$  for national); and for commenting on posts by MPs ( $R=.264$ ,  $p<.01$  for local;  $R=.298$ ,  $p<.001$  for national). Yet there are no similar correlations for following MPs for news and messaging them - implying that user's activity towards MP, when news based, is primarily based around the consumption of news, and in some instances reacting to it through likes and comments rather than citizen-initiated contact.

#### *7.5 The interpretation of MPs social media approach and levels of reciprocity*

This section seeks to understand how citizens interpret how MP's use of social media for broadcasting. The survey asked citizens how they would describe contact with MPs. This was to understand if the primary broadcast-style by MPs is replicated in citizens' perceptions. 42.9% of social media users said that the relationship they had with MPs was one-way, with citizens following the MP. For these citizens, it seems rather than using social media for two-way communication as many democratic revivalists had originally hoped, the platform instead fits with the top-down method of communication. 17.1% of citizens said they have tried to contact MPs but feel ignored. Only 6.9% explained that communication was in some way a conversation. The relationship between MPs and citizens cannot be described as interpersonal communication and goes further to suggest that direct representation is not conducted on social media.

Table 7.10 further confirms the low level of communications from MPs to citizens. Only 15.9% of respondents had received any contact from MPs on social media. Of the 84 respondents who had commented on an MP's post, just 8 (12.5%) said they had received a reply. Those directly messaging MPs via social media had a higher rate of response (30.7%) but still quite low when compared to reported response rates of 50% for emails (*WriteToThem*, 2015). This again supports

the notion that MPs do not consider responding to comments or messages via social media to be a priority, especially when compared to more traditional methods of communication.

**Table 7.9.** ‘How would you describe the communication you have with MPs on social media?’

	<i>N</i>	%
No communication/ Have not tried to contact them	120	32.2
One way – I only follow them	160	42.9
I have tried to contact them, but feel ignored	64	17.1
We have conversed once/ a few times	26	6.9
Infrequent	2	0.5

Two factors, in particular, could explain who received responses on social media. Firstly, the higher the level of educational attainment, the greater the likelihood of receiving a response from an MP ( $R=.128, p<.05$ ;  $R=.109, p<.05$ ). Secondly, those who claimed they had more political knowledge and higher consumption of current affairs were more likely to have their messages responded to ( $R=.108, p<.05$ ;  $R=.110, p<.05$  respectively). This finding supports social media response patterns found in previous studies conducted outside the UK (Spierings, Jacobs, & Linders, 2019). MPs are seemingly more inclined to respond to citizens who have technical knowledge of politics or who provide more topical questions rather than general ones.

**Table 7.10.** Actions Made Towards Citizens By MPs

<i>Action</i>	<i>N</i>	%
None	314	84.1
Followed/friended me	29	7.8
Shared/retweeted one of my posts	21	5.6
Messaged me (without prior contact from me)	10	2.7
Replied to a message I sent them	20	5.3
Replied to a comment I sent them	8	2.1
Liked My post	26	6.9
Commented on one of my posts	16	4.2

Additionally, the analysis of the data indicates a stronger correlation with MPs responding to citizens who have similar values to the MP or are supportive of them. Citizens who reported that they followed MPs because they share the same values, had a higher correlation with being responded to on the social media ( $R=.280, p<.001$  for messages and  $R=.261, p<.01$  for comments). While people who follow MPs to show support for them also had a higher correlation with receiving a comment response ( $R=.143, p<.05$ ), but no correlation with responding to messages. Citizens who follow MPs to show support for a political party are also more likely to receive a response to MPs ( $R=.162, p<.05$  for messages and  $R=.174, p<.01$  for comments). This suggests that MPs are incentivised to respond to citizens who are most likely to send supportive or positive messages, which could explain the higher response rate to these citizens. Impression management also explains the response behaviour as MPs appreciate that the comments they respond to will be seen by a greater number of users. As a result, MPs will seek to respond to, and therefore promote, statements which put themselves in a favourable light.

#### *7.6 Communication between citizens and their local MP on social media*

Research on internet communications and MPs tends to focus on the direct links MPs have with their constituents. This is for good reason, after all those who support more delegate forms of representation highlight the requirement for communicative links between constituents and those that serve them. This section examines this type of relationship on social media, and how citizens hear information from their local MP. It finds that while MPs are unresponsive to their constituents on social media, and maintains a one-way flow of communication, this communication has made a positive difference in how local constituents feel about their MP regardless.

For users, social media has become an increasingly important means of communication with their local MP. As Table 7.11 indicates, more citizens said they had received communication from their MP on social media than any other platform. This includes previously more important forms such as television, radio and print. While it seems social media has become an essential way for citizens to hear about their local MP, it does not state to what extent they trust or find this information useful. Indeed, during the 2017 General Election, 19.5% of respondents found social

media the most useful, but only 9.9% found it the most trustworthy way to learn about political news. While users might be getting their information from their local MP from social media, the level of trust in this information is much lower.

It was found that while 44.4% of people follow their local MP, this is by no means an exclusive relationship. Table 7.12 shows how of those surveyed followed their local MP on social media, but only 5.3% follow their local MP exclusively. Indeed, there is also a significant proportion who follow MPs, but not their own local one (34%). When asked for why they followed MPs, only 28.2% stated that it was because the account belonged to their local MP. More citizens cited news as a reason why they followed an MP, and 30.95% said it was because they shared the same views as the MP they followed, suggesting that the linkage between local MPs and their constituents on social media might be weaker than it first seems, with citizens having a higher priority on news and values than locality.

**Table 7.11.** Which of The Following Methods/Platforms Have Citizens Received Communication From Their Local MP

<i>Platform</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Social Media (e.g Twitter, Facebook)	159	42.6
Direct communication from Local MP (Letters)	153	41.0
Newspapers (Online)	104	27.9
TV and radio news programme	81	21.7
None of the above	79	21.2
Newspapers (Printed)	74	19.8
Websites or online forums	68	18.2
Direct communication from Local MP (Door-step)	49	13.1
Through Friends/Family	42	11.3
Visiting their surgeries	4	1.1
Monthly/weekly emails	3	0.8
Other	3	0.8

**Table 7.12.** “Do you follow your local MP on social media?”

<i>Response</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
None/Don't	80	21.4
No (follow others)	127	34.0
Yes (only local MP)	20	5.3
Yes (and follow others)	146	39.1

As citizens correctly interpret the actions of an MP as broadcasting, this does not reflect the importance of interpersonal communication which is given by representative theorists (Chapter 2). However, it seems that regardless of the responsiveness of MPs on social media, the data suggests that following and hearing from an MP on social media is enough to make citizens feel represented. Respondents who followed their local MP were found to have a high correlation with greater feelings of local representation ( $R=.214, p<.01$ ); being informed by the MP ( $R=.165, p<.01$ ); that the MP is easier to contact ( $R=.181, p<.01$ ); and in-touch with their local MP ( $R=.195, p<.01$ ). Importantly, those who follow their local MP are more likely to say that they feel more represented overall ( $R=.182, p<.01$ ). Citizens who follow their MP feel more informed, closer, and more represented. The above evidence is a significant finding in the context of this thesis, as it seems to suggest a model where constituents feel represented when they see content from their MP even though communicative dynamic is primarily one way. In this way it suggests that even though prior evidence in this thesis has discounted the potential of democratic revival through direct representation, social media might be having unpredicted benefits. In that merely the presence of a local citizens MP in their social feed is having positive effects: Something that will be discussed in the final concluding chapter.

## **Chapter 8 – How social media has changed political representation in the United Kingdom**

This thesis sought to advance understanding of the ways in which social media is changing the conduct of representation in the UK, if at all. As shown in Chapter One, after the introduction of social media into mainstream public use, there has been considerable debate on the positive, and negative aspects of these websites in political life. This thesis has justified its focus on representative communication, through examining the extent of how social media has brought citizens and representatives together. To do this, a mixed-method approach was applied, combining data from all perspectives of representative-citizen communication across three platforms. This approach enabled an assessment of how this communication takes place, its effects on the transference of the wants and wishes of citizens to those who represent them, and the ways in which MPs posts can be found to have representational benefits. Four interrelated research questions: *To what extent do MPs use social media, and for what purpose?; what patterns of citizen-initiated contact can be found towards MPs on social media?; does social media suggest a model of Direct Representation?; what model explains the citizen-representative communication, and does this communication fulfil representational duties?* were answered through combining the results. These questions were designed so that the results of each could be compared against each other for a holistic response to the overarching question: How has social media changed political representation in the United Kingdom?

This concluding chapter argues that the conduct of representative communication on social media does not provide evidence for the expected changes of representation through the forms of political dialogue, direct representation, or more deliberative forms of representation. However, this does not mean that changes in communication have been representatively unremarkable. It finds that the previous focus on the possibilities for new technologies to increase interpersonal communication is an overly narrow view that ignores other potential benefits of social media to representation. Everyday communication and posts created by politicians have a multitude of functions. Proposed concepts, such as *connectedness* are independent of direct communication, and instead can be fostered through what can be described as parasocial



representation. This is the feeling of representation that occur when citizens have been placed in greater contact with their representatives through more personalised and relatable content, but the overall relationship remains one-way.

Evidence presented in this thesis also supports the argument that MPs social media content is highly beneficial to the accountability of events in Westminster and citizens' constituencies. Research into political news has highlighted that the role of the media as educators of activities in Westminster has decreased (McNair, 2018:42). This is especially true in reporting on the local impact of national political events or local affairs generally (Gibbons, 2010:373). Evidence from the survey suggests that one of the main benefits of following an MP's social media account is for current affairs and to hear about either local or national issues, depending on the platform. As such, it has representative benefits in ensuring citizens are informed about not only what their representatives are doing, but also about wider political affairs.

This chapter will begin by outlining the responses to the four research questions from this thesis. It will then seek to consider the implications of the overall findings from the elite interviews, surveys, and social media data for the original contributions of this research. Limitations of the methodology and the overall approach will then be considered. The chapter will then conclude with an overview of the main take-way points.

### *8.1 RQ1: The Extent to Which MPs Use Social Media, And for What Purpose*

The first overarching aim of this thesis was to understand the use of social media by MPs, who was using it, why, and how. Previous research found (see Chapter 3) that many MPs had adopted their previous media strategies and applied them to social media. They primarily use social media to broadcast information and to present themselves as hard-working and likeable representatives (Golbeck *et al.* 2010; Grant, Moon, & Grant, 2010; Jackson & Lilleker, 2011). Other studies from outside the UK have found that while representatives use of social media was one-way, it was with a new flair of personalisation in an attempt to be more relatable and show off about who they were as a person rather than a politician (Ross & Bürger, 2014; Highfield, 2016:128). An approach which could have a positive effect on citizens interpretation of politics (see Coleman, 2005b). It was suggested that with time, MPs might also be persuaded to take a more interactive approach to social media with citizens but that no empirical evidence could be found of regular

interpersonal dialogue as of yet (Speakers Commission on Digital Democracy, 2015; Thromble, 2016). However, the above analysis faces two key issues. Firstly, much of the research on UK MPs are based on Twitter alone and does not seek to understand how MPs use other platforms. Secondly, the research methodologies analyse what MPs are doing, rather than asking why MPs take a specific approach. This thesis sought to address these issues, to understand what MPs are using social media for using a mixed-method approach.

