"It's Better to Light a Candle Than to Fantasize About a Sun": Social Media, Political Participation and Slacktivism in Britain

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Declaration

I, James Dennis, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

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Abstract

This thesis examines how routine social media use shapes political participation in Britain. Since the turn of the century, many commentators have argued that political activism has been compromised by "slacktivism," a pejorative term that refers to supposedly inauthentic, low-threshold forms of political engagement online, such as signing an e-petition or "liking" a Facebook page. In contrast, this thesis establishes a new theoretical approach—the continuum of participation model—which illuminates what happens before political action occurs. This is explored in three interrelated contexts, using three different research methods: an ethnography of the political movement, 38 Degrees; an analysis of a corpus of individually-completed self-reflective media engagement diaries; and a series of laboratory experiments that were designed to replicate environments in which slacktivism is said to occur.

I argue that Facebook and Twitter create new opportunities for cognitive engagement, discursive participation, and political mobilisation. 38 Degrees uses social media to support engagement repertoires that blend online and offline tactics. This organisational management of digital micro-activism provides participatory shortcuts, enabling large numbers of grassroots members to shape campaign strategy. But, in contrast to both advocates and critics of online participation, I find no evidence of a widespread, one-size-fits-all, self-expressive logic. Instead, I argue that we ought to think in terms of a typology of citizen roles in social media environments. *Civic instigators* and *contributors* engage in digital micro-activism by way of refining their political identity. *Listeners* use social media to consume political information but refrain from public forms of expression and instead take to private spaces for political discussion. When listeners do act it is not effortless, but carefully considered. Experiments show that these roles derive from pre-established personal preferences, rather than the stylistic presentation of information or visible indicators of the popularity of an information source. Overall, this study argues that slacktivism is inadequate and flawed as means of capturing the essence of contemporary political action. Social networking sites offer an important space for democratic engagement in the milieu of everyday life.

Acknowledgements

The quote for the title of this thesis comes from "Plan B" by Million Dead. The idea for this project came when I was listening to this song on a late night train from Tamworth to Burton-upon-Trent in 2010. It is fitting that the band that first encouraged me to think critically about politics back in my early teens has shaped such an important journey.

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1. Introduction: Slacktivism and #Kony2012

"Slacktivism" is an apt term to describe feel-good online activism that has zero political or social impact

(Morozov, 2009)

The more promising way to think about social media is as long-term tools that can strengthen civil society and the public sphere

(Shirky, 2011)

On March 5, 2012 Invisible Children, an American non-governmental organisation (NGO), released a 30-minute video entitled *Kony 2012*. The video was part of an ongoing campaign to raise awareness of the atrocities committed by Ugandan rebel Joseph Kony, leader of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), and increase pressure on the US federal government to ramp up their efforts to capture Kony (Engelhardt and Jansz, 2013). Featuring Hollywood-style editing and dramatic imagery, the video's main focus was to highlight the role of Kony in the recruitment of children to fight in the LRA's militia (Lotan, 2012). Released on YouTube and Vimeo simultaneously, the video took just six days to reach 100 million views, faster than the likes of Lady Gaga's video for "Bad Romance" and Susan Boyle's "iconic" performance on *Britain's Got Talent* (Wasserman, 2012). The campaign witnessed an unprecedented level of sharing on the social networking sites Facebook and Twitter. The hashtag, #Kony2012, featured in a phenomenal 1,200 tweets per minute at the campaign's peak (Lotan, 2012), with over 12 million mentions of Kony on the service in total throughout March (Fox, 2012). This was a result of the video's explicit encouragement of individuals to share the campaign within their online networks. In particular, those watching were asked to lobby a number of "elites" in order to raise awareness. These elites were not, as we may expect, exclusively politicians, but twenty so-called "culturemakers"; cultural icons, including twelve politicians, with an extensive reach and influence across large networks on Facebook and Twitter. This included the likes of Mark Zuckerberg, one of the co-founders of Facebook, and popstar Rihanna, whose Tweet was shared 18,832 times (Zuckerman, 2012a):

"Please go to Invisiblechildren.com Even if its 10 minutes… Trust me, you need to know about this! #1LOVE"

(Rihanna, 2012)

Invisible Children raised over $5 million in just 48 hours. Overnight, the campaign put Joseph Kony, and Invisible Children co-founder Jason Russell, firmly at the forefront of popular discussion; the questionable impact of low-effort digital activism followed.

Debate ensued regarding the controversial narrative that some suggested was promoted through the video, that by simply clicking "share" or "retweet" you could make an observable difference in the world (Lotan, 2012). This narrative spoke directly to an individual's sense of personal efficacy, "the feeling that individual political action does have, or can have, an impact on political processes" (Campbell, Gurin and Miller, 1954: 187). A number of interconnected critiques quickly emerged in response to the video. Grant Oyston, a 19-year old political science student at Acadia University, Canada, published a Tumblr post challenging the notion that by sharing a video, or buying a wristband, an individual could contribute to the political aim of justice against Kony (Oyston, 2012). This argument gained increasing momentum as a number of bloggers began to delve into the financial accounts of Invisible Children; less than a third of Invisible Children's revenues from 2011 were spent on direct services in Uganda, while a significant proportion were used for promotional materials (Carvin, 2012; Kersten, 2012; Oyston, 2012). Ultimately, the campaign was deemed unsuccessful. It failed to turn the unprecedented mass of online activity into offline mobilisation, since the "Cover the Night" campaign—a call for activists to cover their neighbourhoods with images of the wanted warlord—amounted to little more than a few posters in major cities (Carroll, 2012). The campaign failed to turn awareness into observable political change.

Why was this campaign so successful at raising awareness *online*, but such a failure in mobilising political action *offline*? In order to optimise the potential for the campaign's message to be spread among online networks, its narrative was simplified. This is because Facebook and Twitter are examples of what Jenkins, Ford and Green (2013) define as "spreadable media," platforms on which the success of content distribution depends on the user base circulating material within their social networks. The complicated array of factors that explain the rise of the LRA, and their recruitment of children as soldiers in Uganda, was underplayed. Instead, the campaign fixated around one man—the "bad guy," Joseph Kony (Fisher, 2012; Laessig 2012). This perpetuated an easily relatable "good versus evil" dynamic—put simply, "catch the bad man who is kidnapping kids" (Hilsum, 2012). This overly simplistic narrative meant that the video was accused of obfuscating the complex role of militias in Uganda, with potentially disturbing consequences. For example, Zuckerman (2012a) argues that the

video provides tacit support for Yoweri Museveni, a dictatorial leader renowned for his poor track record on civil rights. Also, by focusing on a simplistic narrative designed to be expressed in 140-characters, a number of critiques claimed the campaign propagated an ever-present ideal within advocacy that Africa is helpless and dependent on the West to act as its saviour (Beckett, 2012; Drumbl, 2012; Fisher, 2012). Thus, while oversimplification increased the reach and inclusivity of the campaign, it also had a number of detrimental effects.

In terms of raising awareness and facilitating online discussion, #Kony2012 was a success, but for a number of commentators this came at a high price. The campaign caused potential damage to public knowledge due to an emotionally provocative, but crucially misinformed, campaign message. The driving force of the widespread sharing of the video online was claimed to be political self-indulgence (Beckett, 2012); self-interested political engagement intended to fulfil one's personal desire to have political impact, or to boost one's feelings of personal efficacy. Taking part was easy; simply click a button and become an activist. Taking part was deemed a social necessity; the simplistic narrative compelled those conscious of their virtual identity to become involved. How could you not take a stance against a man accused of recruiting thousands of children for military combat? As illustrated in Figure 1.1, a popular internet meme widely shared in response to the video, the critiques highlighted that a certain sense of inauthenticity was cultivated as citizens either succumbed to peer pressure, or were attracted by a purposefully misinformed and emotionally charged video. This phenomenon is conceptualised as slacktivism, and this contentious concept forms the starting point of this thesis.

Figure 1.1. An internet meme posted in response to #Kony2012

WATCH 30 MINUTE VIDEO ON INTERNET

BECOME SOCIAL ACTIVIST

Questions surrounding the authenticity and impact of social media on political engagement form the basis of slacktivism, a pejorative term that has recently emerged in popular commentary about the internet and politics. It refers to low-threshold forms of political engagement online, such as signing an e-petition, "liking" a Facebook page, or changing one's avatar on Twitter in support of a cause. These forms of micro-activism are perceived by many to have an insignificant effect on politics because they are characterised not by an ethic of solidarity, or an individual's pre-existing political ideology and commitment, but merely the simulation of positive deeds or, worse still, inauthenticity (Morozov, 2009; 2011; Gladwell, 2010). The "substitution thesis," a component of the slacktivist critique, claims that offline mobilisation is being compromised by this inauthentic online political action (see Christensen, 2011; 2012). Set in the context of these recent debates about the rise of online slacktivism, and due to the ubiquity of social media in everyday life, the aim of this research is to explore empirically what effect the routine use of social networking sites has on political engagement and citizenship in Britain. Do interactions on Facebook and Twitter affect our awareness and understanding of political events and issues? Do expressive forms of

engagement online lead to instrumental forms of participation? Under what conditions do social media users engage in real space mobilisation?

This thesis examines slacktivism as a reflection of, and judgement on, the routine use of social media within a political context. This conceptual approach is adopted due to the popularity of the term to describe actions that a typical user would be expected to perform through everyday use; for example, liking a Facebook page, sharing a video, or commenting on the status update of another user. Slacktivism forms part of a wider critique of the political use of social media within popular public discourse. This is problematic given that the concept itself is fundamentally flawed.

Slacktivism has been the object of substantial criticism (see Christensen, 2011; 2012). Most controversially, a handful of anecdotal case studies form the basis of a critique that is used to debase the significance of an entire medium. The Iranian presidential election protests in 2009 (Morozov, 2011) and the use of Facebook and Twitter to overthrow the Communist Party in Moldova during the same year (Gladwell, 2010) are not representative of how citizens use these tools in day-to-day life. These isolated cases often equate the legitimacy of participation to the degree of impact it has. Tufekci (2012a) claims that this is misleading and, given the personalised and social nature of social networking sites, slacktivism should instead be seen as the encroachment of politics into people's everyday life. Context, here, is key; often acts of slacktivism are not performed by seasoned activists, but by non-activists taking action in spheres traditionally controlled by political professionals (Tufekci, 2012a). Social media can provide a space in which these non-activists cultivate their political identity, shaping future participation. This thesis offers an alternative conceptual framework to the slacktivist critique, analysing both sets of hypotheses empirically.

The #Kony2012 case study provides a fitting starting point to illustrate this new approach. Through the application of the slacktivist critique, the campaign was deemed to be an abject failure. The flash mob-inspired poster event was relatively ignored and, at the time of writing, Joseph Kony is still at large. This is despite the assurances of media scholar Clay Shirky, who in the immediate aftermath of the furore that followed the video wrote on Twitter, "I'm just going to put this here, so it's time-stamped: I bet they catch Kony in the next three months. Will follow up either way." (Shirky, 2012). He did not follow up. However, if we move beyond judging engagement and activism purely on whether it achieves the stated aims, aims that in this specific case were obscured by the reaction, then there are a number of significant trends that require further exploration.

Firstly, the campaign demonstrated the potential of social media as a tool for mass political mobilisation online. By designing the campaign with the sharing functionality of social media in mind, #Kony2012 showed the speed in which wider networks can be activated (Mogus, 2012; Watson, 2012). This poses a number of questions as to the conditions in which viral campaigns transform into participation that requires further effort on behalf of the individual. When campaigns do translate into further participatory acts, what form do these acts take? Alternatively, what factors result in the failure to mobilise wider networks?

Secondly, #Kony2012 highlighted the importance of the individual in contemporary political engagement. The campaign's message was purposefully disaggregated in a way that was easy to personalise, encouraging the audience to participate on the basis of self-motivation (Chadwick, 2012; Gregory, 2012). Therefore, it is imperative that empirical research is undertaken to investigate how the use of online tools connects to citizenship and political identity more broadly. What motivates a citizen to share political materials or undertake political actions on social networking sites? How does this vary depending on their audience? Ultimately, are digitally networked acts undertaken as a result of self-interest, even narcissism, or an attempt to maximise personal efficacy on issues of personal relevance?

Finally, the campaign exemplified how social networking sites can act as a space for political learning. A number of recent reports from the Pew Internet and American Life project highlight how users consume political news on Facebook and Twitter, with some using these platforms to contextualise and evaluate this information through interpersonal discussion (Rainie et al., 2012; Smith, 2013). This exposure can act as a spark for further interest. Their survey found that 43 percent of respondents say they have decided to learn more about a political issue because of something they read about on a social networking site (Smith, 2013: 33). As for #Kony2012, Invisible Children were successful in raising awareness about a still-active war criminal (Bugay, 2012; Domanski, 2012). Even though the campaign undoubtedly had faults, the critiques formed in response acted as a mass learning experience; those who shared the video were exposed to this information as a by-product of their involvement (see Chadwick, 2012: 41-42). Oyston's critical post on Tumblr was viewed over a million times and received tens of thousands of replies (Zuckerman, 2012a). Blogposts from scholars, such as Professor Henry Jenkins (2012) and Ethan Zuckerman (2012a), received wide exposure online. Mass media outlets, such as Al Jazeera (2012), the *Independent* (Okwonga, 2012), and Channel 4 (Hilsum, 2012), also offered further coverage to

different audiences. The campaign was therefore not only spreadable, illustrated by how widely the video was shared, but the response shows that it was also "drillable," as a smaller number of highly informed actors were willing and able offer in-depth content (Gregory, 2012; Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013). This has potentially important ramifications for political information consumption online. Do social networking sites provide an interconnected platform in which citizens can consume and discuss civic and political matters? Can this exposure mobilise those citizens who may have traditionally been on the periphery of political activism?

These three trends highlight the need for more detailed empirical research on the relationship between the normalised use of social media and political engagement.

1.1 Aims and Research Question

This thesis examines the effect of routine social media use on political participation in Britain. By testing the hypotheses of slacktivism and an amalgamation of theoretical models from across political communication, notably Bennett's (2008; Bennett, Wells and Freelon, 2011) concept of the "actualizing citizen," Papacharissi's (2010) concept of the "private sphere," and Chadwick's (2012) hypothesis that social networking sites create new conditions for individuals' political learning, this thesis explores the extent to which slacktivism has value as a judgement on contemporary political action.

The study addresses the following research question: set in the recent debates around online slacktivism, what effect does routine social media use have on political engagement in Britain? Given the scope of this relationship between the independent variable and dependent variable, a number of supplementary questions are used to guide this research: what political information do citizens consume when using social networking sites, day-to-day? Do these social networking sites provide a space for discursive engagement, and if so, what is the nature of this discussion? And, crucially, do these low-effort interactions evolve into further participatory acts? When they do, what are the attitudinal motivations driving this involvement?

As Bimber, Flanagin and Stohl (2012: 1) note, much of the literature focuses on groups or organisations when analysing the impact of digital media on political behaviour (see Bennett and Segerberg, 2013; Chadwick, 2013; Gerbaudo, 2012; Karpf, 2012a). While these book-length studies have made significant contributions to our understanding of the internet's effect on political participation, there is a gap in the literature for an in-depth study of the individual level unit of analysis. As Howard

(2011: 2) notes, when we adopt a network perspective on the media, individuals become meaningful objects of study as they have more control and autonomy over their identity.

By adopting a "deep data" approach, through the collection of thick, descriptive data tailored around individual level attitudes and behaviours, this study analyses how, and why, digitally active citizens use social media. This research seeks to establish the personalised context for the remarkable forms of digitally networked action that have taken place over the last decade; what happens before instances of collective, or connective, action (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; 2013)? In doing so, this thesis contributes to the growing body of work on digital citizenship (Bennett, 2008; Bennett and Segerberg, 2013; Chadwick, 2013; Coleman and Blumler, 2009; Dahlgren, 2009; Graber, 2004; Howard, 2006; Karpf, 2012a; Papacharissi, 2010).

This thesis sets out an alternative theoretical framework to challenge the assumptions of the slacktivist critique. I dispute the notion that participation is a public-only phenomenon. Our private, everyday experiences shape our public behaviours. As such, I propose that access to social networking sites can create new opportunities for political learning, discursive engagement, and political action. I challenge the assumption that forms of micro-activism and online self-expression are lazy and easy forms of self-gratification, but contend that these symbolic acts provide evidence of active citizenship.

The relationship between routine social media use and political engagement is examined in three different settings using an experimental, mixed-method research design. These represent the different spaces in which these tools can be used, outside of the isolated case studies offered by proponents of slacktivism. Firstly, in an activist context, through an ethnography of the political movement 38 Degrees. Secondly, within day-to-day life, by combining evidence of participant behaviour online with reflective diaries. Thirdly, in those conditions in which slacktivism is hypothesised to thrive, through a series of laboratory experiments conducted on Facebook.

Although big data studies and cross-national survey research provide vast amounts of detailed statistics on user behaviour, these findings can often be superficial, focusing on specific actions or service functionality in isolation. As Neuman, Bimber and Hindman (2011: 32-33) note, much of this research is based on indictors that are not designed with a "ubiquitous and universal" internet in mind. Both approaches lack an understanding of the quotidian experiences that drive behaviour online—the *why*. This thesis seeks to address that void. The findings suggest that, in contrast to both my own expectations and those who support the slacktivist critique, there is no evidence of

widespread self-expressive logic amongst heavy social media users. Instead, many users take to semi-public and private spaces for political discussion as part of "multi-step flows of communication" (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955). A typology of citizen roles in social media environments is set out to identify the different ways in which users engage with political material on Facebook and Twitter.

These two social networking sites are the focus of this research. These services have been selected due to their popularity with both citizens (Rose, 2013) and political groups in Britain (Obar, Zube, Lampe, 2012). As of January 2015, survey data suggests that almost half (43 percent) of the UK population were "active" on Facebook, while one in five (19 percent) regularly use Twitter (Kemp, 2015: 343).[1] Other online services will be examined as a by-product of their overlap with Facebook and Twitter.

A number of research limitations should be noted. This study uses a non-random, convenience sampling frame based on the target population, British citizens that use Facebook and/or Twitter. It is important to note that this population is not representative of the wider British public (Anstead, 2012; boyd and Crawford, 2012: 669; Ofcom, 2013a; 2013b). For example, Table 1.1 illustrates that although the uptake of social media has increased universally since 2007, it is clear that the adoption rate is higher amongst younger citizens.

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[1] Figures represent the percentage of the total national population using the platform in the past month. The survey is based on the respondents' own reported activity (Kemp, 2015: 343).

Table 1.1. Set up own profile on a social networking site by age, gender and socio-economic group, 2007-2012

| | % of respondents | | | | |
	2007	2009	2010	2011	2012
Age group					
16-24	54	77	86	90	92
25-34	27	65	70	81	84
35-44	12	40	58	58	67
45-54	7	30	32	48	47
55-64	8	11	27	24	35
65+	3	7	11	19	25
Gender					
Female	22	48	56	63	67
Male	21	40	51	55	61
Socio-economic group					
AB	19	40	54	57	64
C1	24	46	52	62	65
C2	23	45	51	59	62
DE	20	46	58	59	66

Source: Data adapted from Ofcom (2013a: 91-92).

While age was factored into the recruitment for this study, gender and income were not. As Table 1.1 demonstrates, adoption has increased at a similar rate across all cohorts. Although the participants in the diaries were skewed towards those with higher levels of education, participants were figuratively representative of this population. The sampling frame for each study is discussed in Chapter 4. All relevant participant information is included within the appendices provided (see Appendix A1; B1; B2; C1). Although the small-N research design does limit the external validity of this research, the methodology was necessary to generate rich, descriptive data at the individual level. The exploratory nature of this thesis provides a basis for future, large-N empirical research.

This thesis explores social media use in Britain and, as such, all findings are culturally specific. However, the research will generate theoretically informed inferences at the individual level that may have salience in other advanced industrial democracies. This is discussed in further detail in Chapter 8. This thesis does make use of academic work originating from the United States (US). Any cultural discrepancies that emerge between these theories and the findings are discussed in the empirical chapters. Furthermore, this study also uses a number of concepts that refer specifically to young people, notably the actualizing citizen framework (Bennett, 2008; Bennett,

Wells and Freelon, 2011). The differences and similarities that arise between different age groups will be reflected upon, when necessary.

1.2 Plan of the Thesis

Chapter 2 describes the utopian-dystopian dichotomy that has re-emerged within popular discourse. Characterised by a prevalence of unsubstantiated generalisations, anecdotal case studies, and a lack of empirical testing, slacktivism forms part of this vague and imprecise dichotomy. The critique has become synonymous with a negative perception of the political value of social media. However, it is flawed by an overly narrow focus. In order to critically analyse the relationship between the routine use of social media and political participation, we must first develop a comprehensive understanding of the environment in which these new forms of social and political self-expression take place. The slacktivist critique cannot definitively represent everyday use, as it ignores the role that micro-activism plays in relation to other forms of political action, both online and offline. While each act, taken in isolation, may be deemed to be an "expression of benign idleness" (Rickett, 2013), the critique ignores how micro-activism often complements other forms of participation, and can lower the threshold for involvement for those traditionally marginalised by high-cost activism. An alternative theoretical approach—the continuum of participation—is proposed, designed to capture the nuance of mediated citizenship at varying scales.

Chapter 3 outlines the guiding theoretical assumptions for this thesis. These build upon the research agenda introduced in the first two chapters. Bennett's (2008; Bennett, Freelon and Wells, 2011) actualizing citizen framework reflects the attitudinal shifts discussed in Chapter 1, as modern citizenship is characterised by individual autonomy, rather than duty and obligation. A combination of recent theoretical innovations in the field of political communication are used to operationalise the continuum of participation, introduced in Chapter 2. Chadwick (2012) suggests that social media users are exposed to political issues organically through their normal, day-to-day use. Based on this exposure, Papacharissi (2010) describes how the convergence of what we consider to be public and private creates the conditions for new forms of participation online. This personalisation forms the basis of what Bennett and Segerberg (2013) describe as "connective action," collective action that is mobilised through the use of digital media. Finally, this chapter sets forth two sets of expected findings to be analysed empirically. Based on this theoretical framework, I offer an alternative

prognosis to challenge the hypotheses derived from the slacktivist critique; low-threshold interactions conducted online are not ineffective and narcissistic acts of slacktivism, but integral components within a scaled continuum of participation.

Chapter 4 describes the research design employed in this study. While cross-sectional survey studies and big data methodologies are widely used in research on social media use and participation (see Boulianne, 2015), new methodological tools are required to get under the skin of micro-level attitudes and behaviours. By using an experimental and innovative mixed-method research design, that brings together qualitative, quantitative, and computational traditions, this thesis explores the relationship between social media and political participation from three perspectives.

Chapter 5 focuses on the use of social networking sites in an activist context, through an ethnographic study of the hybrid mobilization movement 38 Degrees. The leadership use the seemingly mundane functionality of Facebook and Twitter to empower their membership. This organisational management of digital micro-activism is evident across the continuum of participation, as Facebook and Twitter are used to inform members, to involve them in the movement's decision making, and to activate wider publics for further online and offline action. These findings challenge Gladwell's (2010) hypothesis that "weak ties seldom lead to high-risk activism," as hybrid mobilization movements strategically use micro-activism as part of wider engagement repertoires. In line with MoveOn in the US (Karpf, 2012a), members pick and choose those campaigns they wish to be involved with. Social media is therefore key to cultivating a collective identity amongst the movement's ideologically disparate and geographically dispersed membership. It is through exposure to emotionally salient "personal action frames" that members develop weak ties with like-minded others.

By using diaries collected over a period of three months, Chapter 6 examines how citizens use Facebook and Twitter to access information and talk about politics within everyday life. The media diaries show that, for some citizens, these acts are not easy as they are keenly aware of their audience online. Instead, rich political discussion often takes place in private online and offline spaces with trusted others, with the cross-platform mobile messaging application WhatsApp proving particularly popular with younger diarists. These "listeners" would only express themselves publicly on social media for those causes that they felt most passionately about. For those that do post political updates regularly—described as "civic instigators" and "contributors"—this is a way of raising awareness for causes they deem to be important. Self-expression on

social media is not immediately disregarded, as predicted by the slacktivist critique, but forms part of their political socialisation and political identity formulation.

Chapter 7 focuses on a series of experiments designed to measure the likelihood of future engagement depending on the type of information that a participant is exposed to, and the popularity of content. The results suggest that both micro-activism and more substantive political acts are based on pre-established personal preferences, rather than the stylistic presentation of information or visible indicators of popularity. Young students, who formed the sample for these experiments, are more conscious of their actions than first assumed by the slacktivist critique.

The final chapter brings together the results from the three empirical studies to analyse the relationship between routine social media use and political participation in Britain. By exploring each of the expected findings in turn, I conclude that both the slacktivist critique and the theoretical framework lack an appreciation of the dynamics of mediated citizenship at the individual level. As boyd and Crawford (2012: 669) note, "the very meanings of 'user' and 'participation' and 'active' need to be critically examined." By conceptualising participation as a process and exploring the relationships formed between social media use and other modes of public and private communication, this thesis contributes to our understanding of individual level attitudes and behaviours. By comparing these findings to those from national and cross-national research projects, I consider the limitations of this thesis and suggest the need for future comparative research.

This thesis will explore concepts that are disputed by media scholars and political scientists alike. How should we conceptualise citizenship? What is "effective" participation? How do we measure engagement? A brief literature review follows in which a number of these contested terms are considered.

1.3 The Context: Conceptualising Citizenship, Political Identity and Engagement

> Contrary to the widespread view that citizenship is in crisis (Putnam, 2000), Britain at the start of the twenty-first century still enjoys a civic culture, albeit rather different from that outlined by Almond and Verba (1963) forty years ago.
> (Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley, 2004: 189)

Citizenship is a concept with a number of competing definitions. Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley (2004: 22) define citizenship as, "[a] set of norms, values and practices designed to solve collective action problems which involve the recognition by

individuals that they have rights and obligations to each other if they wish to solve such problems." As such, citizenship is enacted in relation to the authority of a political community. Traditional accounts of citizenship generally refer to a legalistic and rights-based definition; the community is defined as the nation-state, in which citizens are represented by political parties, trade unions, and religious cleavages (Bellamy, 2008; Cammaerts and Van Audenhove, 2005: 180). However, political community is no longer restricted to just the nation-state, but includes a diverse range of real and imagined communities at the local, national, and global level (Anderson, 2006: 6; Cammaerts and Van Audenhove, 2005: 179; Svensson, 2011: 647). A void exists within the literature between these bounded notions of citizenship and the reality of life in advanced industrialised democracies. Citizens have more control over their own political identity, more choice over the political communities they join, and are more creative in the political acts that they undertake (Papacharissi, 2010; Zukin et al., 2006). This brief literature review will outline the socio-political conditions in Britain in which social media platforms operate.

In order to analyse citizenship it must be deconstructed into two constituent parts: the attitudinal, an individual's sense of norms, rights and values, and the behavioural, the ways in which an individual participates within their respective political community (Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley, 2004: 129). The attitudinal and behavioural form a reciprocal relationship, as a citizen's political identity shapes how they engage, while the norms of a political community are formed and established by the participation of its members (Svensson, 2011: 644). Therefore, political attitudes and behaviours are constantly evolving and the way in which citizenship is defined should reflect the normative desires of the citizenry at the time of inquiry (Dahlgren, 2009; Dalton, 2008; Graber, 2004; Norris, 2011; Papacharissi, 2010; Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley, 2004).

Numerous scholars have described this evolution, pointing to new sources of identity and the growth of unconventional forms of political engagement (Bennett, 2008; Cammaerts and Van Audenhove, 2005; Dalton, 2008; Dahlgren, 2009; Pattie, Seyd, and Whiteley, 2004; Schudson, 1999; Zukin et al., 2006). A distinct transformation has occurred from the dominance of uniformal ideologies, to a state of individuation, where individual autonomy and self-expression are sacrosanct (Bennett, 2008: 14; Dahlgren, 2009: 33; Zukin et al., 2006: 14). A number of developments have facilitated this shift.

Firstly, the location of where "politics" takes place has become more diffuse due to the "information society," as the mass adoption of new communication technologies undermines the monopoly the state holds over the spread of information (Castells, 2000; 2001; Howard, 2011: 20). Citizens are no longer restricted by the limitations of physical proximity, but are instead connected to transnational political events and issues, with global ramifications in an abstract global space (Aikens, 1999: 186). Through real time, interactive, and global communication, a time-space compression has occurred, facilitating information flows between the local, national, and global spheres with relative ease. As Howard (2011: 72) notes, "digital media create a space of cultural flows that makes territorially distant places feel nearby." Subsequently, the boundaries between foreign territories, and their respective political issues and identities, have become blurred (Gerodimos and Ward, 2007: 117; Cammaerts and Van Audenhove, 2005). In accordance with this diffusion, the locus of power shifts from government and elected representatives to new actors, such as those in the commercial sector and nongovernmental organisations. Therefore, citizens may see the need to achieve public goals through cooperative work that engages or targets institutions other than government (Zukin et al., 2006: 53).

In alignment with the structural evolution of politics, the monolithic national culture often associated with individual nation-states has broken down into a state of cultural pluralism. This has resulted in the diversification of identity and the development of alternative socio-cultural frameworks (Dahlgren, 2009: 27, Dalton, 2008; Giddens, 1991). Castells (2000: 128) traces the evolution of socio-cultural frameworks over time. Primary networks, those concentrated around the family and religious identity, were the first to form. Secondary networks followed, in which citizens were bound together through group-based political associations. Finally, contemporary society is typified by tertiary networks, those centered around an individual's own, personally-defined political identity. This breakdown of uniformity can be linked to a number of gradual cultural changes within society. As Inglehart (1990: 3) notes, "what people want out of life is changing."

Socioeconomic conditions have dramatically altered the characteristics of citizenship and political identity. As basic economic needs have been met and educational standards have improved, new, often niche, issues have become politicised (Dalton, 2008: 7; Inglehart, 1990: 4; Popkin, 1994). Inglehart describes this as a value change from "materialism," and the need to secure physical and economic necessities, to "post-materialism," and the pursuit of autonomy through self-expression (Inglehart,

1990: 68). Individuation is the modal social condition in post-industrial democracies (Bennett, 2012: 22).

Traditional representative associations have experienced a significant decline in their influence on political identity in Britain (Dahlgren, 2009: 28; Giddens, 1991: 214; Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley, 2004: 79). For example, bar a slight increase following the 2015 general election, political parties have seen their membership levels drop consistently, with less than 1 percent of the electorate now belonging to a party (Wilks-Heeg, Blick, and Crone, 2012). As grassroots party activism has become increasingly subjugated by centralisation, public support for parties has become much more conditional, often dependent on certain issues (Denver, 2006; Dunleavy, 2005; Hay, 2007; Heffernan, 2009: 445; Stoker, 2006; Whiteley, 2011). As Whiteley (2009: 55) argues, "cheer-leading is not an adequate incentive to promote their involvement."

Citizens increasingly identify with new emergent forms of group-based politics that are organised around personal identity (Dalton, 2008; Heffernan, 2009: 451; Norris, 2011). Such "new" political issues have little in common with the traditional left-right economic issues that previously delineated the partisan boundaries between the two major parties in Britain (Dalton, 2008; Denver, 2006; Inglehart, 1990; Heffernan, 2009; Sloam, 2012a: 7). These new organisations tend have less rigid hierarchies and offer self-actualisation rather than banal representation (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Karpf, 2012a).

As a result of these structural and socio-cultural changes, citizenship is now personally derived from one's sociological positioning, and engagement is focused around issues of importance to the individual, rather than overarching platforms or ideologies (Bauman, 1999, 2001; Dalton, 2008; Giddens, 1991; Inglehart, 1990; Norris, 2011; Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley, 2004; Svensson, 2011; Zukin et al., 2006). This decentralisation has enabled individuals to form political communities over shared interests, even niche commonalities, rather than being limited to geographical restrictions or hierarchical institutions (Bennett, Wells and Freelon, 2011: 836; Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Bimber, Flanagin and Stohl, 2012; Castells, 2001; Chadwick, 2006: 106; Dahlgren, 2009; Deuze, 2012: 134; Jenkins and Carpentier, 2013: 16; Karpf, 2012a; Papacharissi, 2010). Changes in citizenship are therefore facilitated, but not determined, by technological advancement, as new communication technologies enable these alternate, networked forms of political organisation to prosper. Group-based politics is more fluid, forming and dissipating on a seemingly ad-hoc, issue-to-issue basis. Described by some scholars as "networked individualism," citizens have the

capacity to join and form networked communities, constructing their own collective experience around issues in which they have an emotional investment (Castells, 2001; Rainie and Wellman, 2012).

A shift has therefore occurred away from structural models of citizenship, such as "civic voluntarism," in which macro-level social forces are responsible for participation (Verba and Nie, 1972; Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995), to "choice-based citizenship," where the personal identity of each individual citizen shapes their participation (Dalton, 2008; Norris, 2011; Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley, 2004: 140). Personal efficacy is key to understanding this choice-based model; if a citizen believes that their own participation has little impact on outcomes, whether political, social, or psychological, then there is little incentive to get involved. These outcomes are not limited to policy impact or material self-interest, but also include the symbolic rewards and sense of empowerment that citizens can accrue through participation (Bucy and Gregson, 2001: 365).

So how do people form their political identity? Networks challenge rigid, territorially bound identity, as each citizen balances a competing set of fluid, postmaterialist values. These values become politically significant in certain contexts and scenarios (Coleman, 2007: 170; Dalton, 2008: 25; Dahlgren, 2009). However, I do not suggest that these changes necessarily result in transnational citizenship, whereby identity is no longer tied to national or territorial boundaries whatsoever. Rather, the nation-state, as well as social factors like class, gender, and race, acts as a foundation for the construction of identity (Bellamy, 2008: 597; Dalton, 2008: 25; Pattie, Seyd, and Whiteley, 2004: 21). Political socialisation is still important.

Citizens now have multi-layered identities, in which a number of attitudinal orientations compete and converge to form our own personal construction of identity (Dalton, 2008: 25; Yuval-Davis, 2007). As shown in Figure 1.2, Dalton's (2008: 25) "hierarchical model of beliefs" illustrates how citizens mould their political identity based on the perceived importance of these different "layers" (Yuval-Davies, 2007; for examples in Britain see Ethnos, 2005; Wilks-Heeg, Blick and Crone, 2012). Consequently, digital media are used to shape and build upon the issue-interests that form at the intersection of these different layers.

Figure 1.2. A hierarchical model of beliefs

Structuring
principle

General
orientation

General
orientation

General
orientation

Specific
issue

Specific
issue

Specific
issue

Specific
issue

Specific
issue
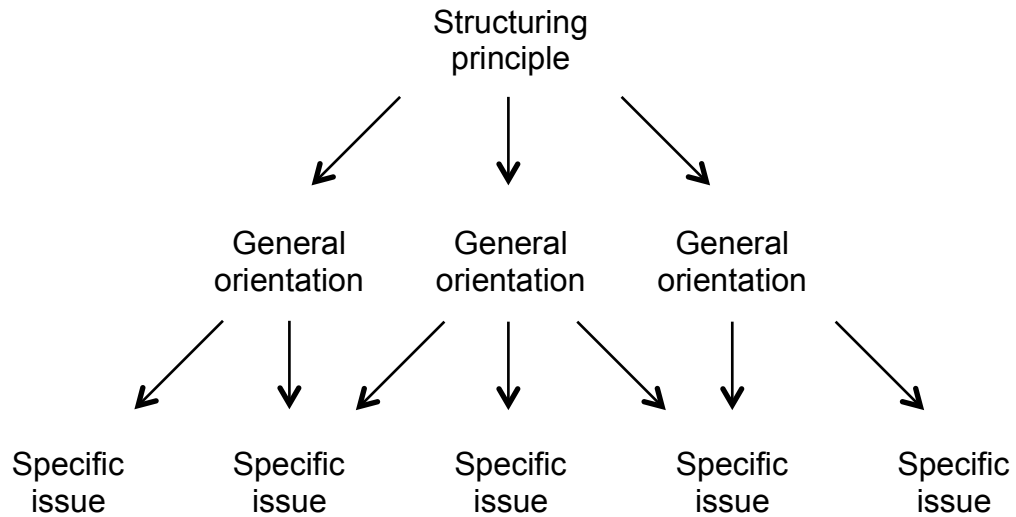
Source: Dalton (2008: 25)

Individual autonomy is central to modern citizenship. As traditional avenues of influence fail to diversify and evolve, alternative modes of self-expressive participation form and thrive (Coleman, 2007: 166; Dalton, 2008; Henn and Foard, 2012; Norris, 2011: 242; Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley, 2004; Sloam, 2012a: 7; Stanyer, 2005). Citizens seek new methods of influence that are reflexive to the different spatial domains in which political decisions take place, such as consumer activism (Bennett, 2012: 21; Micheletti, 2003; Ward, 2011). As Neuman, Bimber and Hindman (2011: 32) argue, if we look beyond formal, institutionalised politics, it is evident that citizens are not apathetic:

> [A] leading problem in this literature involves what constitutes political participation. Most research so far has focused on very traditional outcomes… but there are good reasons to think that many citizens, especially younger ones, are more interested in civic engagement, lifestyle politics, and citizen-directed advocacy than they are in institutionalised forms of participation.

A more nuanced understanding of participation is therefore required in order to account for the growth of alternative forms of political behaviour.

