



THE POLITICS OF SOCIAL MEDIA



Foreword

Joanna Arnold, CEO, Vuelio



This has been an extraordinary year in politics with near constant uncertainty globally and nationally. Underneath political change, there has been a transformation in the relationship between politicians and the public. Trends, from the adoption of technology to social activism and the proliferation of trolling, have taken us into a new age of political immediacy.

We sought to better understand how social media has changed political discourse and so commissioned ComRes in June 2019 to undertake a survey of MPs. The key question was whether social media platforms were delivering on their promise of improving access to politicians and empowering engagement.

The findings are fascinating, even if they make for depressing reading. The majority of MPs believe that while social media has changed access and engagement for the better, public understanding of politics has been changed for the worse. Regardless of political affiliation, a large group of MPs consider social media platforms to be damaging to the political debate and to policy making.

While MPs have very serious concerns about social media, they share a belief that it is more important than editorial media in reaching their constituents. In contrast to speaking on TV, in print or online news, MPs consider that social media as a far more effective means of engaging with audiences directly. This in part explains recent decisions by the Prime Minister's advisers to prioritise Facebook Live rather than Radio 4's flagship Today Programme.

We consider that for politics to function effectively there has to be public debate and scrutiny in editorial media as well as on social media. Journalists are crucial to holding politicians to account and translating complexity for the public while social media is vital to empowering debate and improving transparency. We need both for MPs to communicate as effectively as possible with the public and for constituents, stakeholders and the media to find the credible information they need to understand and engage in politics.

This is timely research that provides a wake-up call to the challenge politicians face in using a platform that the majority of their voters increasingly rely on for communications. We hope you find it useful.

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read 'Joanna Arnold'. The signature is fluid and cursive, written on a white background.



Rt Hon Liz Saville Roberts MP, Westminister Leader of Plaid Cymru

Social media undeniably has a central role in modern democratic politics. It is a fantastic way to communicate between politicians and other people affected by politics. But its downsides are extremely serious. From the oversimplification of issues to fit into a tweet, to the drowning out of certain voices, all the way to the hateful attacks some people have to endure online, social media can have a very negative effect on politics. That is before we mention some of the 'dark arts' that were reportedly at play in recent ballots.

Social media platforms must do more to deal with many of these issues. These multi-billion pound tech companies have been dragging their feet for too long on issues of the abuse received by many online and the effects are clear for all to see. They must be responsible for the effects of their commercial interests.



Robert Neill MP, Conservative Chair of the Justice Committee

Social media can undoubtedly be used as an extremely useful tool to communicate with constituents, disseminate information and promote campaigns. From my experience, it's also helping to nurture a more politically conscious and engaged electorate.

However, it also comes with some serious baggage. Precisely because of its effectiveness, it's liable to being hijacked by individuals and groups with unpalatable, politically extreme views on both the far right and far left of the political spectrum. An increase in unchecked fake news, a rise in the abuse and intimidation of elected representatives, and the growing prevalence of digital echo chambers – in which the different views of others are the subject of scorn and vitriol, rather than positively debated – are all the by-products of a system that is still to put in place adequate checks and balances. We need to put that right.



Rt Hon Tom Brake MP, Liberal Democrat Spokesperson for Exiting the European Union

There is no doubt that social media is a brilliant tool for MPs. For instance it allows us to poll constituents and find out their views on any number of issues. How else would I have been able to identify the wishes of over a thousand local people for bus service improvements?

But at the same time it has unleashed a whirlwind of abuse and threats which are extremely disturbing for members and their staff. That is a genie that is going to be very hard to get back in the bottle.

Headline findings

Vuelio commissioned research from MPs across the House of Commons to understand the importance of social media in public engagement. The survey was completed by 137 MPs between June and August 2019.

It found that MPs see face-to-face meetings and social media as the most important communication channels when engaging with constituents. However, when engaging with stakeholders (professionals that work in policy or the media), activities in parliament remain most important.

Results indicate – perhaps unsurprisingly – that younger MPs are more likely to see social media as an important channel when engaging with constituents.

Interestingly, MPs in marginal constituencies are more likely than those in safe seats to see social media as important when engaging with constituents. This could be explained by social media providing a direct means of being in touch, even when based in Westminster.

Overloaded

A majority of MPs believe that social media has made it easier for the public to access information they would not otherwise have access to. However, regardless of whether in Government or in opposition, MPs also feel that the public is overloaded with information and find it difficult to source credible information from trustworthy sources. Half of MPs did not agree that the public know how to find information from a trustworthy source. Older MPs are particularly sceptical as to whether the public can find information from a trustworthy source.

MPs believe that, on balance, social media has changed access to and engagement with politicians for the better. However, by way of contrast, they feel politicians' understanding of public opinion, public attitudes towards politicians, public understanding of policy and the policy making process has been changed for the worse by social media. Conservative MPs tend to be most likely to say that social media has changed the ways in which the public interact with the political process for the worse.

The research was further analysed by comparing findings against those from a Core Group of MPs who are actively engaged in policy around social media and community engagement. The Core Group were more likely than the average MP to consider social media important when engaging with constituents. They were also more likely to feel that social media has made it difficult for the public to source information from trustworthy sources and believe that social media has changed public access to politicians for the worse.