### *8.1.1 Which MPs use social media?*

The first finding through the data collected is concerned with why MPs use social media. It was found that both Twitter and Facebook are normalised services, with uptake being 89.3% and 83.7% respectively. Instagram is less adopted by MPs, with only 36.0% of MPs having an account. This is a significant increase from the last set of studies in this area from 2011, that found only 51 MPs, or 7.8%, were on Twitter at the time (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011). It seems that rather than being a curiosity, social media is now prevalent in its use by political representatives.

Given that social media is widespread, the question regarding its uptake is less about who is on these platforms, but who is not. Data from MPs who do not use social media suggest age and high electoral majorities are variables that correlate with non-use. During the interviews, it was generally male MPs with high majorities and in rural constituencies who said they did not use the service. It suggests that those who do not use social media are in constituencies where they would not be pressured into doing so. Yet for most MPs social media has become the expected norm, and a platform they use because they gain significant benefits from it, because other MPs did too, or because they had used the platform before they were elected.

The uptake of Instagram, however, deviated from that of the two above platforms as a smaller (but not insignificant) proportion of MPs are on the service. From the data, it appears that there is no significant variation in uptake on the platform between party, gender, marginality, or otherwise. The only factor that mattered was the age of the MP. However, the elite interviews suggested the real reason why the platform had not had widescale adoption was the ambivalence of its use. While most MPs had a clear idea about the purpose of Facebook and Twitter, Instagram was not well defined, suggesting that until the service had proven benefits, MPs would not use it. Many MPs who had signed up to the photo-sharing platform have seldom used it since, with 77

of the 243 MPs with an Instagram account not using it at all during the data collection period. MPs could have signed up to the service as a curiosity, or to test it out, but found no obvious benefits to using the service.

### *8.1.2 RQ3: Evidence against Direct Representation: MPs use of social media for unmediated communication*

One of the main questions of this thesis was to find what evidence there was for more direct forms of representation on social media (see Coleman, 2005a; 2005c). For this to happen, there needs to be evidence that MPs and citizens enter into frequent dialogue on social media which would allow for this representative mechanism (Section 2.6.1). However, the evidence presented in this thesis suggests that the primary communication form of MPs on social media is broadcast with little evidence of reciprocity or dialogue between citizens and politicians. When asked why they used social media, most MPs suggested that rather than interpersonal dialogue, it was the communication *towards* citizens which was the main reason for posting on these platforms. From the social media data, 5.14% of MPs tweets were in the form of replies. This implies that while the number of MPs on social media platforms has increased, patterns of use have not changed since previous studies. However, earlier research did little to explain why MPs took this approach. Through the comparative analysis between the social media data and interviews with MPs, it seems that several factors can be found for why MPs took a broadcasting approach.

The first was time and resources. MPs highlighted that they struggle to keep on top of the communication that comes into their office from constituents, never mind the masses of tweets, comments, and other forms of social media communication they might receive. MPs reported that they already have long working hours which limits their ability to undertake further communication activity. Previous research has found that most MPs work an average of 67 hours a week, plus 10 hours travel, far more than the average working week for most UK citizens (Korris, 2011). MPs try their best to utilise their time, such as being active on social media in situations when they are unable do any other work, like when they are in the debating chamber or travelling. However, MPs reiterate they still would not have adequate time to respond to every message. Some MPs have been tempted to have their staff post on social media as them; but felt uncomfortable doing this or attempted to limit the extent that their staff posted for them. While they could be more active this way, it came at the cost of being less authentic and personalised,

two things MPs appreciated (as will be discussed below). One respondent, Phillip Davies MP, who did not use any social network even stated that ‘I couldn’t think of anything worse, if someone else is doing it, it’s not from me, is it?’.

The survey responses indicate that citizens are aware when MPs are not actually using social media themselves, and rather that messages are from their staff; and that citizens find this approach disingenuous. A result that posits that while MPs could use their staff for social media communication, at least some constituents would dislike this approach. Therefore MPs might be correct in their approach to social media, to use the service less frequently, more one-way, but to be more authentic.

It's fairly obvious when it's not the actual MP using social media. I'd prefer them to either use it personally or to state that it is a member of their media staff posting on their behalf. This is mostly an issue I notice on an MP's Facebook profile I follow but it irritates me.

(Survey participant, 2018)

Relatedly, MPs also had concerns over the representativeness of their audiences on social media. MPs time is limited, and the time they spend to set aside for communicating with voters, they would prefer to be with constituents, rather than with citizens from outside the area they represent. MPs are also wary of strict Parliamentary protocol regarding which citizens they can act for. Therefore, MPs prefer communication methods where they can verify a citizen’s locality, which MPs would not be able to do on social media for data protection reasons. Even then, MPs when speaking to a constituent are often eager to take the conversation off social media, as it avoids citizens sharing potentially sensitive details in a public environment. There was also a technical element, one MP claimed that social media messages would not integrate into their CMS systems, and they had no way of tracking the communication that happened through the platforms. As a result, they preferred communication through email. Signifying that the formats of social media may cause issues for MPs in tracking and responding to constituents.

Overall, this indicates that previous calls for MPs to engage in more interpersonal communication with citizens online might be misguided in their understanding of MPs ability to do so. MPs are significantly time-poor, overloaded by email (Dai, 2007), and have long working hours that reduces the time they have to engage with all requests on social media. Furthermore, it seems that asynchronous platforms are not well suited to responding to constituents. This finding also answers RQ3. A prerequisite for direct representation is the frequent communication between

representatives and citizens online – which the data suggests does not happen on social media. While the prospect of MPs using new media to broadcast is not new, the explanations provided in this thesis are. This perspective can be used to foster new ways of increasing the levels of interactivity by MPs; such as developing new tools to make interpersonal communication easier for political representatives. This could be in the form a web browser extension that not only aids in verifying and highlighting which citizens on their social media pages are actually their constituents but also making tracking messages easier.

### *8.1.3 Why MPs use social media: A matter of audience?*

One of the main reasons for MPs use of social media was the audience. Representatives have the perception that Twitter and Facebook (and to a lesser extent, Instagram) are useful avenues to reach a large number of citizens. Many MPs even suggested that social media had become more important than their websites. Jo Platt MP said ‘Websites don’t have the same impact’, and Tim Farron MP stated that social media websites had become ‘key for engaging with a wider audience’. Why social media has such valuable audiences for MPs can be explained through two key reasons. Firstly, unlike MPs websites where a citizen would actively have to search for it, on social media users can be exposed to MPs content through normal everyday use. Citizens do not have to actively follow an MP to see content from them, and they only have to be part of a wider network where their friends could re-share a post from an MP. This vastly expands the MPs overall audience for their content, especially to citizens who do not already follow them and could come across an MPs content accidentally. Secondly, is the way social media can connect with other elites or journalists who might re-share or comment on MPs content – especially on Twitter. For instance, Paul Flynn MP found Twitter particularly useful in this regard, and said how it was ‘Important to get re-tweets by press that multiply audience for campaigns’. Above all, audience could explain MPs use of SNS. This suggests that MPs are pursuing a broadcast approach, as they are more concerned with how many people can see their content, as opposed to how many people they can communicate interpersonally with.

However, one puzzle was that if MPs are seeking the largest potential audience, then why do they not have more uptake on the platform with the highest number of users: Facebook. As stated previously, more MPs can be found on Twitter than on Facebook, and they are also more active

there too, posting more frequently on Twitter with 78,366 tweets, or 34,028 with retweets removed, compared to the 13,607 posts by MPs on Facebook. An explanation for this is discussed in Chapter 5; Twitter is seen as a more political space, and far more likely to connect with a larger national audience. Twitter may have a smaller audience, nonetheless it is more valuable in getting their communication noticed.

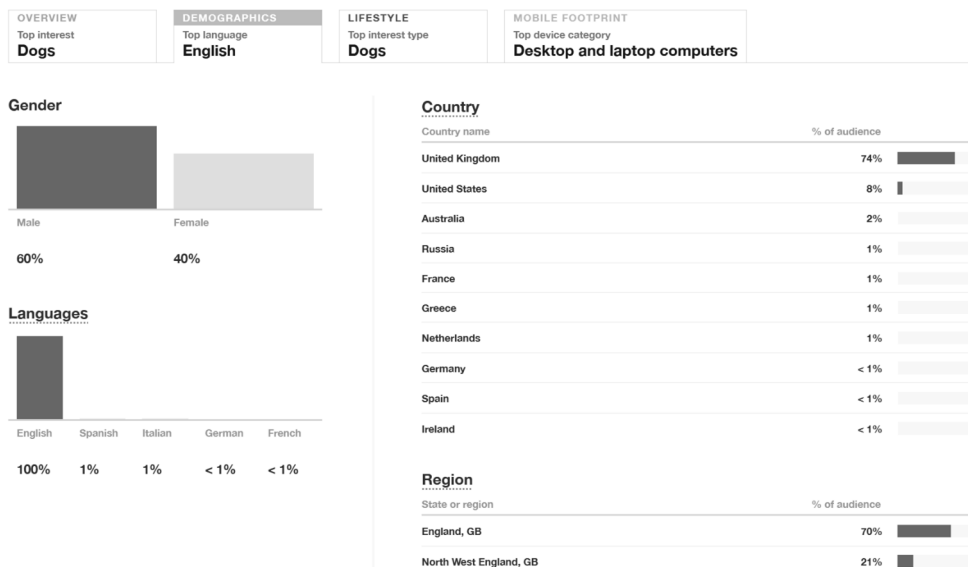
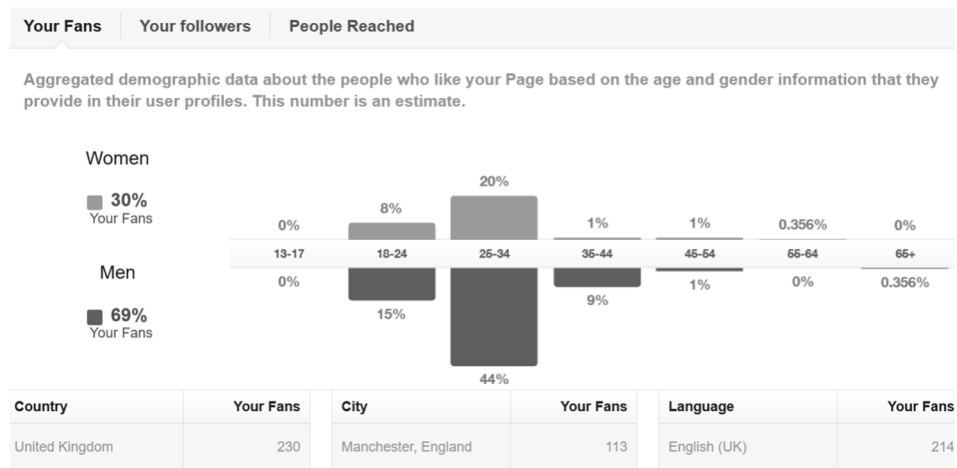


Figure 8.1 – Example of the User Analytics Available For Both Facebook (top) and Twitter (bottom)

It is also noteworthy that many MPs spoke about some of the tools within social media websites that allow them to have a greater understanding of their audience through analytics. Using these tools, MPs can see who their audiences are; the demographics, and what interests they have. Furthermore, the amounts of likes, shares, and comments provide MPs with a barometer of what posts are most successful or how they are received by citizens which they might not have access to on their websites or blogs. Overall, these statistics justify the use of the services to MPs.