Political participation has been traditionally defined as those activities that aim to influence the selection of government personnel and the actions they take (Verba, Nie and Kim, 1978: 2). Acts typically include voting in elections, contacting representatives, party membership, and involvement in the policy process, such as through public consultations (Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995: 2). Evidence from the *Audit of Political Engagement* (Hansard Society, 2013; 2014; 2015)—the Hansard Society's annual "health check" on British democracy—shows that these acts are in decline in

Britain. Just 49 percent of those surveyed were certain that they would vote in the 2015 general election, while only 12 percent had contacted a political representative, at any level, during the previous twelve months (Hansard Society, 2015: 30-31). While the causes of this disengagement are disputed, Norris (2011: 8) links these trends to a growing dissatisfaction with the democratic performance of political institutions.

Two conflicting schools of thought contest the ramifications of this democratic deficit. Firstly, those advocating the "generational replacement" thesis argue that democracy is in crisis, as older, politically active citizens are replaced by an increasingly apathetic and disengaged youth (Putnam, 2000; Putnam, Feldstein and Cohen, 2004; Whiteley, 2012). However, the validity of this interpretation depends on how democratic engagement is conceptualised. Minimalist approaches to democracy confine participation to mere representation and elite influence within institutionalised politics. As such, active citizenship becomes synonymous with the institutions that govern (Cammaerts and Van Audenhove 2005; Carpentier, 2011a: 17; Carr and Porfilio, 2009: 134). However, as Fox (2013: 4) asks, should we focus on established "conventional" forms of behaviour, or do we need to take account of "unconventional" modes of engagement?

I argue that democratic systems are dynamic; they are based on a loose set of ideals that are subject to interpretation and renewal (Dalton, 2008: 2; Papacharissi, 2010: 11). As Papacharissi (2010: 11) argues, "if we accept that democracy as a concept is evolving and fluid, then the public or media (dis)engagement with the democratic system becomes consonant with that fluidity." Although traditional forms of engagement may be on the decline, this does not account for claims of holistic political disengagement. Rather, our frameworks for understanding political participation have become outdated (Cammaerts and Van Audenhove, 2005: 180; Coleman, 2007: 166; Inglehart, 1990: 422; Neuman, Bimber and Hindman, 2011: 32).

A second school of thought, "post-modern citizenship," has a very different evaluation of these trends. While recognizing the decline in these conventional acts, others argue that democracy is not under threat due to the rise of new forms of participation (Amnå and Ekman, 2014: 265; Bennett, 2008, 2012; Dalton, 2008; Dahlgren, 2009; Deuze, 2012: 156; Inglehart, 1990; Norris, 2011; Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley 2004; Papacharissi, 2010). A growing appetite for self-actualisation has fundamentally altered how citizens participate. As Norris (2011: 219) notes, "traditional political activities that arose and flourished in industrial societies during the late 19th and early 20th centuries are often thought to have peaked in the postwar era and waned

in popularity today." Participation is shifting to new, non-institutional forms of action, which are based on post-materialist values (Amnå and Ekman, 2014; Bennett, 2008, 2012; Dalton, 2008; Dahlgren, 2009; Henn, Weinstein and Forrest, 2005; Henn and Foard, 2012; Norris, 2011; O'Loughlin and Gillespie, 2012; Papacharissi, 2010; Sloam, 2012a; 2012b). Citizens increasingly prioritise issues that relate to their own personal political identity. Giddens (1991: 214) describes this as "life politics," "political issues which flow from processes of self-actualisation in post-traditional contexts, where globalizing influences intrude deeply into the reflexive project of the self, and conversely where processes of self-realisation influence global strategies." As life politics drives social and political identity, micro-political engagement becomes more common and, thus, empirically significant.

Academic research on political participation predominantly focuses on macro-political activities, those actions that aim to influence rules, laws, or policies (Norris, 2011: 247; Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley, 2004: 76). However, given the evolution from structural definitions of citizenship to choice-based models, micro-political participation is equally important. As Couldry (2012: 125) argues, "too many accounts of politics concentrate on institutions and neglect the level of individuals… this level is crucial to understanding whether people have reasons to act politically." Micro-politics refers to the day-to-day experiences that shape and form our political preferences (Norris, 2011: 247; Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley, 110; Scherer, 2007: 564). This emphasis on personal attitudes and private behaviours opens up new spaces for democratic involvement.

As the boundaries between the personal and political become more porous, civic forms of participation become politically significant. Civic participation is defined as "organized voluntary activity focused on problem solving and helping others. It includes a wide range of work undertaken alone or in concert with others to effect change" (Zukin et al., 2006: 7). Typical activities include volunteering, community outreach, and fundraising. A study of political life in the US illustrated how many are actively involved in forms of collective action in their community, but do not perceive these actions to be political (Zukin et al., 2007: 197). This highlights the disconnection between the evolution of political behaviour and the static, "voter-centric" definition of politics that is pervasive in advanced industrialised democracies. As Hay (2002: 3) argues, it is imperative that research adapts and explores the political significance of these seemingly non-political, social interactions:

> …the political should be defined in such a way as to encompass the entire sphere of the social. The implication of this is that events, processes and practices should not be labelled 'non-political' or 'extra-political' simply by virtue of the specific setting or context in which they occur. All events, processes and practices which occur within the social sphere have the potential to be political and, hence, to be amenable to political analysis. The realm of government is no more innately political, by this definition, than that of culture, law or the domestic sphere.

Similarly, other less visible, "passive" forms of engagement are often overlooked. Framing participation as active or passive has normative implications. Passivity is often synonymous with disillusionment or a lack of effort, when seemingly passive political behaviours may actually be beneficial to democracy (Amnå and Ekman, 2014: 263; Bucy and Gregson, 2001: 359). Bucy and Gregson (2001: 359) argue that, while passivity invokes a certain sense of detachment, activities such as news consumption, opinion formulation, and interpersonal discussion, represent important expressive behaviours that require time and effort. These activities are examples of "cognitive engagement," broadly defined as "paying attention to politics and public affairs" (Zukin et al., 2006: 54), and they are a necessary pre-condition of instrumental action (Amnå and Ekman, 2014; Carpentier, 2011b; Dalton, 2008; Hardy and Scheufele, 2006; Scheufele, 2001; Valenzuela, Kim and Gil de Zúñiga, 2011). These behaviours are particularly significant when we consider political efficacy. Traditional forms of engagement can lack the same observable and immediate symbolic rewards as these forms of civic and micro-level engagement (Bucy and Gregson, 2001; Coleman, Morrison and Yates, 2011: 216).

The growing popularity of these expressive forms of engagement means that the conventional-unconventional distinction is no longer relevant. We are not witnessing holistic political disengagement, or the erosion of British civic culture, but the birth of a new one that emphasises self-actualisation. The following chapter explores what role, if any, social media is playing in this emergent civic culture.

2. A New Research Agenda for Political Participation and Social Media

> Whether from digital enthusiasts or critics, hyperbole is unhelpful… there is often considerably more going on in DNA [digitally networked action] than clicktivism or facile organizational outsourcing of social networking to various commercial sites.
>
> (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012: 22)

Current scholarly debate reveals a number of fundamental deficiencies among both proponents and critics of online activism. These include, for example, analysing social media in isolation from other media, the use of anecdotal generalisations based on context-dependent case studies, and hard technological determinism. As a result, there has been a return to the utopian-dystopian dichotomy that bedevilled the social science of the internet during the 1990s. Slacktivism forms part of this vague and imprecise dichotomy. This chapter will outline the flaws present within the slacktivist critique, and propose a new research agenda in order to systematically analyse the relationship between routine social media use and political engagement.

2.1 Click Here to Save the World: The Roots of Slacktivism

> It has never been so easy to change the world; a horrible world, full of bigotry and social injustice and bankers and Starbucks and oblivious politicians. All you have to do is sit down at your computer screen, take a deep breath and tap a key. Abracadabra: suddenly, the politicians are a little less oblivious. And you, with your sense of common decency and rectitude, are empowered. That's all it took, a second, maybe a fraction of a second if your computer has a good connection. You might not even feel the need to take a deep breath.
>
> (Liddle, 2013)

Popular debate on the political value of social media is often framed as part of a deterministic dichotomy; either social media will usher in a new era of mass participation and political equality, or it will enable a dystopian, Orwellian future (see O'Loughlin, 2011: 350; Rieff, 2013; Thierer, 2010a; 2010b; Wright, 2012a; Zuckerman, 2013 for an overview). This debate may invoke a sense of déjà vu, as similar divides have accompanied new communication technologies throughout history (Carpentier, 2011b: 24; Chadwick, 2006: 18; Nielsen, 2011a). This divide between the so-called "utopians" (Carswell, 2012; Jarvis, 2009; 2011; Negroponte, 1995) and "dystopians" (Bauerlin, 2009; Gladwell, 2010; Keen, 2008) is illustrated through the

work, and conflicts,[2] of Clay Shirky (2008; 2010; 2011) and Evgeny Morozov (2011; 2013). According to Shirky (2011), as networked communities expand and become normalised within everyday communications, it is irrefutable that social technologies will be used for all future coordination of rapid and mass political mobilisation. Morozov's stance is markedly different. He refutes the ideals of the so-called cyber-optimists, instead arguing that social networking sites are simply entertainment platforms that distract citizens. These passive political acts compromise legitimate forms of offline activism (Morozov, 2009; 2011; 2013).

This dichotomy is fraught with inaccuracies that fail to comprehensively explore the relationship between the use of social media and political participation. The literature too often relies on anecdotal case studies to formulate generalisations on the dynamics of political behaviour (Wright, 2012a: 248). For instance, Gladwell (2010) and Morozov (2011: 190) refer to just a handful of Facebook groups in constructing their critique of slacktivism.[3] As Theocharis (2012: 2) notes, the political potential of social media is still relatively uncharted, and anecdotal evidence does little to address that research void. The problem at the heart of these debates is that both sides attempt to generate definitive conclusions about the nature of technological effects where none can be made. Furthermore, by resorting to hyperbole rather than rigorous empirical analysis, the debate has established a pervasive "either-or" frame in which academic work is often pigeonholed (Wright, 2012a: 248).

Given the polarised literature from which slacktivism originates, the term's precise definition is somewhat unclear. For example, slacktivism and clicktivism are often used interchangeably in popular discourse, despite clicktivism referring to a specific form of low-effort, online participation (Halupka, 2014), and slacktivism being used as a more general critique of participation that requires minimal effort (Karpf, 2010). Evidently, the term has undergone a radical transformation since its inception, as it was originally coined by Clark to describe small, personal scale activities undertaken to benefit a community (Christensen, 2011). Therefore, it is important to clearly define the term. The interpretation of slacktivism used in this thesis comes from the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition, referring to "[those] actions performed via the Internet in support of a political or social cause but regarded as requiring little time or

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[2] For example, see:
http://neteffect.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/01/15/picking_a_fight_with_clay_shirky.
[3] Morozov (2011: 190) refers to a Facebook group entitled "Saving the Children of Africa." Gladwell (2010) refers to the Facebook page of the Save Darfur Coalition.

involvement."[4] I use slacktivism, rather than clicktivism, as it is the more commonly used term within the field of political communication (Christensen, 2012: 3). In this thesis I predominantly focus on digital forms of micro-activism—a term that I use to describe low-threshold interactions without normative judgement—on Facebook and Twitter. In essence, slacktivism is a modern depiction of Olson's (1971) free-rider problem, as citizens avoid effort-intensive activism in favour of the gratification of easy, micro-activism online (Breuer and Farooq, 2012: 4; Christensen, 2012: 1; Morozov, 2011: 180).

Christensen (2011; 2012: 3) identifies two themes that link the term's use in academic (Breuer and Farooq, 2012; Karpf, 2010; Morozov, 2011; Rotman et al., 2011; Shulman, 2009), journalistic (Gladwell, 2010; Morozov, 2011), and activist (Khazan, 2013; White, 2010; 2011) circles. Firstly, low-effort forms of online engagement are less effective than traditional, offline methods of participation. These actions rarely achieve any substantive political impact. As Morozov (2011: 180) notes, "while Facebook-based mobilization will occasionally lead to genuine social and political change, this is mostly accidental, a statistical certainty rather than a genuine achievement. With millions of groups, at least one or two of them are poised to take off." Secondly, the futility of these actions is of paramount concern due to the substitution thesis, in which low-effort, online methods of engagement replace tried and tested activist repertoires. Examples of slacktivism include starting an e-petition, targeting a message at a politician on Twitter, or sharing campaign materials to wider networks on Facebook.[5]

A number of additional themes can be observed amongst proponents of the slacktivist critique. Firstly, the design of social networking sites is not conducive to effective activism. Gladwell (2010) argues that weak ties are formed on services like Facebook, whereas high-risk activism requires strong ties. With this shallow commitment comes large networks (Granovetter, 1973). This hinders organisational efficiency, as it is difficult to establish hierarchy in large groups (Gladwell, 2010; Morozov, 2011: 193-195).

Secondly, metrics are an indication of successful engagement on social networking sites, such as Facebook (followers, friend count, likes) and Twitter (favourites, followers, retweets). White (2010; 2011) contends that this logic permeates

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[4] Slacktivism [Def. 1]. (n.d.). In *Oxford Dictionaries Online,* Retrieved August 19, 2013, from http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/slacktivism.
[5] Although the slacktivist critique does not refer exclusively to political behaviour social networking sites, the term is most commonly used in popular discourse to refer to such cases (Morozov, 2011; Gladwell, 2010; White, 2010; 2011).

into the political arena, as political parties and pressure groups adopt marketing practices, such as tracking the click-through rate of campaign material as an indication of the level of involvement. By reducing the demands of a participant to ensure high levels of engagement, a mirage of active citizenship is cultivated, one that mistakes quantity for quality (Gladwell, 2010; Morozov, 2011: 187; Shulman, 2009; White, 2011). This appeal has resulted in some pressure groups inundating individuals with opportunities to engage, potentially raising political apathy as a result (Shulman, 2009).

Thirdly, those advocating the slacktivist critique also question the authenticity of users' actions online, claiming that these political behaviours are driven by self-gratification, or narcissistic self-presentation (Christensen, 2011; Morozov, 2009; 2011). The platforms of social media offer a variety of quick and easy fixes to satisfy one's desire for political involvement. Morozov (2011: 201) argues that this creates an illusion that a user is making a meaningful political impact, with potentially stark consequences for the balance of power between elites and the public. This also fuels the substitution thesis, as rigorous, traditional activities are compromised and replaced by ineffective micro-activism (Christensen, 2012: 5).

This appeal of low-effort political behaviour on social media is strengthened by the public nature of the digital-self online. Given the various transfigurations of the audience online, both within and between different social networking sites, users are motivated to act as a means of cultivating their image amongst networked peers (Morozov, 2009; 2011). This can result in viral cascades, such as the #Kony2012 campaign, that distort the salience of political issues as emotive matters gain excessive exposure (Sunstein, 2007: 84). This logic is epitomised by the title of Morozov's (2013) book, *To Save Everything, Click Here*. These campaigns are presented on social media as a statement of one's character (Morozov, 2011).

I argue that the slacktivist critique is indicative of the polarised dichotomy from which it originates. The critique is based on a series of causal assumptions that fail to comprehensively account for the potential use of these new technologies within everyday life. Revisions are therefore required to extract the relevant concerns and create a new, systematic research agenda for understanding the environment in which these new forms of social and political expression take place.

2.2 Refuting the Assertions of Slacktivism: A New Research Agenda for the Study of Political Participation and Social Media

> These myths of technologically enabled utopias or dystopias then predispose our reaction to technological innovations in ways that operate outside the realm of pragmatism.
>
> (Papacharissi, 2010: 8)

Slacktivism has become synonymous with a negative perception of the political value of social media. However, the critique is flawed by an overly narrow focus, analysing micro-activism in isolation from other modes of engagement (Knibbs, 2013a; Tufekci, 2012b), and from other forms of media, in what is now a hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013). As such, the critique lacks an appreciation for the complexity of normalised use, relying on anomalous case studies to support vague, grand theories of internet usage where none can be made (Theocharis, 2012: 2). In order to critically evaluate the relationship between social media and political engagement, one must first develop a comprehensive understanding of the environment in which this usage takes place. This thesis will examine the relationships formed between social media and other forms of online and offline communication, exploring the role of Facebook and Twitter as part of broader engagement repertoires. It is in the interactions that form between different modes of engagement within a hybrid media system that we will discover substantive conclusions on the relationship between social media and political participation.

The intention of this chapter is not to discard the hypotheses of the slacktivist critique, especially without any empirical evidence. Instead, I propose a number of theoretical problems. In order to provide a more accurate reflection of day-to-day use, the theoretical scope must be broadened. An alternate research agenda is proposed based on five key revisions.

2.2.1 A Nuanced Conceptualisation of the Participatory Process: The Continuum of Participation

> Politics is not defined by the *locus* of its operation but by its nature as a *process*.
>
> (Hay, 2002: 3, emphasis in original)

Firstly, the slacktivist critique evaluates the relationship between acts of digital micro-activism and the desired political outcome in isolation (Karpf, 2012a: 8). This

deterministic, causal relationship lacks an appreciation of the expansive, procedural foundations at the heart of political engagement (Arnstein, 1969; Carpentier, 2011b; Fung, 2006; Vegh, 2003). This emphasis on "end-product" actions ignores the role that social networking sites play in relation to information exchange, discursive engagement, and political mobilisation.

A key theme amongst proponents of the slacktivist critique is that campaigns conducted on social networking sites are ineffective in producing political change. As Rickett (2013) argues, "Facebook is not going to catch Joseph Kony and we won't tweet our way to peace in Syria." However, as Figure 2.1—a meme shared in the aftermath of the #Kony2012 campaign—shows, this critique implies that low-threshold interactions form a causal relationship with the desired political effect(s). In doing so, the critique ignores the complex array of factors that result in a political outcome. Moreover, conventional forms of participation seldom bring such immediate results, be they party membership, voting, or even real space protest (Bucy and Gregson, 2008: 376). Take, for instance, the 2003 protests which saw around two million people take to the streets of London to object to the imminent Iraq War (Kettell, 2006: 96). This shortcoming is exacerbated when these acts of micro-activism are compared to revolutionary change (Gladwell, 2010; Morozov, 2009; 2011; White, 2010; 2011). Instinctively, low-effort forms of online engagement will not feasibly produce systemic political change on their own (Couldry, 2012: 125). By focusing on this deterministic relationship, the slacktivist critique ignores the process of engagement that enables an individual to participate. Whether voting in an election or sending a tweet to your Member of Parliament (MP), active citizenship depends on access to informational resources, opportunities to take part in discursive spaces, and the capacity to organise. Moreover, forms of symbolic participation, like self-expression on social media, commonly complement other direct and representative forms of participation (Fung, 2006: 66).

Figure 2.1. A meme based on #Kony2012 that illustrates the causal relationship between digital micro-activism and political change

These forms of symbolic involvement are overlooked because the slacktivist critique focuses on the macro-level as the arena in which power is contested and exercised. This emphasis on observable, end-product action omits the significance of the micro-level and the attitudes and behaviours of individual citizens. As Wright (2012a: 249) notes, it may be the case that more democratically important political and social changes occur amongst the interactions of ordinary citizens. Although a number of studies describe the individualisation of political identity and the rise of postmaterialist political action (Dalton, 2008; Giddens, 1991; Inglehart, 1990; Norris, 2011), very few studies of online engagement account for levels of political interest, political knowledge, or include attitudinal measures (Boulianne, 2009: 195). I argue that our definition of political participation should be broadened, taking into account this process of enablement (Breuer and Farooq, 2012: 5; Carpentier, 2011b; Christensen, 2011; Karpf, 2010: 29; 2012b; Rotman et al., 2011). As Breuer and Farooq (2012: 5) note, "it appears justifiable to regard the digital expression of individual political preferences as belonging to the larger set of activities defined as political participation."

Vegh (2003: 72) notes that online activism generally falls into three distinct categories across a "ladder of engagement," each of which can either be internet-enhanced, supporting offline efforts, or internet-based: (1) awareness and advocacy, (2) organisation and mobilisation, and (3) action/reaction. The slacktivist critique isolates the action stage. As such, the potential of online technologies to share informational goods, as a means for symbolic participation, and as an organisational tool, is

discounted. Similarly, Carpentier (2011a; 2011b) offers a process-based approach entitled the "access, interaction and participation model," arguing that access to political content and socio-communicative relationships represent prerequisite conditions for participation.

However, while access and interaction remain important conditions for participation, Carpentier (2011a: 31) argues they cannot be equated to participation. In doing so, he disagrees with Jenkins (2006; Jenkins and Carpentier, 2013) who describes information consumption and political discussion as participatory acts. As Carpentier (2011b: 69) notes, "they are distinct from participation because of their less explicit emphasis on power dynamics and decision making." As such, this model reinforces the concept of slacktivism by isolating acts that explicitly display the contestation of power between actors. I argue that this is conceptually problematic for a number of reasons.

Firstly, power is diffuse across the model as access and interaction are inextricably linked to participation. An awareness and understanding of a political issue, formed through media consumption or interpersonal discussion, may well define how a citizen acts. The consumption of information empowers a citizen, as it provides them with the informational goods on which to act (Delli Carpini, Cook and Jacobs, 2004; Jenkins, 2006; Norris, 2011). Power is also evident in the way that information is communicated between a producer and a receiver, a process defined as "framing," "selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues and making connections among them as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation or solution" (Entman, 2004: 5). Traditionally, this meant that elite actors exercised power by using media frames to shape how those consuming the information made sense of an event or issue (Castells, 2009: 115; Coleman, Anthony and Morrison, 2009: 2; Graber, 2004: 548; Ward, 2011: 167). Networked communications pose new questions regarding these established logics, as individual citizens can bypass traditional frames, challenge them, and even create new ones (Castells, 2009: 164; Chadwick, 2011; Dahlgren, 2009: 172; Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2010; Levy, 1997; Nip, 2007: 230; Rawnsley, 2005: 179; Tewksbury and Rittenberg, 2012: 163). As such, the desire and means to participate depend upon how political information is framed.

Similarly interaction, by definition, is always relational and power dynamics are displayed in the exchanges between actors (Jenkins and Carpentier, 2013: 12). This is especially true on social media, given the discrepancies in visibility and influence between users (Couldry, 2012: 122; Graham and Wright, 2013; Sunstein, 2007: 86). On the other hand, interpersonal discussion can help citizens contextualise and understand

political information (Eveland and Shah, 2003; Hardy and Scheufele, 2006; Scheufele, 2001: 29). As McLeod, Scheufele, and Moy (1999: 329) note, "communication plays a critical role in either motivating participation or making it possible." Therefore political conversations, either face-to-face or online, shape the conditions for participation (Shah et al., 2005; Valenzuela, Kim and Gil de Zúñiga, 2011).

However, although I argue that access, interaction, and participation are interconnected, they do not necessarily form a causal model. Public actions are not guaranteed to follow, as information consumption and interactions may remain confined to private spaces. Bakardjieva (2009: 96) describes this as "subactivism," "small-scale, often individual decisions and actions that have either a political or ethical frame of reference (or both) and remain submerged in everyday life." Actions include reading a newspaper, conversations with friends, either face-to-face (Eliasoph, 1998) or with networked peers (Wright, 2012b), playing videogames (Skoric and Kwan, 2011), and watching television (Coleman, 2007: 167; Jones, 2005). Power is contested in these seemingly insignificant activities. As Bakardjieva (2009: 96) argues, "it is not about political power in the strict sense, but about personal empowerment seen as the power of the subject to be the person that they want to be in accordance with his or her reflexively chosen moral and political standards." The information that an individual consumes and the conversations they have, even if mundane or informal, can have an effect on how they shape their political identity (Bakardjieva, 2009; Couldry, Livingstone and Markham, 2010). Furthermore, these micro-political behaviours can wield substantial political power when considered collectively, either as a challenge to elites (Chadwick, 2012: 54), or in reinforcing the authority of a political community (Bucy and Gregson, 2001: 357; Svensson, 2011: 649).

This public-private distinction becomes more complex given the porousness of visibility online. Since clicks are measurable, and can be easily visualised, they become an easy proxy for engagement within the slacktivist critique. However, this neglects the complexity of how we use social media, as the boundaries between mass and interpersonal communication become blurred (Baym, 2010: 4; Papacharissi, 2010). Online self-expression can be published to public, semi-public, or private spaces depending on the service functionality. For example, a post to another user's "wall" on Facebook, or a tweet directed at another user, can be interpersonal in that this communication is intended for another individual, but, under normal use, these can also be viewed by a wider audience (Baym, 2010: 4). Thereby, user generated content can even have political effects without the expressed intent of the user. One example of this

is what Anstead and O'Loughlin (2012: 4) describe as "semantic polling" techniques, which involve "pulling vast datasets from Twitter then machine-reading this content using natural language processing techniques in an effort to quantify the tone of public opinion."

Owing to these limitations the access, interaction, participation model is too restrictive, neglecting the important power dynamics that citizens encounter in everyday life. The socio-communicative relationships that Carpentier distinguishes from participation are also sites of power, as individuals or groups try to persuade and shape the preferences of others through forms of communication (Lukes, 2005). However, the model does offer a way of overcoming the active-passive dichotomy in political participation research (Amnå and Ekman, 2014: 263; Bucy and Gregson, 2001: 359; Fox, 2013: 3; Theocharis, 2012). Carpentier links these seemingly passive behaviours, which are often ignored, to forms of political action. Based on the process-based approaches proposed by Vegh (2003) and Carpentier (2011a; 2011b), I offer an alternative model, the continuum of participation, illustrated in Figure 2.2.

Figure 2.2. The continuum of participation model
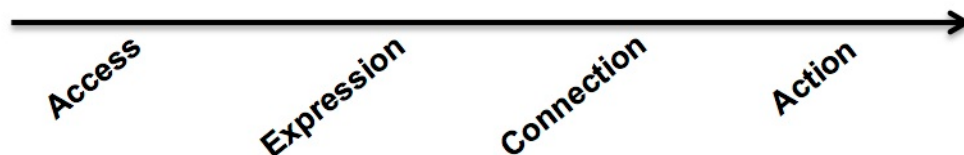
The continuum of participation reflects the idea that engagement is a process, rather than an outcome. As Table 2.1 illustrates, the descriptive model consists of four stages. Access refers to cognitive engagement, and the ways by which citizens pay attention to politics and public affairs. Expression encapsulates forms of political communication between citizens. The effects of expression can vary across the continuum depending on the motivations of the user, how receivers use this information, and the composition of the audience, such as: one-many; real-imagined; online-offline; public-semi-public. Connection represents the processes of political organisation, as citizens use social media to establish and join networks for a range of purposes. These consist of both strong and weak tie relationships, depending on the issue. Finally, action signifies goal-orientated, public-political acts, as social networking sites are used for digital activism, or form part of interconnected engagement

repertoires. By using this approach, and exploring the relationships between the different stages, a new set of questions emerge regarding the value of social media as a tool for political learning, for the honing of personal identity, for discursive participation, and for public forms of self-expression. This model is developed in Chapter 3.

Table 2.1. Describing the continuum of participation model

Stage of the continuum of participation	Description
Access	Cognitive engagement and the ways by which citizens pay attention to politics and public affairs. Information consumption shapes personal political identity.
Expression	Users post a variety of personally expressive content on social media as a means of political participation.
	The effects of expression can vary across the continuum depending on the motivations of the user, the composition of the audience, and how receivers use this information.
Connection	The processes of political organisation, as citizens join like-minded others to coordinate political action.
Action	Goal-orientated, public-political acts—online and offline—or those behaviours that complement other online and/or offline political acts as part of engagement repertoires.

The marriage equality campaign lead by the Human Rights Campaign, an LGBT equal rights organisation based in the United States, demonstrates that a new theoretical approach is needed as the boundaries between self-expression, subactivism, and instrumental action become blurred. In March 2013, the group shared a red version of its logo to coincide with the Supreme Court hearing two, potentially groundbreaking, cases on marriage equality. The organisation encouraged its supporters to change their profile picture on a number of social networking sites to show their support (Knibbs, 2013b). Advocates, in the form of individual supporters, other political groups, and commercial brands, went one-step further and remixed the logo, fusing it with a variety of political and cultural icons, including: the U.S. constitution; the popular video games

character "Super Mario"; the film franchise *Star Wars*; and the internet meme "Grumpy Cat," as shown in Figure 2.3 (Garcia, 2013). If evaluated as a direct tactic to sway the opinion of those Justices adjudicating the case, as the slacktivist critique would propose, the campaign was most likely a failure. However, this overly simplistic approach lacks an awareness of the wider benefits of the campaign, which can be seen when mapped on the continuum of participation. Supporters personalised pre-existing content to fit the narrative and, in doing so, were simultaneously raising awareness and providing a platform for further action (Bennett, 2008; Bennett, Wells and Freelon, 2011; Deuze, 2012: 165). As Knibbs (2013a) notes, "the fact that so many people were participating in this small way did bring attention to the issue, and underlined how mainstream the support of this once-fringe cause has become."

Figure 2.3. Examples of re-mixing content from the Equal Rights Campaign, March 2013
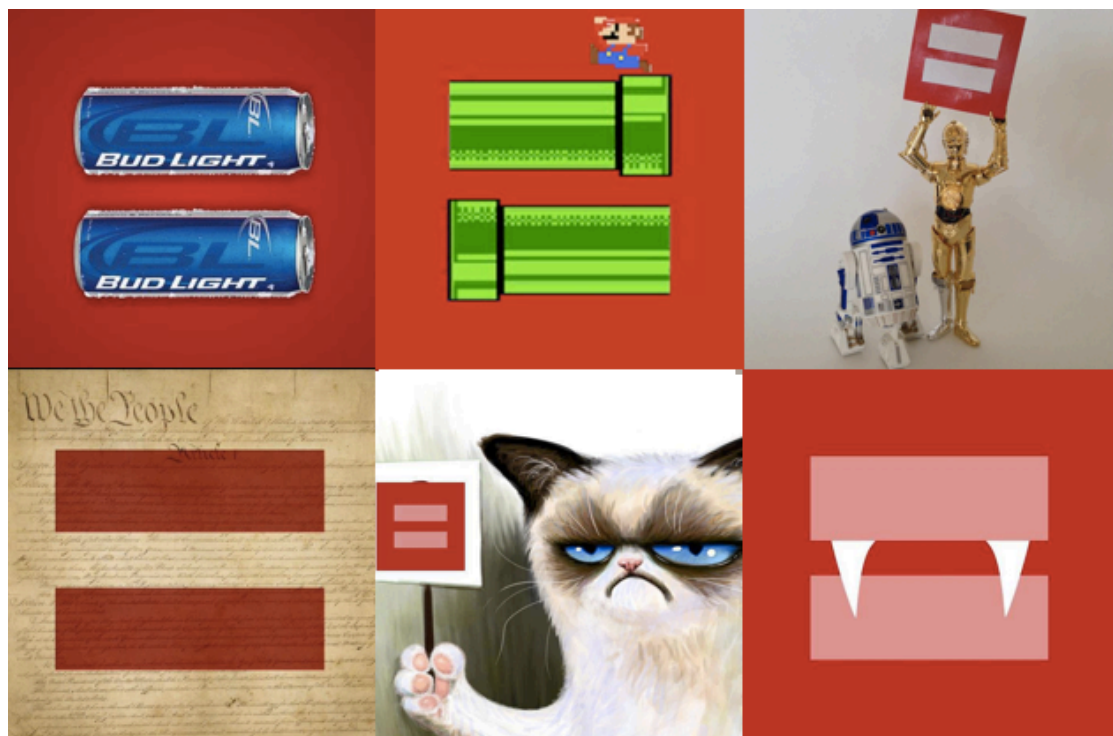
Source: Adapted from Garcia (2013)

This thesis will describe how different forms of engagement enmesh across the continuum of participation, and the role that social networking sites play within these repertoires. Do social media form part of a meaningful participatory model (Rotman et al., 2011), or do services like Facebook and Twitter prove unsuccessful when trying to turn awareness into action (Morozov, 2011: 191)?

2.2.2 The Hybrid Media System: The Three Spheres of Hybridity

> If we understand political participation as solely within party, campaign, or movement organizations and if we look at its varieties (e.g., conventional and unconventional) as somewhat alternative to each other, than we lose sight of the many ways in which old and new political organizations and their supporters are integrating different modes of political engagement in everyday activities.
>
> (Vaccari, 2013: 222)

The slacktivist critique focuses on social media in isolation. By claiming that tried and tested offline methods are more effective than digital micro-activism, the slacktivist critique falls foul of "digital dualism," the belief that online and offline are distinct and separate realities (Jurgenson, 2011). As such the critique fails to account for the empirical reality of contemporary activism, as fluid online and offline tactics intersect throughout the continuum of participation. As Karpf notes (2010: 28), low-effort, high volume micro-activism makes up just a single tactic in the strategic repertoire of actions used by both citizens and organisations. The interconnectivity of social media, coupled with the mass adoption of services such as Facebook and Twitter, provides political parties, pressure groups, and social movements with a body of activists and organisational tools for collective action. As such, micro-activism often compliments other online (Christensen, 2011; Rotman et al., 2011) and offline tactics (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012: 22; Bimber, Flanagin and Stohl, 2012; Karpf, 2012a).

Furthermore, the condemnation of an entire communication medium as low-effort lacks an awareness of similar, relatively easy, offline political tasks such as political consumerism, postcard campaigns, or even voting (Breuer and Farooq, 2012: 13; Christensen, 2011; Karpf, 2010; Leonard, 2009; Ward, 2011: 164). Moreover, users can also undertake high-effort acts on social networking sites, by creating political groups or devoting hours to civic discussion. It is therefore not a question of engagement on social networking sites being defined by low-effort slacktivism, but a renewal of these engagement forms within a new communicative space (Karpf, 2010; 2012).

In highlighting the weaknesses of digital micro-activism, and claiming that offline activism is more effective, the medium itself supersedes user behaviour as the focus of analysis. However, technology does not possess some innate quality to influence human behaviour (Chadwick, 2006: 18; Tufekci and Freelon, 2013: 843-844; Wright, 2012a: 246). Therefore, the slacktivist critique represents a form of

technological determinism, as the characteristics of the technology shape political behaviour, rather than the intentions of the user.

The first sphere of hybridity refers to how social networking sites are often used to support other forms of online and offline engagement as part of interconnected engagement repertoires, where repertoires refer to the participatory tactics and structural form adopted by a political group. Traditionally, different organisational structures adopt different repertoires depending on their position and goals within a political system (Chadwick, 2007: 285). However, Chadwick (2007: 286) argues that different organisational forms are becoming increasingly hybridised as they adopt "digital network repertoires," where online and offline techniques are being amalgamated, with new kinds of actions accompanying classic ones at the local, national, and transnational level. This blurring of engagement tactics is evident in a survey of 53 pressure groups in the US, where Obar, Zube and Lampe (2012: 10) found that groups adapted their use of social media around existing campaign strategy to suit their specific organisational goals. The leadership of these groups underlined the benefits of social media in facilitating new forms of activism, "helping groups to mount collective campaigns for issues that perhaps couldn't have been addressed in the past due to the time constraints imposed by older communication models" (Obar, Zube and Lampe, 2012: 16).

Theocharis (2012) has demonstrated this organisational flexibility in a study of the 2010 university occupations against the UK government's planned cuts to higher education. Theocharis (2012: 179) notes two distinct contexts in which Twitter can be used. Firstly, the "mobilising stage," where Twitter was used to provide information to wider audiences, to set an agenda for the movement through communication with other activists, and for the logistical planning of future protest events. Secondly, the leadership used Twitter during the demonstrations to disseminate crucial information to activists on the ground in real time, in what Theocharis (2012: 179) characterises as "dynamic" or "demonstrational" use. Subsequently, the use of Twitter was not simply an easy, symbolic online action, but a fusion of online and offline engagement tactics that were fluid throughout the mobilisation process.

Therefore, social media enable a great deal of flexibility at the organisational level, as groups can vary their action repertoires depending on the issue or campaign (Bimber, Flanagin and Stohl, 2012; Bennett and Segerberg, 2013; Chadwick, 2007: 284; Karpf, 2012a). The speed and reach of networked communication platforms enable groups to switch and change their engagement tactics during a campaign. As such, social media do not replace the established norms of collective action, as claimed in the

substitution thesis, but they empower political parties, pressure groups and social movements to diversify their engagement tactics (Bimber, Stohl and Flanagin, 2009: 74). Furthermore, these technological affordances have enabled the growth of entirely new political organisations. As Karpf (2012: 156) argues, "a new generation of netroots organisations has emerged… Their advocacy work extends well beyond 'clicktivism,' engaging supporters in large-scale, sustained collective action. Their work routines and campaign strategies are built around the Internet." It is therefore crucial to evaluate the role of Facebook and Twitter within these wider engagement repertoires.

Secondly, by focusing on social media in isolation, the slacktivist critique constructs an arbitrary barrier between online and offline that ignores the impact of media convergence on information consumption and interpersonal discussion (Chadwick, 2013; Jenkins, 2006). The slacktivist critique detaches moments of discussion and expression, focusing on just one service or one event (Wright, 2012a: 252). This is problematic, as our everyday political experiences are fundamentally diffuse. As Wright notes (2012a: 254), "people don't discuss politics in one place or using one technology; they use a variety of applications from email to Facebook and blogs to discussion forums – and these are often intertwined heavily and cross-fertilize." Moreover, this one-dimensional approach neglects how our behaviours on social networking sites influence our offline relationships and networks (Baym, 2010: 9; Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe, 2007; Valenzuela, Kim and Gil de Zúñiga, 2011: 167). As such, a new approach is required—the second sphere of hybridity—that accounts for the convergence of media, where convergence is defined as "the flow of content across multiple media platforms, co-operation between multiple media industries and the migratory behaviour of media audiences" (Jenkins, 2006: 2).

