# THE CHALLENGES OF STUDYING DIGITAL CAMPAIGNING

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report looks at the issue of digital campaigning and the methodological challenges this poses for scholars interested in this realm. Reflecting on the proceedings of 2 workshops funded by the British Academy, it is structured around four questions:

PART 1: Why study digital campaigning?

*This section reflects on the motivation to study digital campaigning, and the varied questions academics and non-academics are seeking to ask*

PART 2: What are the methods used to study digital campaigning?

*This section outlines the range of methods used by workshop participants to study digital campaigning, highlighting computational methods, qualitative and quantitative techniques.*

PART 3: What are the challenges of studying digital campaigning?

*This section identifies 5 issues confronted by researchers interested in digital campaigning, namely:*

- Data access
- The object of study
- Methods
- Ethics
- Researcher capacity

PART 4: How can we respond to the challenge of studying digital campaigning?

*This section includes reflections from workshop participants about possible responses to the challenges that researchers face.*

The report seeks to highlight the challenges researchers face and facilitate discussion about the ways in which these challenges may be overcome.

# INTRODUCTION

Digital campaigns have gained much attention in recent years. Often discussed in the context of elections, online campaigning tools are being regularly used to promote different issues and agendas online. Actors from political parties and governments, to lone activists and campaign groups deploy campaigns on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, GoogleAds, WhatsApp and snapchat filters. Whilst academics have long been interested in the strategies, actions and fortunes of political actors as they campaign and battle for power, recent trends in digital campaigning have been seen to require urgent study and response. With claims of misinformation, foreign interference and voter suppression being promoted online, it has become important to know what is happening, but also what the consequences of different forms of digital campaigning are.

Whilst interest in these questions has grown, challenges including a lack of transparency, difficulties of access and methodology have made it hard to understand what is going on. Researchers, regulators and policy makers alike have therefore faced significant challenges in gaining information about, let alone systematically analysing, digital campaigning trends.

Recognising these challenges, we convened two British Academy workshops in 2018 and 2019. Bringing together practitioners, industry stakeholders, policy makers and academics, these workshops reflected on the challenges posed by advances in digital campaigning and considered how it may be possible to respond. In this report, we present the outcomes of these events reflecting on the varied motivations for studying digital campaigning, the methods used, and the nature of the challenge faced by academics and stakeholders. We have subsequently invited a number of participants to respond to this report, offering short reflections on how these challenges may be overcome.

# WORKSHOP 1:
# PRACTITIONER WORKSHOP PARTICIPANTS

| | |
|---|---|
| Sara Badawi | Head of communications and partnerships at Fair Vote |
| Dr Marco Bastos | Lecturer in Media and communication at City, University of London his research brings together communication and computational social science to study social media and online behaviour |
| Rob Blackie | Founder of Digital Strategy, a strategic marketing and communications company |
| Kate Engles | Policy Manager in Campaign Finance Policy at the Electoral Commission |
| Dr Jessica Garland | Director of Policy and Research at the Electoral Reform Society |
| Professor Rachel Gibson | Professor of Political Science at the University of Manchester and conducts research on the use of the internet in political campaigns |
| Professor Robert Hazell | Professor of Government and the Constitution at UCL. His research looks at constitutional reform |
| Sam Jeffers | Co-founder of Who Targets Me an initiative launched to monitor political adverts and micro-targeting on Facebook. |
| Jessica Montgomery | Senior Policy Advisory at the Royal Society who has conducted research on machine learning and AI. |
| Michela Palese | Research Officer at the Electoral Reform Society |
| Professor Rob Proctor | Professor of Social Informatics in the Department of Computer Science at the University of Warwick. He is a specialist in data science methodologies and applications and has conducted large scale studies of social media use. |
| Dr Jacob Rowbottom | Associate Professor of Law and Fellow of University College Oxford. He is a qualified barrister who researches legal regulation of the democratic process. |
| Dr Rebecca Rumbal | Head of Research at My Society |
| Cassie Staines | Senior Policy Officer at Full Fact |
| Daniel Stoker | Senior Policy Advisor at the Electoral Commission |
| Alex Tait | Co-founder of the Coalition for reform in political advertising |
| Brendan Tobin | Head of Growth at ecanvasser, a campaign tools provider |
| Josephine Willows | Senior Committee Specialist on the DCMS Committee leading the inquiry into Fake News |