#### *8.1.4 What type of content do MPs post? Broadcasting about themselves?*

The primary function of social media for representatives is the documentation of their actions; posting about what they are doing at any given time. This is often formatted to demonstrate they are hardworking, busy, and taking action on behalf of the community. Across the different SNS covered, this type of content makes up 22.4% of Facebook posts, 21.0% of Twitter posts, and 41.3% of Instagram posts. The higher number for Instagram is due to the limited functions of the platform which leads to MPs documenting more, than discussing policy which is harder to convey using images. To explain this overall approach MPs were asked about this behaviour, which one, Ben Bradley MP, responded that *'If you don't tell people what you're doing [...] they'll assume you're doing nothing'*. This is evidence that MPs are under pressure to show they are working hard, as citizens will assume they are lazy by default. The tendency for MPs to document what they are doing correlates with previous findings regarding impression management by Jackson & Lilleker (2011). This thesis has contributed new perspectives on why MPs take this approach. Although further inquiry is needed, it appears that documentation does make citizens more understanding of what an MP is doing, with 26.8% of survey participants stating that they had seen this type of activity from their representative, with some going on to comment that *'Yes, regular posting shows that an MP is still out there and hopefully working on their behalf.'* (Survey participant, 2018).

The second function for MPs appears to be the use of social media to share news. However, the presentation of this current affairs content is framed through the politician's world view in a way that persuades citizens to agree with an MP's political ideology. While on the surface this activity could be seen as an attempt to inform citizens, it seems that the framing of news is suggestive of a particular motive for doing so. When MPs shared news on their social feed, they often did so

by attaching their own opinion, or statement to it indicating how they felt the news could impact local residents, or how it is good/bad for the nation. Only 3.4% of tweets contained news that directly linked to the story, compared with 10.6% of all tweets which linked to news with an attached opinion from the MP. Furthermore, MPs often used social media to attack political opponents, with these posts taking up 13% of all Facebook posts, 17% of those on Twitter, but only 2% of Instagram posts (argued to be due to this social media being seen as a more positive platform). Overall, it appears that social media is a useful platform for sharing news not only about what they are doing (see above) but wider political events in ways which are agreeable to the MPs own political persuasion.

In regard to representation, it was important to find out the extent to which MPs used social media to inquire about their citizens' values. From the data, it was shown that on the whole MPs did this infrequently across all three social media platforms with only 2.1% of posts on Facebook, 0.9% for Twitter and 0.1% posts for Instagram asking citizens for their views or to link to surveys/polls. The low number of these posts seems to stem from the perception by MPs that social media audiences were a poor representation of their citizens' values, and that social media polls could be too easily gamed for political points. This seems to provide additional evidence against the use of social media as a place for direct representation. However, that while limited in its use for inquiry, Facebook out of all the social networks provided the best platform for this type of activity. It is the platform which had the most inquiry posts as a percentage, and as MPs considered Facebook as having an audience more representative of their constituency. MPs indicated that they perceived Facebook as more local (Chapter 5) and as such is a better place to hear from citizens. Annelise Dodds MP stated, '[Facebook is] important for communications with constituents [...] letting people give me their opinion on what I'm doing, and maybe things I'm not doing that they think I should be doing'. Her responses suggest that if MPs could verify who their audiences are on social media, they might be more receptive to using it to understand their constituents.

MPs use of social media for broadcasting or to persuade citizens of their perspective has one common aspect: that all this content is delivered through a personalised tone of voice. Previous research has already shown that politicians have used online communications to show a more personalised version of political events, or present personal attributes which are attractive to voters (Adam & Mairer, 2010; Tumasjam *et al.* 2010; Parmlee & Birchard, 2011; Manning & Phiddian, 2015; Highfeild, 2016). Therefore, this thesis sought to see to what extent the content



of MPs social media activity is personalised. From Chapter 6, three types of coded posts were deemed to be personal: non-political updates about themselves; selfies with no other political meanings; or general photography which also had no deeper political meaning attributed to it. From this coding it was found that these posts accounted for 5.0% and 5.5% of posts on Facebook and Twitter respectively, suggesting that direct personalisation was limited (see table 8.1). This type of activity was much higher on Instagram at 21.3%, the differences can be found due to the more personable and ‘me’ focused posts that Instagram and the culture it promotes (Alhabash & Ma, 2017). It should also be noted that 11.5% of citizens recalled seeing this type of activity on social media from MPs, and that directly personalised posts were only encountered infrequently.

**Table 8.1.** Percentage of personality focused social media posts by platform

	Personal Update (%)	Selfies (%)	Photography (%)	Total
Facebook	1.3	1.1	2.6	5.0
Twitter	4.1	0.1	1.3	5.5
Instagram	8.4	6.3	6.6	21.3

There is also evidence that the personalisation of MPs content is less direct, and instead is more widely seen through an approach that ingrains an aspect of their personality into every one of their posts. For instance, when talking about Parliament, MPs frame their content in a personal approach by talking about the Westminster process through what they are doing. Their posts could therefore be said to document their specific action whilst taking part in a wider political process. Chapter 5 did show that MPs were keen to highlight their use of social media as a more personable medium. It seems that some of the survey respondents from Chapter 7 appreciated this approach, with one commenting that social media use by MPs ‘show[s] a side we do not usually see. For example, showing they [are] only human and enjoy having some fun on twitter too’. Overall, this suggests a model of social media use by MPs that is primarily undertaken through unmediated rather than interpersonal forms, to highlight what they are doing, their values, and to allow citizens to see the more personal and relatable side of them. Previous research has highlighted that this approach makes MPs appear more authentic, trusted by citizens, and is

useful for convincing citizens that the political activities undertaken by MPs is in their best interests (Gaden & Dumitrica, 2015; Enli, 2017).

#### *8.1.5 Who do MPs represent on social media*

In research by Campbell *et al.* it was found that MPs roughly seek to represent one of four main groups: their *constituency*, who elected them; the *party platform*, to which they were elected; *Parliament* itself, to which they stand; and the *nation* (1999). This thesis sought to understand which of these groups' MPs represented on social media. In 2.6.3 of the literature review, it was highlighted how no research has yet to understand how the platform of communication affects the issues represented. This section will seek to contribute an initial analysis of this issue. Posts from Twitter and Facebook were coded (see table 6.1) to test the degree in which MPs represented these four areas. It was found that there was a significant difference between the two platforms, in what areas MPs represented on each.

Facebook was used by MPs to primarily represent their local constituency: with 41.3% of all posts being about the local area. Furthermore, when talking about national policies (32.1%), representatives seemed to focus on areas that would affect their local citizens the most, including welfare, education and the NHS. This was an approach confirmed during the elite interviews, where MPs highlighted how Facebook was a much more local platform to connect with their constituents when compared to Twitter or Instagram. Westminster was seldom talked about on Facebook, accounting for only 2.4% of MPs' posts. Content about the MPs party was also less on Facebook when compared to Twitter, accounting for 12% of their messages compared to Twitter (21.9%). The evidence here gives the impression that Facebook is a tool used by MPs to represent local issues to their constituents, or at least speak about the issues in which they feel their constituents would be most interested in.

Conversely, Twitter's value to MPs seems to be about representing national issues, their party, and to a lesser extent, Westminster. 27.2% of tweets by MPs were about their constituency compared to much more emphasis on national politics (38.9%), their party (21.9%), and Westminster (6.9%). In interviews, MPs also spoke about Twitter being much more of a platform to discuss and talk about national politics, to a national audience. The subject of MP's tweets was more political, focussed on issues with national or international importance than compared to

posts on Facebook. More tweets discussed Brexit, the economy, foreign relations, and immigration. The use of Instagram was more ambivalent, it seemed to represent a more personalised account of politics; such as documenting the MPs activities.

These differences suggest that sociotechnical factors can shift the issues that are represented across different social media websites. Technological factors seem to have more of an impact on the issue's MPs talk about than previously expected. It has previously been argued that what drives online debate are media or societal factors (See Sunstein, 2018). However, the evidence above contests this account. It was previously argued in this thesis that due to the layout of Facebook, the networks there have closer geographic ties to a citizen's local area, while Twitter's layout expands users' networks to national or even international audiences, and Instagram is a platform that focuses on the self. The result of this has been MPs tailoring their content to match the audiences of each platform. Overall, the finding that the subject of MPs posts is partly driven by technological factors is something that this thesis can argue but is an area that needs further analysis to understand fully.

#### *8.1.6 The selective response: What MPs responses towards citizens say about who MPs represent*

The survey findings set out in this thesis presented new insights into who political representatives are most likely to respond to. In the cases where representatives did engage in conversations or responded to citizens, it seems to be when relevant or advantageous to the MP. Evidence from Chapter 7 shows that only 12.5% of citizens who had sent an MP a message, received any kind of response on social media. However, the demographics of who had received a response suggests a particular pattern. Citizens who hold politically similar values to the MP or are from the same party were most likely to receive a response. Those who receive a response are also those who will send messages that present the representative in a favourable light or agree with them. A further explanation was raised in the interviews, Anneliese Dodds MP mentioned how she preferred contact from constituents, but she also appreciated messages on social media regarding campaigns or single issues she is involved with.