Chadwick (2013: 3) argues that Britain and the US now have "hybrid media systems," which are built upon the interactions within and between different forms of media. Chadwick uses hybridity and flux to conceptualise a holistic approach to the study of media. Rather than differentiating between "new" and "old" media logics—where logics are defined as "technologies, genres, norms, behaviors, and organizational forms"—he argues that power in empirical studies of political communication can only be understood in the relationships and tensions that form between them. The increasingly fluid power dynamics between content producers and consumers, both professional and amateur, is leading to significant changes for political citizenship in Britain:

This goes beyond the simple fact that citizens are now able to express themselves online in public forums. In the hybrid media system it is older media's systemic integration and expectation of citizen expression occurring in newer media environments that often makes the difference. Internet-driven norms of networking, flexibility, spontaneity and ad hoc organizing have started to diffuse into our politics and media and these norms are generating new expectations about what counts as effective and worthwhile political action.

(Chadwick, 2013: 210)

The hybrid media system is an important step in bypassing the aforementioned utopian-dystopian dichotomy. It expands the parameters of media use, rather than isolating a specific social networking site or detaching participation as an offline-only practice (Boulianne, 2009: 195).

The hybrid media system does not, necessarily, equate to a more inclusive form of democracy. While Chadwick (2013: 58-59) does propose that hybridity presents opportunities in which citizens can exert power, traditional elites can, and do, adapt to these new environments. In what Kreiss (2012) defines as "structured interactivity," political parties restrict the agency of social media users by directing citizen participation to those tasks that the leadership need completing. Likewise, broadcast media are still a central cog in the mechanics of media production. For instance, most user generated content is dependent on the informational resources provided by mass media, including newspaper, radio broadcasting, and television (Chadwick, 2013; Jenkins, 2006: 13). However, as media systems become more hybridised, the control an actor has over these information flows weakens and more opportunities exist for citizens to disrupt and influence the framing of an agenda, issue, or event.

This augmentation of digital and broadcast media can be illustrated by the convergence of television and social media. Putnam (2000) argues that television weakens citizen engagement, as isolated viewers passively consume television. However, interactive digital platforms change the viewing experience, creating what Anstead and O'Loughlin (2011: 441) describe as the "viewertariat," users who comment, share, or re-mix content on social platforms as they watch television. Jenkins (2006: 3) argues that these new behaviours mark a cultural shift in which consumption is no longer passive but active, breaking down the distinctions between producer and consumer. This trend is increasingly apparent across television, with audience participation a key feature of: reality shows, such as *Big Brother* (Coleman, 2007: 167) and *The X Factor* (Wakefield, 2011); sports programming (Winter, 2012); and live

coverage of political events, such as the inauguration of Barack Obama (Wohn and Eun-Kyung, 2011).

This activity is what Karpf (2012: 166-168) describes as "activated public opinion," disorganised forms of online political speech that do not mesh with our traditional understanding of political participation or communication. Social networking sites offer a venue for citizens to speak out, share opinions, and spread news. What is so unique about this digital self-expression is the diverse range of effects seemingly identical acts can produce. A tweet can be an isolated instance of opinion expression that becomes submerged in the digital sea (Neuman, Bimber and Hindman, 2011). However, when undertaken collectively, the same action can be part of powerful, co-ordinated political action.

For example, in September 2012, the American weekly magazine *Newsweek* used a controversial headline, "MUSLIM RAGE," to describe a number of anti-U.S. protests in the wake of a YouTube trailer for the low-budget film, *Innocence of Muslims*. Twitter users across the globe took offence to this sensationalist headline and the generalisations made from a protest in which only a few hundred participated (Nasr, 2012). A hashtag, #muslimrage, was created to contest and reframe the narrative, drawing on a mixture of humour and personal anecdotes, as shown in Figure 2.4. This new narrative, generated by disorganised, large-scale self-expression, fed into broadcast media coverage, as the reaction was reported in the *Guardian* (Hotz, 2012)*,* the Huffington Post (Mirkinson, 2012), and the *New York Times* (Kirkpatrick, 2012). This example illustrates the complex power dynamics in-play within the hybrid media system, as new and old media logics intertwine. Self-expression online often depends on the informational resources and reach of professional media, but simultaneously wields the potential to challenge established information hierarchies (Deuze, 2012: 137; see "cascading network activation," Entman, 2004: 9). In isolation, this self-expression may seem trivial or insignificant, but using the theoretical lens of the hybrid media system we can see the disruptive effects of so-called slacktivism.

Figure 2.4. The *Newsweek* cover (17/09/2012), accompanied by two examples of #muslimrage tweets

Source: Hend (2012); Hixson (2012)

This example of remix culture, where existing content is adapted or built upon to convey a different meaning, highlights the third sphere of hybridity: the diffusion of the political into social, especially entertainment-orientated, spaces (Bennett, Wells and Freelon, 2011: 842; Chadwick, 2012: 45; Karpf, 2012a: 168; Lessig, 2008; Jenkins, 2006: 208). The slacktivist critique tends to be dismissive of social media, arguing that it generally serves to entertain and distract a user with gossip, lolcats, and BuzzFeed, rather than provide civic or political informational goods (Morozov, 2009; 2011: 81-82). However, the boundaries between what is deemed to be political and non-political are not static and vary from person-to-person.

Political decisions are often made based on everyday experiences. As Delli Carpini and Williams (2000: 161, emphasis in original) argue, "individuals are *simultaneously* citizens, consumers, audiences, family members, workers, and so forth. Politics is built upon deep-seated cultural values and beliefs that are imbedded in the seemingly non-political aspects of public and private life." Our personal life and private experiences shape the conditions of our participation (Bauman, 2001; Dahlgren, 2009: 27-33; Giddens, 1991). As such, those conversations on social media that seem trivial may have unseen political consequences (Chadwick, 2012; Gaines and Mondak, 2009: 218; Papacharissi, 2009: 230; Wright, 2012a; 2012b). Latent political actors exist in the form of those users who become accustomed to the self-expressive norms of social networking sites, sharing aspects of their daily life (Couldry, 2012: 122). Therefore, it is

necessary to adopt a porous definition of the political in order to understand engagement at the individual level.

For instance, culture can play an important role in guiding democratic citizenship. Howard (2011: 57) defines culture, from a network perspective, as "the relations of production, consumption, power and experience—along with the information infrastructure that support these relations." Therefore, culture is not simply something we passively consume. Authority is maintained and contested through culture; it creates norms, expectations, and hierarchy that affect how a citizen behaves in political life (Hall, as cited in Procter, 2004: 1). As such, convergence culture does not mark a qualitative change in terms of where politics happens, as politics was always diffused through culture. We can see evidence of this porousness in "infotainment," television programmes that blend entertainment and political information (Bastien, 2009: 70; Brants, 1999; Baym, 2005: 259; Coleman, 2007: 185; Graber, 2004: 552; Jones, 2005: 118). Television shows, like *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* in the US (Baym, 2005) and *Have I Got News for You* in Britain (Jones, 2005)*,* use humour to lower the entry costs to news and political debate. However, the internet has fundamentally altered the way we consume and produce culture. The combination of cultural fragmentation and growing individualisation has led to the birth of new cultural artefacts (Howard, 2011: 62; Gerodimos and Ward, 2007: 116; Jurgenson, 2012). These include, for example, "memes": an image, typically humorous in nature, that is copied, adapted, and built upon, and then spread online. Jurgenson (2012) argues that memes represent a rejection of passive consumption and an active attempt to assert individual autonomy. An individual chooses what to share, and repositions a mass, cultural artefact as a statement about oneself; "the meme is personal is political" (Jurgenson, 2012).

As such, the civic culture in Britain is far removed from the one described by Almond and Verba (1963). Dahlgren (2005; 2006; 2009) argues that we now have multiple civic cultures in which different cultural and social groups can express civic commonality in different ways. These civic cultures serve as the pre-conditions for participation, the everyday experiences that guide our sense making processes and stimulate political participation (Dahlgren, 2005: 157-158). In exploring these new civic cultures, we must engage with a diverse range of seemingly non-political, often informal, spaces, in which political issues emerge organically (Coleman, 2007: 167; Couldry, 2012; Dahlgren, 2009; Deuze, 2012; Wright, 2012a: 251-257).

The transition from a broadcast era to a hybrid media system opens up a number of questions. Rather than focusing on examples of slacktivism in isolation, this thesis

will examine the three spheres of hybridity outlined. Firstly, in an activist context, how are Facebook and Twitter used alongside other modes of political action? Secondly, in day-to-day life, how do citizens combine forms of traditional media with social media? Is the audience now active (Anstead and O'Loughlin, 2011; Bennett, Wells and Freelon, 2011; Bucy and Gregson, 2001: 367; Chadwick and Stanyer, 2011: 236-237)? Finally, using a diary methodology, I will examine in what spaces—online and offline—citizens consume political information, discuss issues, and engage in subactivism.

2.2.3 A Matter of Scale: Time, Granularity and the Digital Divide

> Chief obstacles to realizing collective goals, including locating a critical mass of people with shared interests, providing opportunities for meaningful forms of distributed contribution, and coordinating people's actions efficiently have all been diminished by technological tools that fundamentally enhance connectivity among people.
>
> (Bimber, Flanagin and Stohl, 2012: 2-3)

A central component of the slacktivist critique is effort. Slacktivism is often described as a "lazy person's activism," as activists abandon effort-intensive, real space political action in favour of easier methods online (Breuer and Farooq, 2012: 4). As Morozov (2011: 190) argues, "thanks to its granularity, digital activism provides too many ways out." Although this granularity—defined as "the extent to which the creation of informational public goods may be disaggregated into tasks of varying degree" (Chadwick, 2012: 40)—may amplify the number of participants involved, those advocating the slacktivist critique argue this masks the effortless and largely ineffective actions undertaken (Gladwell, 2010; White, 2010).

However, how is effort defined in this context? If we return to the definition of slacktivism in the *Oxford English Dictionary*,[6] it is apparent that effort is synonymous with time. This suggests that the depth of someone's commitment to a cause, or the quality of democratic engagement at the individual level, can be measured by time. However, it is dangerous to simply assume that the more time a citizen devotes to politics, the more impactful their actions will be. Furthermore, it is unrealistic to claim that active citizenship requires such high levels of commitment. This relationship ignores the importance of scale in two respects. Firstly, it ignores the power of volume.

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[6] "Actions performed via the Internet in support of a political or social cause but regarded as requiring little time or involvement."

A single e-petition signatory may seem insignificant but collectively, thousands or millions of signatories can have significant gravitas (Bochel, 2013). Secondly, scale is an important characteristic of the continuum of participation. If we consider the time pressure that citizens experience on a daily basis, then the granularity of digital engagement represents an important means of maintaining awareness, keeping a toe in the water so to speak, sometimes sparking further involvement at opportune moments. Therefore it is important to examine the context in which these apparent quick fixes take place.

Time is a resource that has unique properties. Everyone, regardless of their place within society, has just twenty-four hours in a single day, making it a resource that is inherently scarce (Goodin et al., 2008: 3). As such, it is rational to assume that the amount of time that we allocate to politics indicates the strength of our involvement. But such an assumption disregards the complexity of political behaviour at the individual level, ignoring how our perception of time affects our actions. In their study on citizenship in Britain, Pattie, Seyd, and Whiteley (2004: 175) argue that citizens increasingly seek to make an observable impact with, often, the lowest time demands. This is a result of rising time-pressure, the all too common feeling that we just don't have enough hours in the day to fulfil all of our ambitions (Goodin et al., 2008: 69).

Goodin, Rice, Parpo, and Eriksson (2008) compare the amount of "discretionary time" that a person has control over across six countries. More commonly referred to as "spare time," they argue that the two terms are conceptually different. Discretionary time is the amount of time that an individual has autonomous control over after deducting what is strictly needed for *necessary* activities, identified as bodily, financial, and household requirements (Goodin et al., 2008: 35). However, people do more in regards to these three necessities than is needed. Spare time is defined as "the amount of time you have left over after all the time you actually devote to paid labour, unpaid household labour and personal care" (Goodin et al., 2008: 36). Typically, the amount of spare time available to a citizen is much less than the level of discretionary time.

Two factors account for this perceived restriction of temporal autonomy. Firstly, flux and instability characterise modern work, as citizens shift between different careers, temporary work, and spells of unemployment, a consequence of which is both an increase of autonomy but also stress (Bennett, 2012: 25; Goodin et al., 2008: 69). This anxiety permeates into our domestic duties, especially with the rise of single parent families (Goodin et al., 2008: 69). Secondly, being busy has become a social symbol, as people work harder for the microeconomic benefits and status derived from career

progression (Goodin et al., 2008). This is not to say that past generations did not possess a strong work ethic, but that these changes must be understood as part of broader cultural developments. Inglehart (1970; 1990) describes this as a by-product of the value change from materialism to post-materialism, as citizens seek more freedom over their time to pursue the things that they enjoy or, more broadly, value.

The sum effect of these changes is the existence of a "time-pressure illusion," the gap between one's perception of their spare time and the actual level of discretionary time available to them (Goodin et al., 2008: 85). The anxiety and strain itself is evidently not an illusion, but the sense of pressure stems from the impression that work beyond a level of necessity is required (Goodin et al., 2008: 99). Evidently, this sense of time pressure varies at the individual level, as restrictions to one's temporal autonomy depend on their lifestyle choices. However, unlike many other resources, the acute feeling of time-pressure is somewhat universal. Those citizens on a low-income must spend more time to fulfil their basic necessities, while those on a high-income exist within a culture of success that benefits those who work hardest. These economic and socio-political changes mean that, as time becomes increasingly scarce, individuals prioritise involvement with issues of their choosing (Gerodimos and Ward, 2007: 119).[7] What is derided as low-effort slacktivism may actually be a time-efficient way of maintaining an interest in politics.

Given the time-pressure illusion that citizens experience day-to-day, the diverse array of engagement opportunities online pose new challenges for how we conceptualise active citizenship. It is true that those acts labelled as slacktivism often require small amounts of effort, or time, from the individual, but they are often designed with this very much in mind. By making political actions more granular, the barrier of entry to political participation is lowered.

Such an interpretation challenges the model of citizenship inferred from the slacktivist critique. This critique suggests that the ideal citizen is one who devotes the most time to their activism. However, such a definition is problematic; this dedicated, informed activist type does not, and cannot, exist in most advanced democracies (Coleman and Blumler, 2009; Couldry, Livingstone and Markham, 2010; Dalton, 2008: 14; Dahlgren, 2009; Graber, 2004: 561; Papacharissi, 2010; Schudson, 1999; Stoker, 2006).

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[7] This development goes hand-in-hand with the emphasis on individual autonomy described in Chapter 1 (Dahlgren, 2009; Dalton, 2008; Norris, 2011; Pattie, Seyd and Whitely, 2004).

As Graber (2004: 561-562) notes, it is not feasible to stay fully informed about all political developments, all of the time. In *The Good Citizen,* Schudson (1999) argues that the "monitorial citizen" model characterises the conditions of modern citizenship, as citizens need only survey the news enough to identify those political issues that have personal relevance. Despite this, much of the debate on citizenship in popular discourse is framed around whether citizens are engaged or apathetic (Fox, 2013; Hooghe and Dejaghere, 2007). This dichotomous approach obfuscates the value of scale, and what Amnå and Ekman (2014: 263) describe as the "standby citizen," "those who stay alert, keep themselves informed about politics by bringing up political issues in everyday contexts, and are willing to participate if needed." This citizen type, an extension of Schudson's monitorial citizen, is normatively separate to those disengaged or disillusioned citizens who are similarly perceived to be apathetic. These citizens monitor those issues that have personal significance, and are prepared to take action, should circumstances warrant them to. Therefore, participatory shortcuts can be beneficial to active citizenship (Amnå and Ekman, 2014; Schudson, 1999; Zuckerman, 2008).

This thesis seeks to probe what value Facebook and Twitter have, if any, in providing participatory shortcuts across the continuum of participation. Past studies have shown that those who benefit from the political use of the internet, in general, tend to be skewed heavily in favour of those well-educated, computer savvy, and socially confident citizens (Brundidge and Rice, 2009; Coleman and Blumler, 2009: 184; Mossberger, Tolbert and Stansbury, 2003: 58; Sloam, 2012a: 9; Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley, 2004: 108). Mossberger, Tolbert and Stansbury (2003: 9) argue that the "digital divide" refers to more than simply an issue of access; a fully immersive experience online depends on a number of skill-sets. One must possess a variety of technical competencies and information literacy skills to use these resources to their full potential. However, as of writing, little empirical research has been undertaken that examines whether social media can help bridge these social and technical divides in Britain.

Intuitively, by their very design, social networking sites can offer information shortcuts to those who may have become marginalised or excluded from political life (Kalnes, 2009: 251). Through interpersonal communication and asymmetric sharing on social media, users are exposed to political information they may not have intended to consume (Chadwick, 2012; Wright, 2012a: 255). For example, "Trending Topics" on Twitter can cover political events—alongside the constant deluge of hashtags related to

the British boyband One Direction—and, crucially, different information from a user's own personal feed (An et al., 2011; Bode, 2008: 3). Similarly, the majority of political information that is consumed on Facebook tends to originate from those contacts that a user interacts with infrequently (Bakshy et al., 2012).

Outside of these informational benefits, Jenkins (Jenkins and Carpentier, 2013: 6) and Zuckerman (2008) have argued that regular access to social networking sites for personal enjoyment creates the latent capabilities for political action. Zuckerman's (2008) "cute cat theory of digital activism" states that through the extended use of digital media tools for entertainment and social relations, citizens develop the organisational and technical capacities to use these tools for political ends, under the right circumstances.

However, this theory assumes that all users are equally comfortable with political self-expression online, whereas closer examination indicates that many citizens are uneasy about digital forms of interaction, as opposed to face-to-face communication. Tufekci (2012c: 43) labels this characteristic as "cyberasociality," "the inability or unwillingness of some people to relate to others via social media as they do when physically-present." These feelings are in flux over time, depending on technological developments, personal circumstances, and the nature of the particular networked contact(s). As Rainie and Wellman (2012: 9) note, citizens must build upon their existing social skills in order to make the most of this expansive, networked environment. Undoubtedly, this social divide can impact a citizen's ability to use the internet in ways beneficial for democracy. Just because the threshold of access to social media is lower does not necessarily mean that the opportunities gained through their use are evenly distributed across society. As such, the social divide must be factored into any conclusions drawn on the impact of Facebook and Twitter across the continuum of participation.

Morozov (2011: 194) contends that social networking sites lead to information overload, as lazy, but image conscious, users share their political perspectives and obstruct collective action efforts in the process—"not everyone can be Che Guevara." But users aren't trying to be full-time activists. The reality is that a majority of citizens balance civic and political interests with the trials of daily existence (Dalton, 2008: 2; Goodin et al., 2008). Therefore, scale is essential when we consider the relationship of routine social media use and political engagement. Citizens are not conveniently divided between those who are active and those who are passive; engagement is not akin to an on/off switch. At various times we are more or less involved, depending on

our personal circumstances. With this in mind, the granularity built into social media must be explored across the continuum of participation, rather than in isolation as in the slacktivist critique.

2.2.4 The Feel-Good Factor: Information Accuracy, Authenticity and the Digital Self

> "Slacktivism" is an apt term to describe feel-good online activism that has zero political or social impact. It gives those who participate in "slacktivist" campaigns an illusion of having a meaningful impact on the world without demanding anything more than joining a Facebook group.
>
> (Morozov, 2009)

The underlying motivational logic behind acts of slacktivism is self-gratification. This can be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, the aspiration to feel-good by doing good. Critics denounce the effortlessness of slacktivism, providing cognitive rewards for the participant while minimising their contribution. However, this judgement is only valid when applied to the context of the action itself. If we isolate a Facebook post or a tweet, and then compare the depth of one's participation with what are often ambitious aims, it may seem that a participant's involvement is self-serving. However, what happens *after* and *alongside* these acts of slacktivism? Research has shown that those users engaging in digital micro-activism do so alongside a wide range of other civic and political activities (Christensen, 2012; Kristofferson, White and Peloza, 2014; Vaccari et al., 2015). What may seem to be a low-effort, self-indulgent act in isolation could in fact lead to further involvement, a process in which the interdependency between different acts sheds light on the normative value of democratic engagement (Chadwick and Dennis, forthcoming).

Secondly, the slacktivist critique argues that actors are more concerned by social presentation than the cause itself, as users seek to cultivate a particular image. In both cases one's actions are deemed to lack authenticity, as narcissism trumps genuine intent. Flawed or problematic campaigns become viral at the expense of other, more deserving or urgent, causes due to this perceived self-indulgence (Gladwell, 2010; Morozov, 2009; 2011: 190). As Morozov (2011: 194) notes, "while many students are wasting their energy on 'saving' Darfur by joining Facebook groups, their own universities are run without the scrutiny they deserve from the student body." Well-documented examples include: the hundreds of thousands of Twitter users who made their avatars green in solidarity with the Iranian election protests in 2009; those Facebook users who changed their profile picture to an image of a cartoon character in December 2010 to

raise awareness of child abuse; and the aforementioned #Kony2012 campaign. In each of these cases the psychological or social benefits to the participant are seen to far outweigh any observable, "real world" impacts (Morozov, 2011: 186).

However, this take on authenticity is imprecise as it conflates two interpretations of the term; authenticity refers to both the sincerity of political behaviour, and whether the campaign is accurate and based on fact. This confusion is understandable as the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of authenticity refers quite clearly to both interpretations.[8] However, it is important to distinguish between the two definitions when analysing political behaviour, as they are not one and the same. Someone may sincerely act on an issue that may be constructed on a suspect narrative. I know when I shared the #Kony2012 campaign video to my Facebook network on the morning of March 5, 2012, I had nothing but honest intentions. Seemingly, the slacktivist critique would deem this to be inauthentic, but in doing so it confuses authenticity for issue salience, as the authors own normative perspective on the issue frames whether the behaviour is credible (Morozov, 2011: 194; White, 2010; 2011). In simply labelling actions as authentic or inauthentic, we revert back to dichotomous thinking, when in reality authenticity is a fluid and hugely subjective concept. Therefore, in order to understand the complex personal motivations that occur prior to acts of digital micro-activism at the individual level, it is important to differentiate authenticity from information accuracy. This will also highlight if, and under what conditions, the relationship between the two concepts is empirically significant.

In this thesis I define information accuracy as the factual accuracy of the information on which political behaviour is based. A measure of this kind can be highly subjective and difficult to operationalize methodologically. For example, a post on a social networking site may be more factually accurate than some news articles. However, as illustrated by #Kony2012, it is important to analyse what type of information sparks viral attention, examining both the format in which it is presented (for example a video, an image, or text) and the way that the content is framed. Authenticity is defined within this thesis as the extent to which behaviour is genuine, or a reflection of one's "true self," as opposed to the result of external social pressures (Yacobi, 2013). This definition intentionally avoids the debates surrounding authenticity and authentic living, as it is necessary to operationalise a somewhat limited

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[8] "Authentic – of undisputed origin and not a copy; based on facts; accurate or reliable: an authentic depiction of the situation (in existentialist philosophy) relating to or denoting an emotionally appropriate, significant, purposive, and responsible mode of human life." Authentic [Def. 1]. (n.d.). In *Oxford Dictionaries Online,* Retrieved August 19, 2013, from http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/authentic.

definition in order to empirically analyse individual level motivations. Questions regarding authenticity have become of particular significance given the emphasis on individual autonomy as an explanatory factor for political engagement (Bennett, 2012; Dahlgren, 2009; Dalton, 2008; Norris, 2011; Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley, 2004). This thesis will examine both information accuracy and authenticity.

Concern over the accuracy of information stems from the ease of use of social media, coupled with the speed of information dissemination online. The desire to produce content that reaches as many users as possible produces "a race to the bottom," as actors seek to compress and simplify campaigns to suit the granular medium (White, 2010). Stepanek (forthcoming, as cited in Watson, 2012) suggests that this can lead to "ad-hocracies," networks that can be activated quickly and passionately around specific, single issue goals, but at the cost of context and depth in understanding. These fears are heightened amongst younger citizens given their apparent difficulties in distinguishing reliable and trustworthy information from deceit and conspiracy (Bartlett and Miller, 2011). As I demonstrated when I shared the #Kony2012 video, a simple, emotive narrative can trigger our pre-reflective consciousness, causing us to act before we reflect on our actions.

This unease is exacerbated by the growing prominence of a new group of influencers online, and the uncertain role that they play in shaping the preferences of other users. Described as "tastemakers" (Allocca, 2011), "power users" (Hampton et al., 2012), and "culturemakers" (Lotan, 2012), these are users who wield significant social influence, usually due to their reach over large networks. For some users, celebrities in particular, this means additional influence within unfamiliar territories. As such, mobilising key influencers has become a key feature of campaign strategy for many pressure groups.

New information providers have also experienced a rapid growth in audience share. The likes of BuzzFeed, the Huffington Post, and Upworthy use social media as their main vehicle for content distribution. These new hybrid media organisations blur the boundaries between entertainment, news, and activism. In doing so, they have been criticised for distracting citizens from serious political news through sensationalist reporting to drive click-through rates (Ball, 2014; Preston, 2014; Zara, 2013).

However, these critiques are based on an analysis of each action, case, or content provider in isolation. If we explore the reaction to these digitally mediated behaviours over time, it is evident that citizens do not just passively consume information online. Sharing information publicly online opens up channels of

contestation, providing opportunities for users to challenge and correct misinformation. Conversation helps citizens process, understand, and question information, ultimately moderating participatory behaviour (Baek, Wojcieszak and Delli Carpini, 2012; Delli Carpini, Cook and Jacobs, 2004; Hardy and Scheufele, 2006: 72-73). For example, research conducted following the 2011 riots in England suggests that social media enabled users to verify information and dispel rumours, such as the speculation that a lion had escaped from a zoo in London (Procter, Vis and Voss, 2013).

Furthermore, the role of these new influencers should be contextualised within the broader literature on media effects (Bennett, 1990; Entman, 2004; Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Robinson, 2002). As Deuze (2012: xi) notes, "media benchmark our experience of the world, and how we make sense of our role in it." Mass media and face-to-face communication have an equally important role in shaping our political attitudes, a role that is similarly prone to abuse (Beck et al., 2002). The processes that citizens use to form opinions are, and have always been, based on emotion, and vulnerable to manipulation. The likelihood of achieving organised, rational, consensus-driven deliberative communication is highly unlikely (Chadwick, 2012; Delli Carpini, Cook and Jacobs, 2004). As such, it is vital to remain realistic and understand that throughout history audiences have been susceptible to trends or the sway of popular opinion; this is not a phenomenon that is exclusive to social media.

Following #Kony2012, Zuckerman (2012a) posed two important questions. Can any political campaign truly be of mass interest without oversimplifying? And how do we balance the need for mass engagement, as a way of legitimising representative democracy, against the dangers of oversimplification? The slacktivist critique disregards the unique attitudinal factors that lead a person to a point of engagement. A more expansive approach is required to interpret how citizens consume, process, and act upon the information that they consume online.

The slacktivist critique also proposes that the audience, both real and imagined,[9] exert social pressure that may cause a citizen to act inauthentically, as citizens ignore their own personal opinion and go along with the crowd in order to secure approval and validation from others (Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004: 606; Sunstein, 2007: 84). This includes refraining from political expression through fear of damaging one's reputation. In a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project, 73 percent of social networking site users admitted encountering political

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[9] The imagined audience refers to the wider audiences, and their potential reaction, that a user may visualise when posting content to a public or semi-public space (Marwick and boyd, 2011; Papacharissi, 2012).

content that they disagreed with, but only 23 percent responded with comments of their own (Rainie and Smith, 2012). This pressure originates from the very design of social media, as users struggle to manage their digital identity in public and semi-public networks (Baym, 2010).

The user profile, a mandatory feature of most social networking sites, is designed to encourage transparency over anonymity. Users are asked to hand over personal information, offering a virtual representation of the self to their network, in an attempt to form a direct link between online and offline identity. As such, the boundaries between what Couldry (2003) describes as the "media world" and the "ordinary world" are in a constant state of flux. As Krotoski (2012) notes, "the days when people were allowed to be dogs [online] is coming to a close. The old web, a place where identity could remain separate from real life, is rapidly disappearing from the computer screen."[10] This calls into question the ways in which we construct our identities and manage our relationships with others, as users have multiple personas that they must manage across and within different services, with both real and imagined audiences in mind (Baym, 2010; Deuze, 2012: 247; Marwick and boyd, 2011; Papacharissi, 2010; 2012; Rainie and Wellman, 2012; van Dijck, 2013). The public and private converge on social media as private behaviours are broadcast publicly. As we navigate this treacherous and fluid terrain of public, semi-public, and private spaces, our personal identity must be reflexive.

Based on the interpretation of authenticity stipulated in this thesis, a citizen can authentically cultivate multiple representations of the self; self-awareness and individual choice are deemed to be the central tenets of authentic living. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1990), Erving Goffman states that human beings rely on appearance and perception to guide how they judge others when they interact (Goffman, Lemert, and Branaman, 1997: 21). The observer relies on the subject's representation of the self in order to make a judgement. As to avoid misrepresentation, we try to manage the impression we give to others. We choose to adapt our persona depending on our audience, our own needs, and the technological affordances a platform provides (Deuze, 2012: 247). As such, the social self that we display on Facebook is normally very different, for example, to the professional image that we relay on LinkedIn (van Dijck, 2013: 204). What the slacktivist critique may deem to be narcissistic or inauthentic

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[10] While this quote does not apply universally, given the large volume of hoax accounts on Facebook and Twitter, it does speak to the general service norms.

practice may be more accurately conceptualised as a consequence of our pursuit of individual autonomy.

By presenting authenticity as a binary condition, we lack understanding of the complexity of personal motivation. As Baym (2010: 108) argues, "impression management may involve outright deception, total honesty, or, most often, a strategic balance of sharing, withholding, and distorting information." It is not my intention to disregard the threat to democracy that reputational cascades pose, but to reframe the debate outside of the reductive labels that are applied within the slacktivist critique. Instead, we must explore both the informational sources that trigger micro-activism, and also the complex, personal contexts that precede it.

2.2.5 The Importance of Technological Specificity and Service Design

A problem that is pervasive across those accounts advocating the slacktivist critique, and the discipline as a whole, is the reference to social media as a homogenous entity. When making claims on the impact of social media on democracy, it is imperative that we clearly stipulate to which social networking sites they apply. Definitions frequently fail to note the fundamental differences between services. This is problematic given that site-specific design can influence the type, quality, and availability of information, whilst also shaping discursive opportunities and the possibilities for expressive engagement (Baykurt, 2011; Baym, 2010; Bimber and Copeland, 2011; boyd and Ellison, 2007; Pasek, more and Romer, 2009; van Dijk, 2013). For example, some sites, like Facebook, strongly support pre-existing offline relationships, while others, such as Twitter, facilitate connections between new contacts over shared interests (boyd and Ellison, 2007; Pasek, more and Romer, 2009: 207-8). Moreover, this potential must be clarified as social networking sites are, first and foremost, commercial entities; they do not seek to amplify the agency of citizens (Andrejevic, 2009).

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010: 61) define social media as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content." User generated content refers to the various forms of informational goods that are created and produced by end-users. As Table 2.2 shows, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010: 62) contrast media richness theory, the degree to which a service replicates face-to-face communication, against the level of self-presentation the service design allows for. In

doing so, social networking sites are differentiated from other examples of Web 2.0 technologies by virtue of facilitating a rich, virtual replication of our identity.

Table 2.2. Classification of social media by social presence/media richness and self-presentation

		Social presence / Media richness		
		Low	**Medium**	**High**
Self presentation	**High**	Blogs	Social networking sites (e.g. Facebook)	Virtual social worlds (e.g. Second Life)
	Low	Collaborative projects (e.g. Wikipedia)	Content communities (e.g. YouTube)	Virtual game worlds (e.g. World of Warcraft)

Source: Kaplan and Haenlein (2010: 62)

A more precise definition is offered by boyd and Ellison (2007), who describe social networking sites as "web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system." In this thesis social media and social networking sites are used interchangeably; both terms refer to this definition.

Two distinctions are significant when comparing the democratic potential of different social networking sites. Firstly, one must differentiate between synchronous and asynchronous communication, as the difference in temporal context can affect user behaviour (Baym, 2010: 7-8; Valenzuela, Kim and Gil de Zúñiga, 2011). For instance, the immediacy of synchronous communication can make the information provided seem more personable (Ryan, 2007: 238-239), posing questions on whether this affects the likelihood of micro-activism. Secondly, different platforms produce different information flows between users. Symmetric sharing is common on Facebook, where each user confirms a connection and then content is shared privately, or semi-publically. The default sharing mechanism on Twitter is asymmetric, where a user shares content publically and anyone can subscribe to their updates. However, this description is somewhat reductive, as it does not account for the variety of information flows that exist within each of these social platforms (Wood, 2011). Therefore clarity, in terms of specific service functionality, is essential.

This call for clarity may seem contradictory given the emphasis on hybridity throughout this chapter; how do we account for media convergence and, at the same

time, recognise technological specificity? I argue that it is possible to do both. Unlike the slacktivist critique, this thesis will not generate conclusions about the impact of each service in isolation; this would be problematic, as Facebook and Twitter do not exist in a vacuum. By using a combination of experimental and qualitative techniques, this thesis will analyse the role that Facebook and Twitter play within a hybrid media system, examining the functions of each service in-depth.

2.3 Conclusion

This chapter has illustrated the problematic nature of the slacktivist critique as a reflection of the relationship between routine social media use and political engagement. An alternate research agenda was proposed based on five key revisions. Firstly, the critique evaluates the relationship between acts of so-called slacktivism and the desired political outcome in isolation. It implies that easy online actions, like sharing a tweet, form a causal relationship with the desired political effect. However, in doing so this ignores the complex array of factors that result in any political outcome. Focusing on the relationship in this way lacks an appreciation of the procedural foundations at the heart of political engagement. By thinking of participation as a process, a new set of questions emerge regarding the value of social media as a tool for deepening knowledge, for political discussion, and for public forms of symbolic self-expression.

Secondly, empirical research on social networking sites must account for the three spheres of hybridity. Digital micro-activism often makes up just a single tactic in the vast strategic repertoire of political activism. By focusing on one social networking site, or one event, we ignore the relationships formed between symbolic digital micro-activism and other forms of online and offline engagement. Furthermore, by focusing on social media in isolation the slacktivist critique treats online and offline as distinct and separate realities. Rather than differentiating between new and old media, Facebook and Twitter must be understood within the expansive, hybrid media system that such tools operate within (Chadwick, 2013). This must be inclusive of what Wright (2012a: 254) describes as "third spaces," non-political discussion forums—online and offline—where political talk emerges within everyday conversations.

Thirdly, slacktivism is often deemed to be lazy activism, as activists abandon effort-intensive, on-the-ground political action in favour of easier methods online. This suggests that the depth of someone's commitment to a cause, or the quality of

democratic engagement at the individual level, can be measured by time. However, it is dangerous to assume that the more time a citizen devotes to politics the more impactful their actions will be, and it is unrealistic to claim that active citizenship requires such high levels of commitment. If we consider the time pressure that individuals experience on a daily basis, then the granularity of digital engagement affords an important means of maintaining awareness, sometimes sparking further involvement at opportune moments. Therefore, it is important to examine the context in which these "quick fixes" take place.

Fourthly, digital micro-activism is often labelled as inauthentic. However, this definition of authenticity is inaccurate, as it refers to both the sincerity of political behaviour and whether the campaign is accurate and based on fact. It is necessary to distinguish between attitudinal motivations and information accuracy when analysing political behaviour online, as someone may sincerely act on an issue that is constructed on a suspect narrative. Furthermore, I argue that self-presentation online can be authentic. As users navigate the fluid terrain of public, semi-public, and private spaces online, our personal identity must remain reflexive. Personal motivations must be explored as users cross within and between these spaces.

Finally, I argue for more clarity in our definition of social media, as service design can shape how these tools impact democratic engagement.

Slacktivism is indicative of the dichotomous literature from which it originates. The critique refers to just a tiny proportion of actions that are in no way indicative of how the use of social media may benefit, or harm, a user's understanding of and engagement with politics. Scale and context are crucial to understanding political behaviour. In this thesis I adopt what Chadwick (2013: 5) describes as, "hybrid thinking," "nudging us away from 'either/or' patterns of thought and toward 'not only, but also' patterns of thought." By focusing on an action, we analyse the technological functionality rather than how citizens use the tool. In order to critically evaluate these new forms of social and political self-expression, we must analyse them within the media environment in which they take place. This must be inclusive of both the multifaceted engagement strategies that political actors employ when using social media, and the expansive, hybrid media system that such tools operate in. It is within these interactions that we will discover more substantive findings about the relationship between the routine use of social media and political engagement. The next chapter will outline the theoretical framework for this thesis, offering an alternative prognosis to the slacktivist critique based on the continuum of participation model.

