Social Media in a Corbyn Led Labour Party: Some Discussion Points

Abstract
This working paper acts a discussion piece to inform a conceptual paper currently under development. The research purpose is to explore how effectively (with the election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader) social media strategy is being used by the Labour Party. The paper presents a contextual background to the current leadership of the Labour Party. It then presents a literature review from two domains; that being literature on political marketing in the Labour Party, and social media marketing as related to politics. The paper concludes with a series of discussion points to be discussed at conference.

Key Words: Social media, politics, Corbyn, Labour Party.

Track: Political Marketing

Paper Type: Working Paper

Introduction
This working paper seeks to act as a discussion piece to inform a conceptual paper which is currently in development. The project aims to explore how effective the Labour Party's use of social media is, under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn, at building support for the party, and whether this will be successful or otherwise in future elections.

Drawing upon Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p. 60) the paper defines social media as "a group of internet-based applications that build upon the ideological and technological foundations of web 2.0, and allow the creation and exchange of user generated content". It is clear that the Labour Party is increasingly using social media as part of its political marketing strategy. This can be immediately seen by referring to the Labour homepage (http://www.labour.org.uk/) which at the time of writing has been transformed into a social media collage of links to Twitter, Facebook, Youtube etc.

This is a recent significant change and there needs to be some greater attention given to whether this is an attempt to modernise political marketing communications, and / or whether it is part of a deliberate strategy by Corbyn to reposition the Labour brand as an ideologically left wing 'mass party' (Duverger, 1964) that is reliant (or perhaps over-reliant) on its membership to attempt to persuade people to vote Labour through social media channels. The proposed under-development paper will contribute to knowledge in that there is limited extant research: (i) which has examined Corbyn's and Labour's political marketing strategy; especially in the social media arena; (ii) untapped research on social media based political marketing; (iii) a lack of emphasis on how the commercial social media literature may be applied to the political arena.

Background
This section outlines the background political context of this study. Following the 2015 General Election Labour Party defeat, Ed Miliband resigned as Leader of the Labour Party. This led to a leadership contest for a new leader of the Labour Party. During the tenure of Ed Miliband he had however reformed the voting and member registration rules, with a move to a one member one vote (OMOV) system, and away from the previous electoral college system which was shared as one third each for the Parliamentary Party, Labour Party Members and Trade unions. Under the new OMOV system not only members were allowed to vote, but also affiliated supporters. Taken as a whole, there are said to be over half a million registered voters for the leadership contests. This is significant as following the announcement that Corbyn would stand for Labour leader there was said to be a surge in new membership and affiliated member applications. There have been suggestions that the surge in applications that led to Corbyn being elected as Labour leader, has been attributable to the voting reforms, with Corbyn gaining 59.5% of the vote in the 2015 leadership contest (http://www.labour.org.uk/blog/entry/results-of-the-labour-leadership-and-deputy-leadership-election, and following a leadership challenge of 2016, 61.8% of the vote (http://www.labour.org.uk/pages/labour-party-leadership-election-2016). It can be suggested that if it were not for the Miliband initiated voting reforms that Corbyn (who is viewed as left wing politician), would never been able to gain the support to become leader. Corbyn's leadership has created considerable tension in the Parliamentary Party, and amongst some members who are fearful that his political agenda is too far to the left to be able to gain victory in forthcoming elections.

It is apparent that Corbyn had harnessed social media to become elected as leader of the Labour Party, and has continued this trend in his current political marketing communication activities. He and the Labour Party are using social media not only to communicate to the electorate, but to communicate within and between different stakeholders in the political process. Hence political marketing is increasingly becoming by way of social media multi-directional, dialogue driven, decentralised and perhaps even more democratic.