# WORKSHOP 2:
# ACADEMIC WORKSHOP PARTICIPANTS

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|---|---|
| Nikos Aletras | Lecturer in Natural Language Processing in the Computer Science Department of the University of Sheffield. He previously worked as a scientist with Amazon (Amazon Research Cambridge and Alexa). |
| Penny Andrews | A doctoral candidate in the Information School at the University of Sheffield and formerly a researcher at the University of Leeds. |
| Marco Bastos | Lecturer in Media and communication at City, University of London his research brings together communication and computational social science to study social media and online behaviour |
| Esmeralda Bon | ESRC-funded PhD candidate at the School of Politics and International Relations, University of Nottingham. |
| Michael Bosetta | PhD Fellow at the Centre for European Politics, Copenhagen |
| Mette Christensen | Senior Policy Adviser at the Electoral Commission. |
| Luke Coughlan | ESRC-funded 3+1 student from Royal Holloway, University of London. |
| James Dennis | Senior Lecturer in Political Communication and Journalism in the Department of Journalism at the University of Portsmouth. |
| Wiebke Drews | Doctoral researcher in the Department of Political Science at the European University Institute |
| Jasmin Fitzpatrick | Postdoctoral Research Associate at the Department of Political Science of the Johannes Gutenberg-University Mainz, Germany. |
| Professor Rachel Gibson | Professor of Political Science at the University of Manchester and conducts research on the use of the internet in political campaigns |
| Genevieve Gorrell | Postdoctoral Research Associate in the Department of Computer Science at the University of Sheffield, where she works with GATE (General Architecture for Text Engineering). |
| Dan Jackson | Associate Professor in Media and Communication at Bournemouth University |
| Kristof Jacobs | Assistant professor at the Department of Political Science, Radboud University |
| Amber Macintyre | Researcher currently working on the Our Data Our Selves project for Tactical Tech which examines the use of personal data in formal and informal political participation. She is also completing her PhD (titled: Campaigning by Numbers) at Royal Holloway, University of London |
| Diana Maynard | Senior Research Fellow in the Department of Computer Science at the University of Sheffield. She is also Lead Computational Linguist at GATE (General Architecture for Text Engineering). |
| Katy Minshall | Head of UK Government, Public Policy and Philanthropy for Twitter. |
| James Moulding | Founder of Common Knowledge, and runs Campaign Lab. He is also a fellow of Newspeak House |

# WORKSHOP 2:
# ACADEMIC WORKSHOP PARTICIPANTS

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|---|---|
| Matti Nelimarkka | Social computing researcher in the Department of Computer Science at Aalto University, Finland. |
| Suay Ozkula | Research Associate and University Teacher in the Department of Sociological Studies at the University of Sheffield. |
| Hannah O'Rourke | Senior Program Manager at Labour Together. |
| Sam Power | Lecturer in Politics (Education and Scholarship) at the University of Exeter |
| Nikki Soo | Postdoctoral Research Associate at the Sir Bernard Crick Centre, University of Sheffield |
| Amy Smith | University Teacher in the Department of Politics at the University of Sheffield. |
| Ros Southern | Lecturer in Political Communication in the Department of Communication at the University of Liverpool. |
| Niels Spierings | Assistant Professor in Sociology and Social Cultural Research at Radboud University |
| Tom Stafford | Senior Lecturer in Psychology and Cognitive Science at the University of Sheffield |
| Daniel Stoker | Senior Policy Adviser at the Electoral Commission. His work is mainly focussed on political finance regulation. |
| Christian Vaccari | Reader in Political Communication in the Department of Communication at Loughborough University. |
| Julian de Vergier | Doctoral candidate at the Faculty of Law, University of Oxford. |
| Luke Temple | Teaching Associate in Political Geography, University of Sheffield. |

# WHY STUDY DIGITAL CAMPAIGNING?

The study of campaigning has long been an area of interest to academics and non-academics alike, but with the advent of digital technology, campaigning practice has evolved. This has prompted a range of new questions for those interested in digital campaigning. Amongst participants of the British Academy workshops these interests were captured by the following questions:

*What is happening in digital campaigning?*
First, questions emerged around the practice of digital campaigning. Faced with changes in practice online, questions arise about what is happening, and how data can be gathered in real time. For academics, there was a particular interest in considering how social, political and media systems shape digital campaigning in different places. In contrast, for practitioners, there was an interest in identifying best practice for the optimal (and ethical) use of digital campaigning tools, and in understanding how to monitor and regulate problematic practices online.

*What impact is digital campaigning having?*
Second, questions emerged around the impact of digital campaigning. This interest focused variously on the impact of digital campaigning upon engagement with politics and politicians, on campaign practice and activism, and on organisational structure and activities. Questions emerged about the way that digital tools were changing political behaviour, the extent to which campaigning online was different to offline, and the way that digital platforms were shaping communication and activism.

*What are the implications of digital campaigning?*
Third, questions were raised about the impact of digital campaigning and the appropriate regulatory response. There was interest, for example, in knowing what effect seeing a political advert had on an individual's' attitudes and behaviour, but recognition that this data did not currently exist. More broadly, participants were interested in exploring whether digital campaigning was positive or negative, and whether spending on digital campaign activities mattered. There were also questions about the way that digital campaigning content contributes to (and influences) societal debates.

*What can a study of digital campaigning tell us?*

Finally, questions also emerged around the broader insights offered by a study of digital campaigning. Some participants were interested in the information that data on digital campaigning could provide about the way people make decisions. There were also questions about the methods that could be employed to study digital campaigning, and the extent to which it was ethical to profile and make inferences about social media.