This finding connects to long-standing discussions about whom MPs represent. Each MP is elected to represent a single constituency, each containing within it a variety of opinions, views and issues from citizens who will wish to be represented. There will be no doubt that the MP will

encounter citizens who will have opinions that differ to their own. Just because they have different values, does not stop the MP being their representative. One could argue that citizens who might disagree with the MP, or be from a different party, should have the same right to be replied and responded to online. Similar arguments have been made when political representatives choose to block some citizens on social media (c.f Williams, Oct 29, 2015). For example, in the US, President Donald Trump was ordered to unblock citizens on Twitter after courts ruled that his account was a ‘public forum’ and citizens have the right to engage with him on the service (Savage, July 9, 2019; Robertson, Jul 11, 2019). To explain this behaviour, previous research in MPs tweeting habits found an explanation why MPs are selective in who they respond to and how. Jackson and Lilleker (2004; 2011) found that MPs often use online communications as a PR and impression management tool, rather than an interactive communication device. MPs will seek to frame and promote certain types of dialogue, either towards an argument they agree with, or to discussions that benefit the MPs themselves (often, as hard-working members of Parliament for a local area). When asked, two-thirds of survey respondents from this thesis thought MPs’ primary focus on social media was self-promotion, campaigning, or re-election, suggesting that the idea of impression management is something citizens expect, rather than necessarily agree with. MPs might be limiting who their overall audience is which could be a reason why so few citizens follow MPs with opposing views. In-line with uses and gratifications theory, this thesis argues that citizens are not following or attempting communication with MPs with different politics, as they expect they will simply be ignored.

## *8.2 RQ2: Patterns of Citizen-Initiated Contact, and The Relationship Citizens Seek with Their Representatives*

The actions of citizens have received less attention in the literature surrounding social media and political communication. Chapter 2 argues that without adequate perspectives from both angles of the conversation, researchers might not be drawing conclusions from the whole picture of how representatives and constituents are communicating on social media. Furthermore, only using publicly visible data might result in the under-reporting of the frequency of communications between them. This research uniquely sought not only to collect social media data, but also seek to understand the perspective of citizens, whose interpretation cannot be deduced from online communication alone, and who might use more private channels to communicate with their MP. This section finds that while much of the blame is placed on political

representatives for the lack of interaction with citizens, there is also the case to be made that citizens might not be seeking interpersonal communication with MPs to begin with. Through patterns of behaviours revolving around current affairs consumption, and what this thesis calls representational lurking, it appears that the one-way form of communication might also be due to citizens themselves, not actively seeking interpersonal relationships with their representatives

### *8.2.1 Citizens seeking news, not representation*

In many instances, internet technologies and social media has been positioned as a potential tool for reconnecting politicians and citizens (Coleman, 1999; Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Graham, 2011). A chapter by Graham, Broersma, & Hazelhoff (2013), asserts that MPs current patterns of usage are neglecting the possibilities of social media to increase levels of political representation, arguing that if politicians correctly used such services, they would allow for what they describe as connected representation. Similarly, Williamson (2009a) argued that there is the potential for closer ties between MPs and citizens via social media, provided MPs chose to use it. Yet all these predictions work on one assumption: that citizens want a more communicative relationship with their representatives. The survey results indicate this is a flawed assumption.

More should use twitter to overcome the distortions & downright [censoring] by Print & Broadcast media.

MPs should use twitter to inform and educate the public. By and large I believe this is the case. However the public have to actively follow MPs to be informed.

(Survey participants, 2018).

When asked why, citizens on social media followed MPs, only 17 out of 294 (5.7%) who follow MPs on social media said that it was to message or communicate with them. Only 5.6% out of 373 respondents, said they had contacted an MP on social media and most of this was in the form of liking or sharing MPs' posts. Although some citizens have used social media to connect with their MP, it is largely in a reactive form. As a result, it is doubtful that most of this communication meets Rafaeli's definition of a conversation (1988): something required for the proper transfer of values, or communicative representation.

Likewise, only a limited number of citizens used social media to partake in political discussion with friends/family (12.1%), even less considered using the platform for debating with strangers (8.6%). There is also evidence that people avoid debating with those who have differing views, with only 3.2% of people suggesting they follow MPs to find views alternative to their own, compared to 24.3% who say they follow MPs that have similar values. People might avoid entering in a dialogue with MPs online who they disagree with. However, Sunstein does make a credible explanation for the lack of citizens trying to communicate with MPs. He explains that “citizens who have been deprived in options may not want the things of which they have been deprived” (Sunstein, 2017:165). It might well be that citizens do not know what a communicative relationship with their MP is like, and, therefore, do not seek it.

Why citizens follow MPs, and what content they see from MPs may indicate what type of relationship citizens wish to have with political representatives. From the evidence gathered above, the main reason why citizens who use social media to follow MPs is to hear about either local or national news issues. Alongside this, three-quarters of respondents reported that social media had become their primary method of receiving news content, above all other forms listed. Thus, supporting the notion that citizens now primarily follow particular accounts that curate the news for them (Newman *et al.* 2019). Citizens will read a news story not because of who it is by, but because of who has shared it. This finding, in conjunction with evidence and that citizens follow MPs with views that agree with their own, implies a model of citizens following MPs who they agree with, as a way to subscribe to a particular type of news that agrees with their pre-existing political values. This then further implies that the media strategies of politicians who share news content to direct the public’s attention towards issues and define how they are framed, can be particularly effective on social media (c.f. Wolfseld, 1997; Bühlmann & Fivaz, 2017). Moreover, it seems that citizens who follow MPs on social media now ascribe a new role of MPs: to provide direction in what news content to consume.

### *8.2.2 Explaining the participation of citizens: Between Representational Lurking and Monitorial Citizens*

In online communities, lurking is the act of primarily observing the online communication of others, but seldom participating, or limiting their activity to simple low-effort tasks such as upvoting a post on Reddit or liking and sharing posts on other social media websites. From the

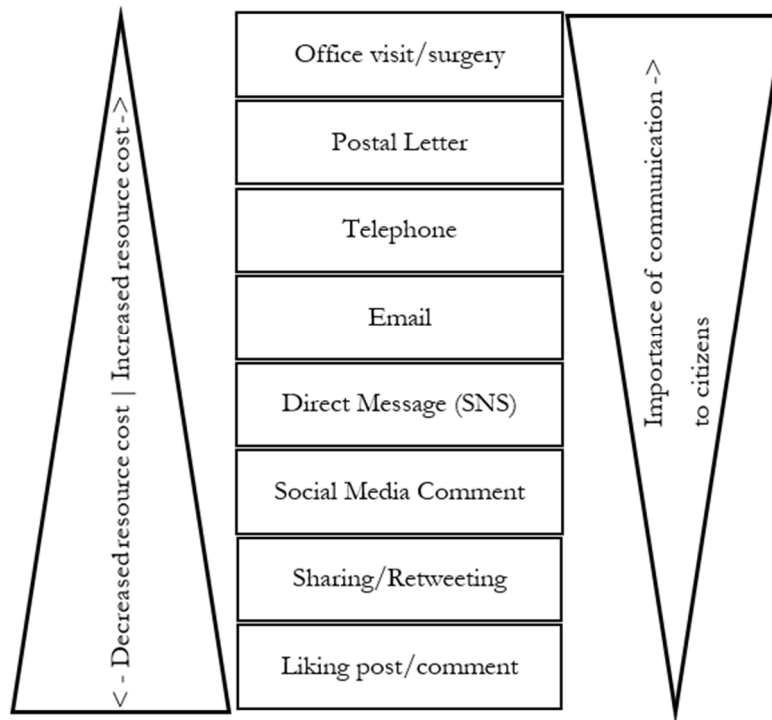
survey sample, it seems that many of the participants who followed MPs used a similar participatory model. Only a limited number of citizens seek to engage with MPs, with the majority of social media users following MPs accounts for their content. While most citizens said they had made some contact towards MPs on social media, this is limited to low effort actions such as liking posts (48.8% said they had done this); sharing (26%), while 31.1% said they had taken no action at all. It seems that the majority of citizens partake in low effort, reactionary, forms of participation towards MPs, if at all. A pattern very familiar to so-called Lurkers.

From those who had made some type of contact that contained a message, only 21.8% of citizens said they had commented on an MPs post, while 11.8% said they had used a social platform to directly message an MP. Yet, interestingly, framed in a different question, a smaller proportion of respondents (5.6%) said they had contacted an MP about an issue on social media. This suggests that a certain level of communication to citizens is of low importance or value to them. Activities such as comments could be an extension of the reactive model and a simple way for citizens to show agreement or negativity towards what an MP has posted. At the same time, it seems that from the question asking how citizens have contacted an MP about an issue, email, seems to remain the most popular contact mechanism, with 23.5% of citizens saying they had used this communication form to contact their representative (Table 7.2). This is compared with 5.6% for social media, 4.3% for telephone, 3.7% for office communication, and 2.4% for postal letters. When a matter is important to citizens, they will seek to use the tried and tested forms of communication with the least resource costs.

This behaviour can be categorised into three distinct participation types. Firstly, those who lurk, only seeking to consume information, and feel no need to participate any further. Secondly, those who undertake low-level activity in a reactionary format; who use platforms to quickly highlight an opinion towards an MP with little expectation of a response. Thirdly, citizens who are willing to undertake more resource-intensive forms of communication when they feel the issue is important enough for them to do so. These citizens will often seek to use a platform of communication that will ensure a response. Taking the levels of participation against the resource costs of each platform provides a potential explanation for the levels of participation seen within this data (Figure 8.2). It suggests that as the importance of the issue increases for citizens, they are more likely to undertake communication forms that have increased levels of resource costs in terms of time and money but have a higher rate of response by MPs. This is a finding potentially

important to MPs, as they can use the method of communication as a way to triage the importance of the subject matter.

**Figure 8.2.** Model of Participation: Importance Compared to Resource Cost



In understanding which of the participatory models explains how citizens seek to be represented through citizen-initiated contact (see section 3.7.1), it is that of the monitorial citizen that best explains the behaviours of the survey participants. This is where citizens have distanced themselves from political action, but have continued to monitor it through news intake, only intervening when they consider it necessary and important enough to do so (Schudson, 1996;1998). The fact that citizens are using social media to consume high amounts of current affairs content but rarely communicate with MPs suggest this model can be seen within this dataset. Additionally, the analysis found that no significant variables from the survey participant demographics correlated with different levels of participation. This suggests that a participatory model is a better explanation for why people communicate on social media as opposed to resource models of participation.



### 8.2.3 On collective action

A heavily researched area of social media and politics is its role in assisting with collective action (Bennett & Sergerberg, 2012). This activity ranges from promoting petitions, creating political events, right up to sparking violence and armed struggle (Hill, 2010; Margetts *et al.* 2015:10). The early and well-known examples of this are the 2010 student protests in the UK and the so-called ‘Twitter revolutions’ including the Arab Spring (Howard & Hussain, 2013; Hensby, 2017). Evidence suggests that there are more and more citizens who can be found to be politically active in collective action campaigns, due to connectivity through social media (Islin & Ruppert, 2015; Penny, 2017). Therefore, it is surprising that within the dataset there is a lack of citizens who have used social media to message MPs as part of a collective action campaign.