3. Theoretical Framework and Expected Findings

> Public political attitude expression is undergoing a transformation. It is no longer confined to certain events such as elections nor does it necessarily require the co-presence of others. The public can articulate its views on political matters via a greatly expanded series of protest repertoires and media outlets, and via new technologies. As the number of issues coming to the public's attention has increased, attitude expression is less and less confined to national issues and conventional politics.
>
> (Stanyer, 2005: 19)

This thesis has outlined the debates within the literature on citizenship and online political participation. These disputes arise from conceptual differences over how we define these key concepts. Much of the political science literature is fixated on a static conceptualisation of citizenship, which prioritises state-centric forms of participation and overlooks the structural transformations evident in everyday political behaviour (Coleman, 2007: 184; Dahlgren, 2009). Chapter 1 discusses these trends, describing how political identity has become personalised, leading to a diffusion of what constitutes political engagement. The slacktivist critique is based on an out-dated notion of the "model citizen." The critique is symptomatic of other accounts of citizenship, in that it has unrealistic expectations and does not account for attitudinal and behavioural changes (Chadwick, 2012; Dalton, 2008; Graber, 2004; Jacobs, Cook and Delli Carpini, 2009; Norris, 2011; Schudson, 1999; Stoker, 2006). Citizenship should be characterised by the attitudes, behaviours, and practices of citizens as they evolve. This chapter offers a theoretical framework that builds upon the alternative approach to analysing the relationship between routine social media use and political participation introduced in Chapter 2.

The guiding theoretical assumptions for this thesis rest upon a number of complementary advances in the study of media and political engagement. Firstly, building on the fusion of the personal and political and the increasing importance of micro-participation, a conceptualisation of citizenship is proposed that represents a more reflexive, individually defined notion of political identity (Dalton, 2008; Norris, 2011; Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley, 2004). Secondly, the provocatively titled "Facebook Activist"[11] seeks to illustrate an alternative prognosis to challenge the slacktivist critique. Through an amalgamation of the theoretical contributions from Bennett,

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[11] The term "Facebook Activist" is used to challenge the negative connotations associated with its use in digital vernacular. For example, the Urban Dictionary—a crowdsourced online dictionary of slang words—characterises a Facebook Activist as a "self righteous individual that thinks forwarding Facebook pics with captions constitutes a real effort to assist their chosen cause(s)."

Chadwick, and Papacharissi, this thesis will contend that low effort interactions conducted online are not ineffective and narcissistic acts of slacktivism, but integral components within a scaled continuum of participation. Through information sharing on social media, citizens are exposed to a diverse array of political information, much of which—given the nature of social networking—is tied to personal preferences and private experiences (Chadwick, 2012; Couldry, Livingstone and Markham, 2010; Papacharissi, 2010). Social media can subsequently provide a platform for self-expression, networking, and the opportunity to engage in collective action on a privatized basis (Papacharissi, 2010). In what Bennett and Segerberg (2012: 36) outline as a connective logic, "taking public action or contributing to a common good becomes an act of personal expression." This emphasis on self-actualization has led to the growth of new organisations and movements that use digital media to support a variety of online and offline political engagement repertoires (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Chadwick, 2007; Karpf, 2012a).

Given that a number of these theories were designed with American citizens in mind, they require further testing in a British context. This thesis will deduce a number of expected findings from the theoretical framework and explore them empirically.[12] These expected findings will act as an alternative to the hypotheses derived from slacktivism (see Christensen, 2011; 2012). By empirically testing these hypotheses, this study will assess the extent to which slacktivism has value as a judgement on contemporary political action. Together, the dual set of hypotheses will act as a guide for analysing the findings generated through the primary research. However, I will also remain open-minded to any new phenomena that emerge during data collection.

3.1 Citizenship in the 21st Century

> If we are to understand political participation at all, we must explore how each new generation comes to develop its own conceptions of citizenship and expresses itself through civic and political engagement.
>
> (Sloam, 2012a: 4)

How we define citizenship shapes the judgements that we reach on the health of democratic engagement (Dahlgren, 2005: 147). Clarity is therefore essential. This section will outline the conceptual framework that I adopt in this thesis. The way a

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[12] Expected findings are used as opposed to generalisable hypotheses due to the non-random sample and the small-N research design.

researcher operationalises citizenship within empirical research can typically take one of two approaches (Svensson, 2011: 645). A researcher may adopt an inductive approach, in which an observation of political attitudes and behaviours forms new socio-political theory, or a deductive analysis, where one's findings are compared against existing citizenship theory. This thesis will combine elements of both, by way of observing how social media affects how citizens envisage their citizenship, and then act upon it.

3.1.1 The Actualizing Citizen

Bennett (2008; Bennett, Wells and Freelon, 2011) has recently outlined a cultural shift in political identity, as duty and obligation are being replaced by individual autonomy. As Table 3.1 shows, this evolution from the "dutiful citizen" to the "actualizing citizen" encapsulates the critique of state-centric citizenship, and embraces new, alternative forms of citizen culture. Citizens enjoy unprecedented levels of freedom to define and manage their identities. This is in contrast to the experience of past generations, who were essentially assigned broad social identities based on religious affiliations or social cleavages (Dahlgren, 2009; Dalton, 2008). Citizens manage these multiple identities as they compete and assemble in complex patterns, the result of which is a diffusion of political issues, interests, and modes of engagement (Cammaerts and Van Audenhove, 2005; Dalton, 2008; Yuval-Davies, 2007).

Table 3.1. The changing citizenry: The traditional civic education ideal of the dutiful citizen versus the emerging youth experience of self-actualizing citizenship

Actualizing citizen	Dutiful citizen
Diminished sense of government obligation - higher sense of individual purpose	Obligation to participate in government centred activities
Voting is less meaningful than other, more personally defined acts such as consumerism, community volunteering, or transnational activism	Voting is the core democratic act
Mistrust of media and politicians is reinforced by negative mass media environment	Becomes informed about issues and government by following mass media
Favours loose networks of community action – often established or sustained through friendship and peer relations and thin social ties maintained by interactive information technologies	Joins civil society organisations and/or expresses interests through parties that typically employ one-way conventional communication to mobilise supporters

Source: Adapted from Bennett (2008: 14)

Structural factors are key to understanding this evolution, as citizens move from one spatio-temporal location to another. Within digitally enabled networks, methods of engagement traverse between the local, national and global level (Bennett, Wells and Freelon, 2011: 838). In this networked landscape, issues often transcend the nation-state and involve a variety of alternative, transnational actors such as corporations. This has led to the emergence of self-organising networks, such as the Occupy movement, which are less hierarchical than the civil society organisations that preceded them (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012: 19; Cammaerts and Van Audenhove, 2005: 179).

In the actualizing citizen framework political behaviour is focused on generating feelings of self-efficacy, as personally expressive forms of engagement that represent an individual's own social and political identity become more commonplace (Bennett, 2008: 14). As such, citizens are increasingly expressive, acting on the basis of personal preferences and lifestyle choices (Dalton, 2008; Inglehart, 1990; Stanyer, 2005). These diverse issues, such as environmentalism or consumer activism, often reflect a post-materialist value orientation, and result in an assortment of new forms of participation.

As Table 3.2 shows, this creative media engagement often takes the form of self-expression and user generated content online. Bennett (2008: 10) describes this as a new civic language, one that fuses social networks and entertainment with civic and political goods. As Karpf (2012a: 167) notes, "they share public sentiments through tweets and Facebook likes, and view this as a legitimate form of expression." Although this framework is based on the attitudes and behaviours of young people, it is important to note that this study will not focus on them in isolation. Instead, the actualizing citizen framework will be applied to a wider age range in the ethnographic research to explore whether these trends reflect a more general phenomenon.

Table 3.2. Dutiful and actualizing styles of civic action and communication

	Actualizing citizen	Dutiful citizen
Civic Style	Open to many forms of creative input, ranging from government politics to global activism	Orientated around citizen input to government or formal public organisations, institutions, and campaigns
	Rooted in self actualization through social expression	Rooted in responsibility and duty
	Personal interests channelled through loosely tied networks	Channelled through membership in defined social groups
Communication logic	Lines between content consumption and production blurred	Primarily one-way consumption of managed civic information (news and political advertisements)
	Individual content production and sharing over peer networks that tie personal identity to engagement (which can occur in traditional political contexts such as viral video sharing in political campaigns)	When individual content production occurs it is aimed at specific institutional targets (contacting elected officials, letters to newspapers)

Source: Bennett, Wells and Freelon (2011: 840)

One may argue that the actualizing citizen framework establishes a rigid dichotomy between citizenship styles, similar to those discussed in Chapter 2. However, Bennett, Wells and Freelon (2011: 839) dismiss this, arguing that the categories are fluid as citizens mix both actualizing and dutiful citizenship styles. For example, voting

is still an important form of democratic engagement for many young people, but the motivations for casting a vote are changing. They critique the work of others, such as Dalton (2008), who—in their view—fail to reflect these relationships (Bennett, Wells and Freelon, 2011: 850). Rather than advocating that duty-bound citizenship has been wholly replaced, the framework describes a gradual shift in contemporary citizenship. Citizens increasingly shape and define their own political identity due, in part, to the structural freedoms afforded by the internet. This study will examine whether there is evidence to support the actualizing citizen framework in Britain, and the role that social media plays in sustaining this shift.

Social networking sites offer unique potential for these mediated forms of engagement, as individuals use services like Facebook and Twitter to manage their issue interests (Castells, 2009; Howard, 2011: 69). Using these tools, citizens can form political communities around niche cultural phenomena. Furthermore, the technical difficulties of self-organising are also diminished somewhat by the skills that people develop using these platforms day-to-day. Therefore, in light of the emphasis on individually constructed political identity, this thesis examines how individuals envisage public issues and collective action. What role do networked social media platforms play in this process? These questions are increasingly important given that the slacktivist critique claims that these behaviours are narcissistic and self-interested.

3.2 The "Facebook Activist": Political Engagement and Social Media

The "Facebook Activist" framework draws upon an amalgamation of theoretical contributions that, when combined, dispute the hypotheses of the slacktivist critique. I argue that when we understand participation as a process, Facebook and Twitter can be important participatory tools for actualizing citizens. Firstly, they can provide access to information and contribute to political learning (Chadwick, 2012). Secondly, social networking sites also offer a public forum in which users can express themselves and talk to like-minded others about the issues that they privately deem to be important (Papacharissi, 2010). Finally, the networked design of these services facilitates a range of collective action opportunities that are based on personal action frames, "[which] are inclusive of different personal reasons for contesting a situation that needs to be changed." (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012: 744). A period of remarkable organisational change has followed, in which organisations and movements have built upon these technological developments and the evolution of participatory norms (Bennett and

Segerberg, 2012; 2013; Bimber, Flanagin and Stohl, 2012; Chadwick, 2007; 2013; Karpf, 2012a). The following section outlines the benefits of the routine use of social media across a continuum of participation.

3.2.1 Accidental Exposure and By-Product Learning

As the product page for Facebook clearly states, the service was not designed with political activism in mind, but for people to "stay connected with friends and family" (Facebook, 2015). Despite this, through our normal, everyday use of the service in a non-political context—browsing your news feed in a shopping queue; sending a private message to a friend; sharing a photo of a particularly appetising meal—we are often accidentally exposed to political information. Downs (1957), writing during the emergence of the broadcast era, was one of the first to describe this accidental exposure. In his classic text *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, Downs applies economic theory to individual level decision-making. In doing so, he emphasised the time costs that citizens incur as they seek and reflect upon political information. One way that these time costs can be avoided is through information shortcuts. According to Downs (1957: 223), "entertainment sources sometimes yield political information as a surplus benefit from what is intended as an entertainment investment." In the mid-twentieth century Downs (1957: 222) suggested that this free data could be sourced through letters, conversations, and discussion groups, but as Prior (2007: 17) notes, the same can be applied to a "pleasant evening watching television with a little bit of political news as a 'surplus benefit.'" As a result, citizens can acquire political information as a by-product of normal everyday activities in seemingly non-political environments.

Building on this model of by-product learning (Baum, 2003; Baum and Jamison, 2006; Downs, 1957), Chadwick (2009; 2012) proposes that users are accidentally exposed to political information through their everyday use of social media:

> Hugely popular user generated content sites such as YouTube and social network environments such as Facebook encourage more by-product learning about politics than do static web pages. While the internet's enormous potential for political information retrieval does not imply that individuals will always use it for those ends, and it is clear that attitudinal variables such as partisanship will act as important mediators, there is a danger that we neglect opportunities for by-product learning in the online environment.
>
> (Chadwick, 2012: 47)

Although people mainly use Facebook and Twitter for entertainment, the information that is shared within these services tends to reflect those issues and experiences that occur within everyday life. As such, feeds can often contain political content and civic discussions as users reflect on how current events or political circumstances affect their personal political identity. As Chadwick (2012: 52) argues, "political life in Facebook occurs amid the everyday life characteristics of the environment."

Chadwick offers an alternative prognosis to that presented by Prior (2007), Sunstein (2007), and Tewksbury and Rittenberg (2009), who suggest that, as technology evolves and provides the user with increasingly sophisticated ways of customising the content they consume, people become more efficient at filtering out political material in favour of entertainment. This could have severe consequences for the health of democracy in Britain, as citizens avoid the shared experiences that bind society (Sunstein, 2007: 6). However, these scholars were writing at a time before the maturation of services like Facebook and Twitter.

With the development of new technologies come new questions. While some argue that Facebook and Twitter result in ever growing personalised information consumption, either user defined (Morozov, 2011: 80) or using algorithms (Dewey, 2015; Jurgenson, 2015), Chadwick (2012: 35) suggests that social networking sites do not result in audience fragmentation. Instead, they cultivate the conditions for active citizenship, as users—intentionally or unintentionally—contribute political material for others (Chadwick, 2012: 35). These political stimuli can come in a wide range of forms, including, but not limited to, "first hand reports of events, personal narratives, conversations, commentary, opinion, archives, spatial and temporal information, and lifestyle and consumption behavior, all of which may be expressed in textual and/or audiovisual forms" (Chadwick, 2012: 40). In this state of informational exuberance, users are becoming increasingly comfortable with expressing opinions and discussing issues that relate to their political identity (Giddens, 1991; Inglehart, 1990; Norris, 2011; Papacharissi, 2008; 2010; Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley, 2004; Shah et al., 2005; Stanyer, 2005: 19).

In analysing the capacity of social networking sites to provide access to content and spaces for self-expression, scholars must be mindful of service design. Brundidge (2010: 1057) describes two important conditions for accidental exposure and by-product learning online. Firstly, "accessibility," defined as the degree to which networks and communities are free to enter and participate in. Downs (1957: 224) first articulated the fear that those who benefit from this free data are those already well-informed, as

politically-interested citizens tend to socialise with like-minded others. Brundidge and Rice (2009) offer a similar hypothesis in modern democracies, arguing that the information divide is exacerbated online. Their findings suggest that political discussion is significantly and positively associated with politically heterogeneous discussion networks; "[the] information rich will get richer while the information poor will remain relatively poorer" (Brundidge and Rice, 2009: 145). Secondly, "traversability," defined as the porousness between political information and discursive spaces. Empirical findings suggest that social networking sites facilitate a participatory form of information consumption (Anstead and O'Loughlin, 2011; Brundidge, 2010; Tewksbury and Rittenberg, 2012). For instance, as part of their study on the use of Twitter during the topical debate television programme *Question Time*, Anstead and O'Loughlin (2011: 441) found evidence of "viewers who use online publishing platforms and social tools to interpret, publicly comment on, and debate a television broadcast while they are watching it."

The hypothesis that social media create the conditions for by-product learning has been tested empirically in large-N studies. Using a representative sample of British internet users, Vaccari (2014b: 7) found that 25.7 percent of respondents "often" or "always" come across political news when they use social media for a different purpose. However, there is still uncertainty about the cognitive and discursive processes that occur following this point of consumption. We cannot simply assume that every user pays the same attention to each piece of political content that they are exposed to. By-product learning is dependent on individual level factors, such as the composition of the network and the issue interests of the user. Furthermore, we know little of the processes that an individual undertakes once they have consumed this information. For instance, do they discuss this with others? Do they verify or contextualise the material by researching the topic more broadly? This is of particular concern to those who suggest that a growing dependency on online sources has resulted in a decline of information literacy, as citizens passively consume and believe what they read online (Bartlett and Miller, 2011). Based on Chadwick's (2009; 2012) theoretical contributions, this thesis will review how users access political information on Facebook and Twitter, if they learn from this exposure, and whether productive discussions take place as a result.

3.2.2 The Private Sphere

Many of the challenges to conventional approaches to citizenship, outlined in Chapter 1, are due to a blurring of what is considered private and what is considered public. In *The Private Sphere* (2010), Papacharissi describes how this convergence has been triggered, in part, by technological developments. As a result, how individuals envisage and act upon their citizenship is fundamentally changing, as public-political acts emerge from the confines of one's personal, privatised space. Papacharissi (2010: 166-167) offers the "private sphere" as a descriptive tool for understanding these new sites of identification:

> The meaning of the political lies in the ability to express dissent, to think differently. To the extent that the private sphere affords the autonomy, control, and expressive capabilities that enable dissent, it effectively reconciles the personal with the political in a way that enables connection with like-minded individuals. The private sphere, as metaphor, describes and explains the mechanisms for civic connections in contemporary democracies. Its value is descriptive and explanatory, but not prescriptive. Far from a recipe for democracy, the private sphere is an attempt at new space and a new sociality.

The notion of the private sphere challenges the longstanding assumption that collective action requires a public face (Olson, 1971). Political acts increasingly represent and fulfil a personalised political identity that is both reflexive and fluid (2010: 131). Maximising personal efficacy underpins political behaviour within an individual's own private sphere, "[as] citizens feel more secure in preserving their individual autonomy and the integrity of their civic identity, and in control of their civic fate" (Papacharissi, 2010: 22).

Social media acts as an important structural facilitator for these actions, providing the familiarity of a seemingly private space, but with a diverse range of public and semi-public audiences that are—to some extent—controlled by the user. Facebook and Twitter are examples of networked platforms on which users can tailor their information consumption, community membership, and engagement to suit their personal preferences (Papacharissi, 2010: 144). Although the slacktivist critique has labelled this behaviour as narcissistic and harmful to democracy, Papacharissi (2010: 146) refers us to the work of Lasch (1979), who states that these seemingly egocentric behaviours "are self-directed but not selfishly motivated." Self-expression simply reflects the importance of individual autonomy to modern citizenship.

Papacharissi offers an alternative to the hypothesis that political actions undertaken on social networking sites are inauthentic, or conducted as a result of social

pressures. In disputing this, Papacharissi refers to *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1990), the seminal work of sociologist Erving Goffman. Goffman uses theatre as an analogy to describe how individuals engage in social interactions in everyday life; individuals naturally seek to control the way that they present themselves dependent on the composition of the audience (Goffman 1990; Goffman, Lemert and Branaman 1997). It is therefore rational to try and shape the impression that we make on others by managing our behaviours.

The juxtaposition of Goffman's theatre analogy and the private sphere may seem somewhat contradictory; if our public actions are based on our private, personal identity, does this not make the analogy redundant? However, while contemporary citizenship is characterised by the personalisation of politics, we still have to manage the way in which we present our private beliefs. This management provides these low-effort forms of expression with a sense of purpose. Users must adapt their online behaviour based on their audience (Bernstein et al., 2013; Marwick and boyd, 2011; Papacharissi, 2012). As such, self-expression, once confined to private spaces for many citizens, can have public implications:

> Participating in a MoveOn.org online protest, expressing political opinion on blogs, viewing or posting content on YouTube, or posting a comment in an online discussion group represents an expression of dissent with a public agenda... It stands as a private, digitally enabled, intrusion on a public agenda determined by others.
>
> (Papacharissi, 2010: 131)

This research examines the salience of the private sphere in a British context, probing the relationship between private motivation and public actions across the continuum of participation. This research will also investigate how the composition of the audience affects the likelihood and form of online behaviour.

3.2.3 The Logic of Connective Action and Personal Action Frames

In line with Papacharissi (2010) and others who argue that citizenship is increasingly personally-defined rather than institutionally-derived, and that engagement is focused around issues of importance to the individual rather than coherent ideologies (Bennett, 2008; Dalton, 2008; Giddens, 1991; Inglehart, 1990; Norris, 2011; Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley, 2004), "the logic of connective action" is a framework proposed by Bennett and Segerberg (2012; 2013) to explain how large-scale collective action is mobilised

through the use of personalised, digital media.[13] The logic of connective action describes how, as a result of social fragmentation and the decline of traditional group identification, individually expressive frames displace the collective action frames in many protest causes (Bennett, 2012: 22). As Bennett and Segerberg (2012: 6) argue, "people may still join actions in large numbers, but the identity reference is more derived through inclusive and diverse large-scale personal expression." Through these "personal action frames," political messages that are easy to personalise and inclusive of the diverse motivations for involvement, collective action is self-motivating as public-political acts are akin to personal expression (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013: 36). For example, the "we are the 99 per cent" frame, that emerged following the Occupy protests in the US in 2011, was personalised by activists involved in the movement. In adapting these political messages around one's personal identity, collective action can gain momentum and leverage across a wide range of digital networks, including Facebook and Twitter (Bennett, 2012: 4; Bennett and Segerberg, 2013: 1-2).

The design of Facebook and Twitter makes them ideal platforms for the dissemination of these frames. Users are connected through public profiles, on which they are encouraged to construct a virtual representation of the self. The service norms of both social networking sites invoke a self-expressive logic by virtue of their design, as users are encouraged to share content across a variety of public, semi-public, and private communication channels. These messages are more than *just* benign self-expression, as they have organisational properties. As Bennett and Segerberg (2013: 42) argue, "communication mechanisms establish relationships, activate attentive participants, channel various resources, and establish narratives and discourses." As such, these personal action frames provide an outlet for expression on issues of personal relevance while simultaneously mobilising friends, trusted others, and wider audiences (Bennett, 2012: 22; Bennett and Segerberg, 2012: 6).

The logic of connective action has significant implications for the literature on political participation as it challenges the classic work on which the title of their framework is based, *The Logic of Collective Action* (Olson, 1971). Olson (1971: 60-65) offers a rational choice account of collective behaviour, arguing that citizens undergo a cost-benefit analysis to determine whether they should participate. Olson argues that people cannot be expected to act together simply because they share a common

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[13] In *The Logic of Connective Action*, Bennett and Segerberg (2013: 45-54) explain the role of digital media in transnational protest movements. In doing so, they offer a convincing three-part typology of connective and collective action networks. However, I do not engage with this typology given my focus on the everyday use of social networking sites, rather than their use in mass mobilisations such as the Arab Spring or the Occupy Movement.

dilemma. In what Olson conceptualises as the "free-rider problem," rational individuals are discouraged from involvement if they can accrue the same benefits without contributing. In response to Olson's rational-choice proposition, social movement scholars identified that "collective action frames" could be used as a way of maintaining the commitment of a large group. Leaders construct a shared understanding of a problematic condition, together with a rationale for change, to maintain the emotional commitment of those involved (Benford and Snow, 2000: 615; Tarrow, 1998: 109-111). Sustaining such frames in a way that forges strong tie bonds between a large group can be challenging, as individuals can be discouraged if they do not see their own interests represented. Developing a collective identity frame that is inclusive of the divergent personal preferences of a large membership has proved to be a significant dilemma for organisations in the 20th century.

However, the combination of vastly reduced communication costs and the emergence of the private sphere creates the conditions in which Olson's free-rider theory can be challenged, as those involved in digitally networked action can engage on the basis of personal motive. As Bennett and Segerberg (2013: 36) argue, personal action frames encourage participation as they are inclusive of the different personal motivations for involvement:

> In place of the initial collective action problem of getting the individual to contribute, the starting point of connective action assumes contribution: the self-motivated (though not necessarily self-centered) sharing of already internalized or personalized ideas, plans, images, actions, and resources with networks of others. This "sharing" may take place on networking sites such as Facebook or via more public media such as Twitter and YouTube through, for example, comments and retweets, potentially building connections as it goes.

This thesis will explore how citizens are exposed to and enact upon these personal action frames within their use of social media. In particular, I will investigate the dynamics and interrelationships among different social networking sites, exploring whether the spread of these frames differs between Facebook, on which users share with trusted contacts, and Twitter, where a user's posts tend to be public and can involve interaction with relative strangers (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013: 36).

As Bennett and Segerberg note (2013: 39), "personal action frames do not spread automatically. People must show each other how they can appropriate, shape, and share themes." A number of new organisations have emerged that use digital technologies to do precisely that. This connective logic goes hand in hand with the evolution of organisational politics in advanced industrialised democracies, where new

organisational forms are emerging that reject hierarchy and traditional conditions of membership (Chadwick, 2007; 2013; Chadwick and Dennis, forthcoming; Dennis, 2015; Karpf, 2012a). The likes of MoveOn, founded in the US in 1998, GetUp!, founded in Australia in 2005, and—the group I explore in this thesis—38 Degrees, founded in the UK in 2009, represent "hybrid mobilization movements" (Chadwick, 2007). By modelling their organisational infrastructure around digital technologies, this new organisational form is structurally fluid, blending older repertoires typically associated with parties, pressure groups, and social movements. Those involved with these movements are not characterised as members, who have traditionally shared an ideological frame, but as affiliates, with more choice over the conditions of their participation (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013: 52). Hybrid mobilization movements have used personal action frames in e-mail communications to offer personalised pathways to engagement (Chadwick, 2013; Karpf, 2012a). This research will observe the logic of connective action on social media, exploring how organisations and non-elites create and share personal action frames across Facebook and Twitter.

Based on this theoretical framework, three important questions need addressing in order to understand political attitudes and behaviours at the individual level. Firstly, how are individuals engaging? Do low-effort interactions online, such as information sharing or e-petitions, transfer into other participatory acts? Or does the slacktivist critique represent Olson's free-rider theory in a modern context, as citizens avoid effort-intensive activism in favour of the rewards gained from easy, micro-activism online?

Secondly, why do they engage? What different types of information are individuals particularly responsive to in terms of their engagement online? If, as research suggests (Zukin et al., 2006: 205), one of the most important predictors of engagement is being asked to participate, how does access to such calls on social media affect a user's willingness to engage? Does this differ between Facebook and Twitter?

Thirdly, what is the end result when hybrid mobilization movements combine new technologies alongside more traditional methods of engagement? Are individuals empowered within these organisations through their use of social media? Or do we still see hierarchies forming? The following section outlines the hypotheses that will guide the empirical research.

3.3 Expected Findings and Hypotheses

These theoretical contributions require further investigation in a British context. This thesis will be deductive, as a set of expected findings are outlined based on this theoretical framework. These will be compared and contrasted with a number of hypotheses derived from the slacktivist critique. However, given the conceptual weaknesses raised in Chapter 2, the hypotheses are explored on the basis of a number of caveats. This research will also be theory-building, as rich data at the individual level of analysis will be generated through an experimental, mixed-method research design.

3.3.1 Expected Findings

A number of behavioural and attitudinal expected findings have been mapped onto the continuum of participation, as shown in Figure 3.1. These expected findings have been formulated as an alternative prognosis to slacktivism, and set out to capture the nuance of mediated citizenship at varying scales.

Based on Chadwick's (2012) model of accidental exposure and by-product learning online:

EF_1: Facebook and/or Twitter users are accidentally exposed to political information as a by-product of everyday use.

This is important, given the positive relationship between the consumption of political information and feelings of self-efficacy (Baum, 2003; Baum and Jamison, 2006; Coleman, Morrison and Yates, 2011; Downs, 1957; Jones, 2005). This research will examine whether participants are exposed to political information and, if so, what kind of content they consume. In contrast, this thesis will also consider whether personalisation results in harmful issue fragmentation, in line with those that argue the internet leads to audience fragmentation (Atkinson, 2009: 138; Eveland and Hively, 2009: 209; Morozov, 2011: 80; Prior, 2007; Sunstein, 2007).

Perhaps more importantly, this study will observe what style of content drives attention. As Couldry, Livingstone and Markham (2010) argue, we cannot assume that access equates to attention. This is a key drawback of any inferences that are made on the basis of content reach online. A significant intervening variable that must also be accounted for is the variation of each user's self-selected network. As Downs (1957:

224) notes, "the president of a giant firm receives information of national political significance... a dishwasher may never hear politics at all." The makeup and size of a participant's network will be reflected on in the empirical findings.

Secondly, due to the porous boundaries between content production and consumption embedded within the design of social media, political conversation is fostered by virtue of access to the content shared (Anstead and O'Loughlin, 2011; Bakshy et al., 2012; Bennett, Wells and Freelon, 2011; Brundidge, 2010; Chadwick, 2012; Chadwick and Stanyer, 2011; Valenzuela, Kim and Gil de Zúñiga, 2011). Users have the option to discuss and share content with others as they consume it, fostering an active, rather than passive, consumption experience (Brundidge, 2010: 1057):

EF$_2$: The use of Facebook and/or Twitter facilitates political conversation between users due to the porous boundaries between information consumption and production.

If, as predicted, users comment and engage in political discussion, is there evidence to suggest that this discussion enhances political knowledge (Hardy and Scheufele, 2006; Jacobs, Cook and Delli Carpini, 2009; Prior, 2007; Zukin et al., 2006)? Furthermore, what motivates, or inhibits, discursive engagement? While the technological boundaries may be porous, a user's social boundaries may be less fluid. As such, does the relationship between the user and the networked contact affect both the likelihood and sentiment of an interaction?

Thirdly, existing empirical research has shown how users post a variety of personally expressive content on social media as a means of participation (Anstead and O'Loughlin, 2011; Aslan, Dennis and O'Loughlin, 2015; Bennett, 2008; Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Papacharissi, 2010; Stanyer, 2005). As Papacharissi (2010: 131) argues, private-political acts can have a range of public effects:

EF$_3$: Facebook and/or Twitter are used for personally expressive forms of engagement on public-political agendas, *the purpose of which can vary.*

As the dashed line on Figure 3.1 illustrates, the public permutations of self-expression online can vary depending on the motivations of the user, the composition of the audience, and how those receiving the message use this information. These acts cannot be arbitrarily categorised, as they may serve a number of functions. For example, when

taken to its extremes, this could refer to a comment expressing a personal grievance amongst a closed group of friends, or an update used to co-ordinate a real space mobilisation, as evidenced through the use of hashtags during the 2010 student protests in Britain (Theocharis, 2012). The update may be a form of digital activism, such as "tweet bombing," where large groups of users post messages at a strategically relevant moment (Zuckerman, 2012b). Conversely, the message may not even have been intended for a wider audience, as publicly available content is collected, mined, and analysed by political and commercial elites (Anstead and O'Loughlin, 2012; 2015). Moreover, an update that at first might seem trivial may later become politically salient, as public content forms part of an archive of informational goods. This research will seek to observe these various forms of self-expression and micro-activism in action.

Fourthly, online, low-effort tools are not substituting high-effort offline participation at the individual level, or within emergent, digitally enabled advocacy groups (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Chadwick, 2007; 2013; Karpf, 2010; 2012). Instead, these online tools—such as co-ordinated representative contact and e-petitions—replace redundant offline equivalents, such as postcard campaigns and paper petitions. As Karpf (2010: 1) notes, "[they] represent a difference-of-degree rather than difference-in-kind":

EF$_4$: The use of Facebook and/or Twitter as a low-effort political tool does not substitute high-effort, offline engagement, but instead equivalent low-effort, offline engagement at both the individual and organisational level.

Through participant observation of the political activist movement 38 Degrees, this thesis will also examine the organisational level. As Howard (2011: 2) proposes, researchers can often learn more by exploring the links between different units of analysis. In doing so, I will investigate how ordinary members interact with the leadership. What is the level of involvement that members have within these networks, and what actions are undertaken as a result? Therefore, this study will observe whether these low-threshold actions are used to complement other forms of activism, or isolated as an easy replacement for political self-satisfaction (Gladwell, 2010; Morozov, 2011; Rickett, 2013).

Fifthly, as Bennett's (2008) actualizing citizen framework explains, political engagement online is not narcissistic, but the result of sweeping attitudinal changes. Each citizen increasingly prioritises those issues that they deem to be important, as

individual autonomy—the individual's capacity for self-directed, independent action—and self-efficacy—the belief in one's capabilities to achieve a goal or an outcome—are key determinants of participation (Bennett, 2008; Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Cammaerts and Van Audenhove, 2005; Dalton, 2008; Downs, 1957; Giddens, 1991; Inglehart, 1990; Norris, 2011; Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley, 2004). This is self-actualisation, rather than self-interest:

> EF_5: Individual autonomy and self-efficacy are the overriding motivational logics throughout the continuum of participation.

Through in-depth ethnographic research in an activist context and in an "everyday" setting, this thesis will observe what drives self-expression and micro-activism online in different environments. A range of different informational stimuli will also be used in the experiments to ascertain whether content style, rather than pre-existing issue support, impacts the likelihood of engagement.

Finally, in mapping these expected findings across the continuum of participation, as shown in Figure 3.1, a number of antecedent variables must be addressed. These impact the extent to which users become actively involved in this expressive political culture:

> EF_6: Political actions across the continuum of participation vary depending on the user's (1) social boundaries, (2) technical competencies, and (3) level of internet access.

As identified in Chapter 2, these social and technical divides are expected to have a significant effect on behaviour. Firstly, according to Tufekci's (2011) concept of cybersociality, some users find difficulties in expressing themselves online, in both a social and political context, as opposed to through face-to-face communication. This varies depending on the audience, both real and imagined (Bernstein et al., 2013; Goffman, 1990; Marwick and boyd, 2011; Papacharissi, 2010; 2012). Secondly, the digital divide, outlined in points 2 and 3 above, refers to the disparity in skills amongst social media users, with variation in technical competencies, information literacy, and differences in the level of access to the internet, based on income and geographic location (Mossberger, Tolbert and Stansbury, 2003; Mossberger, Tolbert and Franko, 2013). The combination of these antecedent variables represents the futility of causal

models that apply to large populations, such as the slacktivist critique. Through thick description of individual level usage habits, this research will observe the impact of these antecedent variables across the continuum.

Figure 3.1. Expected findings mapped onto the continuum of participation model
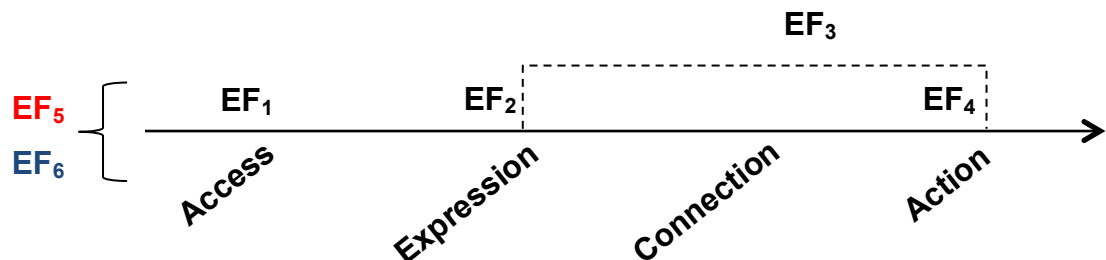
Note: The black text refers to the behavioural expected findings. The red text refers to the attitudinal hypothesis. The blue text refers to the antecedent variables.

If accurate, these expected findings offer practical solutions to some of the obstacles to participation that were raised in the civic voluntarism model (Verba and Nie, 1972; Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995). As Verba and Nie (1972) suggest, a number of social factors can determine the likelihood of participation, including an individual's: (1) perception of free time; (2) their level of civic and political skill, where skill is defined as an awareness and understanding of politics, broadly defined, and the ability to use this knowledge to organise and influence other actors; (3) their perceived political impact or contribution from their actions; and (4) their access to recruitment networks. Social media could address some of these problems.[14] Firstly, these tools can alleviate time-pressure through the quick dissemination of information, and the ability to debate, discuss, and display political affiliations in a time efficient manner. Secondly, social networking sites may lower the entrance requirements to these discursive and political spaces. Thirdly, the design of Facebook and Twitter offers users the opportunity to tailor their information consumption around their own personal preferences, increasing the likelihood of involvement as issues become more personally relevant. Finally, there is an abundance of political networks online that are vying with each other to recruit willing activists. This thesis will assess the extent to which these propositions are an empirical reality.

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[14] Address, but not solve. I do not advocate a technologically determinist argument that social media will resolve deficits in participation.

3.3.2 Hypotheses Derived from the Slacktivist Critique

In order to explore the slacktivist critique empirically, the following hypotheses will be considered. However, due to the aforementioned conceptual deficiencies of slacktivism as a reflection on the routine use of social media, these hypotheses will be considered alongside a set of exploratory questions. These have been formed on the basis of the research agenda outlined in Chapter 2.

Firstly, a common concern held by those advocating the slacktivist critique is that forms of micro-activism do not result in political change, especially when compared to tried and tested activist repertoires:

H_1: Political acts that are undertaken on social networking sites are less effective than offline methods of participation.

A limitation of this critique is the suggestion that the legitimacy of political behaviour is determined by its impact (Gladwell, 2010; Morozov 2009; 2011). This is problematic, as it suggests that the only acts that are beneficial for society are those that are successful, negating the significance of symbolic empowerment (Bucy and Gregson, 2001: 359). This thesis will operationalise effectiveness based on the aims of the individual undertaking the political act, analysing both the psychological and symbolic benefits from their perspective, alongside the material effects of their engagement. Based on this definition of effectiveness, a range of online and offline modes of participation will be considered in activist and day-to-day settings.

Secondly, this concern over the effectiveness of digital engagement is exacerbated given the substitution thesis, in which online micro-activism is replacing traditional forms of participation (Christensen, 2011):

H_2: Low-effort online forms of engagement are replacing "tried and tested" offline methods.