The questions that surround digital campaigning are therefore diverse and concern not only what is happening, but also what implications these trends are having, and how they affect how we understand and study politics today.

# WHAT ARE THE METHODS USED TO STUDY DIGITAL CAMPAIGNING?

Digital campaigning is a diverse activity that can be studied in many different ways. Spanning the quantitative-qualitative divide, but also drawing in expertise from different disciplines, scholars can deploy different methods individually or in combination. Amongst participants in our workshop we identified the use of computational, qualitative and quantitative methods including:

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|---|---|
| Big data social media analysis | National language processing |
| Clustering | Participant observation |
| Comparative and doctrinal electoral law | Pragma-dialectics |
| Content analysis | Qualitative comparative analysis |
| Critical discourse analysis | Real-time content monitoring |
| Digital ethnography | Regression modelling |
| Disambiguation and linking | Semantic search |
| Discourse analysis | Social media scraping |
| Ethnography | Social media tracking panel data |
| Experimental methods | Social network analysis |
| Exponential random graph models | Spatial analysis |
| Eye-tracking | Structural equation modelling |
| Focus groups | Surveys |
| Frequency based statistics | Term extraction |
| Interviews | Text mining |
| Machine learning | Time series analysis |
| Media diaries | Topic detection |
| Named entity recognition | Topic modelling |
| | Website coding |

The wide range of different approaches not only shows the very different types of data that can be produced, but also raises important questions around the skills and methods researchers interested in digital campaigning (and other digital trends) need to gain and deploy. It also suggests that those interested in studying this area need, at the very least, the ability to understand and interpret different forms of data in order to understand the varied insights researchers can produce.

# WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES WHEN STUDYING DIGITAL CAMPAIGNING?

Along with growing interest in the topic of digital campaigning, there have also been concerns about the challenges of studying and responding to these trends. With scandals around data use evoking questions on regulation and privacy, participants in both of our workshops were eager to understand digital campaigning, but identified key barriers in their ability to do so. From electoral regulators to charities, academics to think tank researchers, there was a commonly articulated challenge in understanding and studying what is going on.

Reflecting on the precise nature of the challenge researchers confront in seeking to study digital campaigning, we identified 5 issues of salience:

- Data access
- The object of study
- Methods
- Ethics
- Researcher capacity

**Data Access**

The first, and most widely cited issue confronting researchers interested in digital campaigning is the issue of data access. As suggested above, a range of different types of data can be used and analysed to generate insights into digital campaigning, ranging from interview data, social media data, survey data or content analysis - and yet, for each data source researchers highlighted issues around data access and availability.

Amongst scholars employing qualitative methods it was argued that 'it is now harder in many countries to gain access for interviews', especially due to the increasing use of nondisclosure agreements that make it challenging to secure consent for on the record interviews. This dynamic often occurs because practitioners are unwilling to disclose their practices (and lose a competitive advantage), but also because of a wariness of scandal and the potential for ethically questionable practices to be disclosed. This makes it challenging to gain access for interviews, observations or ethnographies, making it difficult to observe intentions or what is actually happening on the ground.

Qualitative methods can be employed to study online content (using processes such as website content analysis or coding), and yet capturing these online data sources and analysing them in real time is exceedingly challenging. Not only do researchers face challenges in knowing which content to capture and archive (something that can be exceedingly time consuming without computational assistance), they also face difficulties in appreciating what (if anything) they have failed to capture and analyse.

For scholars using computational and quantitative methods, data access was highlighted again and again. The collection and analysis of data was seen to be increasingly challenging, with companies such as Facebook seen to be making it 'very difficult – if not impossible – to download data using packages that were previously available'. The challenge here comes in different forms. First, different companies and firms make data available to different degrees - resulting in a proliferation of studies using Twitter data (where data is easy to collect), and far less work looking at platforms such as Facebook or WhatsApp (where data is not easily available). Second, the quality of available data is not always guaranteed, raising issues about the kind of inferences that can be drawn from available material. Given, for example, that recent studies have highlighted the prominence of 'bots' on online platforms such as Twitter, questions emerge about the extent to which social media data reflects the actions of 'real' individuals or automated programmes.

This speaks to broader questions about how 'good' data can be collected and the need to ensure that available data does not dictate research questions. As one participant reflected, there is currently a tendency for 'data bias', reflecting that on Facebook 'we have traditionally formed conclusions about campaigning from public posts (not sponsored ads or the engagement rates of posts within private networks)', whereas 'On Twitter, keyword selection criteria and the use of various APIs' can be used to gather different information. This means that researchers can often study an unrepresentative sample, or draw inferences from different data sources that they then seek to compare.