Literature Review
There is an established literature on the historical political marketing practices of the Labour Party (Needham, 2001; White and de Chernatony, 2002; Wring, 2005), although its focus has not been largely on social media. There has been a more recent literature on the prospects for Corbyn. Richardson (2016) suggests, drawing upon consumer culture theory and brand community theory that if managed correctly voter disengagement may be reduced with the election of Corbyn as party leader, as it may enable a bottom up form of politics to emerge through what he terms 'social re-aggregation' amongst consumer citizens. Bale (2016) adopts a more critical view and argues that Corbyn cannot win the next general election because what he argues are weaknesses of credibility, economic credibility, and being perceived as a soft touch on issues such as immigration and welfare. In contrast Richards (2016) argues that whilst Corbyn has a mandate from his election victory, this is undermined by a parliamentary party which opposes him. Richards (2016, p. 15) suggests that "compared to the festival of waffle, here was a candidate who became a rock star at rallies of genuinely excited followers". Russell (2016, p. 22) however seems to appear critical of Corbyn's reliance on social media when she states: "an anti-political mood and few opportunities for organising (albeit sometimes requiring little more than a click via social media) seem to have reversed much of what we thought we knew".

Parsons and Rowling's (2015) study of social media by politicians in South Wales uncovers a nervousness and scepticism amongst politicians as to the use and value of social media channels. Harris and Harrigan's (2015) discussion of the UK 2010 general election asserts that social media usage was far behind Obama's use of social media in his presidential campaign. They assert that social media has most potential when implemented as a long term and systematic strategy, appropriately blended with off line relationship building.

Aharony (2012) have examined how Twitter was used by US, UK and Israeli political leaders. Towner and Dulio (2012) present a review of social media channels used in the 2008 US election (i.e. facebook, twitter, youtube etc). Towner and Muñoz (2016) analysed the 2012 presidential election contests and found that for older voters that the presidential candidate websites heightened attention for the political campaign and led to various forms of online (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Youtube etc) and off line activities. This emphasis on candidate web sites partially echoes the argument of Lilleker (2015) who contends that candidate web sites are their 'shop fronts', which is complemented by social networking. Grussel and Nord (2016) analyse the 2010 and 2014 Swedish national elections and note that digitization activities are strong especially amongst larger political parties. Cameron et al (2016) have found that in the context of the 2011 New Zealand general election that the effect of social media on voting behaviour was small, and only predictive in close election races. Sherman et al's (2012) US based study uncovers a lower level of trust by young voters for social networking sites in terms of their influence on voting behaviour, relative to other common media and information sources. However interestingly the study found that politician's internet sites are more trusted than social networking, and other media channels such as television, radio, independent web sites, direct mail etc. Nonetheless according to

Sherman et al (2012) family , friends and the printed press remained amongst the most influential on young voter decision making.

Discussion Points
The working paper wishes to use the conference as an opportunity to discuss the following questions to inform the future development of the paper.

1. In what ways is a Corbyn led Labour Party using social media techniques and strategies?
2. How successful or otherwise is a social media strategy adopted by Labour likely to be in maximising widespread support and votes?
3.Does the increased emphasis on social media strategy underline an attempt to reposition the Labour brand as a left wing ideologically driven mass party?
4.To what extent is the increasing reliance on social media a result of the nature of the newly joined members' and supporters' preference for e-campaigning?
5.What institutional support and development is being realised by the Labour Party for social media purposes, or is the party over-reliant on grass roots implementation?
6.Does the Labour Party have sufficient traditional political marketing communications activity to run in tandem with the increased emphasis on social media marketing?
7.To what extent may commercial social media theories be useful or otherwise to inform the social media based political marketing theory and practice of the Labour Party.

Conclusion
This working paper has outlined an important potential area of research resulting from an apparent change of emphasis for political marketing communication in the Labour Party. The paper has outlined the developing context that has influenced a greater reliance on social media channels. It has also undertaken a baseline review of relevant literature in relation to Labour's use of political marketing and the impact of Corbyn's leadership, as well as reviewed relevant articles on social media in the context of politics and political marketing. Finally, some questions are posited to be discussed at the conference with other academics.

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