In a case study of internet activism in Finland, Christensen (2012) concluded that those acts derided as slacktivism actually have a positive impact on offline mobilisation, the opposite of the substitution thesis. However, this research was based on a survey that differentiated online forms of participation from those offline, focusing on the correlations that emerged in the responses as an indication of behaviour. This approach

lacks a contextual understanding of how organisations mix different engagement repertoires, and the role that digital micro-activism plays in relation to real space mobilisation.

Furthermore, political interactions on social media platforms are not always low-effort. Some acts can be high-effort, such as cultivating a political network on Twitter, or maintaining a Facebook Page. Likewise, acts that are disregarded as being easy, quick fixes require a substantial personal investment when added up over time. Therefore, rather than treating online behaviour in isolation, this research will examine the relationships *between* online and offline forms of engagement over time (Arnstein, 1969; Fung, 2006).

Finally, the slacktivist critique questions the authenticity of political behaviour on social media, as these forms of self-expression are likely to be conducted in public:

H_3: Acts of slacktivism are inauthentic as they are based on "reputational cascades," where users cease to rely on private information and instead go along with the crowd to maintain the good opinion their peers.

As discussed in Chapter 2, this conceptualisation of authenticity is problematic as it has no empirical support. We cannot assume that these behaviours are narcissistic based only on the design of social networking sites. Doing so ignores the rich body of work that demonstrates the personalisation of politics (Bennett, 2012; Dalton, 2008; Giddens, 1991; Papacharissi, 2010; Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley, 2004; Zukin et al., 2006). The only way that a researcher can understand whether an act is genuine is through a study of the individual unit of analysis. Furthermore, cascades can still take place when those involved feel their behaviour is authentic, in what Sunstein (2007: 94) defines as "informational cascades," where "people cease relying, at a certain point, on their private information or opinions. They decide instead to act on the basis of the signals conveyed by others." As shown in the #StopKony case study, citizens may place their faith in dubious sources. This research will establish the personalised context for micro-activism through diaries and interviews. In addition, this study will also investigate informational cascades through a series of experiments that examine the sources that participants are receptive to on Facebook.

3.4 Conclusion

Over the course of this chapter, I have presented the theoretical framework that underpins this thesis. Based on this, I provide an alternative prognosis to challenge the hypotheses derived from the slacktivist critique: low-threshold interactions conducted online are not ineffective and narcissistic acts of slacktivism, but integral components within a scaled continuum of participation. In the following chapter, I present the mixed-method research design that will be used to explore these hypotheses. Given the expansive scope of the continuum of participation framework, designing a robust methodology proved to be challenging. Rather than relying on widely used survey methods or big data solutions, I argue that a combination of experimental and qualitative methods are the most suitable approach for getting under the skin of the routine use of social media at the individual level.

4. Methodology and Research Design

> The new media environment demands new techniques. Those techniques carry risks – they have not undergone the years of seasoning and sophistication that dominant methods have. But they also carry the promise of expanding the scope of our inquiry and applying intellectual rigor to topics of broad social significance.
>
> (Karpf, 2012b: 641)

The research design used for this thesis will be mixed-method, combining computational, experimental, and qualitative methods. This chapter begins with a justification as to the suitability of this unconventional approach as opposed to more established methods that explore the intersection of social media and politics, such as survey research and big data analysis. Importantly, the methodology used in this thesis is based on Karpf's concept of "kludginess,"[15] using experimental workarounds to generate empirically based observations in a fast changing, spatially diffuse, and subsequently chaotic media environment (Gerodimos and Ward, 2007; Karpf, 2012b). The methodology employed by this research, at its core, is a workaround; a creative, but problematic, fix designed to explore the relatively uncharted terrain of micro-level, digitally mediated engagement practices. Furthermore, given the emphasis on political engagement and media use at the individual level of analysis, this study will use what Salmons (2012) defines as a "deep data" approach, drawing on rich, thick descriptive data that is tailored around micro-level attitudes and behaviours. In order to achieve this, this thesis will combine in-depth ethnographic data, collected through a participant observation of the hybrid mobilization movement 38 Degrees and media diaries, with a laboratory experiment based on small samples of young internet users. This chapter will explain each method in detail, and highlight the limitations of each approach. Reflecting on the shortcomings of the experimental design is important, as Karpf (2012: 665) notes, "if we are to understand the digital landscape, we will need to get our hands dirty and then take note of the dirt under our fingernails."

It is important to outline why a mixed-methods research design has been used in this thesis. Primarily, this is because mono-method research designs that examine political participation often fail to encapsulate both political attitudes and behaviours. By combining three complimentary methods, this study seeks to ground observation of online political engagement within an understating of the motivational context on which these acts are predicated. However, this task is problematized by the increasingly

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[15] "The essence of a kludge is that it is inelegant, but usefully solves a problem" (Karpf, 2012b: 654).

personalised understanding of what comprises the political (Couldry, Markham and Livingstone, 2010; Dahlgren, 2009; Dalton, 2008; Norris, 2011; Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley, 2004). Given these developments, in-depth qualitative techniques are deemed most appropriate, as qualitative research allows respondents to discuss the areas of political knowledge with which they are familiar and try to frame information in their own way (Graber, 2004: 560).

Secondly, the fluid and rapidly evolving nature of the internet poses a number of methodological challenges (Bimber and Copeland, 2011; Gerodimos and Ward, 2007; Karpf, 2012b). Gerodimos and Ward (2007) pinpoint two problems in particular that call for a re-evaluation of how we conduct research of political participation online; the diffusion of "what" encompasses political acts and "where" they take place. This combination of the growth of new forms of political behaviour and the porous spatial characteristics of the internet, creates difficulties for the researcher, as it is near impossible to define the parameters of precisely where political behaviour takes place online.[16] Despite the hopeful proclamations of big data enthusiasts (Mayer-Schonberger and Cukier, 2013), or the anxieties raised by those wary of holistic data accumulation (Croll, 2012; Morozov 2011), the sheer amount of content online and the seemingly limitless virtual space in which it exists within means that information is often ephemeral. It is intrinsically difficult to record who accesses online content, and what they do with it post-consumption, especially if they leave no digital trace (Gerodimos and Ward, 2007: 120-121). This makes for a messy landscape, one in which the use of quantitative methods, which require isolated variables and measurement precision, may not be appropriate (Karpf, 2012b: 645). Bimber and Copeland (2011: 2) claim that the more embedded digital media becomes within everyday life, the more difficult it will become to deconstruct causal relationships online. As such, Gerodimos and Ward (2007) advocate an in-depth qualitative approach that focuses on smaller case studies. This will be adopted within this research through an ethnography of 38 Degrees and by using media diaries to capture detailed self-reflection of an individual's own political experiences.

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[16] See Wright (2012b) on "third spaces." Political discussion can happen on any platform that allows for user generated content.

4.1 Go Your Own Way: A Rejection of Survey Research and Big Data Analysis

The diffusion of the political into new, personally defined spaces across an expansive hybrid media environment poses a number of measurement difficulties for survey research and big data methodologies. Although both methods have value in generating inferences on large samples, new methodological tools are required to get under the skin of individual level attitudes and behaviours.

John, Reynolds, and Mycoff (2008: 181) define survey research as, "the direct or indirect solicitation of information from individuals by asking them questions", predominantly through questionnaires. Survey research benefits from large-N sampling frames and measurement precision through standardised measures (Bryman, 2004). As a result, survey research is often well placed to make valid and reliable statements on causal relationships, especially regarding indicators of participation that are easily measured such as voting (An et al., 2011; Coleman, 2007; McLeod, Scheufele and Moy, 1999). However, a number of problems emerge in the use of survey research to examine micro-level participation, particularly from the perspective of the respondent.

Firstly, survey research often relies on closed questions to measure a respondent's political attitudes and their level of engagement (Henn, Weinstein and Forrest, 2005: 557). While this does offer benefits in terms of generalisibility, data is often shallow. The use of closed questions compels a respondent to choose an answer that may or may not represent their position. This can often oversimplify a participant's contribution or, worse still, distort reality (Johnson, Reynolds and Mycoff, 2008: 325). As such, survey-based studies offer a limited, retrospective presentation of examined behaviour, neglecting the important contextual factors on which political behaviour is based (Dell Carpini, Cook and Jacobs, 2004: 324; Eliasoph, 1998: 18). Furthermore, a researcher can never be certain that the accounts provided in response to written or oral questions are accurate. This is especially pertinent for studies of political engagement. Respondents may feel compelled to provide a socially desirable response due to the research setting or their own perception of behavioural norms (Bryman, 2004: 165; Wilhelm, 1999: 163). This may be reduced if the survey is undertaken online as opposed to face-to-face (Christensen, 2012). However, this may trigger further complications, as an individual may not pay the same care and attention to a survey conducted in an abstract, digital setting.

Secondly, due to the importance of reliability and validity within survey design, measurements and indicators often replicate a very narrow, static conception of politics

that is fixated on institutional forms of engagement (Bennett, Wells and Freelon, 2011: 837; Bennett, 2012; Boulianne, 2009; Dalton, 2008; Eliasoph, 1998: 18; Henn, Weinstein and Forrest, 2005; Sloam, 2012a; 2012b). As politics becomes increasingly personalised, and the locations in which it plays out become more diverse, the indicators we use must remain equally reflexive.

This alludes to a more fundamental problem with survey research; the assumption of shared understanding between the researcher and the survey respondent (Henn, Weinstein and Forrest, 2005: 557). In order to examine lived-in political experience a research design must take into account the diffuse, often unstructured, nature of political action. For example, a respondent may deem political talk on Facebook to be inappropriate within a survey context, given the nature of the act in comparison to more formally recognised modes of participation. Just like debates over key terms within academia (Carpentier, 2011b; Fox, 2013; Jenkins and Carpentier, 2013), respondents may also have dissimilar interpretations of concepts like citizenship and participation. As such, designing operational indicators that facilitate shared understanding is challenging (Bryman, 2004: 105).

Surveys often require specific knowledge about certain topics as proof of political interest. However, this is problematic as the topics that are selected by the researcher may be alien to the respondent's own civic and political experiences. This is evident in the survey designs used by Prior (2007: 138) and Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, and Delli Carpini (2006: 57). Both draw upon a narrow definition of political awareness by asking questions that refer to specialised, "schoolbook" political knowledge, rather than everyday political experiences and related knowledge of policy issues (Graber, 2004: 561). Granted, survey research can include open-ended questions, but this reduces the reliability and generalisability of the results as such responses rely on the subjective interpretation of the researcher (Johnson, Reynolds and Mycoff, 2008: 328).

Although survey research can offer detailed statistics on usage habits (see for example the Pew Internet and American Life project), a survey is not feasible for the explorative nature of this study. Instead, qualitative techniques are more appropriate given the unit of analysis and the emphasis on micro-politics. As Graber (2004: 562) notes:

> When ordinary people discuss major political issues using their own words and perspectives, even groups that generally score poorly on typical tests... they display political insight and cognitive complexity in addressing major political issues that they regard as matters of concern.

This thesis aims to examine how politics and political engagement is framed and enacted at the individual level, rather than a survey of predetermined notions of politics that may have little relevance to the respondent. This is significant if we consider the growth of a new, digitally enabled civic vernacular online (Papacharissi, 2010: 161).

While survey research may rely on a respondent's own interpretation of their political behaviour on social networking sites, big data methods provide a potential solution; the ability to draw generalisable inferences on the basis of large-N studies of natural behaviour (boyd and Crawford, 2012: 663). Big data methodologies draw upon large data sets, collected through a range of commercial and free-to-use computational sources, to identify a range of patterns. The opportunities presented by big data for social media research are intuitively quite clear. Huge datasets collected from social networking sites offer large amounts of increasingly rich data on user behaviour outside of the confines of a research setting. Enthusiasts claim that this data is not prone to issues of researcher bias, as in survey research, and the content collected may even rival some qualitative research for depth (Mayer-Schonberger and Cukier, 2013). However, this reliance on size as a determinant of quality is a fundamentally flawed logic, one that compromises the methodological rigour of the research. As boyd and Crawford (2012: 663) argue, such an approach cultivates a harmful and pervasive myth that large collections of data offer access to a higher form of knowledge, surpassing the insights that are possible through small-N research designs. The weaknesses of big data analysis are outlined as to convey why this is not suited to the research aims of this thesis.

Firstly, although data voluntarily produced outside of a research setting does offer a more accurate representation of user behaviour, the motivational influences behind the action are difficult to gauge without communication with the actor (boyd and Crawford, 2012; Crawford, 2013). The intention of a user is often not clear when based solely on the evidence of their action. As such, inferences based on big data offer only part of the whole picture.

Secondly, big data analysis offers little clarity on how content that is produced online is subsequently consumed or acted on by others. While it is possible for research conducted on Twitter to accurately track the volume and type of communications within the service (An et al., 2011; Bruns and Stieglitz, 2013; Conover et al., 2011; Wohn and

Eun-Kyung, 2011), claims on consumption are often made on the basis of user reach: the total number of unique Twitter users whose timeline will feature a specific tweet. This neglects the personalised nature of consumption, such as the amount of attention devoted to the material, if any, and whether any actions occur following consumption in other spaces, both online and offline (Wright, 2012b). Big data research exploring political behaviour therefore lacks clarity on information consumption and the resulting behavioural effects that this can have following the point of exposure.

A factor that can be a key determinant of consumption habits is the dynamics of the relationship between the receiver and the producer.[17] Patterns in large datasets can be misleading when trying to understand network effects, and those relationships that an individual values (Bernstein et al., 2013; Marwick and boyd, 2011). Although computational techniques can produce an assortment of network diagrams describing the flow of communication, this data can result in spurious causal relationships as the volume of communications between users does not necessarily signify the strength of a relationship. For example, boyd and Crawford (2012: 670) highlight how mobile phone records may suggest that the user values work contacts over others. Therefore, the context available through qualitative methods is necessary when analysing individual level network effects in depth.

Thirdly, claims to objectivity are misleading as big data research still involves a level of subjective interpretation. When a researcher creates a coding framework they cannot be neutral, as subjective decisions must be made when designing and applying the coding schema (boyd and Crawford, 2012: 667). This is evident in the study by Wohn and Eun-Kyung (2011), which examines the two-screen phenomenon in which users are active on Twitter whilst watching television. The authors coded tweets on the basis of four separate categories: attention, emotion, information, and opinion. Even when intercoder reliability and intracoder reliability are accounted for, the authors had to make subjective decisions (Bryman 2004: 197). Subjectivity is also present when a researcher decides on a sampling frame (Bruns and Stieglitz, 2013). Using keywords to refine large collections of social data can compromise the data collected, because the sampling frame may systematically exclude other relevant tweets (see Jungherr 2014). Although the use of hashtags and keywords are an option for those analysing the behaviour of users in relation to a specific event (see Conover et al., 2011; Dennis, Gillespie and O'Loughlin, 2015), it would not be appropriate within this research given

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[17] Users can refer to diverse range of contacts, including celebrities, family, close friends, work colleagues, acquaintances etc. These different connections can have contrasting effects on user behaviour depending on the dynamics of the relationship.

the focus on social media in day-to-day life. As Jungherr (2014: 244) notes, "the active use of hashtags presupposes a certain level of Twitter proficiency; users below this level are thus excluded from the analysis."

Finally, perhaps the biggest stumbling block is the availability of robust datasets and reliable data scraping tools for graduate-level researchers. As boyd and Crawford (2012: 673-674) note, there is a considerable unevenness in terms of who gets access to what data on Facebook. While a number of studies have focused on user behaviour in specific contexts, such as during election campaigns (see Boulianne, 2015; Kalnes 2009: 259), those studies able to make generalisable claims about a wider proportion of the user base are undertaken by scholars who have privileged access to Facebook data. Compare, for example, the scope and scale of this thesis with a recent study undertaken by Bakshy, Messing and Adamic (2015)—in collaboration with the Data Science Team at Facebook—that draws on over 10 million subjects.[18] Likewise, Twitter increasingly restricts access to large volumes of historical user data to those willing to part with significant sums of money.[19] Researchers can access the freely available Streaming API to harvest tweets, but this limits the user to a 1 percent sample of all public tweets. As such, it would be logistically and financially unfeasible to secure a dataset from either Facebook or Twitter that would be suitable for this research.

The research design of any study should always be designed based on the research questions that it seeks to address. Neither survey research nor big data methods offer a suitable approach for observing individual level political engagement within a hybrid media system. As the relationship between digital media use and participation is highly dependent on social and political context (Bimber and Copeland, 2011: 2), this study seeks to collect what Salmons (2012) describes as "deep data":

> Qualitative research approaches allow us to dig below the surface to explore how, why or what, and to explore relationships and connections not readily evident in Big Data—which is why I've taken to describing it as Deep Data.

By drawing on both experimental and qualitative traditions, this thesis aims to gain an understanding of the complex processes that connect personalised political attitudes, participatory behaviours, and media practices.

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[18] For further information on the Data Science research team at Facebook:
https://research.facebook.com/datascience.
[19] For example, see http://gnip.com/pr_gnip_first_to_market_historical_coverage_twitter/.

4.2 Indicators and Measurement: Issues of Definition and Interpretation

> That political actions of many kinds—often aimed more at expressive than instrumental goals—occur constantly at the intersection between digital media, mass media, and people's social lives does not necessarily mean that citizens will participate more, or more effectively. It does, however, imply that people's definition of what it means to engage with politics and their understanding of how it can—and, perhaps, should—be done have changed substantially compared to the standard definitions employed in political science research.
>
> (Vaccari, 2013: 222-223)

The conceptual foundation on which a researcher constructs their study has an integral impact on one's methodological design and, subsequently, the conclusions reached, given the often-deterministic nature of those variables under review. This is especially true of research exploring political participation. How a researcher conceptualises engagement can shape their conclusions on the health of a political system. For example, Whiteley (2012) warns that Britain is teetering on the edge of becoming a flawed democracy, given the declining membership of political parties, waning voter turnout, and decreasing engagement with community organisations. However, as Fox (2013) highlights, these conclusions are inexorably tied to Whiteley's definition of participation. This represents a wider problem within academic research in this area. As Carpentier (2011a: 14) notes, "in communication and media studies... participation is still used to mean everything and nothing."

Whiteley loosely bases his prognosis on a definition of participation derived from the seminal works of Verba and Nie (1972; Verba, Nie and Kim, 1978). Political participation is understood as those activities by private citizens that are directly aimed at influencing the selection of government personnel, the decisions they take, or both (Verba and Nie, 1972: 2). Evidently, this definition is bound to political institutions and does not reflect the evolution of citizenship and subsequent diversification of participatory styles (Bennett, Wells and Freelon, 2011; Coleman, 2007; Dalton, 2008; Henn, Weinstein and Forrest, 2005; Gerodimos and Ward, 2007; Neuman, Bimber and Hindman, 2011; Sloam, 2012a). Studies that adopt this approach often emphasise the importance of macro-level indicators of participation, like voting, at the expense of micro-level acts, the type which prosper within online environments (Bennett, Wells and Freelon, 2011: 836). It should not come as a surprise that findings of this nature often support the "reinforcement thesis," that the internet sustains pre-existing patterns of participatory inequality (Brundidge and Rice, 2009; Margolis and Resnick, 2000; Mesch and Coleman, 2007). However, such a conclusion is problematic as political

disconnection in this context refers to the disjuncture between citizens and political institutions, rather than a disconnection with politics more broadly (Coleman, Morrison and Yates, 2011: 215; Dalton, 2008; Gerodimos and Ward, 2007: 114; Norris, 2011). As Fox (2013: 2) notes, there is no "true" definition of political participation; researchers must construct and adopt a definition that fits their research context. Therefore, it is important to highlight why conventional, macro-level indicators are not appropriate for this research, before providing an explanation of the type of micro-political acts, both online and offline, that this study seeks to observe.

Firstly, it is important to recognise that a substantial proportion of the literature on digital participation tends to focus on the effect of the internet on a narrow selection of offline political acts, rather than other forms of online activism (Boulianne, 2009: 195; Neuman, Bimber and Hindman, 2011). These studies operationalise macro-level indicators of political participation, those acts that are explicitly aimed at political institutions or public policy, rather than micro-level measurements, which track everyday political experiences (Norris, 2011: 247). As such, a number of studies have found evidence of a relationship between internet use and political disengagement through measures such as party membership or voting (Bode, 2008; Coleman, 2007; Ward, Gibson and Lusoli, 2003). However, this does not represent *holistic* political disengagement as these indicators lack measurement validity in this context; they do not embody the changes to political identity and citizenship in Britain outlined in Chapter 1.

This thesis defines participation as a process, linking the disparate mediated and non-mediated acts that occur across the continuum of participation. As such, this thesis will not attempt to draw arbitrary parameters prior to data collection. This would contradict the emphasis on individual level sense-making that forms the focus of the literature review and theoretical framework. Essentially, every citizen has a certain degree of political sophistication, but this varies depending on personal issue interest and everyday experiences. The most effective way to capture this dissimilarity is through thick description, a technique that allows for self-reflection. By using diaries and interviews, this study will encourage participants to describe what they perceive to be political or non-political, and to reflect on their engagement from this perceptive (Couldry, Livingstone and Markham, 2010; Eliasoph, 1998; Zukin et al., 2006: 55).

Participation will be measured on the basis of an amalgamation of indicators from other studies (Bennett, Wells and Freelon, 2011: 842; Bucy and Gregson, 2001: 357; Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley, 2004: 78; Zukin et al., 2006: 57). For example, this research will emulate the approach used by Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, and Delli

Carpini (2006) in measuring participation as a process, from information dissemination to action, as shown in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1. The core indicators of engagement, based on Zukin et al., (2006)

Modes of participation	Indicators of engagement
Cognitive engagement	Following government and public affairs
	Talking with friends and family about politics
	Political knowledge
	Attention to news media
Public voice	Contacting officials
	Contacting the print media
	Contacting the broadcast media
	Protesting
	E-mail petitions
	Written petitions
	Boycotting
	Canvassing
Civic action	Community problem solving
	Regular volunteering for a non electoral organisation
	Active membership in a group or association
	Participation in fundraising run/walk/ride
	Other fundraising for charity
Political action	Regular voting
	Persuading others
	Displaying buttons, signs, stickers
	Campaign contributions
	Volunteering for candidate or political organisations

Source: Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins and Delli Carpini (2006).

This list of indicators, while not exhaustive, provides a useful platform on which to build, albeit with some alterations. Primarily, the diversity of political behaviour on social media significantly blurs the different modes of participation, making the use of discrete categories somewhat redundant. The continuum of participation is therefore used as a solution to harness the complex diffusion of personally expressive political engagement online, as illustrated in Table 4.2. Civic and political forms of engagement are merged within this list, as participants will determine the parameters of what constitutes political or civic involvement.

Table 4.2. Example indicators of political participation

Continuum of participation	Indicators of engagement
	• Attention to news media
	• Attention to information created and shared by peers
	• Following 'political' interests (including government, public affair, issues)
	• Opinion formulation
	• Interpersonal political discussion
	• Contacting the broadcast or print media
	• Mediated interactions or face-to-face contact with an elected representative
	• Mediated interactions or face-to-face contact with other political actors
	• Expressions of civic or political orientation
	• Self-produced forms of digital media
	• Membership of peer-defined networks and groups
	• Membership of traditional, hierarchical organisations
	• Organising and mobilising future civic and political actions
	• Donating to civic or political causes
	• Signing a petition
	• Voting in an election
	• Consumer activism (boycotting and buycotting)
	• Political party activities (canvassing, campaigning)
	• Campaigning and advocacy work (including raising awareness, fundraising for a civic or political cause, and self-produced forms of digital media)
	• Volunteered time for a civic or political cause
	• Taken part in an legal public demonstration
	• Taken part in illegal protest activities

It is important to note that this list of indicators will act as a descriptive aid during data collection, rather than a definitive list.[20] This research seeks to observe how citizens envisage participation through their own experiences, rather than the researcher imposing a mandatory definition through a rigid set of indicators. Furthermore, the research also aims to unearth evidence of new practices online that are currently absent from the existing literature.

A similar inductive approach will be undertaken in evaluating why citizens participate. Participants will be given the opportunity to define and discuss politics, and

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[20] This list is exemplary rather than prescriptive. The ordering mimics the four stages on the continuum of participation but, as discussed in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, these acts are fluid and can correlate with different categories depending on the context of use.

their political motivations, in their own terms (see Eliasoph, 1998). Structural factors, such as time demands and technical competencies, will also be recorded during data collection as a means of contextualising the findings (Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley 2004: 140). Demographic factors are also significant when we consider how citizens construct and understand their political experiences. As the "civic voluntarism model" (Verba and Nie, 1972; Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995) notes, demographic factors are important in shaping participatory behaviours, including age, income, geographical background, and level of education. While this thesis has noted the declining influence of such structural models of citizenship, both Dalton (2008) and Yuval-Davies (2007) stress that demographic factors are still very much important. As such, it is important to note that the sampling frame used within this thesis will not form a representative sample of the wider population, that is those British citizens active on Facebook and Twitter. Instead, this study will rely on a number of convenience samples (Bryman, 2004: 100; Johnson, Reynolds and Mycoff, 2008: 225). As a graduate researcher, random sampling is not feasible for this study due to cost and time restrictions. This thesis will instead attempt to ensure that samples are figuratively representative of their population. The sampling frame for each method is discussed in the following section, and the influence of demographic factors will be considered during data analysis. All relevant participant information is included within the appendices provided (see Appendix A1; B1; B2; C1).

4.2.1 Service Selection and Measurement Online

Given the broad scope of the term social media, it is important to reinforce what this research refers to when using the term (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). This study will focus on two social networking sites in depth, Facebook and Twitter. These two services have been selected due to their popularity in Britain, as a social and entertainment tool for citizens[21] and an organisational tool for political groups (Obar, Zube and Lampe, 2012). Other online services will be examined as a by-product of their overlap with Facebook and Twitter. Table 4.3 provides a list of active interactions available on each service, correct as of September 2013. This will act as a guide for data collection.

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[21] Figures from 2013 show that there were just under 33 million live Facebook accounts in the UK, and an estimated 34 million Twitter accounts (Rose, 2013). Both figures should be taken with a healthy dose of scepticism given the lack of transparency in how each service measures an "active account." Finding reliable user information is difficult as neither company publishes this data.

Table 4.3. Active interactions available to users on Facebook and Twitter

Active interactions on Facebook	Active interactions on Twitter
• Like content posted by a friend, a page, or an application • Post a comment on content posted by a friend, a page, or an application • Post a comment on content provided by the user • Re-share content posted by a friend, a page, or an application • Share content from a source outside of the Facebook platform • Join a group • Subscribe to other contacts within the Facebook platform • Post content in a group • Create an event page • Join an event page • Undertake a political act within the Facebook platform (e.g. Causes) • Post a status-update • Upload a note • Upload a photo • Upload a video • Tag a user(s) in a post • Use of the messenger platform (asynchronous communication) • Use of the chat platform (synchronous communication) • Create and manage a list • App-specific interactions	• Tweet – no user mentions and not a Retweet • Interaction (@ mention) with another user • Retweet of another user (native style) • Retweet of another user (traditional style) • Modified tweet from another user • Use of hashtag(s) • Share content from a source outside of the Twitter platform • Embed content in a tweet (e.g. YouTube video; TwitPic photo) • Share content from an external source using the tweet button • Favourite a tweet • Create and manage a list

Note: The following interactions are omitted from this study: poke feature; "Facebook Questions"; "Facebook Gifts"; and "Listen with Friends." Traditional style retweets refer to this format: RT @username. List correct as of September 2013.

A difficulty with the empirical study of social media is what Karpf (2012b: 640) labels as "internet time," the rapid speed with which digital technologies develop and change. This unpredictability can make life difficult for those trying to analyse media effects in a digital environment. In just a few years, Twitter has "moved from the lead adopter stage to the late-majority stage of diffusion" (Karpf, 2012b: 641). Similarly, Facebook has continued to grow and diversify as a platform with a number of notable acquisitions, such as the photo-sharing application Instagram and WhatsApp. As service

functionality evolves and changes, research can quickly go from cutting-edge to irrelevant (Bimber and Copeland, 2011: 6). This thesis will attempt to overcome this potential pitfall through thick description of holistic service use, exploring each platform in relation to other online and offline behaviour, rather than isolating the specific functions listed in Table 4.3. As such, the findings will offer a snapshot of how Facebook and Twitter integrate within broader media and engagement practices at the individual level.

Time, and its relationship with effort, is an important measurement in contextualising this snapshot of user behaviour. Effort has long been considered a core indicator in assessing the depth of an individual's political participation (Verba, Nie and Kim, 1978: 55). The slacktivist critique operationalises effort in terms of the time expended when undertaking a political act. Citizens are deemed lazy when the action itself—such as the click of button (Morozov, 2013)—only takes a small amount of time. As a result the often unseen processes that may precede such an act, such as cognitive mobilisation and private deliberation, are ignored (Dalton, 2008: 38; Inglehart, 1970). A similar logic can be applied to voting.

The time expended to physically vote can be a matter of seconds, especially when we consider the growing popularity of the postal vote (Cracknell, 2014). However, unlike low-threshold acts online, this does not mean voting is perceived to be a lazy or insignificant act. Such an assessment underplays the time a citizen spends considering which candidate to vote for. This process may involve a range of mediated and face-to-face interactions. If a citizen simply turns up to the polling booth and chooses a candidate at random then he or she may be deemed to be "lazy." However, we cannot assume that *all* of those who vote are lazy based on the costs associated with action; the same should also apply to digitally mediated expression and micro-activism.

This thesis operationalises time as a measure of the depth of one's engagement. The amount of time that a participant devotes to political actions across the continuum of participation will be compared to their own perception of their spare time; the amount of time available after bodily, financial, and household necessities are accounted for (Goodin et al., 2008: 35). It is important to recognise that the amount of spare-time available to an individual depends on their personal context. The time-pressure illusion—the gap between actual spare time and potential discretionary time—is an increasingly important factor when accounting for the nature of contemporary citizenship.

The analysis will be structured around three cases, outlined next.

4.3 An Ethnography of 38 Degrees

38 Degrees is a non-profit, political activist movement based in the United Kingdom. Since their foundation in 2009, the group has amassed a "membership" of over 2.5 million people, with donations from their members totalling over £2 million (Babbs, 2012).[22] The group boasts an impressive track record across a range of political issues, most notably their campaign against the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government's plans to sell off public forests in 2011 (Chatterton, 2011). However, what is most striking about the group is their organisational ethos, "People. Power. Change." Named after the angle at which snowflakes come together to form an avalanche, individual autonomy is central to the movement's modus operandi:

> 38 Degrees puts power into people's hands. We're helping to strengthen democracy by giving 38 Degrees members a new way to be involved in politics. We want to be more than just voters and ensure our voices are heard all of the time, not just once every five years.
>
> We are a community of people who want positive change. We are a loud and persistent knock on the door of the politicians, influencers and institutions who make the decisions that affect us all. We hold them to account and make sure they listen and respond to our calls for positive change.
>
> (38 Degrees, 2013a)

However, despite their evident impact on Britain's political landscape, little academic research has been undertaken on how the group operates and whether they deliver on their ethos of member-led political campaigns. This research will provide a detailed account of 38 Degrees from inside the organisation, illustrating the role that members play within the movement. Furthermore, this thesis will analyse how Facebook and Twitter are used to complement their activism.

Following in the footsteps of MoveOn in the US (Karpf, 2012a) and GetUp! in Australia (Vromen and Coleman, 2014), 38 Degrees is an example of a new organisational form, what Chadwick (2007: 283) describes as a hybrid mobilization movement, using digital technologies to adapt and transform their organisational structure and repertoire of actions during campaigns in real time (Chadwick, 2007: 283). Members engage with the movement through a range of online and offline political "actions," "specific activities that the leadership aims to structure for its

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[22] Figure correct as of November 2012. Members do not have to pay a membership fee but can donate to the organisation if they wish. As with MoveOn in the United States, 38 Degrees "redefines membership from 'small donor' to 'message recipient'" (Karpf, 2012a: 31).

members to enable them to exert influence on the mainstream news media, online networks, and the policy agenda" (Chadwick, 2013: 189). Although these actions vary depending on the context of the campaign, they are generally underpinned by their use of the internet. 38 Degrees mobilises vast, national networks through the use of new communication technologies, predominantly email, but increasingly using Facebook and Twitter. These online tools are often used to co-ordinate offline participation, as demonstrated by the group's localised campaign to halt further privatisation of the National Health Service in 2012 (Harris, 2012). Their use of e-petitions and other forms of digital micro-activism has resulted in criticism from journalists (Rickett, 2013) and politicians (Burns, 2011; Davies, 2014). As such, 38 Degrees offers an ideal case study for exploring how Facebook and Twitter are used within an activist context.

This fieldwork has three principal research aims. Firstly, this research aims to observe and document the political behaviour of 38 Degrees members. How do members engage with the movement's leadership throughout the campaign process? What role do members have in the selection of new campaigns and in directing campaign strategy? How do members organise and mobilise? Fundamentally, how is power diffused throughout the organisational structure? Are campaigns really "people-powered"?

Secondly, if we are to understand the extent to which social media can facilitate collective action then we must also establish a clearer understanding of how activists themselves perceive the role of these tools. It is not enough to simply know how social media is being used, we must also engage with the intentions and motivations of the user (Obar, Zube and Lampe, 2012). Therefore, this study aims to investigate the political attitudes of members. Why do members engage? What forms the basis of individual motivation? How do members make sense of public issues? Crucially, are digitally networked acts undertaken on the basis of narcissistic self-interest, as hypothesised by the slacktivist critique, or do they reflect a genuine attempt to maximise personal efficacy on issues of personal relevance?

The third and final research aim of this study focuses on the role of social media across the continuum of participation in an activist context. Do social media platforms provide an interconnected space in which members learn about and discuss political issues? And does micro-activism online—through awareness building, e-petitions, and forms of representative contact—transfer into further participatory action, or is offline engagement compromised by inefficient online engagement?

In order to explore these questions this study will focus on two distinct strands. Firstly, while assuming the role of a volunteer in their central London office, I will gain an appreciation of the organisational dynamics of 38 Degrees. This will provide an insight into how the leadership use social media within the movement's day-to-day operations (H_2) and whether these tools enable grassroots members to influence strategic decision-making (EF_3). Furthermore, I will investigate the purpose and function of social media within the movement's wider campaign repertoires, exploring the factors that motivate members to participate (EF_5; H_3).

Secondly, this thesis will examine how Facebook and Twitter are used for activism through two short case studies (EF_3; EF_4; H_1): a national mobilisation to compel a leading energy company to pay more tax, and a series of local level efforts to galvanise resistance to the British government's controversial 2012 healthcare reforms.

4.3.1 Logistics and Details

The ethnography of 38 Degrees took place over three months, between May and July 2013. During this time I acted as a "participant as observer," contributing to the day-to-day running of campaigns as a volunteer (see the classification of participant observer roles, Gold, 1958). This was an overt observation, as staff and members were aware of my role as a researcher. In undertaking ethnographic research I aim to develop an understanding of the culture that underpins 38 Degrees as a political movement, and the role that members fulfil within it (Geertz, 1975). This study will not analyse the effectiveness of the organisation in achieving their own campaign aims,[23] but will instead generate observations on the attitudes and behaviours of individual members and the strategic use of social media at the organisational level.

Ethnographic research is a proven research tool for exploring attitudes and behaviours at the individual level. In *Avoiding Politics* (1998) Eliasoph offers a unique insight into how citizens discuss politics within everyday life. By embedding herself within a local community, Eliasoph provides evidence of a growing political disconnection between public-political issues and private-political attitudes in the US. Similarly, in *Ground Wars* (2012), Nielsen challenges the conventions of contemporary political campaigning through an ethnographic study of two campaigns, noting the

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[23] For further research on the policy influence of 38 Degrees, see Chadwick (2007; 2013) and Chadwick and Dennis (2014). For further research on other hybrid mobilization movements, see Carty (2010), Eaton (2010), Karpf (2012), Kavada (2012), Vromen (2015), and Vromen and Coleman (2013).

significance of personalised communication with voters for successful campaigns. As these studies show, ethnographic research provides the researcher with unique access to their object of study on which to build a contextual understanding of political behaviour.

I collected rich ethnographic data through interviews, field notes, and a combination of e-mails, social media content, blogposts, and online news articles. This approach is based on Howard's (2006) "network ethnography," later developed by Karpf (2012a: 18). Interviews were conducted with members and staff in order to construct a sense of grassroots involvement throughout the campaign process, from conception to action. All interviews were semi-structured, so as to provide opportunities for interviewees to discuss political issues in their own terms (see Geertz, 1975). Interviewees were selected through snowball sampling on the basis of contacts made throughout the placement. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or over Skype, and were recorded and transcribed. Two sets of field notes were taken; one recording observations throughout the placement, and a second reflective diary completed at the end of each day (Bryman, 2004: 306-308; Ortlipp, 2008). Finally, I collected a range of materials to contextualise the campaigns that were active during my observation, including all e-mails and blogposts published by 38 Degrees during this period. A list of emails is provided in Appendix A1. Data from Facebook was also collected manually from the movement's Facebook page.[24] Data from Twitter was compiled via Sysomos Media Analysis Platform (MAP),[25] a commercial text mining platform which grants access to the complete Twitter "firehose" archive ensuring that analyses are based on 100 percent of the tweets that match the user-defined search criteria.