Further challenges also emerged because where data is available, it can often be limited (such as when platforms give researchers access to only certain data sets). This makes it difficult to build up a picture of the full extent of campaign activity. Available data can also be unrepresentative of practices more broadly (either online or offline) making it important to question the inferences that can be drawn from a particular data source. There can also be issues around inequality of access, with only certain academics (at certain career stages) being given access to data sources. This led to calls from some workshop participants for researchers not to work in isolation but to collectively share data and methods. For others, there were valuable opportunities for access to be gained by working with companies and platforms, yet these opportunities were viewed by many with a degree of caution.

These issues of access were compounded for scholars using very different methods by the lack of transparency around current practices. Whether gathering qualitative or quantitative data using computational or social science methods, a lack of information about current practices and trends makes it difficult to understand what is happening online (and offline). In essence, platforms and digital campaigns are seen to operate as 'black boxes' making it almost impossible to know what was going on. Indeed, one participant reflected that there was a real challenge in 'finding the right research question given real world complexity and the fact that we can only study what we have data for'. Whilst some participants argued that researchers could innovate to identify new ways of following practices and gathering data (such as partnering with organizations that collect their own data), the issue of not being able to observe, let alone gather data on current practices was a prominent concern.

**The Object of Study**

In addition to issues of access, challenges were identified that reflect the nature of digital campaigning itself. In part these challenges reflect issues encountered in the offline world, but challenges also arose that were explicitly digital.

Thinking first about challenges encountered when studying campaign activity either online or offline, participants argued that there is often little sense in bracketing 'digital campaigns' off as a separate object of study. As the idea of hybridisation captures, campaigns often blend online and offline techniques, deploying different tools under the auspices of a common strategy. It is therefore important not to presume that 'digital' campaigning is something entirely different from non-digital campaigning. Indeed, many of the challenges that arise around digital in terms of access and transparency apply equally offline. For example, participants highlighted challenges in determining the status and role of activists relative to a campaign. Whilst 'official' campaigning activities can often be identified by clear badging and branding, 'unofficial' campaign activity or the origin of some campaign material can be difficult to identify. This challenge is not exclusive to the online realm, but is equally experienced when studying practices offline. Many of the challenges of studying digital campaigning are therefore longstanding and should not be connected only with studying practices online.

Some challenges surrounding the study of campaigning did, however, relate explicitly to online campaigning. One prominent issue raised by participants was the degree to which change and rapid transformation characterised digital campaigns. Whilst campaigns do evolve offline, changes in technology were seen to produce particularly rapid shifts in the online sphere. Participants therefore argued that it was 'exceptionally hard to gather data in real time and analyse it fast to find patterns. It is also hard to keep apace of new practices and adapt existing methods to generate data on what tools are being used and how'. This rapid pace of change posed data collection problems arising from the difficulty of constantly needing to keep abreast of often not very transparent digital practices.

Such issues were seen to be intensified by 'the general reluctance and sensitivity of political operators/influencers to be forthcoming on their practices'. It was also seen to make it challenging to develop 'robust methodologies' as innovations were constantly required to keep abreast of the latest trend and secure data on these trends. In this way, the constantly evolving nature of digital itself made it challenging to study campaigns. For regulators in particular, this challenge was keenly felt, and there was an overt desire to combat this difficulty by thinking about how to design regulation that was able to 'keep pace with technological developments in digital campaigning'. This meant thinking not about what was happening now, but about how to design and implement regulation that would be applicable to future trends.

In addition to change, the digital aspect of campaigning was also seen to raise new questions about how campaign practice was understood. Whilst theories exist that govern our understanding of offline campaigning, participants argued that it was not the case that researchers could automatically transfer 'theories and concepts for the offline world into the online world' as many of the dynamics and implications were not the same. In this way there was seen to be something substantively different about digital campaigning that requires new theorisation and debate. Theoretical development is, however, currently seen to be hindered by a lack of common understandings and reference points. One participant therefore reflected that there is a '[l]ack of defined terminology to help us understand both they nuanced differences between tools and techniques, as separate parts or as a whole'. This means that studies of digital campaigning often speak past one another as there is not a common vocabulary about what is being studied, or around what to expect from different practices online. This suggests that there are challenges that relate to our understanding of digital campaigning itself that need to be overcome.

An additional challenge around the object of study related to the diversity of different practices and forms of data that were encapsulated by the idea of 'digital campaigning'. Whilst often talked about as a singular entity, digital campaigning activities can come in very different forms and result in markedly different types of data. Twitter data is therefore different from Facebook data, making it hard to talk about 'digital' practices as one thing. But even more than this, it should not be presumed that data from a single source comes in a predictable form. Thinking about Facebook data, for example, international studies have begun to demonstrate the lack of uniformity in Facebook affordances around the world. This means that a comparative study of Facebook would not produce the same kind of data in different places. This diversity can pose challenges for scholars who are often unable to combine and draw comparable inferences from data in single or comparative case study research. It can therefore be difficult to determine the extent and scope of a campaign, or the degree to which practices are coordinated or replicated in different sites.