As stated, the model of collective action campaigns, and the increase in participation does not fit within this research’s findings. One explanation for this could be that collective action is a very particular form of participation that might not directly interact with MPs on the individual level. *The Citizen Marketer*, argues that social media allows for very specific forms of action, most of which have the primary aim of changing the media agenda. Penny highlights: the Kony 2012 campaign; ‘Milifandom’ during the 2015 General Election; ‘Corbyn-mania’ in 2016; #BabiesforBernie; and even the social media supporter groups for Trump campaigns, to show how social media can be used by citizens to support politicians or parties of their choosing (Penny, 2017:97-98, 131). However, explanations for why citizens join these campaigns indicate they do so in order to send a message of their value orientations through expressions of allegiance and identification (*ibid*, 2017:179). Likewise, Dennis finds that many actions taken on social media by citizens are not done with any grand strategy, but instead, are ‘instinctive, and undertaken without any real consideration of their meaning or democratic value’ (Dennis, 2019:167). Recruitment of these participants follows a reactionary model of political participation, often to send a signal, not a transference of ideals from one person to another (Dennis, 2019:111). However, the research by both Dennis and Penny does not seek to understand how citizens undertake more individual conversational activity, or lobbying of their MPs. Penny suggests that alone, citizens might not be algorithmically important enough to have their voice heard amongst the crowd (Penny, 2017:181). This implies that while models predict that social media users might engage in more participatory, collective action, this did not translate into individual citizen-initiated contact with MPs.

### *8.3 How is Social Media Changing Political Representation in the UK*

#### *8.3.1 Explaining the MP-Constituent Relationship on Social Media: Surrogate & Parasocial representation.*

This thesis argues that the increased levels of communication and more personalised forms of posts by MPs has fostered bonds of connectedness between representatives and citizens. While there was a limited communicative relationship between citizens and MPs, it was found that politicians' use of social media still has important representative repercussions. Nearly half of respondents followed their local MP which considering the rates of contact, this number is much higher than might be expected, and is suggestive that more citizens have linkages with their constituency MP than previously thought (c.f. Hansard, 2019). Furthermore, this research found that those who follow their local MP are also those believe that their MP represents them. They are also more likely to feel more represented overall. This is an important finding, as previous research into political effects and political empowerment models have found that citizens who feel more represented are more likely to vote, and participate in politics, while the opposite is true for those who feel politically alienated. Citizens feeling represented is therefore regarded as good for democracy, and such feelings provides the backbone to a more stable democratic system (Almond and Verba, 1965; Dahl, 1961). This effect can be explained through Reef and Knoke, who found that alienation is a social condition caused by a lack, or minimal, connection with those who represent them (1999).

Beyond general effects on representation, it can be argued that the results in this chapter provide evidence that little change has been made to the role of MPs. Previously, the introduction of new internet communication platforms has led to the increasing rates of citizen-initiated contact, raising concerns of casework overload by MPs (c.f Norton, 1994; Williamson, 2012; Norton, 2012). However, only small numbers of constituents use social media to contact MPs, preferring instead to use emails, so there is little change in the process for MPs. This is not to say that some of the reported increases in the volume of emails MPs receive is an indirect result of an MPs social media profile.

One area where we can see MPs increasing their representative duties is through their information sharing. While MPs have been shown to expand their accountability function in previous chapters, the way citizens interact with the news content provided by MPs suggests the growth of another representative function. The book, *The Good Representative*, argues that representatives

have a role in consolidating the identity of the groups they serve – helping articulate the groups interests, opinions, and perspectives (Dovi, 2007:155). Additionally, they have a role in providing information to their citizens, not about their own work, but also the material that the representative uses to create public policy or positions (Dovi, 2007:139). Examples of the types of news shared by MPs can be found within the previous chapter.

Citizens are extending who they follow across social media past just their local MP. One might argue they citizens are now seeking news, and maybe even representation from MPs other than their own. This suggests that citizens may actually be seeing what Mansbridge calls ‘surrogate representation’ on social media (2003). This is where citizens seek or feel that they are represented by others whom they have no prior electoral relationship. However, while citizens might be seeking this form of representation, it appears that MPs are less receptive to this. As most seem to focus on, and want to be seen acting for, their constituents. This type of surrogate representation, therefore, is a one-way claim.

However, all this points to the changes in representation being due to top-down factors, rather than through interpersonal interaction or a two-way flow of information. Yet, citizens still feel more represented when they follow their local representative. It could be argued that the whole process of representation is to ensure that citizens can get their representatives to do what they want them to do. However, this thesis suggests that social media is a poor conduit for this representative communication, and thus it is somewhat confounding that citizens feel more represented. As an explanation, this thesis proposes a model of parasocial representation. This is where through MPs appearing more regularly to citizens, and to be seen acting on their behalf, causes citizens to have a belief in a representative relationship they otherwise do not have.

### *8.3.2 Is Social Media increasing representation of citizens? A contingent yes.*

One of the overarching questions of this thesis is if social media is bringing citizens and their representatives closer together. From the three measures from table 2.3, inquiry, accountability, and closeness, this thesis has provided evidence that at least two of these can be found in the citizen-representative relationship online. This thesis finds that while there is no evidence of inquiry, there is an argument to be made that social media has increased the level of accountability and closeness.

The argument or closeness is found in Chapter 7. Citizens who followed their local MP correlated with feeling more represented ( $R=.182, p<.01$ ) furthermore 21.1% of citizens suggest MPs social media use has made them more engaged in politics. The hypothesis by Coleman (2005b) regarding simply having an increased presence of MPs in citizens lives might make them feel more represented. One could also argue that the increased levels of personalisation by MPs has meant citizens have felt closer to their representatives, as they appear more relatable, and thus feel more represented by them. The finding here is that MPs, through the personalised use of social media, has left citizens feeling more represented by them.

Accountability occurs when the communication from representatives towards citizens contains information that informs their constituents of their actions and therefore makes themselves more accountable to them. By allowing citizens to understand how they are being represented by MPs, it holds an important function within Pitkin's theory of representation. As evidenced within this thesis, citizens are now following MPs more for news content and information consumption, at the same time MPs are posting more about what they are doing through documentation. This has resulted in more citizens being exposed to information about what their MPs are doing, the politics they stand for, and what an MP is doing for the local area.

However, while it seems that forms of representation are tied to information, and the feeling of representation increases when citizens follows MPs, this is not without its concerns. The increases of citizens getting their news directly from MPs may cause concern to many. As found in 2.6.2, democracies are healthier when they have a strong and active media acting as indirect representatives on citizens behalf. With the increased circumvention of the media, it could be argued that this role is in a state of jeopardy, and could cause a decrease of the quality of accountability. Furthermore, these findings suggest that while citizens are feeling closer to MPs, and more represented as a result, there is little evidence to suggest that the values and wants of citizens are being transferred through more direct means. Feelings of representation could have beneficial effects, but the impact it has on the transference of representation may ultimately be superficial, as the major representational changes due to social media are top-down.

### *8.3.3 The unknown role of algorithms: Evidence that social media companies are skewing the perceptions of MPs to citizens?*

In recent years, social media sites have received much criticism over how they choose to display content. Much of this concern is directed towards Facebook following privacy violations after the Cambridge Analytica scandal, and from concerns to how the platform selects what news to show to citizens, and the use of political advertising on the platform (Theilman, Aug 29, 2016; DeVito, 2016; McLoughlin & Ward, 2019). Twitter has not been immune, after findings that foreign governments were using the service to distort news and influence elections, or inflame divisions within society (Broniatowski, *et al.* 2018). However, evidence presented here suggests that social media has a significant impact on the relationship between citizens and MPs. For instance, algorithms that choose which accounts are promoted for others to follow, which is responsible for how a fifth of citizens found an MPs page. These are also used to dictate what content and posts by MPs citizens see and the survey here indicates a massive divergence between what MPs post and what citizens see. As MPs most frequently post about what they are doing, but most citizens see posts containing news content from MPs. This research posits that social media sites dictate what type of posts citizens see based on what will keep citizens interacting with content, or on the website longer. If the algorithms are well trained, they will be able to show content that agrees with the user resulting in a positive reaction to the MPs content, or negative. The result is that social media feeds could be promoting some MPs, or only showing favourable or adverse content from MPs based on a system which nobody has access to. The result of these mechanisms could therefore be the mis-representation of MPs, their values, or what they stand for with negative consequences for democracy. While more information is needed on this subject, the findings certainly underline the growing power of social media platforms in potentially framing representative politics and the image of MPs.

### *8.4 Limitations of this thesis and areas for future study: Is there space for two-step representation?*

This thesis was empirically ambitious, seeking to understand the interactions between citizens and representatives on social media which has resulted in a nuanced understanding of the relationship between the two. It did this through an approach that looked at citizen-representative interaction by itself. The thesis argues that while social media might not result in the direct

transference of political values from citizens to MPs through interpersonal communication, there is a space for social media for more indirect representation through methods not understood in this research. The literature review introduced the notion of networked representation (section 2.6.3), however data from Chapter 6 found that MPs seldom interact with social media users, nor see social media as representative of citizens, discounting this as a mechanism for representation. However, prior research in collective action campaigns might suggest that networked acts could still be representatively important. Through what can be described as two-step representation. As while MPs might not be receptive to citizens views directly from social media, there is evidence that representatives will acknowledge and respond to information from collective groups (see Penny, 2017; Dennis, 2019), or when a citizen's post has been highlighted in the media. This suggests that representatives will acknowledge the views of citizens which have been posted online after it is carried through a third actor such as the media or campaign group. As this research did not look outside the citizen-representative relationship, this an area that this thesis argues deserves more rigorous testing as a potential mechanism for representation.

From the data two key methodological limitations of this paper have become evident. The first is in the number of elite interviews with MPs. This thesis only captured the perspective from 12, or 1.8% of the total number of MPs. While the range of MPs was diverse (Party, gender, executive position, age, and constituency type) to get a wide range of perspective, the views of the MPs as presented are not a true representative sample of MPs across the House. While the results from this section are qualitatively useful for the thesis, they are not able to be analysed quantitatively. The second issue was due to ethical considerations. From the results of the ethics section (4.2.7), it was decided that the comments of citizens left on MPs pages were not to be coded or used as part of this analysis, as consent had not been given. However, the use of this data could have been significant in understanding which issues are the subject of citizens comments, and if MPs are responsive to this. One way to overcome this would be to only code the comments left by citizens on Twitter, where users are more generally understanding that their data will be used for academic purposes than users of Facebook or Instagram. However this would have limited results. Because, as shown by this thesis, each social media network is different, and data only from Twitter is not representative of social media as a whole.

### *8.5 Concluding Remarks*

This research used an original methodological approach that sought to respond to some of the unanswered questions of the conduct of political representation on social media. By building on and going beyond existing research that either only understood the representative-citizen relationship through web-accessible social media data or research papers that only studied one social network alone. It did this through a data collection of the interactions between MPs and social media users on three platforms (Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram), elite interviews with 12 MPs, and a survey of 373 social media users. In doing so it discovered the form of the relationship between them, alongside what the conduct of MPs and citizens on these platforms means for representation. Alongside this, the thesis also answered a number of supplementary questions to help develop a more rounded understanding of the subject matter.

