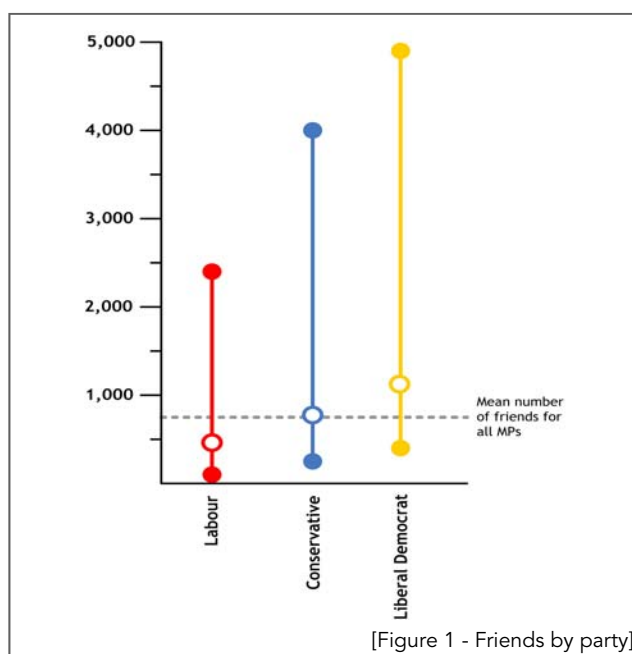


MPs on Facebook

Launched in 2004, Facebook's growth over the last two years has been particularly rapid, seeing it overtake (and some might argue, replace) other social networking sites such as MySpace and Bebo. As of March 2009, Facebook had 17.8 million registered users in the UK, an increase of 19% over the previous quarter alone. Facebook claims over 200 million users worldwide and that around half of them are active on Facebook daily. The Hansard Society has already identified MPs as increasingly becoming adopters of social media and it is no surprise that a number are now active on Facebook. This short paper looks at a group of MPs and how they are using this social networking platform.

Data was obtained from a Facebook group established by the eDemocracy Programme of the Hansard Society and used to monitor the activity of MPs, other elected representatives and potential candidates. The data set, which was captured during March 2009, contained 17% of MPs from the three main parties (Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrats), that is n=101 from a total population of 606. This is slightly less than the 23% of MPs self-identifying as having an account on Facebook in recent Hansard Society research. The difference is accounted for by the need to actually 'friend' MPs in order to obtain the data for this study. Reasons for not 'friending' include non-identification of members and failure to accept 'friend' requests (reasons for



which include restricting Facebook 'friends' to campaign activists to prevent disclosures.

The mean number of friends per MP was 723. The MP with the most 'friends' has 4,908 whilst the fewest 'friends' is 26. Liberal Democrat MPs are more likely to be on Facebook than members of any other party. Over half of all Lib Dem MPs have a presence (51%), whereas the Conservatives appear the least likely to use Facebook (9%), with 15% of Labour MPs having a presence. This trend to some degree is a reflection of a wider and emerging evolution in online campaigning strategy amongst the three parties in terms of how they target specific

web technologies and, to some extent, how online strategy is driven at either a party level or by the individual MP.

It would be easy to associate an MP's number of friends with online activity, however, this study shows that some MPs are visibly active only in that they accept new friend requests, there is no track record of postings or more widespread use. Of the 101 MPs included in this study, 54 had updated their status in the last six weeks. The majority of these (39) within the last week, which includes 12 MPs who had updated their status on the day of the study.

The foregoing of itself does not indicate the frequency of activity that occurs, so the study also included a brief content analysis of Facebook pages to

assess the frequency and nature of online activity. The postings to Facebook that were analysed, which include notes, events or status updates, show that 42% of MPs