**Ethics**

A third challenge confronting researchers - and felt acutely by policy makers - was the issue of ethics and the degree to which it is acceptable to gather data about political campaigning online. Recent scandals have raised particular concerns about the collection and storage of third party data, raising questions about the degree to which researchers need to gather consent. Within academia, there have been calls for researchers to make their data available for replication, promoting debate about the ethics of sharing personal data. The ethical duties of researchers have therefore gained increased scrutiny, and yet there are few concrete answers. Given that much digital campaigning 'moves across public, semi-public, and private settings' it is often not clear which data can be used permissibly. Interestingly, academic workshop participants reflected that 'there are few guidelines and little precedent for us to follow', leading to varied practices in how data is gathered and utilised. This suggests the need to produce clear ethical terms and rules of engagement, particularly concerning the ethics of gathering data in ways that conflict with a platforms' terms of service (e.g. web-scraping on Facebook post-API restrictions).

**Methods**

The fourth challenge concerned the methods themselves, both in terms of the affordance of available methods and the need to combine different techniques. In terms of methodological affordances, many existing methods were seen to have 'areas of strength and areas of weakness'. Natural language processing, for example, was seen to offer valuable new insights, but it was acknowledged that 'certainly it can miss a lot'. Similarly interviews could offer insights into disclosed intentions, but such data alone was not able to examine the actual execution of these ideas. It was therefore argued that researchers interested in digital campaigning needed 'to draw together multiple methodologies and work in teams'. The value of employing qualitative and quantitative methods simultaneously was emphasised - although it was acknowledged that there are challenges in integrating such data and, for academics, in publishing genuinely mixed method work.

In addition, participants also called for methodological development. One participant therefore highlighted a current lack of methods able to account for the role of visuals in online communication - leading to a call for innovation. Others argued that there was a need to think about the ways that existing and new methods could be used to gather data about interesting practices online. A particular issue, for example, was seen to be the availability of methods for 'mapping and measuring the supply and exposure [of campaigning tools] among voters'. Indeed, participants acknowledged that it was currently very difficult to accurately determine exposure to information in a campaign, or to test the effect of being exposed to different digital campaigning tools. Limitations with available methodologies were therefore seen to be a key challenge for attempts to understand not only what is happening, but what implications those practices have, leading to calls for methodological innovation and change.

**Researcher competency and capacity**

Finally, and related to questions of methods, a challenge emerged that related to researchers' ability to apply the variety of different methods and approaches detailed above. Whilst calling for mixed methods and for teams with interdisciplinary backgrounds, it was acknowledged that there is an 'absence of researchers with a strong background on computational methods and sociological theories broadly defined'. This means that researchers often face a scenario in which 'those who understand the problems rarely know how to study them and those who can carry out empirical research have limited understanding of the broader sociological questions'. Building interdisciplinary teams is one possible solution, and yet establishing a common language and sufficient shared understanding to enable collaboration was seen to be a barrier to such work. Alternatively, it was argued that there is a need for greater methodological training and skills promotion. Investing in a wide range of qualitative and quantitative skills was seen to be particularly valuable, and yet such a move has significant implications in terms of time and resource for established and new scholars alike. The ability for individual scholars to therefore master a range of methodologies was a key concern, but collaboration and interdisciplinary working - whilst often positive - was recognised to be an undertaking that could deliver frustrating results.

We conclude this report with three reflective blogs, written by participants at the second workshop to understand how we might better respond to these challenges.

# HOW CAN WE RESPOND TO THE CHALLENGE OF STUDYING DIGITAL CAMPAIGNING?

**Amidst Facebook Data Lockouts,
It's Time to Forge Real Academic-Industry Partnerships**

**Dr Michael Bossetta**

For scholars studying digital political communication, the past year has been one of reflection. In April 2018, Facebook officially shut down its public APIs, essentially blocking researchers' access to data from Page posts and their comments. Undoubtedly, the throttling came as a response to the 2016 US election, with developers logging bug reports as early as February 2017 and ramping up shortly after the Senate hearings in October the same year.

While marketers remain largely unaffected, Facebook's retreat into its infamous Walled Garden caused scholars of digital political communication to pause, reflect, and convene about how to proceed in studying social media's impact on contemporary politics. One such convention took place at the Crick Centre, where I put forth the argument that researchers need to strike academic-industry partnerships to circumvent our reliance on platform data. In this post, I'll expand on that argument and offer up reasons why I think this model is a fruitful path for research moving forward.

In the interim between that workshop and now, Facebook has partnered with Harvard academics to offer new data streams to researchers. The initiative is called Social Science One, and despite its stated goal of transparency, we have little insight into how peer review of applications is conducted. Moreover, if you want data access, you'll have to apply and (if successful) cite these Harvard academics for time immemorial (see the Requirements of this recent RFP).