4.3.2 Limitations

There are a number of limitations associated with ethnographic research due to the predominantly interpretive approach. It is possible that the pre-existing assumptions of the researcher may cloud the objectivity of the findings. Even if a researcher conducts the ethnography in an impartial manner, they still have to interpret and construct their object of study for other social scientists (Geertz, 1975). This emphasis on personal interpretation compromises the reliability of the results, as the ethnography will not be

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[24] 38 Degrees Facebook page: http://www.facebook.com/peoplepowerchange.
[25] For further information on Sysomos MAP: http://www.sysomos.com/products/overview/sysomos-map/.

replicable. However, the observation will follow the standard procedures for ethnographic research. Overt observation also runs the risk that the objects of study may change their conduct. However, these concerns will be minimised, as the ethnographic data will be complemented by evidence of natural member behaviour from Facebook and Twitter.

The use of Sysomos MAP to collect data from Twitter is limited for researchers, due to the lack of transparency about the sampling frame used when exporting large amounts of tweets from the service (see Dennis, Gillespie and O'Loughlin, 2015: 443). As of August 2012, the export function was restricted to 5,000 randomly selected tweets per search term. However, rather than depend on the tool for analysis, this study used the platform as a means of pinpointing the peaks and troughs in Twitter flows. The trends identified were used for further in depth qualitative investigation.

4.4 Media Diaries

The principal aim of this thesis is to examine the use of social media for political participation within everyday life. However, two conceptual realities pose methodological difficulties in achieving this goal. Firstly, given the emphasis on personalised political identity in the literature review (Bennett, 2012; Dalton, 2008; Norris, 2011), this study aims to generate the participants' own reflections on what constitutes the "political" and therefore portray what they understand to be political engagement. Secondly, these attitudinal and behavioural reflections must be explored in relation to media use within a hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013), where online and offline informational stimulants converge and overlap in unpredictable ways. As such, the data required to analyse the effects of social media on political learning, on the formulation of political attitudes, and on the undertaking of action, is fragmented. The interactions that shape these often take place across a range of public, semi-public, and private spaces. Based on the research design used by Couldry, Livingstone and Markham in *Media Consumption and Public Engagement* (2010)*, this thesis will use media diaries to produce 29 individualised accounts that describe the effect of mediated and non-mediated interactions on the continuum of participation.[26]

This research will draw on a mixed-method approach, combining personalised diary data, interviews, and survey data, with evidence of participant behaviour collected

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[26] Although 30 participants were recruited, one diarist withdrew from the project prior to writing their first entry. As a result they are not included in any of the analyses in Chapter 6.

from Facebook and Twitter. Combined together these methods balance their own respective weaknesses. While the diaries are highly interpretive, they can provide clarity as to the motivations behind digital self-expression. Diarists will be asked to track what media content they have regular access to, to reflect on political issues that they deem to be important, and to keep a record of their political behaviour over a period of three months. Although a diarist's opinions may not explicitly change over time, nor may they undertake political actions during this period, the reflective process of completing a diary enables the researcher to track the different sources of information that citizens consume (Couldry, Livingstone and Markham, 2010: 47). Similarly, the diary methodology provides an opportunity to observe the spaces in which diarists discuss news and political topics. As such, reflective diaries allow the researcher to track both online and offline interactions to see how they impact both political attitudes and behaviours. This is an important contribution, as the current body of literature often focuses on social media in isolation from other media. Furthermore, by requiring participants to complete the diary over a period of three months this thesis avoids the limitations of event-specific analysis, a trait of the slacktivist critique. This thesis will instead explore the relationships formed between expressive and instrumental forms of participation.

The empirical data produced from the diaries will provide a foundation for probing a number of the expected findings and hypotheses derived from the slacktivist critique. Firstly, rich accounts of media habits at the individual level offer a chance to explore whether social media provides a way of filtering out political material, or whether users become accidentally exposed to political information (EF_1) and discursive spaces (EF_2) as a by-product of their day-to-day use. Alongside the diaries, I will also maintain a database of the cover stories from the front pages of four British newspapers: the *Sun,* the *Daily Mail*, *The Times* and the *Guardian*.[27] This data will be used to compare the relative prominence of news stories in the press with those reported in the diaries. This will provide a basis to investigate whether diarists use Facebook and Twitter to personalise their news consumption, and, in doing so, avoid the communal experiences deemed necessary to form societal bonds (see Sunstein, 2007). Secondly, by analysing reflective diaries alongside user data from Facebook and Twitter, I aim to observe what political actions occur, online and offline (EF_3; EF_4), and assess how these actions relate to media use. Finally, by drawing on reflective diaries and interviews, I will explore the factors that influence political action, and whether this varies online as

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[27] Further details for how this comparison was conducted are provided in Appendix B6.

opposed to offline ($EF_5; H_3$). The introspective diaries, in which participants discuss those issues relevant to them, will be used to investigate questions of authenticity, as participant's consider their reflexivity: "the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts and vice versa" (Archer, 2007: 4).

4.4.1 Logistics and Details

I recruited 29 diarists using a non-probability, convenience sampling technique. As such, this study is not representative of either the general public or the British user base of Facebook and Twitter. Participants were recruited through advertisements across two pre-existing networks available to the researcher: Royal Holloway, University of London, and the South Derbyshire Centre for Voluntary Services. As a result, this sample has an overrepresentation of participants linked to the Department of Politics and International Relations (nine in total). Participants were paid a fee of £10 for volunteering to take part in the research, and entered into a prize draw for a tablet computer. Details of all participants are provided in Appendix B2.

This convenience sample was designed intentionally, to identify participants with media habits and a political interest that was reflective of the slacktivist critique. Of the 29 diarists, 24 had a Facebook account and 20 used Twitter, with two diarists included who do not use either service as a control. Political interest was calculated through a measure of political activity, which, when compared to the findings of the *Audit of Political Engagement* (Hansard Society, 2014), suggested that participants were generally representative of the target population. Participants were not excluded on the basis of their age, gender, or level of education, although there was a slight overrepresentation of young males. Further discussion of the sampling frame is provided in Appendix B1.

The dataset for this study consists of the diaries, content from Facebook and Twitter where applicable, pre-diary interviews, and post-diary survey data. Diarists were asked to complete weekly, free-form diary updates over a period of three months. A diary template was provided on request, as shown in Appendix B3. The template was designed to be plain, to minimise researcher influence. Diarists were not given direction over the length or structure of the diary, but encouraged to develop a style that worked for them. This was done purposefully to motivate reflection on what participants deem to be political (Couldry, Livingstone and Markham, 2010: 48).

Diarists were encouraged to discuss how they use different forms of media, online and offline. For example, on Facebook do they read the entirety of their news feed, or do they only follow certain lists of friends? By combining evidence of user behaviour with a record of how diarists use each service in detail, the diaries provide valuable insights into whether forms of political behaviour relate to specific social networking sites, or even particular service functionality. This is an important design feature as it is vital that research begins to drill deeper into moments of media convergence, providing clarity as to the conditions in which political behaviour materialises.

Participants were given the option to record their diaries through a number of different mediums to minimise the inconvenience caused, and to avoid participant withdrawal. Diarists used the following methods to submit their entries: email (12 participants); Microsoft Word, using a template provided by the researcher (10); Evernote, using a shared notebook (4); Google Drive (1); Facebook, through a series of messages (1); and 1 participant completed their diary by hand. The Evernote web clipping add-on[28] was recommended for those who favoured digital submissions as a means of collecting content of interest from closed environments, such as Facebook.

The diary entries submitted varied dramatically, both in terms of their depth but also substance. "Joshua" would send a few lines, highlighting the topics that caught his attention over the last week, while "Joe" would go into great depth. Precisely what formed the main topic of reflection differed from diarist to diarist. Some, such as "Deborah," "Leo," and "Thomas," used the diary to discuss specific items in the news each week. Others, like "Charlie," "Christian" and "Claudia," reflected on their use of social media, even addressing slacktivism directly at times. These different styles are important, as they illustrate that the diaries were already highly interpretive before any analysis was undertaken.

I also conducted a semi-structured interview with each participant before they began the project. This interview provided an opportunity to discuss the scope of the research, in which diarists were asked to include all interactions that they deemed relevant to the research, whether that be debate on Twitter or one with friends in their local pub. This pre-diary interview also enabled the researcher to establish some sense of each participant's background, and the issues that he or she may have an existing interest in. See Appendix B4 for the pre-diary interview questionnaire.

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[28] Evernote Web Clipper: https://evernote.com/webclipper/.

A survey was conducted with the 26 participants who completed their diary in June 2014. This took place some months after end of the study, to provide a period of reflection in which each participant could consider what they had learnt about their own media habits and provide feedback on the project more generally. The post-diary survey also included a series of questions on their political engagement to compare with the evidence from the diaries. The survey is included in Appendix B5.

All public posts on Facebook and Twitter were collected during the three-month period in which each individual diarist was active, details of which are provided in Appendix B8. In total 561 posts on Facebook and 1,008 tweets were collected. The interview data and diaries were then analysed using NVivo. The interviews were coded inductively to get a sense of the diarists and the themes emerging from their experiences. These formed the basis of a coding framework, included in Appendix B9. This was designed to identify the service functions being used, the content of the post itself, and, if identified as political, its purpose. The level of interaction on each post was also recorded by way of identifying those updates that triggered reactions from wider networks. These moments were then studied in further detail.

The attrition rate for the diary research was relatively low. Of the 30 diarists that were originally recruited for the study, four participants withdrew before completion. "Alan," Christian, and "Ron" gave consent for their partially completed diaries to be included in the research, contributing five, six and seven entries respectively. As such, none of these diarists took part in the exit survey. Of the 26 diarists who did complete the survey, one participant, Charlie, only produced eleven entries due to work commitments. Furthermore, due to a range of factors including family crises, vacations, and the logistics of participant recruitment, diaries were not always completed concurrently. This did not jeopardise comparability between the diaries and the newspaper sources, as mentions of political issues were weighted to account for the number of active diarists. This approach is outlined in Appendix B6. All diary entries were collected between October 2013, and March 2014.

4.4.2 Limitations

A number of difficulties were encountered during the diary study. One of the problems of interpreting reflexivity is the level of performance in each diary (Couldry, Livingstone and Markham, 2010: 53). Just as users may alter their behaviour online depending on their audience, participants may also structure their diaries in line with

their own perception of what the researcher seeks to find. I attempted to identify any inconsistencies by drawing on multiple data sources.

The exit survey raised a number of methodological limitations. Firstly, some participants reported that they had difficulty recalling detailed reflections due to the weekly format. As such, issues and events that occurred closer to the date in which the diarist prepared the entry were more likely to included, irrespective of their comparative importance to earlier topics.

Secondly, a number of participants highlighted the demands of the research on their time. Both "Angela" and "Sam" informed the researcher relatively early on in the project that they found writing the entries to be cumbersome, so, to avoid them withdrawing from the project, guidance was offered as to make their entries briefer.

Thirdly, it is not possible to claim that the entries provided an entirely accurate representation of normal, day-to-day experiences. "Arnold," Joe, and Joshua all noted that they were more attentive to political news during the diary period than they otherwise would be. Others noted how their participation triggered mediatisation, an engagement with the way that information was portrayed across different mediums. For example, "Zoey" noticed that the way in which the stories were presented could have as significant an effect as the content itself. In his penultimate entry Leo (entry 11) offered a similar observation:

> Writing a media diary has made me realise that I have started ignoring/blocking out journalistic spin, sometimes stopping reading stories if 'sensationalism' annoys me.

This illustrates the difficulty of balancing the need to inform participants about the nature of the study, while also trying to avoid priming those involved.

4.5 Laboratory Experiments

Experimental research is an increasingly valuable, but often ignored, methodological approach within the academic subfield of internet politics. Although the ethnographic research design used in this thesis will provide a rich and detailed descriptive account of social media use at the individual level of analysis, there is a pressing need for experimental research that directly captures those conditions in which slacktivism is hypothesised to thrive (Karpf, 2012b; Wright, 2012a). As such, the final component of this study's research design is a series of laboratory experiments built within the

Facebook platform, designed to test the value of micro-activism in relation to: (1) the type of information that a user is exposed to; and (2) the popularity of content (EF$_6$; H$_3$). These experiments will explore whether acts of micro-activism are merely the result of social media cascades, or a contemporary form of political engagement. This experimental approach finds its roots within the field of political communication, in those studies that use different media messages as an experimental treatment (Entman, 2004; Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Tewksbury et al., 2000; Zaller, 1992; 2001).

4.5.1 Experiment 1: Testing for the Effect of Information Type

The first experiment presents participants with varying types of information on the same issue to measure if exposure affects the likelihood of future political mobilisation. The slacktivist critique claims that viral content can vary substantially in terms of its reliability, which, due to the speed of communication on social media, can lead to political actions being formed on the basis of erroneous information (see H$_3$; Morozov, 2011: 179-186). However, information accuracy is a difficult variable to operationalise, as there is no deterministic relationship between the medium and the reliability of information. Therefore, as exemplified by the Hollywood-style editing of the #Kony2012 video discussed in Chapter 1, it is more the style of content that is designed to be shared on social media that forms the basis of the critique. By exposing participants to a range of content that reflects the diversity of political materials shared on social media (Chadwick, 2013; Tewksbury and Rittenberg, 2012), this experiment will investigate what type of sources trigger attention and engagement among young social media users.

As Figure 4.1 shows, five separate Facebook groups were designed, each with an identical news feed excluding the treatment post. The following sources, outlined in Table 4.4, were included as the treatment: (1) an article from BBC News Online; (2) a post from BuzzFeed UK; (3) an e-petition from Change.Org; and (4) a post from Upworthy. As Nelson, Bryner and Carnahan (2011: 202) note, most experiments that analyse media effects concentrate on the variation within a source category, rather than across mediums. However, this experiment focuses on online news where there is less uniformity in information type. BBC News Online is more text-heavy, while BuzzFeed articles tend to contain a large number of images. E-petitions have an overt political frame designed to persuade, while the emotive video content published on Upworthy is more subtle.

BuzzFeed and Upworthy are both representative of a new type of information provider, whose main vehicle for content distribution is over social media. Both sources fit the sampling frame used in this study. The core demographic for BuzzFeed is much younger than most newspapers or broadcast media, with 60 percent of the audience for BuzzFeed UK aged between 18 and 34 (Gorkana, 2014). Similarly, the target demographic for Upworthy is progressive, young citizens, often described as "millennials" (Ball, 2014; Thompson, 2013). A rationale for case selection is provided in Chapter 7.

A control group is also included within this design, in which participants were not exposed to any of the treatment posts. This is important to ensure that the design itself, without the treatment, does not lead to behavioural change (Gaines, Kuklinski and Quirk, 2007: 8-9; Sniderman, 2011: 103).

Figure 4.1. Design for experiment 1: Testing for the effect of information type

October 22, 2014
40 participants

Pre-test survey

Measure the following:
- Media habits
- Awareness of a range of information providers, including those on news feed
- Level of interest in subject matter on news feed
- Awareness of subject matter on news feed

Information type			
BBC News Online	BuzzFeed	Change.org	Upworthy	Control group

Measures:

Attention
- Clickthrough rate
- Time spent on all pages included on news feed
- Post-test survey: level of interest in content providers (treatment)

Engagement
- Post-test survey: future intention to participate on treatment issue

Post-test survey

- Future intention to participate on subject matter on news feed
- Level of interest in content providers on news feed
- Demographic questions
- Full debrief on the experiment

Table 4.4. A list of information types used in laboratory experiment 1

Information source	Categorisation	Rationale	Article title	URL: Live page	URL: Screenshot from day of experiment
BBC News Online (http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/)	The website of BBC News, the UK's largest broadcast news organisation	The most popular news website in the UK (Alexa rankings, July 2015)	Climate change: Thousands march across the UK	http://goo.gl/YYdtFj	https://db.tt/YKtdTXnA
BuzzFeed UK (http://www.buzzfeed.com/)	A "social news and entertainment company" (BuzzFeed, 2014)	An example of genre hybridisation, blending comedy, entertainment, and political material	Russell Brand, Emma Thompson And Cara Delevingne Join Thousands At London Climate Rally	http://goo.gl/so6Wzp	https://db.tt/YphsqjBj
Change.org (https://www.change.org/)	The world's most popular petition platform	Evidence of micro-activism	The world needs US leadership on climate change	http://goo.gl/INYFvK	https://db.tt/pdW4DewP
Upworthy (http://www.upworthy.com/)	"We're a mission-driven media company" (Upworthy, 2014)	An example of emotive, viral political content	People In 162 Countries Went For A Walk. Together.	http://goo.gl/5J6zEq NB: the video on this page was changed following the experiment. Original video: https://goo.gl/yxqk82	https://db.tt/emiLDakr

4.5.2 Experiment 2: Testing for the Effect of Facebook Likes

The second experiment investigates the willingness of participants to sign an e-petition on the basis of its popularity. Facebook likes were used in this experiment as a proxy measure for exploring social information (Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004: 606). Four separate, identical Facebook groups were designed, as shown in Figure 4.2. The level of Facebook likes on each of these treatment posts varied across three conditions: high (16 likes), low (3 likes), and no likes. The petition itself, and the wording of the post that accompanied it, did not change. Social information was controlled for in the control group as none of the posts had any likes.

A live petition could not be used as the treatment due to the effect that the number of e-petition signatories may have on the participant (see Margetts et al., 2011; 2013). Furthermore, it was not possible to include an existing petition as participants may have pre-existing biases toward certain petition platforms and campaign groups. An artificial petition was designed as an alternative using Squarespace,[29] a website builder platform. Producing a website that looked legitimate was essential for the success of the experiment. A poorly designed treatment could act as an intervening variable, particularly given that some subjects actively seek to identify the deception during the experiment (Dickson, 2011). During the pilot study a number of volunteers noted that the original petition design, created using a standard Google Forms template, was clearly not trustworthy and that this stopped them providing their personal details as a signatory on the petition. As such, great care was taken designing a website that was trustworthy.

Two attributes of the website were carefully considered to create an authentic-looking platform. Firstly, it was necessary to create a title, or more precisely a brand, that could conceivably exist; this was *mypetition.org.uk*. This title was selected as it is representative of the type of campaigning platforms that I was hoping to emulate, namely self-organising petition websites like Change.org and 38 Degrees' Campaigns By You website. Secondly, as shown in Figure 4.3, the design of the page was also based on these websites. The petition page was distributed to colleagues prior to the experiment to ascertain whether they felt that the website appeared trustworthy. All agreed the branding and design seemed legitimate.

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[29] For further details on Squarespace: http://www.squarespace.com.

Figure 4.2. Design for experiment 2: Testing for the effect of Facebook likes

October 29, 2014
38 participants

Pre-test survey

Measure the following:

- Media habits
- Awareness of a range of information providers, including those on news feed

Threshold of likes on treatment			
High (16 likes)	Low (3 likes)	No likes	Control group

Measures:

Attention

- Clickthrough rate
- Time spent on all pages included on news feed
- History: order of engagement with items on news feed

Engagement

- Petition signatories
- Post-test survey: future intention to participate on treatment issue

Post-test survey

- Level of interest in subject matter on news feed
- Future intention to participate on subject matter on news feed
- Demographic questions
- Full debrief on the experiment

Figure 4.3. Mypetition.org.uk - the petition used as the treatment in the experiment

The treatment was designed to minimise the level of deception. The petition was based on an existing campaign led by 38 Degrees, the hybrid mobilization movement, analysed in Chapter 5. As Figure 4.3 illustrates, the petition text, and all of the fields

required to sign, were copied from the live petition page[30] and an accompanying blog post.[31] On completion of the experiment all participants were provided with a link to the live petition. Any data entered on the treatment was linked to a password-protected spreadsheet hosted on Google Drive, accessible only to the researcher. This personal data was destroyed on completion of the experiment.

This petition was selected given its popularity at the time that the experiment was designed. As Chadwick and Dennis (forthcoming) note, the success of an e-petition often depends on its momentum within wider public discourse, brought about by the interdependency of campaigners and the news media. In October 2014, the issue of expenses for Members of Parliament (MPs) was prominent in the press, as the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA) launched a public consultation on whether those MPs under investigation for the improper use of expenses should be granted anonymity (Doyle, 2014; Swinford, 2014).

To determine the values for the treatment conditions, I calculated averages for the number of Facebook likes on petitions shared by 38 Degrees. I collected data for 50 petitions shared on the movement's Facebook page, as shown in Appendix C4. This data was collected on August 5, 2014, with petitions shared in August omitted by way of avoiding those posts that were still in circulation amongst their membership. I then calculated the inter-quartile range and divided these values by 100 to produce levels of Facebook likes that were more manageable for the researcher to reproduce. The high like condition had 16 likes and the low condition had three. Likes were included on the majority of the other content posted on the feeds as to mask the treatment. The number of Facebook likes on these posts were in proportion to the values calculated for the treatment posts.

The feeds were populated with likes by drawing on volunteers amongst my own Facebook network. A staged process of liking material was co-ordinated during the weekend prior to the experiment. Volunteers were sent an ethical release form so that they were aware that a participant may click and view their public user details during the experiment.[32]

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[30] For further details on the petition: https://secure.38degrees.org.uk/page/s/keep-mps-expenses-public#petition.
[31] For further details on the blog post: http://blog.38degrees.org.uk/2014/10/02/mps-expenses-keep-them-public/.
[32] These contributor guidelines are available online: https://db.tt/SefPYvxa.

4.5.3 Logistics and Details: Common Features of Both Experimental Designs

Both laboratory experiments have a post-test only design (see Campbell and Stanley, 1963). A control group is used to determine the effect of the treatments on the outcome variables, attention and engagement. Any differences between the experimental groups and the control group are compared and analysed.

The sampling frame used within experimental research is integral to its success or failure. As De Vaus notes (2005: 392), experiments should be designed in a way that allows the researcher to identify whether any differences that emerge between the experimental groups and the control group can be attributed to the treatment. It is therefore vital to ensure that the participants are randomly assigned to each group, or that they share near identical demographic traits. Both approaches were adopted in this study. Recruiting a homogenous sample was necessary as randomisation is only at its most effective when working with larger samples.

Recruitment focused on those who share similar characteristics with so-called "slacktivists" — namely, young citizens with an interest in politics, who are active on social media. This was achieved by focusing on three demographic factors: (1) age, (2) political interest, and (3) media use. As such, all participants in these experiments were students based at Royal Holloway, University of London. As Druckman and Kam (2011: 41) argue, students do not inherently pose a problem to an experiment's external validity if a study aims to test a specific theory rather than generate inferences on behaviour that are generalisable. The intention of this study was to test a number of hypotheses derived from the slacktivist critique. Further details of the sampling frame used are provided in Appendix C1. This includes the demographic information for all participants.

Participants were recruited through posters placed across campus. All participants were entered into a random prize draw for a tablet computer and gift vouchers. While incentives can change the way that subjects behave during an experiment (see Dickson, 2011), it was not plausible to recruit the required number of students without some form of prize draw.[33]

In total 90 students were recruited for the experiments, with 50 participants signing up for the first experiment exploring information type and 40 for the experiment analysing the effect of social information. Although they had the choice between the

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[33] This decision was made on the basis of initial enquiries with students as to their potential engagement in the study on a voluntary basis.

two dates on which each experiment would be held, participants were randomly assigned to an experimental group using an online tool, Research Randomizer.[34] In total, each group was allocated 10 participants. The attrition rate for this study was relatively high for the first experiment at 20 percent, with 10 participants not taking part. This did lead to some inconsistency in the size of each treatment group. The second experiment had a much lower attrition rate at only five percent.

The experiments are designed to explore two outcome variables: attention, operationalised by each subject's interaction with the news feed, and political engagement. In order to analyse attention and engagement it was necessary to collect a number of different sources of user data. TimeStats,[35] a Google Chrome extension, was used to measure clickthrough rate, the ratio of clicks to exposure, and the amount of time that a participant spent on each page. As discussed throughout the thesis, time is a valuable measure of attention, as it shows the depth of a subject's engagement with the material rather than just relying on page views, which can be misleading in isolation. For example, a number of participants opened all of the links in new tabs as soon as they started the experiment, but then devoted the majority of their time to a select few items. TimeStats also provided the data to calculate the clickthrough rate on the treatment, as the application only records URL information for those websites that a user visits. In addition to these measurements, the history from each browser was also collected in the second experiment to identify whether social information influences the order that participants click on posts within the feed. Engagement was also measured through petition signatories.

Both experiments included a post-test survey to measure behavioural intention measures. An 11-point likert scale was used to measure the likelihood that subjects would participate on a political issue in the future. A post-test only design was used, rather than the conventional pre-test-post-test design (Campbell and Stanley, 1963), as I did not want to prime the participants when attention is a valuable measure within the experiments. These behavioural measures are based on those used in the *Audit of Political Engagement* (Hansard Society, 2014: 90). Political engagement is operationalised through seven modes of participation, shown in Table 4.5. These reflect the variety of forms of engagement across the continuum of participation, as the effort threshold varies from low-effort acts, such as discussing a political issue with friends, to those acts that require a higher level of involvement, such as taking part in a real space

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[34] For further details on Research Randomizer: http://randomizer.org.
[35] For further details on TimeStats: https://goo.gl/GzSh9G.

action. By offering a range of actions, weighted to account for the variation in the commitment required from the individual, it is possible to gain a more accurate sense of a subject's future intention to participate on an issue. This list also includes two indicators specified by the slacktivist critique, as the experiment examines how the stimuli influence public self-expression on social media and the likelihood of signing an e-petition.

Table 4.5. List of indicators for political engagement

Forms of political engagement
• Discuss the issue with family, friends or acquaintances
• Take part in a protest/rally/demonstration
• Write, call or email a newspaper, magazine, or television news organization
• Contact an official
• Donate money to a charity or campaigning organisation
• Write or sign a digital or written petition
• Distribute or share information over social media

Source: Adapted from the Hansard Society (2011: 90)

In order to mask the treatment and the purpose of the experiment, a deception was used. While the use of deception as a tool for experimental research is common in political communication research, it does have some drawbacks. If a participant expects that a deception may be part of the experiment then this can distract their attention and compromise results (Dickson, 2011). The use of deception brings a number of ethical questions. Participants can become annoyed or angry at being deceived, which in turn can affect their attitudes to experimental research more broadly. As such, the experiments were designed to ensure that the deception was minimal and caused no harm to those taking part. Subjects were informed that the experiment was part of a study investigating how young people interact with information on social media feeds. Participants were also asked a number of other questions in the pre-test survey, such as their opinions on other topics included in the news feed and a series of questions about their preferred media providers. The full survey is provided in Appendix C2. Although these questions did risk experimental realism, as subjects noted their lack of enthusiasm due to the length of the survey in the debrief,[36] they were necessary in order to mask the purpose of the study.

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[36] The question asking participants to reflect on their use of a range of media providers was originally conceived to explore who was aware of BuzzFeed and Upworthy. However, many subjects did not fill out their responses accurately given the length of the list so I cannot use this data.

A number of design decisions were taken to preserve comparability between the treatment and control groups. All of the experimental groups were identical in each experiment, except the treatment. This included the content of the posts, the order in which they were placed within the feed, and the number of likes on each post in the second experiment. All posts in both experiments were submitted by a single user account created for the purpose of the experiment to ensure the reputational dynamics of the user account were controlled for.[37] Furthermore, in order to minimise the risk of intervening variables, participants were asked to refrain from interacting with the feed, through likes, comments, or shares, for the duration of the experiment.

Access to the Facebook groups was time-controlled. Each subject had 11 minutes to interact with the feed. In trying to design a realistic reproduction of normal Facebook use, the duration of the experiment was based on pre-existing data measuring the average time spent per visit.[38] However, this is most definitely a "kludge," as data for the amount of time a user spends on Facebook is unreliable given the wildly varied nature of Facebook use, especially when we factor in mobile use. A simple timer was used during the experiment.[39] Subjects were required to start the timer when prompted to do so by the survey. Although it was not mandatory for participants to complete the full 11 minutes, the vast majority of participants did so. All participants spent at least 8 minutes engaging with their respective news feed.

Both experiments were designed within the parameters of Facebook, to strengthen the external validity of the study. These groups were private, closed groups inaccessible to non-participants. Participants took part using their own user credentials. This is a necessity when we consider that both the slacktivist critique (Morozov, 2011) and the more positive theoretical interpretations of digitally mediated online behaviour (Baym, 2010; Papacharissi, 2010) point to the pressures of managing one's personal identity when using social media. This is in direct contrast to earlier experimental work on the internet which suggested that citizens were more expressive in online spaces due to their perceived anonymity (Nelson, Bryner and Carnahan, 2011: 205).

Mundane realism, "the likelihood the events represent or are similar to those in the real world" (Druckman and Kam, 2011: 44), was central to the design of this study. Given the aims of this thesis, it was important to ensure that the treatment and control groups reflected something that a Facebook user may experience in their normal, day-

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[37] https://www.facebook.com/npclabstudy [Link no longer active].
[38] For data on the average length of time a user spends on Facebook in a single-visit see:
http://www.teachthought.com/social-media/twitter-vs-facebook-competing-for-your-time/ and
http://infographiclabs.com/news/facebook-2012/.
[39] For further details on SnapTimer: http://dan.hersam.com/software/snaptimer/.

to-day use. This is a near impossible task given that each user has a personalised news feed that is dependent on who they are connected to and what pages they follow. In order to produce something that reflects a "standard" news feed, each group contained a range of different articles. The news feeds in both experiments are accessible through the URLs provided in Table 4.6.

Table 4.6. Experimental news feeds for both experiments

	Treatment	URL: Experiment news feed
Laboratory experiment 1: Information type	BBC News Online	https://db.tt/FY8npW5h
	BuzzFeed UK	https://db.tt/EqvxwjJs
	Change.org	https://db.tt/1IzyX3JW
	Upworthy	https://db.tt/kwYeiGR6
	Control group	https://db.tt/jIMEJ5NV
Laboratory experiment 2: Facebook likes	High: 16 likes	https://db.tt/vdLZfymI
	Low: 3 likes	https://db.tt/0xVDjEHU
	None: 0 likes	https://db.tt/DHFoPiyy
	Control group	https://db.tt/AbzcS1CT

By designing the control and treatment groups shortly before the experiments were due to take place, I was able to ensure that the information included was reflective of the items that a participant may conceivably have been exposed to in their own personal news feed during that day. Temporal immediacy was essential for external validity. All publishers were selected on the basis of the most shared content producers on Facebook during September 2014, as reported by the social media research agency, News Whip (Corcoran, 2014). See Appendix C3 for further details on the news feed design.

The study took place within two offices at the university. The rooms were set up with comfortable seating and posters. While the nature of Facebook means that there is no such thing as a natural environment in which users access the service, I tried to ensure that the setting for the experiment did not distract those taking part.

4.5.4 Limitations

These experiments were designed to balance the interpretivist nature of the ethnographic fieldwork with an approach rooted in the positivist tradition. However, as

expected when designing an experiment within a live and constantly changing social networking site, I encountered a number of challenges.

The most significant limitation of this experimental research design is the artificial nature of the news feeds. It is impossible to recreate an archetypal news feed as none exists. Each user has a unique news feed, personalised on the basis of their network of friends and the Facebook pages that they choose to subscribe to. How a user manages and constructs their personalised network can have an effect on the information that they are exposed to. Similarly, the order of the posts included in both experiments was not an accurate reflection of the algorithm used on Facebook. It is not possible to replicate this algorithm in a laboratory experiment setting, given that over 100,000 personalised factors are used to determine content prioritisation on the news feed (Constine, 2014). As such, the information that subjects were faced with may not resemble that which they would encounter in day-to-day use.

Furthermore, the experiment overlooks the effect of specific contacts on user behaviour, be they close friends, celebrities, or particular organisations (Baym, 2010; Hampton et al., 2012; Smith, 2013: 33-34). In both experiments just a single Facebook account was used to populate the groups with content for the experiments.[40] This account, entitled "Lab Study," had no profile picture, no user details, and had one publically accessible friend – the researcher leading the study. While this is not representative of everyday use, where a news feed would contain posts from a range of strong and weak tie contacts, this bolsters the internal validity of the experiment as it controls for the potential intervening variables associated with a user account. However, this does mean that the study omits the influence of strong ties, which, as Chapter 6 shows, can influence behaviour.

Building the experiments within a Facebook group also raises problems. Past research has shown that the imagined audience, those that we perceive may be exposed to our online actions, influences our behaviour (Bernstein et al., 2013; Marwick and boyd, 2011; Papacharissi, 2012). Therefore, by placing participants within a network created purely for the purpose of an experiment, the imagined audience for a subject is not their own contacts but their fellow participants and the research instigator. This may in turn lead to social desirability bias, as participants adopt traits that they perceive to be the norm within this new network.

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[40] I originally intended to include 50 artificial user accounts to simulate an experience more representative of day-to-day use. However, Facebook closed these accounts during the planning phase.

For some, the flaws in the design of the news feeds compromise the validity of the experiments. A colleague in my department, with expertise in experimental research, expressed reservations about the design for the first experiment, claiming that information type would have been more effectively explored outside of the Facebook ecosystem. In their view, internal validity should be paramount to any experimental design as to maximise the strength of causal evidence (see Iyengar, 2011). Their concern was that participants could choose to avoid the treatment, thus reducing exposure. As shown in Chapter 7, this proved to be the case, with noncompliance especially high amongst those presented with the petition from Change.org. However, I deem this to be a strength of the experimental design rather than a weakness.

The design of an experiment should always be based on the aims of the research (Druckman and Kam, 2011: 43). This study was not designed to generate strong causal inferences that could be generalised to wider populations. Instead, it is an exploratory experiment, designed to explore the dynamics of political attention and engagement on Facebook. In realising this goal it is necessary that the experiments provide those taking part with a choice of content to engage with, as they would have if they were browsing their own personalised news feed. Druckman and Kam (2011: 41) argue that neglecting to provide participants with a choice of content is a significant intervening variable in political communication research, as media effects weaken substantially when participants can choose whether to receive it (Arceneaux and Johnson, 2008, as cited in Druckman and Kam, 2011: 43). A design in which users are simply exposed to each of the treatments in turn would not only detach the participant from Facebook, but it could also result in a higher rate of socially desirable responses, especially without any sense of network or audience effects.

Therefore, while this section seeks to outline the shortcomings of the experiments, their design is actually a strength. External validity is fundamental to this experimental design as the young, digitally active, and politically interested subjects are representative of the target population (Druckman et al., 2011: 19), and selective exposure on the experimental news feeds represents everyday use (Holbrook, 2011: 148). While controlling for exposure may produce stronger causal relationships, these are not reflective of normal behaviour on social media.

There were two features of the experiment that deviated from this pursuit of mundane realism. A significant service norm that was absent was the ability for participants to like, comment on, or share the content within each of the Facebook groups. This was a necessary step to control for the effects of these interactions. For

example, if the treatment post received negative comments, this would have invalidated any claims that I could make regarding the treatment itself. Furthermore, participants were required to remain within the confines of the Facebook group when taking part in the experiment. This is problematic given that citizens sometimes refer to other sources as a means of verification when confronted by new information on Facebook, as shown in Chapter 6. These changes were necessary in order to know that the conclusions reached were a result of the manipulation.

The final disadvantage of the design is the uniform way by which subjects accessed the experiment. Both experiments were undertaken using identical PCs installed with Windows 7 and the latest version of Google Chrome. However, user experience on Facebook varies depending on the platform used to access the service. The norms of interaction may differ depending on if a user interacts with Facebook via mobile, tablet, or on other devices.

Outside of its design, there are a number of other limitations to this study. Firstly, the sample size was small. Although 78 participants took part in both experiments, no group had more than 10 subjects. Secondly, attention, when operationalised by clickthrough rates and the amount of time spent browsing a page, does not necessarily indicate positive support for that source. A participant may spend a significant amount of time on the stimulus but may be doing so in a state of indignation at its content, or as a result of the experimental conditions. As such, these findings in Chapter 7 must not be taken as tacit support for either the information provider in experiment one, or the e-petition in experiment two. However, irrespective of sentiment, evidence of attention is still substantively important for understanding what type of content persuades a participant to interact. Thirdly, there are drawbacks in measuring media effects immediately after the experiment. Chong and Druckman (2010) found that post-test attitudinal and behavioural measures are exaggerated when taken directly after exposure. While it would have been preferable to capture these intentional measures a few days after the experiment, this was not feasible given the demand on resources.

Finally, the second experiment, exploring the effect of Facebook likes on behaviour, had two specific weaknesses. Although the number of likes was based on the spread of likes on petitions posted by 38 Degrees on their Facebook page, the overall volumes were significantly smaller. The threshold was much lower than the critical mass of support that Margetts, John, Escher, and Reissfelder (2011; 2013) observed in a study on the level of e-petition signatories. While I originally intended to have higher

volumes, I was unable to do this given the resources required to recruit contributors (i.e. those volunteers who liked the posts). These volunteers also acted as an intervening variable, as a handful of participants browsed the list of users who had liked the posts. While all efforts were made to ensure that no participant was a mutual friend of any of the contributors, this is a tacit acknowledgment of the role that social influence may play in directing behaviour on social media.

4.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I have set out the research design for the thesis. I propose that, while cross-sectional survey studies and big data methodologies offer top-level findings on the basis of large samples, new methodological approaches are required to analyse political behaviour online at the individual level. I use a deep data approach, drawing on thick, descriptive data, to explore the diffusion of the political into new, personally defined spaces across an expansive hybrid media system. As a result, the methodological framework designed for this thesis is based on a series of workarounds (Karpf, 2012b: 654).