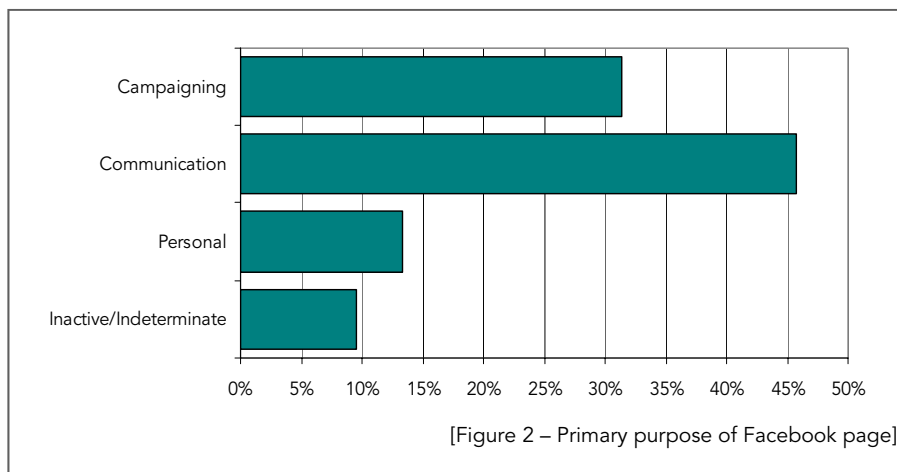
were publishing at least one item daily and 17% had regularly made multiple posts in the same day over a two-month period. At the other extreme, 23% were posting no more than weekly and 6% were occasional posters.

It was also important for us to assess the tone and nature of each MP's Facebook page to determine what the primary purpose of the page was. In doing so, we identified three main types of usage: Campaigning, communication and personal use (See Figure 2 above). As might be expected, given our earlier findings in the MPs Online project, more MPs (46%) are using Facebook primarily as a communications tool (defined as a largely one-way publishing medium). Thirty-one percent of MPs were at this time actively using Facebook to canvas and campaign (which included promoting party-political events or people). It also appeared that a further 13% of pages were being used primarily for personal information

and 10% were either inactive or indeterminate (usually as they lacked sufficient content).

On a per-party basis, Liberal Democrats MPs appeared more likely to see Facebook as a communications tool (69%) but were the least likely to have personal or inactive pages. Conservative MPs were as likely to have a campaigning page as a personal one (24%) but were still most likely to be using Facebook as a communications tool (41%). Labour were the party most likely to be campaigning via this medium (33%), only slightly fewer MPs than those using Facebook as a communications tool (37%). Labour and the Conservatives were most likely to have inactive and indeterminate pages (both 12%).

Facebook has become popular with MPs, it would



appear, because it is another broadcast medium, however, this is not a particularly effective way to use social media. The key to harnessing this new generation of tools is conversation and engagement; citizens

want to be able to communicate with their MPs and to get a response. Facebook is one tool that allows this to occur and there are limited examples of this new kind of engagement taking place, however, MPs on the whole have a long way to go before they can claim to truly understand the power of social media.

Our recommendations for MPs using this platform are straightforward; publish by all means but also be prepared to listen and respond. It's the two-way conversational nature of social media that sets it apart and this direct engagement is increasingly what the public wants to see—and be a part of.

Soliciting feedback

Facebook doesn't just allow MPs to transmit information, their 'friends' can post comments and feedback to them too—positive or negative! A good example of this can be seen here on the page of former Labour Cabinet Minister Hazel Blears MP (~2,500 friends).



Merging with other social media



Jo Swinson MP (Lib Dem, ~1,500 friends) uses Twitter to regularly update her Facebook page. Comments are about topical political issues, reports on what she is doing (including tweeting from PMQs) and replies to others. Because she links her Facebook account to Twitter, her status is normally updated many times a day.

Engaging and responding

Conservative Andrew Rosindell MP (~4,500 friends) is a less prolific Facebook user than the previous examples but what he does do well is respond to comments and questions that have been posted. Rosindell is one of the very few MPs who appears to be actively engaging with the public through Facebook.



DIGITAL PAPERS

MPs on Facebook, Dr Andy Williamson
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The Hansard Society is the UK's leading independent, non-partisan political research and education charity. We aim to strengthen parliamentary democracy and encourage greater public involvement in politics. From the internet's impact on Parliament, to better government engagement with citizens and the potential for civil society to harness digital media, the eDemocracy Programme's thought-leading research has been a formative part of an emergent digital Britain. Today, we undertake research and produce publications and commentaries with a focus on online political communication and citizen engagement, exploring the many faces of digital inclusion, citizen engagement, political campaigning and parliamentary process.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors. The Hansard Society, as an independent, non-party organisation, is happy to invite analysis and discussion of these views.



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