Social Science One's ultimate ambition is to be the central data hub for all social media platforms. The initiative, while laudable in its mission, is faltering in its secrecy, promulgation of academic inequality, and frankly, its diluted offering of data. It's a noble cause altogether, but it's saddled with legal and contractual obligations that aim to mitigate Facebook's reputational risk. To an extent, these obligations are understandable; after all, the origins of the Cambridge Analytica scandal stem from academia.

*Renewed opportunities*
Yet, Facebook's data closure has led me to search for more fertile fields for research, and I think they offer promising yields. Platform data is not the only data to study political campaigning, protest mobilization, or citizens' discussions online. In fact, this data may not even be the best suited to answer the particular research questions we have. After reflection on this issue, I've arrived at the conclusion that, simply, political communication scholars have become all-too-reliant on the data that commercial platforms provide. It's time to look to the flanks.

Through my interviews with an array of practitioners on the Social Media and Politics Podcast, I've discovered a host of political and civic start-ups that collect their own data through proprietary technologies. Here are some examples. In the civic space, Apptivism deployed Facebook Messenger chatbots to issue surveys that connect constituents to the Scottish government on issues relating to water and sewage policy. Pack plugs into Facebook and Twitter users' feeds to amplify messages relating to British advocacy groups, such as the Scouts, or political campaigns, such as the Camden Labour Party.

Similarly, in the political space, proprietary mobile apps developed by uCampaign helped coordinate citizens' social media sharing to support Trump's election and Vote Leave during Brexit. Who Targets Me, whose technology was developed by a British teenager, offers a downloadable Chrome extension that scrapes users' Facebook timelines for sponsored ads. The technology was used in the 2017 British General Election and the 2018 Irish Abortion Referendum. A recent academic study from the LSE partnered with Who Targets me for the former case, in order to glean insights into how micro-targeting was conducted months before Facebook officially released its political Ad Library. The data is imperfect, but so is that from Ad Library.

My argument here is that instead of collecting data from social media platforms, or applying to their Social Science One proxies, academics should seek to engage with companies amassing data through their political work on the ground. Instead of hoping for access to data on the numbers of likes, retweets, or shares on public posts, researchers can engage with owners of proprietary technologies and campaigning firms that collect rich data in-house. Lest we forget, there are hosts of digital campaigners who establish their own representative samples of voters and consistently poll them before and during elections.

*Forging new partnerships: a two-way street*

At this point, you may be asking: What's in it for them? These businesses – and that's what they are – would receive academic feedback and scientific scrutiny on: current tools and procedures, suggestions for future developments, and ultimately legitimacy based on rigorous evaluation. For academics, we get insight into decision-making processes and the data produced by these technologies. Most of these businesses sit on troves of collected data that they simply do not have time or cognizance to analyze. Their capitalist logic forces them to move forward in search of profit; our curiosity (and publishing logic) drives us to look for explanations that are necessarily rooted in the past.

If successful trust is built through initial pilot studies, academics can help inform the future operations of these businesses by running live experiments (through A/B testing and access to inserting questions into rolling polls). And, crucially, our intervention in the campaigning space may help inform their business practices in way that is ethically and democratically responsible.

Understandably, my proposal of academic-industry partnerships raises concerns around exactly these issues: ethics and democratic responsibility. It may well be that businesses try to leverage academic partnership as a form of legitimacy to promote sales. Personally, I'm less worried about breaching ethics in this scenario, since businesses have little incentive to appeal to academics. Academics will necessarily be vanguards in pioneering these collaborations, and let me state emphatically, that we must not try to forge them with the interests of data or publishing in mind. Rather, we should seek out those partners in industry that have inadvertently acquired data relevant to the public good, but lack the incentive or analytical skills to mine this data in ways that is meaningful for social science.

To me, it seems that the current regime of social media conglomerates have the data, the skills, but not the incentive to engage in such collaborations. The Social Science One initiative is a start, but one plagued by a selective release of data that is ultimately self-serving to platforms. Few academics have the resources to conduct a research study that will influence Facebook's modi operendi. But perhaps, by partnering with an up-and-coming group of proprietary businesses steeped in collecting their own data, we can glean better insights into what's happening on the ground. And crucially, shape these practices in ways that benefit politics and society.

# Rising to the Challenges in Digital Campaigning -
# The Value of Mixed Methods

## Dr Nikki Soo

The rise of digital tools in political practice, such as election campaigns and constituent communication, has resulted in methodological challenges as researchers seek to investigate its development, process, and impact. In response to these challenges, using mixed methods has been suggested as an answer, and is also being strongly encouraged by grant funders. For instance, in the UK, funding calls from research councils and such as the UK Research and Innovation development of Global Interdisciplinary Research Hubs to specifically seek to support interdisciplinary work across the world.

Indeed, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the UK's largest funding body for social sciences, currently has four calls for proposals (funding projects up to £1.5m) with criteria such as "reach across the physical sciences, arts and humanities, social and environmental science," "interdisciplinary approach exploring how to co-design the research with different disciplines within and beyond the social sciences, arts and humanities," and "multilateral, inter- and transdisciplinary".