By using an experimental mixed-method research design, that brings together qualitative, quantitative, and computational traditions, I explore the relationship between social media and political participation across three perspectives. Firstly, through using diaries collected over a period of three-months, I observe how citizens use Facebook and Twitter to access information and talk about politics within everyday life. Secondly, a series of laboratory experiments have been designed within Facebook to explore the conditions in which slacktivism is hypothesised to thrive. Finally, in the next chapter, I investigate the activist context through an ethnographic study of the hybrid mobilization movement, 38 Degrees.

5. 38 Degrees: Exploring the Role of Social Media Within an Activist Context

5.1 Organising With New Organisations: A Glimpse of Campaigning at 38 Degrees

On May 14, 2013, the Conservative Policy Forum (CPF) issued a 12-page discussion paper to their national membership. The CPF is a policy discussion network formed of 250 local groups, which provides grassroots members of the Conservative Party with a role in shaping party policy. This particular survey sought the opinions of party members on the ways in which local healthcare provision could be improved, with a focus on dentistry services and the care provided by local doctors' surgeries (Conservative Policy Forum, 2013). The briefing paper included a list of purposefully provocative statements on which respondents were asked to identify their level of agreement across a five-point scale. One such statement asked if "there should be no annual limit to the number of appointments patients can book to see their GP [General Practitioner]" (Conservative Policy Forum, 2013: 11). Despite the authors clearly stating that the brief should not be seen to represent the views of the Conservative Party, this question was the trigger for a national mobilisation involving over 200,000 citizens.[41]

The following Sunday, May 26, four newspapers covered the briefing paper: the *Daily Mail* (McCann, 2013), the *Daily Mirror* (Beattie, 2013), the *Independent* (Merrick, 2013), and the *Daily Telegraph* (2013). These articles claimed that the Conservative Party was considering proposals to limit the number of GP appointments that a patient could make in a calendar year. The story prompted condemnation from the Royal College of General Practitioners, the professional body for GPs, and the leading opposition party, the Labour Party. Both argued that the proposal revoked a founding principal of the National Health Service (NHS), that access to treatment should be based on clinical need (Merrick, 2013). As one may expect with a topic as politically charged as healthcare, the proposal was met with a mixture of outrage and disbelief.[42]

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[41] The discussion paper is available here. The disclaimer, "CPF Discussion Briefs exist to stimulate debate. They do not represent the views of the Conservative Party," is included in the footer of the document:
http://www.conservativepolicyforum.com/sites/www.conservativepolicyforum.com/files/local_health_discussion_brief.doc.

[42] For instance, see this discussion thread on the entertainment forum, Digital Spy:
http://forums.digitalspy.co.uk/showthread.php?t=1830281.

On Tuesday morning, May 28, 15 employees sat around a desk in a stylish office space in Farringdon, central London. This small group make up the leadership of 38 Degrees, a UK-based hybrid mobilization movement. The team, ranging from seasoned campaign professionals to bright-eyed volunteers, were deep in discussion. The conversation moved at a frenetic pace, darting between a rundown of what colleagues got up to over the bank holiday weekend and the important news stories that had emerged in their absence. After a few minutes, the hum of chatter fell away and the first meeting of the day began. This "huddle" was normal practice, as the staff sought to establish their workload for the week ahead. As is customary for the first working day of the week, the group discussed the results of a poll completed over the weekend. Each week, the leadership survey a random sample of the movement's membership by way of tracking their priorities. The results showed that threats to the NHS were deemed to be the most pressing issue. Volunteers, who monitor communications over email and social media, noted that this issue also featured heavily in member correspondence over the previous week.

The team then moved on to determining which campaigns would take priority for the week ahead. For most pressure groups this is a relatively straightforward process, as campaigns are planned weeks, or even months, in advance. For 38 Degrees, this is not the case. Staff monitor both the priorities of the membership and salient issues within professional news media to identify the point at which a campaign could have impact. The movement is therefore somewhat dependent on, and responsive to, the news agenda. A campaign manager mentioned the reports from the Sunday papers, which suggested that the Conservative Party was considering limiting access to GP visits. The team agreed that, based on the results of the weekly poll, this may be something of interest to their membership.

A decision was made that members should be consulted over whether they should launch a campaign in response to the proposal. By midday "Jonathan," a campaign manager, had posted a link to the *Daily Mail* article on the movement's Facebook page (38 Degrees, 2013h). As shown in Figure 5.1, members were asked to indicate their approval by liking the post and were asked to offer suggestions about how, strategically, the movement could respond.

Figure 5.1. A screenshot of the leadership of 38 Degrees using Facebook to gather feedback from members

Source: 38 Degrees (2013h)

Within a few hours the post received 3,289 likes, a clear signal of approval from those members who follow the group on Facebook. A significant proportion of the 344 comments expressed outrage at the proposed restriction. Some reflected on how their own personal circumstances made regular contact with a GP a necessity. Others highlighted the potential risks to public health if sick people were discouraged from seeking medical attention. The post was also shared 803 times, raising awareness of the proposal amongst wider networks that may not have been exposed to the original media coverage.

An e-petition was launched on the back of this tacit approval. This is a typical first step for the organisation, as e-petitions are an efficient and widely used proxy for translating the disparate voice of its large membership into a tangible form of citizen action. The petition was shared on Facebook, Twitter, and, most importantly, through an email to the "full list" of 38 Degrees members.[43] Email is essentially 38 Degrees' organisational infrastructure (Chadwick, 2013: 190). From the leadership's perspective, one becomes a "member" of the movement by virtue of signing up to become an email recipient. The full list refers to all those citizens who have agreed to receive email communications from 38 Degrees. In May 2014, there were over 2.4 million members

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[43] action@38degrees.org.uk, 2013. NHS: A serious threat. [email]. Sent 28/05/2013. Retrieved 28/05/2013.

(Dennis, 2014). The email itself has two functions. Firstly, as the excerpt from the email below illustrates, it was a call to arms, a way to rapidly mobilise members to take part in a campaign action:

> This could be very serious. **The Conservatives are floating plans to cap the number of times we are allowed to visit our GP.** [1] If we run out of visits – because we've got a sickly child or long-term health condition, for example – we could be forced to pay to go elsewhere.
>
> At the moment it's just a proposal. [2] But if the Conservatives don't see a big public backlash, it could soon be a grim reality. **So let's raise an outcry as quickly as possible and push them to drop the idea immediately.**
>
> **Please sign the urgent petition now: tell health minister Jeremy Hunt to rule out limiting our access to NHS GPs.** [Emphasis in original]
> (action@38degrees.org.uk, 2013. NHS: A serious threat. [email]. Sent 28/05/2013. Retrieved 28/05/2013. Emphasis in original)

Secondly, the email also fulfilled an educative role. For each action request, the leadership provide links to a range of sources from professional news coverage to detailed policy documents. This enhances the transparency of the movement, providing an opportunity for members to consult source material prior to deciding whether or not to take part.

Particularly striking here is the speed and agility of these processes. In less than 24 hours the movement was able to identify a potential campaign that was in line with the priorities of their membership, measure the level of support for this specific issue, and launch an "action," a specific activity designed by the leadership that enables its members to exert influence on the policy agenda (Chadwick, 2013: 189).

The following day, May 29, saw the movement's leadership take to Facebook once again, this time to drum up support for the campaign (38 Degrees, 2013i). Mobilising members to share campaigns within their own personal networks enhances the legitimacy of the movement, and the reach of an action. One way in which the leadership encourage engagement in an extended repertoire of actions is by using success as a motivational tool (Eaton, 2010: 180-181). In this example, the number of petition signatories, now over 145,000, was used to motivate users to share the petition across wider networks (38 Degrees, 2013i). By Thursday, May 30, the petition had reached over 200,000 signatures.

On Thursday morning, as the campaign continued to gather momentum, the Secretary of State for Health, Jeremy Hunt (Hunt, 2013), took to Twitter to offer a

response. As shown in Figure 5.2, Hunt refuted the story and questioned the movement's intentions.

Figure 5.2. A screenshot of the response to the campaign on Twitter from the Secretary of State for Health, Jeremy Hunt MP

Source: Hunt (2013)

As news of Hunt's tweet filtered through the office, a meeting was called to discuss how to respond. The team were visibly perturbed by the allegation made regarding their neutrality, a trait that a number of members mentioned as a key reason for their involvement (Interview 15, August 2013; Interview 19, October 2013). "Amy," the campaigns director who was leading the meeting, pointed out that the campaign explicitly stated that this was a proposal and not policy. Jonathan noted that Hunt's response was a little ironic given that the CPF was seeking the opinions of its grassroots members, asking "what can be more resolute than the voice of over 200,000 citizens?" The group agreed that this marked a significant campaign victory and that this success should be shared with their membership.

As Jonathan prepared an email to update the membership on the turn of events, David Babbs, the Executive Director of 38 Degrees, consulted the group's Facebook page. The movement had shared a screenshot of Hunt's tweet immediately after it was posted. The comments that followed were mixed, with some revelling in the group's success, while others were more sceptical of the accuracy of the petition (38 Degrees, 2013j; Williamson, 2013). David fed a selection of these comments back to Jonathan as the email took shape. Here, Facebook provides a discursive space in which members can shape the leadership's actions. As David notes, "it's a very good way of bringing

our members into the room" (Interview 7, June 2013). By late afternoon an email had been dispatched to the full list of members, explaining the actions taken, the significance of their involvement throughout the campaign, and the importance of member donations in sustaining the movement.

This example, which took place during my participant observation, provides a fitting starting point for my analysis, as it sheds light on both the norms and practices associated with the movement's style of digital campaigning.

Firstly, lasting just four days from conception to completion, this campaign illustrates the speed in which the organisation operates. Jonathan claims it is this agility that separates 38 Degrees from other advocacy groups, it is "because 38 Degrees are who 38 Degrees are, that we were able to do this" (Interview 3, May 2013). Secondly, this example demonstrates how the group's style of campaigning thrives on the momentum of news-cycles, for better or for worse. Although the news coverage resonated with members, the way in which the discussion paper was framed in these articles was evidently problematic, as the significance of the briefing to Conservative Party leadership was exaggerated. This can, in turn, affect the legitimacy of the movement. Thirdly, it shows how the movement tries to launch campaigns in the direction set by its members, establishing its priorities through regular polling and the "seeding" of ideas on Facebook and Twitter (Chadwick, 2013: 190).

Where does social media fit within this activist context? This campaign illustrates how such platforms are not only used as an outlet for self-expression, but are also used as sites of learning. They also demonstrate how "access," broadly understood as the consumption of information, can also empower members within the movement, as they are able to shape strategic decision making by virtue of their low-threshold interactions with material shared on Facebook. Finally, this example shows the value of Twitter as a space to interact with established elites. By taking to Twitter to announce the response of the Conservative Party to the campaign, Jeremy Hunt reveals the important space the service now fills in capturing the attention of multiple audiences.

5.2 Introduction

Drawing upon participant observation, ethnographic data from interviews with staff and members, as well as campaign emails, content from Facebook and Twitter, and online news articles, this chapter explores how citizens use social media within an activist context. In what I describe as the organisational management of digital micro-activism,

the leadership of 38 Degrees creates opportunities for meaningful participation through its use of social media. These low-effort technologies, deemed to be ineffective by those advocating the slacktivist critique, form part of wider engagement repertoires.

Firstly, I offer an overview of 38 Degrees at the organisational level, describing how the group is structured and the role that the leadership plays within the hybrid mobilization movement. The popularity of 38 Degrees comes from its member-centric approach. Through the use of digital technologies, members are able to shape and influence campaign strategy. However, while the group is member driven, it is not leaderless. As the campaign to halt the proposed limits to GP visits shows, the staff in the London office translates the priorities established by the membership—through communications over email, Facebook, and Twitter—into campaign actions. These leaders draw on their political expertise to design a wide range of sophisticated online and face-to-face engagement repertoires.

This may seem contradictory to the calls for further empirical research at the individual level made throughout this thesis. However, as discussed in Chapter 3, researchers can often learn more by exploring the links *between* different units of analysis (Howard, 2011: 2). Throughout this chapter, I explore the attitudes and behaviours of individual members within the engagement repertoires that are crafted at the organisational level.[44] I argue that we can only understand how members make use of social media in this activist context by examining the relationships formed between ordinary members and the leadership. By doing so, I illustrate when a 38 Degrees campaign transforms into substantive forms of instrumental engagement, and when their activism fulfils the hypotheses derived from the slacktivist critique.

Secondly, I analyse how the leadership at 38 Degrees uses social media to craft opportunities for member involvement across the continuum of participation. These processes illustrate how low-effort forms of digital engagement are not only used for self-expression, but are connected to other forms of digital activism and real space participation. By sharing information on the movement's social media feeds, members are exposed to political information as a by-product of day-to-day use (EF_1). Furthermore, by "liking" and commenting on these posts on the group's Facebook page, members can influence both issue selection and broader campaign strategy.

When members do engage in emotive forms of self-expression, this fulfils a number of functions that go beyond the self-gratification hypothesised by the slacktivist

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[44] The term "craft" refers to the processes in which campaign staff design opportunities for citizen engagement using digital technologies. This originates from Kreiss' (2010: 23) study of Howard Dean's campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2004.

critique (EF$_3$). These forms of personalised communication can raise awareness of political issues amongst wider publics, form bonds between the geographically dispersed and ideologically disparate membership (EF$_5$), and in certain public spaces, they can represent a form of digital activism in their own right. Through the organisational management of digital micro-activism, the leadership offers granular campaign actions based on the priorities set by their membership. These low-threshold forms of digital engagement on social media act as participatory shortcuts, providing a bridge to the processes of policy making for time-poor citizens. As such, these tools do not just replace equivalent offline behaviours (EF$_4$), but contribute to a new form of organisational politics.

Finally, I illustrate how, without the campaigning expertise of the leadership, campaigns can fulfil the hypotheses of the slacktivist critique (H$_1$; H$_2$). On a new platform launched by the group, Campaigns By You (CBY), members are provided with the tools to start their own campaigns. However, these self-organising networks do not share the same characteristics as the group's leader led campaigns, as the technological platform locks members into set engagement repertoires. As a result, campaigns rarely develop out of the e-petition stage. Therefore, in this activist context, political behaviour on social media is not deemed to be ineffective by virtue of technological design, as these actions are given value by their strategic deployment by political professionals. As Karpf (2012: 3) has argued in the U.S. context, this is not "organizing without organizations" but "organizing with different organizations."

5.3 The Role of Leaders in a Hybrid Mobilization Movement: Exploring the Context of the Organisational Level

Prior to analysing how Facebook and Twitter are used within the group's campaigns, I offer a contextual overview of 38 Degrees at the organisational level. This is necessary, as the significance of low-threshold, digital micro-activism only becomes apparent through an evaluation of the role that the leadership plays. Much has been written about the group's influence on British politics, but this is often anecdotal or politically motivated (Harries, 2014; Liddle, 2013; Rickett, 2013). By offering clarity on the movement's structure, or lack thereof, and by determining how its member-centric philosophy operates in practice, this section will highlight the factors that set apart the hybrid mobilization movement as a new form of organisation.

38 Degrees bears little resemblance to the organisational models that scholars in political science have become accustomed to. Unlike political parties or traditional pressure groups, 38 Degrees operates on a more level playing field. Members play an important role in directing the group's day-to-day decision making. The movement tries to foster what Amy describes as a "culture of mutuality" between the leadership team and the members (Interview 4, May 2013). Essentially, the organisation is designed to act as a conduit for its membership, removing the layers of elite-level decision making that characterised political groups of the late twentieth century.

Members are responsible for a number of decisions made throughout each campaign. By using digital tools that are diffused widely amongst its membership, members are able to express their opinion and set the movement's priorities very quickly on an unprecedented scale. These priorities are generated through a number of qualitative and quantitative data sources, the most important of which are the results from a weekly online survey of a random sample of members, the analysis of e-mail feedback, and the collection of communications on Facebook and Twitter (Interview 7, June 2013). By drawing on these data sources, forms of low-threshold, digital micro-activism are linked to substantive forms of political participation.

The leadership use ad-hoc surveys so that members can influence key decisions. As Amy (Interview 4, May 2013) notes, "we talk to our members about tactics... we regularly poll on key pivots within a campaign." During the recent campaign to lobby a leading energy provider to pay more corporation tax, members were consulted on whether the movement should launch the campaign, their ideas were sought for potential campaign tactics and, as shown in Figure 5.3, they were given the final say as to whether or not 38 Degrees should try to organize a mass, "people powered" switch away from the energy provider to alternative suppliers. Outside of specific requests during a campaign, the leadership frequently seeks feedback on the movement's overarching strategy. Members shape the long-term direction of the group through detailed surveys, such as in the run up to a new calendar year (38 Degrees, 2014a), or prior to an election (38 Degrees, 2014b). For those involved, this is a clear and visible way of exerting their influence.

Figure 5.3. A screenshot of a poll for members of 38 Degrees to decide on a campaign tactic
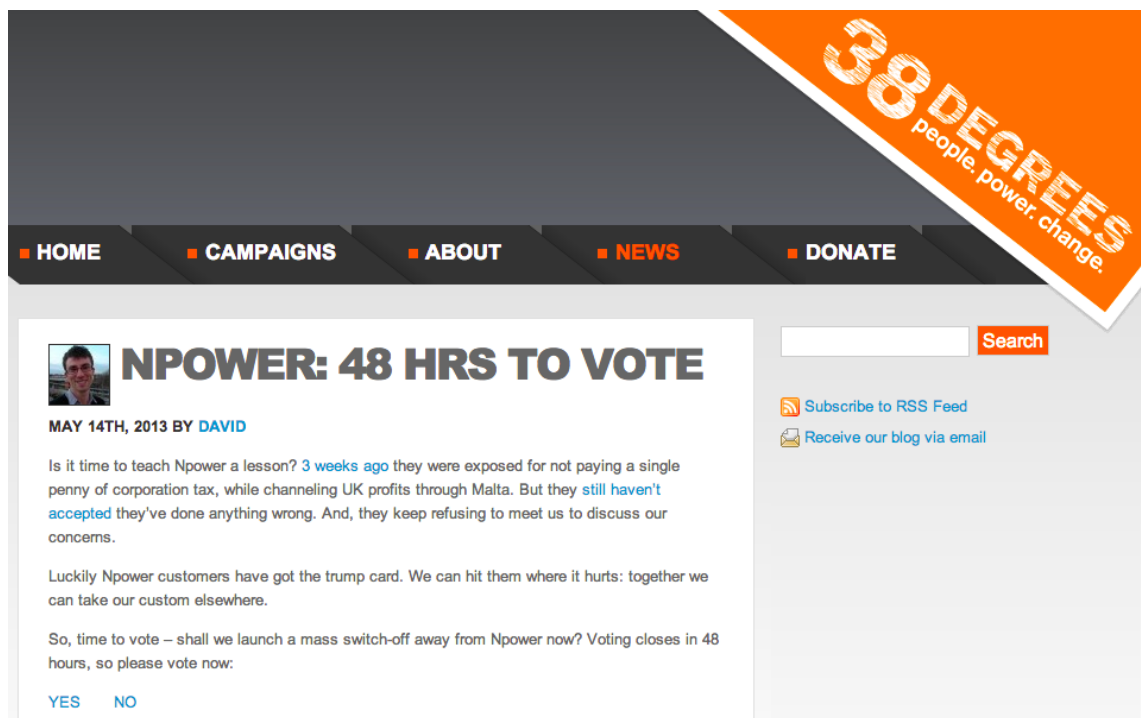
Source: Babbs (2013)

This member-centric approach was evident from the moment that I arrived at the group's London office. The leadership function performed by the office was immediately downplayed. A number of statements stood out during my induction for the role of volunteer: "use we, as opposed to us or them"; "talk about the movement and not the office"; and "never answer questions on a policy position as the central office does not make a position—members do." At first I was sceptical about the feasibility of this in practice, but throughout my time observing the movement it became clear that the leadership does try to design actions with the will of their members in mind.

However, 38 Degrees is not an example of "organizing without organizations" (Shirky, 2008). As we explore these digitally enabled activist movements in more detail, we are likely to find that the relationships formed within them are less hierarchical than traditional organisations, but they are not flat. As Jenkins argues, "leadership is a very necessary condition for participatory organizations to function" (Jenkins and Carpentier, 2013: 15). The staff, based in the organisation's central London office, performs a gatekeeping role. They have an enhanced level of influence over the design and selection of campaign actions. Yet, equally, this is not an elite-dominated hierarchy pretending to be member driven. The movement relies on the central office to assimilate the priorities of its members, and then offers repertoires of engagement. As such, the movement's overall direction is decided by its membership. Gerbaudo (2012) describes

this as "soft leadership," as the staff organises and structures the group's campaigns whilst minimising encroachment on the will of each individual member. The central team provides the technological capacity and campaigning expertise to realise the priorities established by the membership.

Karpf (2012) proposes that we consider this as characteristic of a new type of organisation. These new organisations challenge our traditional conceptions of collective action, as they are structurally fluid. 38 Degrees, like GetUp! in Australia (Vromen and Coleman, 2014) and MoveOn in the United States (Chadwick, 2007; Karpf, 2012a), uses the internet to adapt and transform its organisational structure and repertoire of actions during campaigns in real time. These hybrid mobilization movements mobilise their membership across sedimentary networks; loose affiliations of individuals that exist across a diverse range of issue campaigns. Sedimentary networks provide 38 Degrees with the flexibility to reconfigure and alter its structure on the fly, transforming the balance between centralised control and relatively autonomous but highly connected subunits (Chadwick, 2007: 294). As such, the leadership crafts opportunities for members to have substantive involvement through a range of digital and real space actions. This expertise is essential given the characteristics of the group's membership base.

The terms of membership in a hybrid mobilization movement are unique. Traditionally, one would become a member of a political organisation, be it a political party or a trade union, by opting into a shared, collective identity. The terms of membership were relatively straightforward: you paid your membership, received some kind of formal recognition, often by way of a card, and signed up to a broad set of shared ideological principles. In this way, membership was deemed to be a reflection of one's character. By comparison, 38 Degrees operationalise a much more flexible definition of membership. From the leadership's perspective, one becomes a member by virtue of signing up to become an email recipient. In his analysis of MoveOn, Karpf (2012: 31) suggests that many email recipients may not actually be aware that they are in fact deemed to be members. However, what may appear disingenuous—after all, many political parties have substantial mailing lists—is actually a distinctive feature of the movement and part of its attraction for citizens.

The imprecise parameters of this definition speak to the attachment formed between a citizen and the movement, a relationship that is in constant flux. Some may seldom open the emails that they receive marked "38 Degrees," while others may take part in each and every action. By defining membership in this way, those involved are

not tied into one fixed ideology but have the freedom to choose those campaigns they wish to be involved in. "Mike," a 24-year-old engineer from London, cites this self-determination as the primary reason for his association with the movement (Interview 9, June 2013). Likewise, "George," a 63-year-old member from Birmingham, appreciates that the leadership does not pressure members to get involved (Interview 13, June 2013). Members value this control over the conditions of their participation.

In providing this choice, members are able to personalise and adapt their engagement to fit their own interests. A number of those members that I spoke to drew on their own personal experiences when justifying why they originally got involved with 38 Degrees. For "Mary," this was a campaign to stop the impending closure of her local hospital (Interview 16, June 2013). For "Liam," his involvement grew out of his concern for members of his family who are public sector employees (Interview 19, October 2013). By campaigning on issues that have relevance in day-to-day life, the bond between the participant and the cause is intensified.

Perhaps where the significance of this new form of identification is most evident is when it is juxtaposed against a traditional custom of group-based politics. During my observation of the movement I organised a members meal in Wallington, South London. In this conventional, face-to-face setting the fundamental divides that exist between different members soon became apparent, be it on climate change, same-sex marriage, or one's right to privacy. However, following the animated debates that ensued, what was made abundantly clear to me was that what united my dinner guests was how much they all valued the freedom to act collectively, but on their own terms.

This ad-hoc, issue based involvement speaks to the type of citizens who take part in 38 Degrees campaigns; these are not hardened activists, but, as one interviewee put it, "ordinary people" (Interview 13, June 2013). The members that I interviewed were all passionate about politics, broadly defined, but spoke of the struggles they encountered when pursuing this interest given other family (Interview 13, June 2013), work (Interview 19, August 2013), and social commitments (Interview 17, October 2013). For instance, "Geraldine," a 68-year-old member from Liverpool, spoke of the difficulties of remaining politically active whilst also caring for her husband. As George (Interview 15, August 2013) reflects, "[38 Degrees] provide a voice that otherwise would not be heard. Voices of people who may be stuck at home or very busy and have relatively little time to get out there and say what they want to have heard." Therefore, when designing an action, the leadership must strike a balance between the group's commitment to providing a member driven movement and the reality that many of its

members lack the expertise, skills, and/or time to take on substantial campaigning responsibilities (Interview 2, May 2013).

Rickett (2013) has criticised these forms of engagement, arguing that they only require a shallow commitment from participants. It is true that the actions designed by the central office often require small amounts of effort, or more precisely time, but they are designed with this in mind. By making campaign actions granular, the leadership seeks to lower the barrier of entry to political participation and negate the exacerbation of existing participatory inequalities, in which only those who are politically active offline enjoy the benefits of online activism (Brundidge and Rice, 2009; Margolis and Resnick, 2000). As Amy (Interview 4, May 2013) argues, lowering the costs associated with participation is part of the movement's commitment to "people power," as the leadership tries to involve those citizens who may have been marginalised in the past:

> Time, who has time? As a rule, people with money and people without care and responsibilities, so that has a massive impact on class and politics, a massive impact on gender and politics, a massive impact on the way in which people who have a disability can engage with politics, etc etc. You make it the preserve of people who are time-rich and who are often also money-rich. To me, it isn't the kind of political system that I am very interested in perpetuating. So, do we make it easier for people to get involved? Absolutely, and I am massively proud of that.

The members that I interviewed also value this granularity (Interview 8, June 2013; Interview 22, November 2013).

Furthermore, 38 Degrees is not an *online-only* campaigning organisation. The leadership does not offer these forms of digital micro-activism in isolation, but connects them to different forms of participation as part of interconnected engagement repertoires. As "Adam," a technology manager at 38 Degrees, explains, each campaign will involve a range of ways a member can get involved, from an e-petition to more "high bar" actions, such as organising a local meeting or attending a demonstration (Interview 5, May 2013).

Therefore, I identify three factors that the leadership consider when designing an action, as shown in Figure 5.4. Firstly, is this based on the priorities established by the membership? As previously discussed, the central team use a range of digital technologies to track these priorities. Secondly, is the action inclusive? In other words, is it granular in a way that anyone could get involved, regardless of their comprehension of the subject matter, their campaigning experience, or the amount of time that they are able to offer to the cause. Finally, is there a clear theory of change (Vromen, 2015)?

Can members see why taking a specific action could lead to a desired result? What motivates members to devote more effort to a campaign is the belief that the movement can produce substantive change. Ultimately, these three factors underpin what I describe as the organisational management of digital micro-activism, as the leadership of 38 Degrees craft opportunities for meaningful participation through the use of low-effort, widely diffused forms of digital media.

Figure 5.4. Three factors that guide the organisational management of digital micro-activism
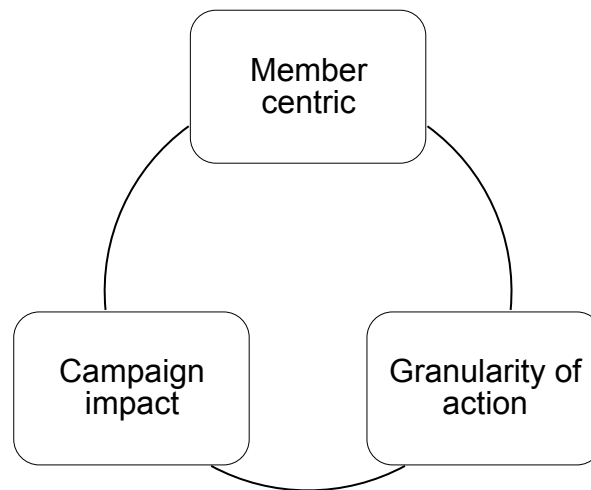
Given its role in providing these opportunities, it is necessary to ask whether there is an ideological grounding that underpins the leadership. I found no evidence to suggest that the staff share a cohesive set of ideals, as one may expect when we consider social movement theory (Benford and Snow, 2000; Tarrow, 1998). Just like the discussions I witnessed at the members meal, there were often fundamental differences amongst the leadership over campaign strategy. Instead, I argue that the underlying principles that guide the movement are the mechanism and form of 38 Degrees as a hybrid mobilization movement, and its commitment to repertoires of action that are based on these three factors.

In using low-effort forms of digital communication to influence the way in which members act together, the leadership possesses significant agency over the group. However, contrary to liquid forms of leadership in other leaderless movements, where those who influence group behaviour wish to be seen as "anti-leaders" (Gerbaudo, 2012: 13-14), staff at 38 Degrees are very transparent about their role in the movement. As David Babbs (Interview 7, June 2013) notes, the relationship between the staff in

London and ordinary members is one of mutual dependency; the members provide the legitimacy and overall direction of the group, while the leaders bring the campaigning expertise and technological platforms that make their activism possible. This member driven model of political mobilisation marks a remarkable development in the ongoing evolution of democratic engagement. What follows is a series of examples that illustrates how the central team uses Facebook and Twitter to craft these opportunities for member involvement across the continuum of participation.

5.4 When Slacktivism Becomes Digital Micro-Activism: The Use of Social Media Across the Continuum of Participation

A critique frequently levelled at 38 Degrees is that its style of campaigning encourages slacktivism, displacing the established activist repertoires used by social movements and legacy pressure groups (Baker, 2014; Burns, 2011; James, 2014). As Rickett (2013) argues, its campaigns are not an extension of resistance, but an expression of idleness. However, the engagement repertoires used by the movement are not just limited to e-petitions or hashtag activism. Such critiques are formed on these behaviours in isolation. As an alternative, I explore slacktivism in relation to the continuum of participation, a process in which the interdependency between different acts sheds light on the normative value of democratic engagement. In what I describe as the organisational management of digital micro-activism, the leadership uses low-effort forms of digital engagement alongside other modes of online and real space participation. If we explore the movement's use of social media across a process-based definition of participation, then we can observe how the leadership crafts opportunities for substantive forms of democratic involvement that require minimal time demands.

5.4.1 Access: Political Learning and Priority Setting

"Access," as defined in Chapter 1, refers to cognitive engagement, the process that we experience when faced with new information. At first glance one would perhaps not categorise 38 Degrees as a news provider, but it often fulfils this function for its members (Interview 4, May 2013). Prior to launching an action, the leadership will post information relating to the issue on Facebook. This acts as an educative space for those who may be exposed to new information as a by-product of their routine use of

Facebook. Furthermore, it provides a forum to evaluate the level of support behind an issue, with clear mechanisms embedded within the design of Facebook for members to register their backing or opposition (i.e. likes, comments, shares).

For some members, the group's Facebook page acts as a site of political learning. In our interview, "Danni," a 24-year-old account manager at an advertising firm, spoke of the difficulty of maintaining a healthy interest in current affairs given the competing demands of her job and busy social life. Although she visits the BBC News website daily, she feels that the selection of political news on offer is limited. By following 38 Degrees on Facebook she claims that she can keep track of "alternative" issues and perspectives that she would not otherwise be exposed to (Interview 22, November 2013). This sentiment was echoed by "Claire," a 25-year-old archive centre operative, who feels that the group keep her "in the loop" (Interview 8, June 2013). Therefore, for some members, the group's social media accounts act as a source of information.

This educative function is particularly important when trying to ensure that a complex campaign is transparent. One way in which the leadership tries to achieve this is by designing infographics, a visual representation of data intended to present information quickly and clearly. This was necessary during their campaign to compel the energy provider npower to pay more corporation tax. The leadership created an infographic to show how npower moved loans from their parent company in Germany through Malta to avoid tax, as shown in Figure 5.5. Transparency and clarity are central to the movement's legitimacy given its member-centric approach; campaigns often falter when members do not feel that they fully understand their rationale (Interview 14, July 2013).

Figure 5.5. A screenshot of an infographic used during the "Big Tax Turnoff" campaign, 2013

Source: 38 Degrees (2013d)

Facebook is also used to determine the level of support for a new campaign, or a specific action. The leadership at 38 Degrees does not arbitrarily choose an issue and then impose this on the membership; instead, the organisation strives to include members in the selection of new campaigns. One way of translating these vague priorities into a clear and coherent strategy is through social media. By posting news items that may be of interest to the members on the group's Facebook page, the central office is able to obtain a trove of qualitative and quantitative data from a significant proportion of the membership in a short space of time. David Babbs (Interview 7, June 2013) proposes that Facebook offers a vital consultative space, in which the leadership

can ascertain the level of member support for an issue and how a potential campaign should be framed and conducted:

> [Social media] is a real time conversation space… I think it gives us two forms of input. It gives us a sense of energy levels around something, which helps us to decide whether we should campaign on this or not, but also, when we are communicating with our members about an issue, it gives us insights into the language they are using and the tone that they would expect us to adopt.

Therefore, Facebook is used to collate the views of the membership, determining whether they want to launch a campaign and, if approved, what form the action should take.

For example, prior to launching their campaign in response to allegations of tax avoidance by npower, a member of staff posted an article from the *Sun* onto their Facebook page, asking the membership to "Click LIKE and SHARE if you think 38 Degrees should campaign on this. Comment and let npower know what you think of them" (38 Degrees, 2013b). Within hours the post had received 2,042 likes and 1,254 shares, deemed by the leadership to be a sign of approval from the membership. Reflecting on this process, Jonathan (Interview 3, May 2013) notes how this source of member feedback enables the movement to respond quickly to current events:

> We spotted the news story as a staff team... I popped it straight up onto Facebook and asked 38 Degrees members the standard line, which is 'click like if you want to campaign on this and if you want to do something about this.' We saw a really big response. We saw lots of 38 Degrees members chatting with each other online and that was the key reason why we decided to launch the campaign so quickly.

Although members had established tax avoidance as a priority in past surveys and in feedback on social media, Jonathan's comments also illustrate the agency of the leadership, as it selects the news stories on which members offer their opinions. While this does diverge from its claims to "people power," the quick actions of the central staff allow the group to strategically adapt, responding to ongoing events to ride the groundswell of enthusiasm and interest that surrounds current affairs (Chadwick, 2013: 193). As such, the leadership has a larger influence over the selection of campaigns, but, by virtue of its access to the materials posted on Facebook, some decision making power is diffused away from the central staff to ordinary members.

As one might expect, this feedback is not always positive. If a member is unhappy with the orientation of a campaign then communication on Facebook is one

way in which they can express their reservations. Prior to the 2012 Summer Olympics in London, the leadership proposed a campaign in response to the temporary tax exemptions that Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) would be providing for major international corporate partners of the games. However, Paul Soper (2012), an accountant and a member of the movement, disputed this, arguing that the campaign was constructed on a misreading of the legislation. He stated that a number of those companies targeted, such as Adidas, McDonalds, and Coca Cola, were not able to qualify for this exemption as their UK subsidiary would be operating at the venues and, as a result, they would be liable for all applicable UK taxation. The post received 12 likes, notable support from other members. In response, the leadership consulted tax blogger Richard Murphy for clarification. He offered an alternative reading of the exemption, which a staff member posted on Facebook in response to Paul (38 Degrees, 2012). This example illustrates how Facebook can facilitate two-way communication between the leadership and rank and file members. However, as I discuss in the next section, this kind of response is not necessarily standard practice for all communications.

5.4.2 Connection and Expression: Strengthening Weak Ties

"Connection," the second stage on the continuum of participation, refers to the relationships and networks formed by citizens. Due to the episodic involvement that members have with the group, often on an issue-by-issue basis, the leadership must craft ways to foster bonds swiftly amongst these sedimentary networks. However, cultivating connection and a perception of commonality between members who have highly personalised intentions and motivations can be challenging, especially with such a geographically dispersed membership base. Although email is an essential tool for mass organisation-to-member communication, it has little value in facilitating member-to-member communication due to the movement's mailing list being closed. Originally, the movement relied on UserVoice, an internet forum platform, to facilitate interpersonal discussion. However, this proved to be less than ideal, as the lack of familiarity with the platform acted as a disincentive for those members who face high time pressures or lack the required digital competencies to use the platform; the service

was not granular. Facebook addresses some of these weaknesses as many, but by no means all, of their members already use the service in day-to-day life.[45]

The leadership feels that users' relationship with the service makes it a suitable space for cultivating bonds between members, rather than through email or on a dedicated web forum. Facebook encourages users to set up their profile as a reflection of their identity. Therefore, when a user then engages with the group's Facebook page, their digital self is exposed to a highly politicised space. As Amy (Interview 4, May 2013) notes, "social media can reintegrate people's political self with their wider self." David Babbs (Interview 7, June 2013) argues that this provides opportunities for the creation of new activist networks with those who would traditionally be identified as non-activists, or even apathetic:

> Campaigning used to grow out of the workplace or your neighbourhood. As economies have got more complex, and communities more atomised, those frameworks for organising have broken down… There used to be quite a hard membrane between my activist friends and my normal friends. I think social media allows people to share stuff with all of their friends. It has become a bit more normalised again.

As members use Facebook for social reasons, politics becomes submerged within this everydayness. The leadership recognises this and tries to encourage member-to-member conversation on Facebook, as by using the service to interact with others, or even by observing these conversations on the group's Facebook page, members can develop connections and a sense of collective identity around ad-hoc issue campaigns.