It seems that social media is changing political representation in a number of key ways. Firstly, it can be found that use of the platforms by MPs has expanded the overall levels of accountability. As it provides citizens with more information about political representatives, with what they are doing, where they are, and what the values are. This has allowed citizens to not only know more about their MP, but has changed their current affairs consumption habits, as it seems citizens desire to get this news direct from the source. Social media is changing the media landscape, and this has implications for how news is delivered and consumed, and thus, how MPs are held accountable to constituents.

Social media has encouraged citizens to seek their current affairs content direct from the source, which according from this data could be leading to a disintermediation effect. This is where the media, who have previously played an important role as indirect representatives and watchdogs of democracy are now less important to citizens. Questions have to be raised regarding the quality of current affairs content delivered by MPs. This thesis suggests MPs are not providing balanced news, but rather a biased account to convince citizens to their world-view. Citizens, as a result could be becoming less well-informed. If citizens are only getting unchallenged and bias news from those they already agree with, are they seeking truth? Or are citizens simply seeking information that confirms their preexisting beliefs? There are certainly questions to be raised in this regard.

Secondly, this thesis has found that citizens' perceptions of feeling represented are independent of the transference of political values from constituents to representatives. The Hypothesis by Coleman proposes that social media would lead to direct representation (2005a), but the evidence on social media does not support this hypothesis. MPs are not using these platforms for their interpersonal potential, nor seeking to use social media websites for the purpose of inquiry. Many MPs claim they simply do not have the time to conduct such activity. As such, calls to encourage representatives to have a more interpersonal approach to online communication are misguided as they underestimate the time it would take MPs to engage more online, while overestimating the amount of time they have to conduct such activity. Furthermore, representatives do not find the audiences of websites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram as representative measures of their constituency. This results in MPs using the platforms for one-way, broadcast, communication. At the same time, the evidence about citizens' news habits suggests that even if MPs are more interpersonal, few citizens seek to be after this relationship as they look for current affairs content above all else.

However, this did not stop citizens from feeling more represented through the communication they have received from MPs. This has been classed by this thesis as parasocial representation, where no representative transference has taken place, but citizens feel represented nevertheless. This is found to be due to the more personal approach taken by MPs, making them seem more relatable, while the documentation of MPs' activities suggests to citizens that they are working hard on their behalf. These factors make any representative claim by MPs more believable, and therefore accepted by citizens (Saward, 2010). However, significant questions have to be asked to further understand differences between *feeling* represented and *being* represented, as while citizens might feel more represented, this is not a measure of if they are actually represented in Parliament.

Overall, the evidence here suggests that social media has changed the conduct of representation within the UK. This thesis found evidence that mechanisms of accountability and connectedness have increased through social platforms. However, at the same time, MPs' use of the services have not provided the expected benefits, implying that social media is not a platform which previous theories of the internet can be easily transplanted onto. Ultimately, it seems that many of the hopes for social media as the potential solution for 'fixing' representative democracy through interpersonal communication have not currently come to fruition. However, it does not mean these platforms have not had a significant positive change to the conduct of representation and these platforms are certainly worthy of additional study.





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## App.A Semi-Structured interview Schedule (UK MPs)

*Interview structures may differ based on MPs background.*

### Preamble:

- Permission to Record
- Consent forms

### Section-one: Introduction

- In a typical day, how many times do you access a social media website?
  - Prompt: Is there any difference between the social media sites you use?
  - Prompt: Is there a difference how you use social media on your phone & desktop?
- Do you manage your social media pages alone, or do your staff help?

### Section-Two: Approach to social media

- Strategically, how important is social media to your role as an MP?
- What do you use social media for?
  - Prompt: Do you use it for outreach, taking in constituent's views, personal capacity?
- To you, what makes social media distinct to other internet technologies such as websites and email?
- Who would you say is your main audience? (local, national, party?)
  - Prompt: Do you think social media has given you an online following of citizens who are not your constituents, does this change how you use social media?
- Are there any specific issues in social media use in politics?
  - Prompt: Abuse, skills, time, wrong audience?

### Section-Three: The role of Social Media in interpersonal communication

- What is the nature of the communication you have with constituents on social media sites?
  - Prompt: Local or National issues?
- [if relevant] Has social media changed the Interpersonal communication you've had with constituents?
- Has social media changed the power relationship between the sender and receiver?

### Section-Four: Representation

- Consider you are torn on a vote, whose views would you consider more important; your own convictions, party guidance or correspondence from your constituents?
- Do you consider your role to be a Trustee or delegate?
- What tools/places/media do you use to guide the voices and values of your constituents?
  - Follow-up: Do you feel the conversations you have with constituents leads your actions as an MP?
  - Follow-up2: Has social media changed this?
- Do you feel social media has representative functions?
  - Prompt: If not, why?

### Section-Three: Finally

- If there anything else you'd like to add?

## App.B Citizen Social Media User Survey

### Section: Preamble

- Consent form

### Section: Demographics

- Age: What is your age? [single-select]
  1. 18-24
  2. 25-34
  3. 35-44
  4. 45-54
  5. 55-64
  6. 65-74
  7. 75+
- Race/Ethnicity: Which group do you consider you belong to? [dropdown]
  1. White – English/ Welsh/ Scottish/ Northern Irish/ British
  2. White – Irish
  3. White – Gypsy or Irish Traveller
  4. White – Any other White Background
  5. Mixed – White and Black Caribbean
  6. Mixed – White and Black African
  7. Mixed – White and Asian
  8. Mixed – Any other Mixed / Multiple ethnic background
  9. Asian / Asian British – Indian
  10. Asian / Asian British – Pakistani
  11. Asian / Asian British – Bangladeshi
  12. Asian / Asian British – Chinese
  13. Asian / Asian British – Any other Asian background
  14. Black – African
  15. Black – Caribbean
  16. Black – Any other Black / African / Caribbean Background
  17. Arab
  18. Any other ethnic group

19. Don't know
  20. Don't want to say
- Gender: What gender do you consider you are? [single-select]
    1. Female
    2. Male
    3. Other
    4. Don't want to say
  - What is the highest educational or professional qualification you have obtained? [single-select]
    1. GSCE / O-Level / CSE
    2. Vocational Qualifications (=NVQ1+2)
    3. A-Level or Equivalent (=NVQ4)
    4. Bachelor Degree or Equivalent
    5. Masters/PhD
    6. Other
    7. No formal Qualifications
    8. Don't want to say
  - What region of the UK are you from? [dropdown]
    1. North
    2. North-West
    3. Yorks & Humberside
    4. West Midlands
    5. East Midlands
    6. East England
    7. South West
    8. South East
    9. Greater London
    10. Wales
    11. Scotland
  - What would you describe your employment status to be? [dropdown]
    1. Full time job (30+ hours per week)
    2. Part time job (8-29 hours per week)
    3. Part time job (under 8 hours)
    4. Zero-hour contract
    5. Not working due to long term illness or disability
    6. Unemployed seeking work
    7. Self-employed
    8. Full time education
    9. Not in paid work for other reason
    10. Don't want to say

### Section: Political Preferences

- Are you a longstanding supporter/member of a political party, if so, which?
  - Conservative
  - Labour
  - Liberal Democrat
  - SNP
  - UKIP
  - Other
  - No preference
- If there was a General Election tomorrow, which party would you vote for?
  - Conservative
  - Labour
  - Liberal Democrat
  - SNP
  - UKIP
  - Other
  - Don't know
  - Wouldn't vote

### Section: Internet/ Social Media Use

- How many hours a week do you use social media sites?
  - Under 1 hour
  - 1 to 2 hours
  - 3 to 4 hours
  - 5 to 10 hours
  - 10 hours +
  - Don't know
  - Don't use social media
- Which of the following social media websites have you have an account: [multiple-choice]
  - Facebook
  - Twitter
  - Instagram
  - Snapchat
  - Reddit
  - Google+
  - YouTube
  - Pinterest
  - Tumblr

- LinkedIn
- Don't use social media
- Which of the following social media websites do you use daily: [multiple-choice]
  - Facebook
  - Twitter
  - Instagram
  - Snapchat
  - Reddit
  - Google+
  - YouTube
  - Pinterest
  - Tumblr
  - LinkedIn
  - None
- What would you describe as your top uses for social media [multiple] (click all which apply)
  - Share my opinions
  - Fill up spare time
  - Stay up to-date on Political News/Current Affairs
  - Stay up to-date on Other news/current affairs
  - Talking to friends
  - Maintaining a professional network
  - Talking to likeminded people
  - Making new friends
  - Following celebrities
  - Follow politicians
  - Follow campaign accounts
  - Follow funny accounts
  - Follow 'experts' (e.g academics/ think-tank's)
  - Following particular issues
  - Talking/debating politics with friends
  - Talking/debating politics with strangers
  - Posting videos
  - Posting pictures
  - Complaints to companies/instructions
  - Campaigning/ political activism

**Section: Interest in politics**

- How do you consider your interest in Politics?
  1. Very Interested

2. Fairly Interested
  3. Not very interested
  4. Not at all interested
  5. Don't know
- How do you rate your own political knowledge?
    1. Very knowledgeable
    2. Fairly knowledgeable
    3. Not very knowledgeable
    4. Not at all knowledgeable
    5. Don't know
  - How much do you know about the current events in Parliament?
    1. Very knowledgeable
    2. Fairly knowledgeable
    3. Not very knowledgeable
    4. Not at all knowledgeable
    5. Don't know
  - Generally, where do you find out about current affairs and political news:
    1. Social Media (e.g Twitter, Facebook)
    2. Experts (e.g Academics, economists, and think tanks)
    3. TV and radio news programmes
    4. Newspapers (printed or online)
    5. Websites or online forums
    6. Direct communication from parties or candidates (Letters)
    7. Direct communication from parties or candidates (door-step)
    8. Other
    9. None of the above
  - Looking back to the 2017 General Election, which of the following, if any, did you feel provided you with *the most useful* information on parties and political candidates.
    1. Social Media (e.g Twitter, Facebook)
    2. Experts (e.g Academics, economists, and think tanks)
    3. TV and radio news programmes
    4. Newspapers (printed or online)
    5. Websites or online forums
    6. Direct communication from parties or candidates (Letters)
    7. Direct communication from parties or candidates (door-step)

8. Other
  9. None of the above
- Looking back to the 2017 General Election, which of the following, if any, did you feel provided you with *the most trustworthy* information on parties and political candidates.
    1. Social Media (e.g Twitter, Facebook)
    2. Experts (e.g Academics, economists, and think tanks)
    3. TV and radio news programmes
    4. Newspapers (printed or online)
    5. Websites or online forums
    6. Direct communication from parties or candidates (Letters)
    7. Direct communication from parties or candidates (door-step)
    8. Other
    9. None of the above