It is evident that collaborative, mixed-methods research is important for knowledge generation, but is also perceived as an important benchmark that good research is measured against. Whilst I agree that this can be an attractive solution for researching digital campaigns, this can be a thorny enterprise in practice. I believe this largely stems from differences in methodological training.

In the following sections, reflecting on my own experience, I discuss why mixed methods can be a useful approach when approaching research on digital campaigns and then reflect on the challenges researchers have faced when trying to embark on mixed methods research. I conclude by offering some suggestions for how  these difficulties can be overcome in the next generation of scholars.

**Why mixed methods?**

With the dynamic and complex nature of the media environment in which political practices involving digital tools is taking place, researchers need to be creative in how they collect and analyse data.  Mixed methods involve the combination of two or more data collection methods that often stem from different disciplines or traditions. This can be used to confirm results or complement findings. A common example is the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, such as the use of surveys and in-depth interviews.

More recently in research involving digital tools, this has also expanded to include the use of computer and data science methods. Whilst many established single methods can offer insights, leading studies have shown that mixed methods can offer different, complementary findings. For example, Jungherr drew on observations and in-depth interviews with six party campaign organisations during the 2013 German federal elections to show how they adapt and use digital tools.

I recently completed work on a mixed-methods project (funded by the ESRC Impact Acceleration Fund) led by Dr Marta Cantijoch, in partnership with the BBC. We wanted to understand audience attitudes towards the BBC, and how digital tools facilitated or impacted their consumption of political news online and subsequent political engagement. Drawing on the strength of researchers on the team coming from different areas of methodological expertise, we used a combination of three methods - an online diary study, a survey, and behavioural data from their usage of the BBC website. A method like this is advantageous as it allows, in varying degrees, details of what motivates and influences individuals' internal thought processes to emerge.

From a macro perspective, the behavioural data provided a 'big picture' overview of what participants were doing on the BBC website, including the news topics and articles read, how much time they spent on the website, and if they went on to share those news pieces online. The survey results shed light on participant consumption habits and consistency over six weeks, but the meaning and motivations behind these habits were only revealed through their diary entries. The rich detail provided in these entries, together with the other data, uncovered habits and actions undertaken, while also presenting the phenomenon in a way we hoped could accurately reflect audiences' everyday news consumption by taking into account actions and moments that are often not obvious to observers at first glance.

The success of this collaborative, innovative approach, not only makes the case for how mixed-methods can provide us with important insights, it demonstrates how different disciplines and traditions can allow us to uncover various types of detail and information. Indeed, there are many reasons to embrace the use of mixed-methods.

**The challenge of mixed methods**

Despite its advantages, carrying out mixed methods research in a single study is not always a straightforward endeavour. The capacity to be equally competent across a variety of methods is rare and often an individual scholar cannot be fully equipped to carry out mixed methods independently. Moreover, due to the nature of this type of research, social scientists have to consistently refine existing, or develop new, methodological skill sets in order to continue researching political practices in the digital realm. This may not always be feasible and can be overcome by by collaborating with other researchers, but this can also prove to be tricky.

When scholars who are not trained in the various methods that span disciplinary traditions try to work together, this can pose issues when agreeing on and establishing the parameters of a study. Questions that may arise when attempting to decide on which combination of methods to answer research enquiries on digital tools include: - Can the methods used provide the data we require to answer the research question(s)? How do we reconcile the different forms of data collected and produced - possibly ranging from numbers, words, audio and visual formats - to answer the research question(s)?

Furthermore, the diverse set of disciplines that mixed-methods research draws on can often make the process of publishing difficult. During the British Academy workshop held in January, this sentiment emerged prominently amongst participants when discussing experiences of publication. After rounds of rejections some ended up making the decision to publish different aspects of their research separately, rather than a mixed-method piece of research.

This does not come as a surprise. The peer review process is often not amenable to mixed methods research. Reviewers are usually experts in a specific methodological tradition and often want more detail on the method they prefer or are most familiar with. The expectation for the level of detail is often simply not possible within the scope of a standard length article. There are therefore relatively few places where it is possible to publish this kind of work., As a result, others who might be potentially interested in carrying out more mixed-method work are less encouraged to do so.

**Future steps**

Whilst mixed-methods appear to be an attractive solution to research related to the use of digital tools, in practice it can be difficult. However, these impediments are not insurmountable. The growing amount of opportunities supported by funding bodies and digital platforms demonstrate a strong support for the academy to continue striving for mixed-methods research. There are also examples of developing success from scholars carrying out this work globally. To conclude, I suggest two ways we can overcome these challenges.

1. Methods training for future scholars

   First, we need to think about the training scholars are given and the kind of curricula we are developing. Scholars need to be armed in methods that are not only relevant to their current research, but their future work related to digital tools.. When designing research methods courses it is important that we consider the trends that the area of study is moving towards. This can include computational methods, along with traditional quantitative and qualitative methods.