81% of MPs believe that public attitude towards politicians has changed for the worse because of social media, with just 5% believing it's changed for the better.

Social media on balance has a negative impact...

- 79% of MPs believe social media has made it difficult for the public to source information from trustworthy sources (12% disagree)
- 78% believe the public are overloaded with information as a result of social media (10% disagree)
- 76% believe social media has made it difficult for the public to source credible information (11% disagree)
- 72% of MPs born between 1950-1959 disagree that the public know how to find information from a trustworthy source compared to just two in five (41%) of those born since 1970.
- 53% disagree that the public know how to find information from a trustworthy source (19% agree)
- 42% of MPs believe social media has changed the policy making process for the worse (8% better)
- 36% believe it has changed public understanding of policy for the worse (16% better)
- 33% believe it has changed politicians' understanding of public opinion for the worse (24% better)

.... But social media has improved elements of the political debate

- 47% MPs believe social has improved the transparency of politicians (15% disagree).
- 44% MPs believe social media has improved engagement between politicians and the public (29% disagree)

Analysis

MPs use social media and recognise it is essential as a means of directly reaching their target audiences yet do not believe that it has changed politics for good. A large proportion of MPs believe it has damaged the public's view of them and made it more difficult for people to find trustworthy information from credible sources. This is despite nearly half of all MPs believing social media has improved transparency and engagement with the public.

Social media is necessary but not the most important channel for political engagement.

- 70% of MPs believe face-to-face meetings are one of the most important ways of engaging constituents and 64% believe social media is
- 75% of Labour MPs and 57% of Conservative MPs chose social media as an important channel
- Three quarters (74%) of MPs born since 1970 say social media is an important communication channel for engaging constituents compared to half (49%) of those born in the middle decade of the last century (1950-1959)
- 75% of MPs in a marginal constituency (those with a marginality of between 0.1-9.9%) are more likely to believe social media is important, compared to those in relative safe seats (those with a marginality of over 30%)
- 90% of new MPs (elected in 2017) say social media is an important communication channel for engaging with constituents, compared to 59% of those elected earlier

Analysis

Face-to-face is still the best way to engage an MP as a constituent but the rise of social media shows newer MPs are finding other ways to engage with the public directly. Over time, this could mean social media becomes the new norm for constituency engagement as new generations of social-media-literate MPs are elected. It is also noteworthy that Labour MPs favour social media for engaging constituents far more than Conservatives, which could be a sign of being in opposition or even indicative of Jeremy Corbyn's leadership. Corbyn came to power with grassroots support and the efforts of groups such as Momentum who practice direct engagement on a mass scale – 'for the many not the few'.

Stakeholder relations are changing...

- 60% of MPs chose activities in parliament, such as debates and APPG sessions, as the most important channel for engaging stakeholders compared to 26% selecting social media
- Scottish and Northern Irish (70%) MPs are the most likely to favour this channel
- 60% of Labour MPs chose face-to-face meetings and 59% chose events, such as think tank debates, as the most important channels for engaging stakeholders
- 59% of Conservative MPs selected activities in parliament and 58% selected face-to-face meetings for engaging stakeholders
- Only 26% of all MPs chose social media as an important channel for engaging stakeholders

Analysis

Public affairs and media professionals could learn a lot from MPs' preferences and do even more at APPGs and organise face-to-face meetings to engage them more effectively. The party split is particularly important: Labour MPs are around twice as likely to consider events important when compared to Conservative MPs, so employing different tactics for different parties is necessary to avoid costly tactics that offer minimal returns. While social media is not a good channel for stakeholder engagement, it could be used to get grassroots public support for a campaign and reach MPs through their constituents.

...as is media engagement

- 35% of MPs see media coverage as important for engaging constituents and 38% for stakeholders
- 47% of MPs in the north of England think it's important when engaging constituents
- Media is more often considered important when engaging constituents among MPs elected before 1997 (44%) compared to newer MPs elected since 2017 (18%)

Analysis

Social media is being used to improve engagement between MPs and constituents but in converse there has been a deterioration in MPs' perception of the value of editorial media. Regionally it varies quite dramatically - it's most important in the north of England, which typically has well respected local and regional titles as they're often underrepresented by the mainstream press. If MPs continue to use social media for their announcements and public engagement, it will not only have implications for our democratic process but could further accelerate a decline of editorial media.

Methodology

Vuelio commissioned ComRes on this research in order to inform a debate on the changing relationship between MPs, the press, editorial and social media. Key is whether MPs should change how they use channels to engage with the press, constituents and stakeholders. ComRes surveyed 137 MPs (51 Conservative, 67 Labour, nine SNP and 10 others) using a combination of paper and online surveys. The survey was conducted between 11 June and 12 August 2019. Data have been weighted by party and region to be representative of the House of Commons.



About Vuelio

Vuelio offers an unrivalled portfolio of products and services for more than 3,000 clients across the UK and Europe, specialising in software for public affairs, public relations and stakeholder communications.

Whether you want to influence traditional or new media, MPs or local government, or your organisation's members and supporters, Vuelio provides you with everything you need on one platform.

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