**Section: contact with MP**

- Can you name your local Member of Parliament (MP)?
  1. Yes
  2. No
- If so, please write the name of your MP
  1. Open Comment
- Outside of elections, which of the following have you heard news about your local MP? [Multiple-choice]
  1. Social Media (e.g Twitter, Facebook)
  2. TV and radio news programmes
  3. Newspapers (printed)
  4. Newspapers (online)
  5. Websites or online forums
  6. Direct communication from Local MP (Letters)
  7. Direct communication from Local MP (door-step)
  8. Other
  9. None of the above
- Putting aside your own party preferences, please rate the following statements [scale] from 1 – not at all to 10 – very much
  1. The Government generally represents people like me
  2. Parliament debates issues that matter to me
  3. My Local MP represents people like me
  4. crucial Local MP keeps me informed
  5. My local MP is easy to contact
  6. My Local MP seeks my opinion

- In the last 12-months Have you: [multiple choice]
  1. Contacted a local councillor or local assembly member
  2. Contacted your MP
  3. Contacted the Media
  4. Taken part in a political campaign
  5. Signed a petition
  6. Donated Money to a campaign
  7. Been a member of a political party
  8. Attended political meetings
  9. Taken part in a demonstration, picket or march
  10. Voted in an election
  11. Contributed to an online discussion on social media
  12. Taken part in a public consultation
  13. None of these
  
- If you have contracted your MP, how did you? [Multiple choice]
  1. Email
  2. Letter
  3. Telephone
  4. Social Media
  5. Office meeting/ surgery/ Other in person
  6. Through an online campaign
  7. Other
  8. None/havn't contacted
  
- What actions would do you expect MPs to do:
  1. Be on Facebook
  2. Be on Twitter
  3. Be on Instagram
  4. Keep me updated via letter
  5. Be on another social media site (please name below)
  6. Have a vlog on YouTube or other video site
  7. Have a website
  8. Have a blog
  9. Create an e-newsletter
  10. Write in the local newspaper
  11. Be on TV
  
- If you stated you wanted MPs to be on another social media, or another platform, please write which below
  1. Open comment



## Section: Politics and Social Media

- In the last 12-months, which of the following social media websites have you discussed politics/current affairs on with other people:
  - Facebook
  - Twitter
  - Instagram
  - Snapchat
  - Reddit
  - Google+
  - YouTube
  - Pinterest
  - Tumblr
  - LinkedIn
  - None/ haven't discussed politics/current affairs
- Which social media websites do you follow MPs?
  - Facebook
  - Twitter
  - Instagram
  - Snapchat
  - Google+
  - YouTube
  - Pinterest
  - Tumblr
  - LinkedIn
  - None
- Do you follow your Local Member of Parliament
  - Yes: and he/she is the only MP I follow
  - Yes: but I also follow other MPs
  - No
  - None/don't follow any MPs
- How many politicians do you follow on social media?
  - None
  - 1
  - 2-5
  - 6-10
  - 10-20
  - 20-49
  - 50-100

- 100+
- What is your main influence into why you follow an MP(s) on social media? [Multiple choice]
  - I share the same political values
  - He/she is my Local MP
  - I like them as a person/ I like what they say
  - To hear about local issues and news
  - To hear about national issues and news
  - To show my support for them
  - To show support for the party I like
  - To message them
- If you have contacted an MP on social media, what was it about? [select all that are relevant]
  - To voice my opinion on national issues
  - To voice my opinion on local issues
  - To ask about a policy
  - To ask why an MP acted/voted a particular way
  - To ask for help on a local issue
  - To ask for help on a national issue
  - To ask for help on a personal issue / casework
  - Asking them to support a campaign
  - Other
  - I haven't contacted them
- If you have contacted an MP on social media, did the MP reply?
  - Yes: It was my Local MP
  - Yes: it was not my local MP
  - No: It was my Local MP
  - Yes: Not my local MP
  - I haven't messaged an MP on social media
- If you have contacted an MP on social media, how did you do it?
  - Posted a message on their social media page
  - Commented on one of their posts
  - Messaged them privately
  - I haven't messaged an MP on social media
- If you messaged an MP on social media, please tell us about your experience and how the MP responded
  - Comment box
- How do you discover an MP's social media page?
  - It was suggested to me by friend
  - It was suggested to me by the social media website
  - I was asked to follow by the MP
  - I knew about the MP previously and searched for them

- I Met the MP and followed them after
- I saw them on the media and searched for them
- A friend shared something they posted
- Their content was suggested to me by the social media website
- Through a keyword/#hashtag I follow
- Other
- What type of content do you see MPs post? [multiple]
  - Local issues
  - National Issues
  - Party related content
  - Shocking statistic
  - Comedy/funny
  - Personal posts
  - Issues on a singular campaign/subject
  - Updates on their current activity
  - Images/videos (political)
  - Images/videos (personal)
  - Selfies
  - Other
  - Non-political
- What actions have you made to an MP on social media
  - I 'liked' their posts
  - I have shared/retweeted their posts
  - I have commented on their content
  - I have messaged them directly (publicly)
  - I have messaged them in private
- What actions on social media has an MP made to you
  - I 'liked' my posts
  - Commented on one of my posts
  - 'Shared'/retweeted one of my posts
  - Followed/friended me
  - Messaged me (without prior contact from me)
  - Replied to a message I sent them
  - Replied to a comment I sent them
- What reason do you think MPs go on social media?
  - To promote themselves
  - To be re-elected

- To communicate with constituents
- Campaigning
- Because “everyone else is there”
- To inform citizens
- Other/ don’t know
- How do you feel MPs being on social media has affected you? (click all which apply)
  - It has made me more engaged in Politics
  - It has made me less engaged in politics
  - It has made me more knowledge about politics
  - I have taken political action as a result
  - Made me more cynical about politics
  - It has made me more likely to vote
  - I feel listened to by politicians
  - It has put me in touch with my local MP
  - It has put me in touch with MPs generally
  - It has made me less likely to vote
  - No change
- How would you describe the communication you have with MPs on social media?
  - One way, I only follow them
  - I have tried to contact them, but feel ignored
  - We have conversed a few times
  - We talk a lot on social media
- Has communicating/following MPs on social media made you feel more represented?
  - Yes – I feel more represented
  - No – I feel less represented
- Are there any other comments you’d like to make?
  - Comment box

## Appendix Three

### App.3 Social Media Coding Schema

Post Format	Subject Locality	About subject	Function of post	Policy area	
Text only	National	Themselves (the MP)	'I'm doing/ at'	Media	Society & Culture
Photo only	Westminster	Local area	Calling out, or attacking opposition	Brexit/EU	Space
Video only	Ministerial (or shad)	Policy	Promoting 3 <sup>rd</sup> organisation	Government Spending/finances	Sport
Photo + text	Party (national)	Opposition	Providing information or facts	Business & Enterprise	Trade
Video + text	Constituency	Party	Showing support for a policy	Climate Change/ Environment	Transport
Link	Party (local)	Third-organisation/ charity	Service information	Competitions (inviting people to enter)	Wales
Quote retweet/share Reshare/retweet	Devolved Area Themselves	Parliamentary business	Providing their opinion Asking to support Policy announcement Updating on policy progress Selfie Links to news Asking for citizens opinions/ inquiry Links to self-written news Showing negativity towards a policy Political outcome Political poster /campaign media Personal update Photography Other – N/A	Consumer Laws/Protection Defence/Security Policy Digital & Technology Economy Education Electoral Reform Employment Energy Fisheries Food & Rural Affairs Foreign Relations Health/NHS Housing Human Rights International Development/Aid Law & Order/ Home Office Northern Ireland Research & Innovation Scotland Posts with multiple policy areas	Welfare Youth Issues Campaigning (politically) Political System Women's Issues Local Issue Local Event Local Area LGBT Issues Disability Mental Health Representing Local Charity Local Person Local Company Immigration Emergency Services No issue or Personal N/A

Appendix Four

App.4 Additional statistical tests, chapter 6

Binary Logistic Regression, MPs uptake of Instagram.

		Variables in the Equation					95% C.I.for EXP(B)		
		B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	Lower	Upper
Step 1 <sup>a</sup>	Party			12.536	8	.129			
	Party(1)	.321	.875	.134	1	.714	1.378	.248	7.650
	Party(2)	.489	.871	.316	1	.574	1.631	.296	8.989
	Party(3)	2.319	1.099	4.453	1	.035	10.162	1.179	87.555
	Party(4)	.289	.934	.096	1	.757	1.335	.214	8.330
	Party(5)	2.008	1.474	1.856	1	.173	7.448	.414	133.858
	Party(6)	22.336	40192.969	.000	1	1.000	5017434917	.000	.
	Party(7)	-1.115	1.372	.660	1	.417	.328	.022	4.829
	Party(8)	-19.869	28386.309	.000	1	.999	.000	.000	.
	gender	-.149	.190	.618	1	.432	.861	.594	1.250
	AGE	-.041	.010	16.590	1	.000	.960	.942	.979
	YearsInOffice	-.004	.014	.103	1	.748	.996	.969	1.023
	majority%	.001	.006	.053	1	.819	1.001	.990	1.013
	Constant	1.178	.988	1.423	1	.233	3.249		

a. Variable(s) entered on step 1: Party, gender, AGE, YearsInOffice, majority%.

Note: Binary Logistic Regression. \*\*\*P<0.001, \*\*p<0.01, \*P<0.05. Dependant variable for gender (1=male, 0=female).

Binary Logistic Regression, MPs uptake of Facebook

		Variables in the Equation					95% C.I.for EXP(B)		
		B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	Lower	Upper
Step 1 <sup>a</sup>	Party			16.035	8	.042			
	Party(1)	-18.629	14098.545	.000	1	.999	.000	.000	.
	Party(2)	-19.542	14098.545	.000	1	.999	.000	.000	.
	Party(3)	-.294	17966.002	.000	1	1.000	.745	.000	.
	Party(4)	-.882	15563.117	.000	1	1.000	.414	.000	.
	Party(5)	-.596	23759.977	.000	1	1.000	.551	.000	.
	Party(6)	-.103	42593.940	.000	1	1.000	.902	.000	.
	Party(7)	-20.820	14098.545	.000	1	.999	.000	.000	.
	Party(8)	-20.439	14098.545	.000	1	.999	.000	.000	.
	gender	-.512	.304	2.847	1	.092	.599	.330	1.086
	AGE	-.048	.016	9.107	1	.003	.953	.924	.983
	YearsInOffice	-.045	.017	7.227	1	.007	.956	.925	.988
	majority%	-.032	.008	16.131	1	.000	.968	.953	.984
	Constant	25.237	14098.545	.000	1	.999	9.131E+10		

a. Variable(s) entered on step 1: Party, gender, AGE, YearsInOffice, majority%.

Note: Binary Logistic Regression. \*\*\*P<0.001, \*\*p<0.01, \*P<0.05. Dependant variable for gender (1=male, 0=female).