There is no need for scholars to master every methodological approach themselves but a sense of reflexivity should be also encouraged and cultivated. This way, scholars will not only continue to refine and improve their research skills in their specific disciplines but also be equipped with a general awareness of what different approaches exist. This will enable them to appreciate the opportunities on offer when it comes to researching future questions, and also potentially identify their own skills that they can then contribute to larger project collaborations.

2.Changes in journal and peer review practice

To encourage and develop mixed methods in our discipline also requires a reworking of the standards mixed-methods research are currently being held against, particularly during the journal and peer review process. A set of criteria that can be used in mixed-methods assessment, as well as a guide for research best practice needs to be developed. Journal criterion needs to be transdisciplinary, and take into account the different perspectives in data collection and analysis. Furthermore, academics in various roles (e.g. author, editor, reviewer) have to take responsibility in upholding quality standards as well as embracing innovation in this growing interdisciplinary and dynamic area of research. Only then can the epistemological underpinnings of the discipline move forward in the area of mixed-methods research.

# Digital literacy, rigour and the study of digital campaigning

## Esmeralda Bon

Studying human behaviour is a challenge. When we study it in person, there may be issues with interpretation, missing information, unwilling participants, a lack of funding. When, in turn, we study human behaviour online, even the physical aspect is gone. As a result, these challenges are exacerbated. Questions arise regarding the quality of interpretation and the completeness and quality of the data. Some of these issues have been addressed in the preceding sections of this report.

Yet, although there are these challenges, analyses of big data are sought after. There is the hope that these tremendously large data sets provide us with the opportunity to uncover hidden patterns, to study phenomena from different angles. The findings of these studies, which will more often than not require the use of quantitative and automated methods, could contribute to the building of public policy and, as such, have an impact. As a PhD candidate sponsored by the Economic and Social Science Research Council (ESRC), having or making an impact is part of my remit. I have collected a relatively big data set, I am using these types of methods, and I have specifically experienced the aforementioned challenges.

**The challenge of gaining data**

Indeed, gaining access to data can be a strenuous and unrewarding task. Although the software is available to assist the collection of data using the APIs of certain websites, to scrape web sites and less accessible digital data, some programming skill (be it R, Python or an alternative) is required. This investment does not always pay off – access is limited and denied at the (seeming) whims of organisations and corporations. As much time and effort are put into designing a study and gaining these skills, I have to say that losing access to an API midway through data collection is incredibly dispiriting! As a result, potential data is lost, and the sides of a story that certain actors may have provided in their digitally published campaign communication will never be heard.

Furthermore, even if data has been collected, it may be unclear to what extent the data is complete and representative of a phenomenon or case. As mentioned in the report, it is tremendously difficult yet important to capture data in real time. Data can disappear, be updated or transformed. It is true that we are very much still dealing with a black box, in terms of the programmes and software we use and the nature of the data itself. What does and not does concern campaign material and what data can we actually collect? These are questions I struggle to answer in my research, which looks at UK politicians and involves the use of Twitter and Facebook data. Today, politicians are under intense media scrutiny, due to the mediatisation of politics, and as a result part of a permanent political campaign. Should we therefore consider all communication of these public office holders, from their public accounts, as reflecting campaign activity?

**Big data: the ethical and pragmatic challenges**

In fact, some of the communication may come across as personal, which links to the question of ethics. There is a grey area when it comes to online data and whether this can be considered public. When, if ever, does public data become personal? Furthermore, to what extent can this data and these findings be made public? If this data cannot be shared publicly, then how can we adequately evaluate this research and contribute to digital campaigning research?

At the same time, we are also tasked with circumventing data access limitations. As a consequence of access issues, we may end up making decisions informed by access, rather than theory. Even when we report the actions we have taken into building the sampling frame, collecting the data and constructing a sample, the question remains whether we really have the data and information we intended to collect. Uncertainty on behalf of the researcher with the potential quality of the data is a problem and easily picked up by reviewers and fellow researchers. Understandably so, the last thing we need this day and age is more misinformation!
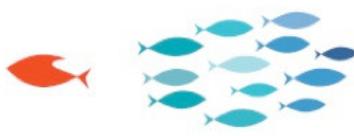
All in all, the study of digital campaigning is a challenge. In the end, whichever method we choose to use, there are going to be trade-offs, and the nature of the data we collect and the platform that we collect data from do provide limitations for digital campaigning research. To advance the field, it is crucial to keep these issues in mind. Therefore, as researchers of digital campaigning, we need to make sure that we become and remain digitally literate and rigorous.

# CONCLUSION

The topic of digital campaigning has received much recent attention, and yet researchers' capacity to generate insights on what is happening and what effects online practices have is frustrated by a range of challenges identified by academics and practitioners alike. In moving forward, it is necessary to think about a range of responses including working with industry, employing mixed methods and constructing interdisciplinary teams. What is clear is that these issues will not be easily overcome, and yet there is a wide community who are devoted to trailing and employing new methods and ideas.