## Binary Logistic Regression, MPs uptake of Twitter

		Variables in the Equation					95% C.I. for EXP(B)		
		B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	Lower	Upper
Step 1 <sup>a</sup>	gender(1)	.703	.393	3.197	1	.074	2.019	.935	4.361
	Party			18.387	8	.019			
	Party(1)	-17.964	14491.091	.000	1	.999	.000	.000	.
	Party(2)	-19.469	14491.091	.000	1	.999	.000	.000	.
	Party(3)	.141	18312.046	.000	1	1.000	1.152	.000	.
	Party(4)	-.377	15913.711	.000	1	1.000	.686	.000	.
	Party(5)	-.186	23957.133	.000	1	1.000	.830	.000	.
	Party(6)	-.343	42725.478	.000	1	1.000	.710	.000	.
	Party(7)	-18.601	14491.091	.000	1	.999	.000	.000	.
	Party(8)	-42.093	31813.970	.000	1	.999	.000	.000	.
	majority%	-.004	.010	.133	1	.716	.996	.977	1.016
	AGE	-.057	.019	9.056	1	.003	.945	.910	.980
	YearsInOffice	-.019	.019	.968	1	.325	.981	.944	1.019
	Constant	24.340	14491.091	.000	1	.999	3.723E+10		

a. Variable(s) entered on step 1: gender, Party, majority%, AGE, YearsInOffice.

Note: Binary Logistic Regression. \*\*\*P<0.001, \*\*p<0.01, \*P<0.05. Dependant variable for gender (1=male, 0=female).

Appendix Five

App.5 Additional statistical tests, chapter 7

Bivariate Correlations, Citizens use of social media

		Correlations											
		Follows no MP	Do you keep up with political news/current affairs?	Do you feel that you can have an impact in politics?	Parliament debates issues that matter to me	The Government generally represents people like me	Gender: What gender do you identify with?	How interested are you in Politics?	How do you rate your own political knowledge?	My local MP represents people like me	My local MP keeps me informed	My local MP is easy to contact	My local MP seeks my opinion
Follows no MP	Pearson Correlation	1	-.156**	-.179**	-.107*	-.022	-.208**	-.219**	-.186**	-.102*	-.077	-.130*	-.119*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.003	.001	.038	.670	.000	.000	.000	.049	.138	.012	.022
	N	373	373	372	373	373	368	373	373	373	373	373	372
Do you keep up with political news/current affairs?	Pearson Correlation	-.156**	1	.383**	.344**	-.056	.057	.683**	.759**	.126*	.097	-.055	-.232**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.003		.000	.000	.283	.272	.000	.000	.015	.061	.290	.000
	N	373	373	372	373	373	368	373	373	373	373	373	372
Do you feel that you can have an impact in politics?	Pearson Correlation	-.179**	.383**	1	.266**	.258**	-.032	.310**	.421**	.279**	.121*	.077	.103*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.000		.000	.000	.540	.000	.000	.000	.019	.138	.046
	N	372	372	372	372	372	367	372	372	372	372	372	371
Parliament debates issues that matter to me	Pearson Correlation	-.107*	.344**	.266**	1	.432**	-.124*	.219**	.270**	.381**	.212**	.210**	.028
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.038	.000	.000		.000	.018	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.588
	N	373	373	372	373	373	368	373	373	373	373	373	372
The Government generally represents people like me	Pearson Correlation	-.022	-.056	.258**	.432**	1	-.037	-.139**	-.074	.469**	.302**	.196**	.207**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.670	.283	.000	.000		.481	.007	.155	.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	373	373	372	373	373	368	373	373	373	373	373	372
Gender: What gender do you identify with?	Pearson Correlation	-.208**	.057	-.032	-.124*	-.037	1	.216**	.159**	-.003	-.001	-.011	.022
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.272	.540	.018	.481		.000	.002	.956	.978	.835	.681
	N	368	368	367	368	368	368	368	368	368	368	368	367
How interested are you in Politics?	Pearson Correlation	-.219**	.683**	.310**	.219**	-.139**	.216**	1	.750**	.042	-.061	-.066	-.223**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.007	.000		.000	.420	.236	.200	.000
	N	373	373	372	373	373	368	373	373	373	373	373	372
How do you rate your own political knowledge?	Pearson Correlation	-.186**	.759**	.421**	.270**	-.074	.159**	.750**	1	.128*	.078	-.011	-.147**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.155	.002	.000		.013	.134	.828	.004
	N	373	373	372	373	373	368	373	373	373	373	373	372
My local MP represents people like me	Pearson Correlation	-.102*	.126*	.279**	.381**	.469**	-.003	.042	.128*	1	.686**	.550**	.458**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.049	.015	.000	.000	.000	.956	.420	.013		.000	.000	.000
	N	373	373	372	373	373	368	373	373	373	373	373	372
My local MP keeps me informed	Pearson Correlation	-.077	.097	.121*	.212**	.302**	-.001	-.061	.078	.686**	1	.584**	.581**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.138	.061	.019	.000	.000	.978	.236	.134	.000		.000	.000
	N	373	373	372	373	373	368	373	373	373	373	373	372
My local MP is easy to contact	Pearson Correlation	-.130*	-.055	.077	.210**	.196**	-.011	-.066	-.011	.550**	.584**	1	.583**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.012	.290	.138	.000	.000	.835	.200	.828	.000	.000		.000
	N	373	373	372	373	373	368	373	373	373	373	373	372
My local MP seeks my opinion	Pearson Correlation	-.119*	-.232**	.103*	.028	.207**	.022	-.223**	-.147**	.458**	.581**	.583**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.022	.000	.046	.588	.000	.681	.000	.004	.000	.000	.000	
	N	372	372	371	372	372	367	372	372	372	372	372	372

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Note: Binary Logistic Regression. \*\*\*P<0.001, \*\*p<0.01, \*P<0.05. Dependant variable for gender (1=male, 0=female).



**Appendix Table.** Bivariate Correlations between following local MP and effects.

	<i>Do you follow your local MP on social media sites?</i>	
My local MP represents people like me	Pearson Correlation	<b>.214**</b>
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000
	N	373
My local MP keeps me informed	Pearson Correlation	<b>.165**</b>
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.001
	N	373
My local MP is easy to contact	Pearson Correlation	<b>.181**</b>
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000
	N	373
My local MP seeks my opinion	Pearson Correlation	<b>.119*</b>
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.022
	N	372
HOWAFFECT: It has made me more cynical about politics	Pearson Correlation	0.026
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.623
	N	373
HOWAFFECT: No change	Pearson Correlation	<b>-.178**</b>
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.001
	N	373
HOWAFFECT: It has made me less engaged in politics	Pearson Correlation	-0.029
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.580
	N	373
HOWAFFECT: It has made me less likely to vote	Pearson Correlation	-0.093
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.072
	N	373
HOWAFFECT: It has made me more engaged in politics	Pearson Correlation	<b>.176**</b>
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.001
	N	373
HOWAFFECT: It has made me more knowledgeable about politics	Pearson Correlation	0.038
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.461
	N	373
HOWAFFECT: It has put me in touch with MPs generally	Pearson Correlation	<b>.105*</b>
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.042
	N	373
HOWAFFECT: I feel listened to by politicians	Pearson Correlation	0.101
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.052
	N	373
HOWAFFECT: I have taken political action as a result	Pearson Correlation	0.051
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.330
	N	373
HOWAFFECT: It has made me more likely to vote	Pearson Correlation	0.045
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.388
	N	373
HOWAFFECT: It has put me in touch with my local MP	Pearson Correlation	<b>.195**</b>
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000
	N	373
HOWAFFECT: influenced my intention to vote	Pearson Correlation	0.008
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.876
	N	373

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**Appendix Table.** Why citizens think MPs are on social media

<i>Citizens Explanation for MPs social media use</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
To promote themselves	137	36.7
Because everyone else is there	40	10.7
Campaigning	58	15.5
Re-election	51	13.7
To communicate with constituents	36	9.7
To inform citizens	21	5.6
Don't Know	30	8.0

**Appendix Table.** How citizens feel MPs social media use has impacted them

<i>Reason</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
It has made me more cynical about politics	70	18.8
No change	192	51.5
It has made me less engaged in politics	6	1.6
It has made me less likely to vote	4	1.1
It has made me more engaged in politics	90	24.1
It has made me more knowledgeable about politics	68	18.2
It has put me in touch with MPs generally	25	6.7
I feel listened to by politicians	3	0.8
I have taken political action as a result	22	5.9
It has made me more likely to vote	35	9.4
It has put me in touch with my local MP	11	2.9
influenced my intention to vote	2	0.5

**Appendix Table. Bivariate Correlations between following local MP and effects.**

Do you follow your local MP on social media sites?		
Less Represented	Pearson Correlation	0.008
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.880
	N	373
No Change	Pearson Correlation	<b>-.157**</b>
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.002
	N	373
More Represented	Pearson Correlation	<b>.182**</b>
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000
	N	373

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

**Appendix Table. Why citizens are on social media (Multiple choice)**

<i>Reason</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Talking to friends	287	76.9
Fill up spare time	210	56.3
Stay up to-date on other news/current affairs	165	44.2
Follow funny accounts	142	38.1
Stay up to-date on Political News/Current Affairs	138	37.0
Posting pictures	128	34.3
Following particular issues	114	30.6
Sharing news/links	97	26.0
Follow experts (e.g academics/ think-tanks)	92	24.7
Share my opinions	84	22.5
Maintaining a professional network	74	19.8
Following celebrities	67	18.0
Follow politicians	61	16.4
Talking to likeminded people	57	15.3
Posting videos	55	14.7
Talking/debating politics with friends	45	12.1
Complaints to companies/institutions	33	8.8
Campaigning/political activism	33	8.8
Follow campaign accounts	33	8.8
Talking/debating politics with strangers	32	8.6
Making new friends	24	6.4

## Glossary

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Likes/Hearts – are actions that can be taken on social media as a form of non-textual response to a post. Often they can be used to show approval or agreeance with the post’s contents.

Lurker – a lurker is a person who reads online communications or comment streams on social media but infrequently contributes to the discussion themselves.

Meme – internet content usually images, videos or text typically humorous that is shared throughout internet circles by users, often with variances to match the context of discussion.

Mention/tagging – A mention is a term used when one social media user tags another. For instance, on Twitter this is done by including another persons username with the @ symbol.

Newsfeed/social feed – a news feed is the homepage of most users social media accounts. It provides a list of posts by other social media users. This can be ordered algorithimically, such as on Facebook, or chronologically, such as on Twitter.

Selfie – self-portrait photograph, usually taken by a user’s phone while it is being held by the users hand or with a selfie-stick. Typically to be shared on social media.

Shares/Retweet – is the act of one user reposting another persons content to their own audience. Sometimes, this can include an additional comment.

SubReddit – A select group or community on the social network site Reddit. Often revolving around a single topic or common theme. Each subreddit has it is own leadership structures through moderators.

Web 2.0 - A term used to describe a set of technologies on websites that emphasise user-generated content, enhanced interactivity with others, and collaboration.