Nonetheless, these attitudinal changes, and the willingness to connect with others online over political issues, are not universal. "Expression," the third stage of the continuum of participation, signifies the variety of ways in which citizens share their opinions. Amongst those members that I interviewed, some felt that politics is not an appropriate topic for discussion in public and semi-public spaces online. "Liam," a 60-year-old teacher from Brighton, suggests that Facebook is not the right forum for "thrusting" one's opinions onto others, instead preferring to talk to people about politics face-to-face (Interview 19, October 2013). Others, like Mike, use specific functionality when discussing politics on Facebook, sharing items with others privately (Interview 9,

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[45] There is a significant discrepancy between the total number of members included on the group's mailing list, at 2.5 million, and the 122,331 Facebook users who follow the 38 Degrees page. However, given that anyone who has signed a petition on the movement's website is included on their mailing list, this total is not an accurate measure of active members. These figures are correct as of October 2014.

June 2013). Therefore, this self-expressive logic is dependent on individual preferences, a theme explored in further detail in the following chapter.

Secondly, social media is sometimes used for connection between the leadership and members, although not in the same way as e-mail. In fulfilment of its ambition to be member driven, maintaining regular contact with members is the responsibility of all staff at 38 Degrees. Organisation-to-member communication is facilitated through a repertoire of contact techniques (Interview 3, May 2013). Internal workflows prioritise email feedback. All emails sent to the office, either directly or indirectly through the contact box on the group's website, are read and replied to. However, messages on Facebook and Twitter are dealt with less formally and have a much lower response rate. During my observation, feedback on these platforms seemed to be prioritised when staff responded to criticism from the membership. Given the public visibility of their social media accounts, this is perhaps unsurprising. For example, upon receiving negative comments on Twitter in response to a video produced by the group, the leadership was quick to respond to those affected, asking how practices could be improved (38 Degrees, 2014c). Likewise, on Facebook, staff will often post responses to comments made on their own updates, but they will not reply to posts by others on the group's page.

Given the absence of a systematic protocol for replying to member communication on social media, Carpen (2013) asks whether the leadership is using social media for its designed purpose:

> They are using social media tools, but are they using social media? They are not one and the same thing… Social media implies a conversation. They are using the tool, but not for the purpose it was necessarily designed for.

Staff at 38 Degrees acknowledge this criticism, and see social media as an area in which they must improve (Interview 3; Interview 4, May 2013; Interview 7, June 2013). When I asked why staff were not more vocal on social networking sites I was told that it was a difficult balancing act. Firstly, responding to messages is resource intensive. The high volume of posts, coupled with their relatively small staff, makes a high response rate unrealisable. Secondly, an active staff presence within the member-to-member conversations on Facebook and Twitter would compromise the group's claim to be member driven (Interview 4, May 2013; Interview 7, June 2013). The leadership tries to intervene only when necessary, as it is fearful of arbitrarily setting the agenda.

Thirdly, the central team uses social media platforms to involve the membership when the movement has success. Relatively early on in the campaign to lobby npower to pay more corporation tax, the group shared the front page of the *Sun,* a British tabloid newspaper, in a Facebook update. The update made a direct link between the actions of those members involved, in this case through donations for a report that the leadership commissioned on the energy provider's tax affairs, and a tangible form of impact. As Figure 5.6 shows, the update claimed that the front-page exposé would be "read by millions" (38 Degrees, 2013c). At the time the paper had a print circulation of 2.1 million (Ponsford, 2015) and, prior to moving to a subscription-based model, their website had a unique visitor count of 30 million per month (O'Reilly, 2014). This generates feelings of self-efficacy amongst members and helps to strengthen their attachment to the group (Interview 8, June 2013). The leadership shares campaign successes on social media to motivate members to engage in an extended repertoire of actions (Interview 7, June 2013). Therefore, what the slacktivist critique may deem inauthentic self-gratification can actually spark further action.

Figure 5.6. A screenshot of the leadership of 38 Degrees using exposure in the *Sun* newspaper to motivate their membership

Source: 38 Degrees (2013c)

Finally, Facebook and Twitter are important spaces for self-expression. The movement's digital infrastructure is built upon a suite of technologies provided by Blue State Digital (BSD), a political consultancy that provides digital solutions for a range of

organisations, such as political parties and pressure groups. Founded in the aftermath of Howard Dean's presidential campaign in 2004 and renowned for their innovations during Barack Obama's historic victory in 2008 (Karpf, 2012a; Kreiss, 2012: 88-89), the tools have a set of campaigning norms embedded within their design. Figure 5.7 illustrates a standard user journey for a 38 Degrees campaign on BSD. Although this workflow is not used in every campaign, as the leadership adopts a specific strategy depending on the issue, it does provide a template for action. In this user journey members are encouraged to share evidence of their behaviour with wider networks. Self-expression is therefore linked to other forms of political behaviour.

Figure 5.7. A flowchart of a typical user journey for a 38 Degrees campaign on Blue State Digital
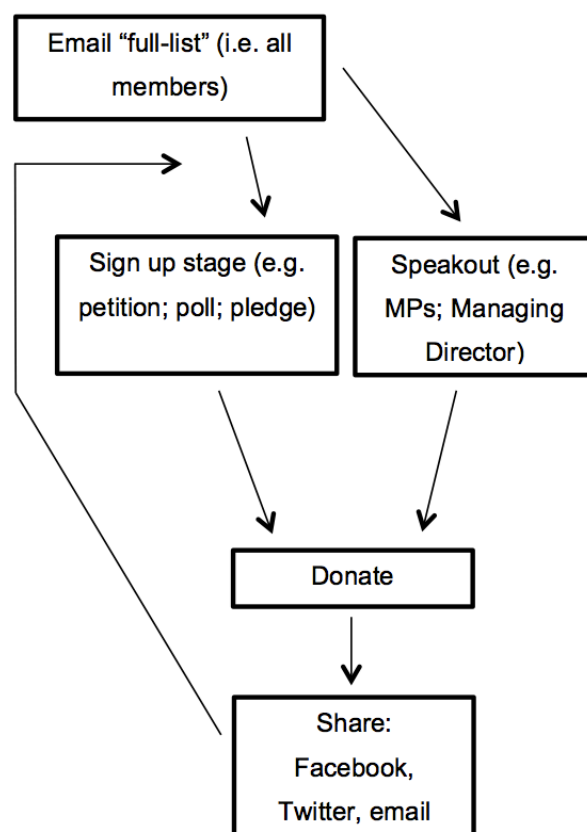
In isolation, sharing evidence of one's behaviour would seem to represent an act of slacktivism. However, this ignores wider network effects. Expressive engagement can be fulfilling for the participant, but can also educate and mobilise others in their network. Those members that I spoke to recognised the value of raising awareness amongst their peers (Interview 10; Interview 11, June 2013). For instance, Danni uses evidence of other people's actions acts as an entry point for her involvement (Interview

22, November 2013). As such, the leadership tries to tap into the self-expressive logic on social media to amplify campaigns amongst wider networks.

What makes this amplification so effective is the nature of the contacts who make up these networks, as members share campaign material on social media with other users who, to a varying degree depending on the nature of the relationship, have a vested interest in them. This expression is often framed around one's own personal preferences. For instance, during the campaign to influence the Transparency of Lobbying, Non-Party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Bill in 2013, referred to as the "Gagging Law" due to the restrictions the bill proposed for political campaigning in general, the leadership provided a poster on Facebook and Twitter that members were asked to print off. Those involved personalised the posters, indicating a cause of deep concern to them that would be restricted under the bill. Members were then asked to upload a photo of their poster to Facebook. A collection of these images is shown in Figure 5.8.

Figure 5.8. A collection of personalised campaign posters in response to the "Gagging Law" campaign, 2013

This individualisation triggers attention amongst the personalised networks on Facebook and Twitter. This is a rather explicit example of what Bennett and Segerberg (2013: 6) describe as personal action frames, as ties are formed amongst groups of

activists on the basis of personalised political messages. As part of each campaign, the leadership encourages their members to express how a specific issue impacts them. For example, during the campaign to halt the proposed restrictions on GP visits, members reflected upon their experiences with the NHS. This expressive engagement provides symbolic empowerment and psychological rewards, such as enhanced feelings of efficacy for the individual (Bucy and Gregson, 2001: 370-371), but also represents a powerful tool for mobilisation. Therefore, given that the leadership mobilises the membership across sedimentary networks, social media acts as a site of activation, in which emotive, personalised campaign material forms bonds between loose affiliations of digitally connected individuals.

5.4.3 Action: A Service-Specific Logic

"Action," the final stage of the continuum of participation, refers to goal-orientated, public-political acts; those behaviours that complement other online and/or offline goal-orientated, public-political acts as part of engagement repertoires. During my time spent observing 38 Degrees, it was evident that the leadership uses social media for both purposes. What follows is a snapshot of two case studies, a national mobilisation in which the group demands that a leading energy company pay more tax, and a series of local level efforts to galvanise resistance to the British government's 2012 healthcare reforms. These campaigns show how the movement uses social media to undertake digitally mediated and real space action. Facebook and Twitter are explored independently, as each service performs a different function.

In reading this chapter, you may be surprised by the lack of discussion of the group's use of Twitter; this is a significant observation. For 38 Degrees, the service has clearly defined roles. For members, besides sharing their campaign action within their own network, Twitter is used to lobby corporations, journalists, and political representatives, on the instruction of the leadership. There was little evidence to suggest that members used the platform for discussion outside of amplifying another member's action through a retweet (Interview 10; Interview 11, June 2013). Furthermore, based on data collected by the leadership team, Twitter is not as effective as email or Facebook in supporting further engagement by members (Interview 2; Interview 5, May 2013).

The "Big Tax Turnoff," the campaign to persuade npower to increase its tax contributions, illustrates how the movement use Twitter. The leadership initially launched an e-petition to signal members' collective anger at the energy provider's tax

affairs. Members were encouraged to share this petition on Twitter. This was strategically significant, as companies seek to preserve and strengthen the reputation of their brand on the service. The staff provided members with pre-formatted tweets that included the energy provider's Twitter username. For example, ".@npowerhq paid ZERO corporation tax in the last 3 years while our bills rocketed. Tell #npower to pay up: http://38d.gs/npowertax" (Rigg, 2013). This enabled each individual member to share their outrage with npower directly, while also providing a public record of their tax affairs for other consumers to see. As a result of this consumer activism on Twitter, npower published a press release defending the amount of tax paid, arguing that its tax affairs were both legal and common practice (Npower Press Office, 2013). Therefore, as members shared the petition on Twitter, the movement benefited from a growth in the number of actors taking part as npower simultaneously suffered damage to its brand.

38 Degrees adopt a similar approach when lobbying elected politicians. Given the prominence of MPs on Twitter, with 461 of the 650 elected representatives now using the service,[46] the leadership use the social networking site as a way of providing a means of elite contact for members in a highly visible, public space. Using a practice described by Zuckerman (2012b) as "tweetbombing," the leadership organises members to send a tweet to their local MP at a specific time, strategically targeting the MP as a way of drawing attention to an issue. This is an established logic amongst pressure groups, be it through postcard campaigns or mass email tactics (Karpf, 2010). During this campaign, the leadership encouraged members to send tweets to their local MP during Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs), a weekly session in which MPs scrutinise the Prime Minister, encouraging them to raise the issue of the energy provider's tax affairs (Rees, 2013). A common criticism of 38 Degrees is that it bombards MPs with communications from members who do not reside in their constituency (Raab, 2010). However, this technique is more nuanced than this critique suggests. The leadership designed a website for this campaign where members could enter their postcode and access the account details for their local MP. This ensured that MPs only received tweets from their local constituents, and reduced the costs incurred by members in finding this information. Although the material benefits of these techniques are questionable, for instance no MP raised the issue in PMQs, these examples show how Twitter is used by 38 Degrees as a platform for direct action.

The leadership also use Twitter to capture the attention of professional news media. As Jonathan (Interview 3, May 2013), the campaign manager leading the npower

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[46] Figure correct as of December 2013 https://twitter.com/tweetminster/status/412881045130719232.

campaign, reflects, "I see the value in Twitter in terms of the media. The media are all over Twitter and they take notice of things that are on Twitter." Ensuring that a campaign receives coverage in professional media is vital to both the scale of an action and ultimately, its level of success (Chadwick and Dennis, forthcoming). We can observe how the ebb and flow of news cycles affects the visibility of a campaign through an analysis of the level of discussion on Twitter. Using the commercial platform Sysomos MAP, I collected a dataset of 10,850 tweets. These were collected between April 16 2013 and May 28 2013, the dates between which the leadership actively worked on the campaign. Tweets were collected on the basis of a Boolean word search. By plotting these tweets on a timeline we can observe the events that triggered peaks in conversation. As shown in Figure 5.9, peaks in activity correlate with coverage from professional media.

Figure 5.9. The volume of mentions of npower on Twitter during the "Big Tax Turnoff" campaign, 2013
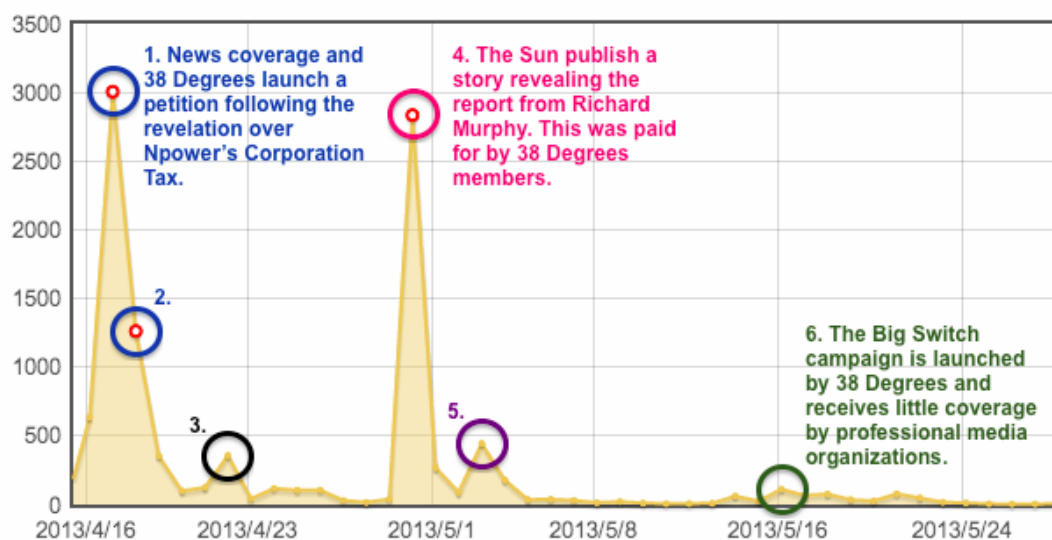
Note: Tweets were collected from April 16 to May 28, 2013 on the basis of a Boolean word search, as follows: npower AND (tax OR 'tax dodging' OR 'tax-dodging' OR 38degrees OR '38 Degrees' OR '38_degrees' OR corporation OR taxes). This yielded 10,850 tweets in total.

Six spikes in conversation volume are evident. The first spike correlates with the news coverage following Paul Massara's admission to the Energy and Climate Change Committee that npower had not paid corporation tax between 2009 and 2011. Point two indicates the traffic generated by the movement's original e-petition. The third, much smaller, peak emerged from tweets and retweets from several well-connected activist accounts on Twitter, including The Artist Taxi Driver (McGowan, 2013), Fuel Poverty Action (Fuel Poverty Action, 2013), and UK Uncut (UK Uncut, 2013). These users

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shared a story from the *Guardian* reporting that HMRC had hired a former director of npower, Volker Beckers, as a non-executive director (Macalister, 2013). The fourth peak followed the publication of the front-page feature in the *Sun*, based on the report commissioned by 38 Degrees. As David Babbs (Interview 7, June 2013) points out, exposure in widely read professional media is still an important campaign tactic:

> We knew that our main lever on that [npower] was to increase the cost of being tax dodgers in terms of their reputation. If you're thinking what would their Director of Communications most freak out about, he or she is going to freak out more about a headline in the *Sun* than almost anything else. So that is why we are trying, as a staff team, to serve our members agenda by freaking out npower and making them consider other approaches to their tax affairs… I think this is a relevant campaigning tactic as long as those in power think that it is relevant, and those in power still think that old media is relevant.

While digital technologies do provide more opportunities for non-elite intervention on public agendas, these opportunities often derive from relationships with established elites, such as political parties (Kreiss, 2012; Stromer-Galley, 2014) and professional news media (Chadwick, 2011). As such, if a news agenda moves on, it can reduce the visibility and the material impact of a campaign.

This was evident with the movement's next tactic, as members who were also npower customers were encouraged to change their energy provider to a competitor. Despite some brief coverage in the *Daily Mirror* (Hiscott, 2013) and the *Guardian* (Brignall, 2013), and several attempts by the leadership to engage with journalists on Twitter (38 Degrees, 2013e; 2013f; 2013g), this did not trigger significant discussion amongst the wider public on the social networking site. Therefore, although the leadership did try to gain press attention using Twitter, this was not successful in this campaign. Here we see evidence of the limitations of the organisational management of digital micro-activism. The largest spikes in conversation on Twitter, illustrated in Figure 5.6, were shaped by professional media coverage. The leadership of 38 Degrees was only successful in influencing this when liaising with journalists privately; the front-page coverage followed private meetings between the central team and journalists at the *Sun*. This represents a more traditional campaign logic (McNair, 2007: 151-152).

Whereas Twitter is used as a tool for direct action, Facebook is deployed by the leadership to support other forms of digital and real space activism. This, in itself, is not new. A number of studies have outlined how digital technologies can be used to support on the ground campaigning (Karpf, 2012a; Kreiss, 2012; Nielsen, 2012; Stromer-Galley, 2014). However, what is unique about the way in which 38 Degrees use

Facebook is how it underpins structural transformations, as the membership displace the leadership's role in the design and implementation of campaign strategy. This second case study illustrates how the leadership use Facebook to enable fast repertoire switching mid-campaign, between online and offline spaces.

The Health and Social Care Bill, which became law in 2012, radically overhauled local healthcare governance, as Primary Care Trusts (PCTs) and Strategic Health Authorities—responsible for the design of local healthcare services—were replaced by Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs). The bill enabled CCGs, formed of local GPs, to tender local health services to providers from the private sector. In response to member demand, 38 Degrees initially organised an e-petition. However, through further member communications and expert professional and legal advice, the leadership reshaped the spatial focus of the campaign.

The central team used Facebook to assist a structural shift, moving from a nationally coordinated, digitally networked action to a local-level, real space mobilisation. Over 150 local groups were created that met face-to-face and were, crucially, semi-autonomous. Karpf (2012: 19) offers three distinct models to describe how netroots organisations use the internet to organise, two of which are evident in this case study. In the initial phase, when the membership was encouraged to fund an event with GPs (Jarvis, 2012a), to fund legal work (Limneos, 2012), and to sign a localised e-petition (Jarvis, 2012c), a "hub and spokes model" was in use. Here, I observed a large amount of organisation-to-member communication between the small central staff and the large membership base. Members predominantly took part through web-based actions. As Adam (Interview 5, May 2013) notes, in this model "38 Degrees doesn't exist in a real, touchable way." Communication between members is mediated through their mobile devices, their computer screens, and their email clients.

In contrast, the localised efforts reflect what Karpf (2012: 19) describes as a "neo-federated model," "offering 'online tools for offline action.'" Although the leadership used email to offer further informational resources, each group had control over their own campaign strategy. Facebook became the foundation for many of these local groups. For instance, the group formed to influence the Nottingham City CCG used the service to discuss strategy, organise local events, and arrange meetings with representatives from its local CCG.[47] As such, Facebook acts as an organisational tool, enabling the movement to rapidly switch its structural form.

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[47] For further information on the group in Nottingham, see:
https://www.facebook.com/38DegreesNhsNottingham.

Nonetheless, this approach was not adopted by all of the local groups. Without organisational oversight, some adopted very different repertoires. In our interview "George," a retired journalist, described how he oversaw the creation of a new regional network, Save Our NHS - West Midlands (Interview 15, August 2013).[48] This group used a range of online services independent from those resources provided by the central office. These included a unique web space, a Yahoo! mailing list, and an e-newsletter. Furthermore, the group also organised a number of action days, where it set up information points across Birmingham city centre to inform the public about the proposed changes to their local healthcare provision.

However, this remarkable example of self-organisation is far from the norm. This campaign was successful because George, who became a de-facto leader, used the skills that he accrued during his career in journalism to design an innovative campaign strategy. There were also many examples of groups that failed to self-organise without the guidance of the leadership. The next section reflects on a service recently launched by 38 Degrees, where the absence of those with campaigning expertise restricts the development of campaigns.

5.5 Campaigns By You: The Limitations of Self-Organising Networks

Social media is not the primary means of communication within 38 Degrees. As Chadwick (2013: 190) argues, "email underpins everything." Email has intuitive benefits over Facebook and Twitter, as all members use it as a means of communication; membership is defined by one's inclusion on the group's mailing list. It is also more trusted. Some of the activists with whom I spoke remain sceptical about how secure communications are on social media. "Jack," a 56-year-old civil servant from London, has doubts about whether these services do enough to protect a user's privacy (Interview 18, October 2013). However, although email provides the digital infrastructure for the movement, this wasn't necessarily based on a decision made by the founding members. As Adam (Interview 5, May 2013) notes, the design of BSD may influence how 38 Degrees, as a netroots organisation, operates:

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[48] For further information on Save Our NHS – West Midlands, see: http://www.saveournhs-wm.org.uk/.

BSD is our most important platform. BSD is very good at sending emails and managing big lists of members. A huge percentage of our technology management resources go into maintaining it. Therefore if BSD, by its design, handled and privileged the use of social media in a different way, it is possible that 38 Degrees would do social differently. Ultimately, BSD may lock in certain thoughts and behaviours amongst its users.

Adam's comments suggest that the emphasis on email within the movement is partially a by-product of the group's use of BSD. This platform, chosen from a marketplace of providers, has an influence on campaign strategy. As the findings from research conducted by McKelvey and Piebiak (2014) suggest, this type of campaign software—and the technological affordances that they provide—shape the parameters of the political activism that can be undertaken by those groups that adopt them. This relationship was also evident during my observations of a new platform, Campaigns By You, launched by 38 Degrees in 2013.

CBY enables individual members to set up their own campaigns on the 38 Degrees website without the direction and input of the central staff. Although the leadership will occasionally offer their strategic expertise to those campaigns that gain significant levels of support across the membership (Interview 2, May 2013), the vast majority of these campaigns are examples of self-organising networks. In theory, the member(s) who set up each campaign has full autonomy over the framing of an issue, the organisational approach used, and the repertoire of actions deployed.

CBY is based on a different back end platform to BSD, which is used to support the leader led campaigns previously discussed in this chapter. The back end used for CBY is Control Shift, a platform developed by campaigners at GetUp!, a hybrid mobilization movement based in Australia (Interview 2, May 2013). The leadership at 38 Degrees implemented this back end following the successful trial of similar services by MoveOn and GetUp! The staff I interviewed hoped that the service could be used to expand the movement's campaigning to the local level, encouraging members to run their own campaigns within their neighbourhoods (Interview 2; Interview 3, May 2013; Interview 7, June 2013). The design is purposefully granular so that members can use the service to easily set up and run their own petitions. As David Babbs (Interview 7, June 2013) reflects, CBY is what the leadership originally intended 38 Degrees to be in its pursuit of "people power":

I actually wanted to build Campaigns By You pre-launch, back in 2009, but we didn't have the resources then… For me, if you are in the business of giving people a voice and being the most effective vehicle possible for them, then, in the same way that offline we are seeing the power of letting people do their own thing, we should be doing the same online.

One benefit of diffusing power away from the leadership is that members can bring fresh perspective to campaign strategy.

During my time observing the movement, Tom Woolley, an illustrator and 38 Degrees member from Bradford, took to CBY to start a petition against proposed cuts to the annual funding of the Science Museum Group. This formed part of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government's comprehensive spending review. Given the suggested reduction in funding, it was anticipated that one of the three museums managed by the group would have to close; the most likely option being the National Media Museum in Bradford (BBC News, 2013). The petition reached over 36,000 signatures and the proposed cuts were shelved. In part, the petition's success was a result of an innovative campaign strategy on Twitter. Tom set up a dedicated Twitter account, @savenmem (Save NMeM, 2014), to lobby local celebrities, such as the controversial politician George Galloway (2013), and the famed British actor John Hurt (2013). However, this innovative campaign was a result of Tom's role as a "leader," as he drew upon his own marketing and design expertise to craft a visually compelling, social strategy.

If one delves beyond the featured campaigns on the CBY homepage, which the leadership will often adopt as their own, and offer extensive support to (Interview 2, May 2013), there are hundreds of dormant actions.[49] These range from 15 students angry about proposed revisions to the current GCSE grading system (Vasey, 2015), a few hundred members outraged by the size of the models featured in the brochure of a popular high-street retailer (Aliwell, 2015), and almost 8,000 supporters who are lobbying the Queen for another general election due to alleged electoral fraud by the Conservatives (Middleton, 2015). These three examples illustrate the problems facing CBY. Firstly, the service is prone to trivial or reactionary campaigns that jeopardise the legitimacy of the movement; as setting up a petition on the service is a low-threshold task. Secondly, as the first two examples illustrate, those campaigns on very serious topics often struggle to gain momentum.

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[49] For example, see https://home.38degrees.org.uk/campaigns/?types[]=campaignsbyyou.

There are two reasons for this. Firstly, just as the technological affordances of BSD create the template for leader led campaigns, Control Shift locks members into certain behaviours and campaign norms. For the minority of the group's membership who have the necessary skills to run a political campaign, this platform can restrain their efforts. I spoke to a handful of members, informally, during a demonstration held at Parliament Square in October 2013.[50] They told me that the limitations of CBY prevented them from doing more. Instead, they had been forced offline, organising real space actions in their local area that used the movement's identity but had no form of affiliation or communication with the central office. Requiring members to move to other services to develop their campaign goes against the granular activism that the movement strives for.[51]

Other members that I interviewed, who had used CBY, felt that the tools provided were similar to those offered by Change.Org, a for-profit petition website on which political groups and individual users can create their own petitions (Interview 9, May 2013; Interview 19, October 2013). This comparison is a fair one, given that CBY is, at its core, a platform for user generated e-petitions. "Anna" (Interview 2, May 2013), the staff member leading the development of CBY, recognises the limitations of the platform:

> At the moment, petitions sites like CBY and Change[.org] are similar in that they are really email capture points. You can put in your name, share it, and then someone can email you. That is really all you can do. Obviously, there is a whole bunch of stuff that you might want to do to run your campaign.

Anna's comments allude to a further restriction, as those who set up a petition on CBY do not have access to the full list of members' email addresses. Users must collate their own mailing list by sharing their petition with wider networks. Although the central team plan to address a number of these limitations by expanding the tools provided to those using the service (Interview 2; Interview 3, May 2013; Interview 7, June 2013), this presupposes that those members starting a campaign have the required skill-sets to use these new tools effectively.

Secondly, many of the group's successes are, at least partially, a result of effective lobbying from those with campaigning expertise. The organisational

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[50] This demonstration was organised as part of the movement's opposition to the Transparency of Lobbying, Non-party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Bill. The members I spoke to wish to remain anonymous.

[51] This also poses further questions for the slacktivist critique, as examples of slacktivism may be a result of the limitations of the technologies provided, rather than a consequence of the attitudes of those taking part.

management of digital micro-activism brings together the experience and judgment of a handful of hardened activists with large groups of loosely connected citizens, who use mundane technologies to set the overall priorities of the movement. When these leaders are removed, many members do not have the experience to bring about effective campaigns. Anna (Interview 2, May 2013) expressed these reservations in our interview, asking whether it was truly feasible for someone—who may never have been involved in political activism in any form—to start a campaign, and possess all of the required informational resources and organisational expertise to have success. In this context Morozov (2011: 194) is right; "not everyone can be Che Guevara."

As McNair (2007: 157) notes, many pressure groups are resource poor, compelling them to act creatively in order to shape public debate or influence the policy making process. Campaigners and lobbyists will spend much of their careers cultivating a set of contacts, which may include politicians, journalists, and those in professions deemed useful to their advocacy. These connections are then drawn upon in appropriate circumstances, i.e. when they have the most strategic significance. These attributes describe the opposite of what 38 Degrees, as a movement, stands for. The archetypal member is not a professional lobbyist but a citizen trying to maintain an interest and an active involvement in politics alongside other commitments within everyday life. Without leaders strategically managing the use of these low-threshold tools,[52] a substantial proportion of those campaigns started on CBY fulfil the slacktivist critique.

5.6 Conclusion: The Organisational Management of Digital Micro-Activism

This chapter explores the relationship between the routine use of social media and political participation in an activist context. I selected 38 Degrees as the focus of my ethnography due to the characteristics of the group's membership. As Wood (1996: 1-2) notes, the costs of activism tend to mean that those small numbers who get involved are devoted to a particular cause. Typical 38 Degrees members do not fit this description. On first glance, they appear to possess the defining characteristics of a "slacktivist," as members share evidence of their actions on Facebook and Twitter by way of self-gratification. Moreover, the actions designed by the leadership often require very little

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[52] This is not to say that self-organising networks can never result in effective political movements. 38 Degrees differ from what Bennett and Segerberg (2013: 46-48) describe as "crowd-enabled connective action," those movements that are organised predominantly by the crowd without the presence of formal organisations. Those involved in the Occupy protests in the US or the Indignados in Spain tend to develop stronger bonds than those within a hybrid mobilization movement, and the depth of one's commitment in these protest causes tends to be higher.

from those involved. However, by embedding myself within the movement, and by contextualising the behaviours derided as slacktivism within the group's broader campaign strategies, the findings from this chapter suggest that these low-threshold behaviours amount to more than just banal self-expression. Instead, in what I describe as the organisational management of digital micro-activism, the leadership deploys these mundane tools in political contexts in which they are still symbolically empowering but where they also have material impact (EF_3; EF_4).

A number of studies have outlined the ways in which digital media challenge the established logics and norms of organisational politics (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013; Beyer, 2014; Bimber, Flanagin and Stohl, 2012; Chadwick, 2013; Gerbaudo, 2012; Karpf, 2012a). The findings from this chapter contribute to these developments by analysing how these organisational level innovations lead to new opportunities for engagement at the individual level. As part of the free-rider theory, in which citizens seek the benefits of collective action without incurring the costs associated with their engagement, Olson (1971) sets out a number of obstacles facing involvement in organisational politics. These include: (1) the lack of non-elite influence within rigid hierarchies, (2) the individual level costs associated with participation, and, (3) the difficulties of forming a collective identity that is inclusive of the divergent personal preferences of a large membership. The leadership of 38 Degrees seeks to circumvent these three hurdles through the strategic use of low-effort forms of micro-activism.

Firstly, the staff uses digital technologies to provide opportunities for members to shape and influence campaign strategy. The low-threshold functionality on social media facilitates feedback loops, through which individual members can meaningfully influence the direction of the group. As some, but by no means all, of the group's membership feel comfortable expressing themselves on the service, Facebook provides the leadership with a means of surveying members' priorities throughout each campaign.

Secondly, by reducing the individual level costs associated with participation, the leadership attempts to make campaigning more granular. The staff offer a variety of ways to take part in each campaign: these include a range of more intense forms of participation, as members select their level of involvement based on their personal context. The central team uses forms of digital micro-activism to offer democratic shortcuts for time-poor citizens throughout the campaign process, from conception to action.

Facebook and Twitter are important sites of activation, in which interest or passion for an issue begins or is strengthened. Members rely on the group's social media accounts as a source of information for topics ignored by professional news media. As such, the leadership provides informational shortcuts to an alternative agenda. This provides evidence to support Chadwick's (2012) model of by-product learning and accidental exposure, as citizens become aware of political issues through their day-to-day use of social networking sites (EF_1).

By using Facebook and Twitter regularly in non-political contexts, members become familiarised to the way in which these services work. As forms of social media become more widely diffused, members develop a set of skills and competencies that can be drawn upon by the central team in its design of campaign actions. As Adam (Interview 5, May 2013) notes, social networking sites provide ideal platforms for granular forms of engagement as "we don't have to teach our members how to use the technologies." However, Facebook and Twitter perform very different functions within these action repertoires, with evidence of a service-specific logic. Facebook is used as an organisational tool for further real space and digital action. The latent skills that users develop by routinely using the service enable the central team to diffuse responsibility for the design of campaigns to ordinary members, so that they can coordinate their own local campaigns. By comparison, Twitter is used for public-political digital actions, as members lobby elites, either as a means of generating public attention or as a direct means of influencing elected representatives and commercial targets.

In summary, these opportunities appeal to members of the group as they lack the same time investment as they would do in a face-to-face setting but they still offer what actualizing citizens want from their political participation; influence and tangible efficacy.

Thirdly, the leadership uses flexible political messages that can be personalised by those involved. Facebook provides a space in which users can customise and share personal action frames (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013), reflecting on their own experiences and forming weak tie connections in the process (EF_5). Gerbaudo (2012: 10) and Bennett and Segerberg (2013: 36) offer two very different interpretations of the type of bonds that are fostered by social media in contemporary popular movements, the former outlining their value in forming a collective identity amongst a group, while Bennett and Segerberg argue that digital media facilitate diverse, individualised identity frames. Although 38 Degrees represents a very different type of organisation to the mass mobilisations featured in their research, the group is unique in the sense that it

adopts elements of both. While citizens initially identify through personal identity, a collective identity is developed on the back of the connections formed with other like-minded citizens.

This process is integral to the organisational form of the hybrid mobilization movement given the conditions of membership. Members are loosely connected to the movement, as individuals pick and choose the issue campaigns to which they relate. In this way, they reflect the standby citizen model (Amnå and Ekman, 2014). Members are not actively engaged within the movement at all times, but passively monitor the information provided by the leadership, waiting for an issue that they identify with. This personalisation suggests that involvement is not inauthentic, but based on those issues that a member deems to be important. These issues were diverse, and at times contradictory, as I discovered during my uneasy observation of the members meal. However, based on the interviews that I conducted I did not doubt their sincerity, as many were involved in campaign actions in which they would not personally benefit from the desired outcome(s). As a result of this pursuit of individual autonomy, members share the characteristics of the actualizing citizen (Bennett, 2008). Once activated, these participants may use Facebook and Twitter to learn more about an issue, influence campaign strategy, and share evidence of their actions. These personally expressive behaviours blur the lines between consumption and production, as self-expression can mobilise wider networks. However, unlike in Bennett's (2008) original hypotheses, all of those members with whom I spoke, irrespective of their age, displayed attributes of this attitudinal logic (e.g. Interview 15, August 2013).

In conclusion, the organisational management of digital micro-activism has significant implications when we consider the slacktivist critique. Integral to the critique is the claim that low-threshold digital interactions have no material impact; they do not form a link to institutional decision making or the policy making process (Couldry, 2012: 123). However, by designing campaign actions that are granular, and by using technologies that are widely diffused amongst their membership, the leadership provides a bridge between digital micro-activism and sites of power (EF$_4$). To achieve the policy change that the movement needs for its legitimacy, leaders are required who understand the established norms, and hierarchies, of political campaigning. While this tactic may seem undemocratic, or even old-fashioned, when compared to accounts of leaderless movements, the process taken in formulating these actions is anything but. Rank and file members are making the important decisions, not the staff based in

London. Although the levers of power remain the same, those who operate them, and the means by which they do so, are unique.

Without the expertise of the group's leaders, this political behaviour does resemble the slacktivist critique, as shown in the discussion of CBY. While this may be the case in an activist context, what about everyday life? How do social media users make sense of political information without the guidance of editors? Are the opinions of users shaped by new influencers online? The next chapter explores of how a group of digitally active citizens use Facebook and Twitter across the continuum of participation.

6. Media Diaries: Exploring the Day-to-Day Use of Social Media by Citizens

This chapter examines how 29 digitally active citizens use social media within their day-to-day lives. By drawing on a mixed-method research design, in which evidence of citizen behaviour on Facebook and Twitter is contextualised with interviews and reflective weekly diary entries collected over three months, I analyse the extent to which the routine use of Facebook and Twitter affects political engagement.[53] Despite some evidence to support the slacktivist critique, in terms of the lack of instrumentalist action undertaken by participants during the diary period, this chapter offers evidence to contest the critique.

Firstly, the diaries suggest that media habits at the individual level are personalised, and considerably more complex than the assumed behavioural traits offered in the slacktivist critique; even amongst the most active social media users, no diarist relied exclusively on social media for their political information. This individualisation complements changes in the way citizens consume news, as participants use a range of media to shape the information they receive around issues that they have a longstanding interest in. Despite these findings, the diaries found no evidence to suggest that this personalisation invariably leads to harmful audience fragmentation, suggesting instead that collective exposure and shared experience still exist (EF_1).

Secondly, by observing the different ways in which the diarists use social media, this chapter offers a typology of citizen roles in social media environments that challenges both the attitudinal and behavioural logics that sustain the slacktivist critique. "Civic instigators" and "contributors," those participants who most closely represent slacktivists, engage in self-expression and digital micro-activism by way of refining and honing their own political identity. They are also more likely to engage in instrumentalist forms of political action, a rejection of the substitution thesis. However, the expected findings of this thesis are also challenged, as social networking sites do not invoke a self-expressive logic by virtue of their design (EF_2; EF_3). The majority of participants in this research were "listeners," using social media to consume political information but refraining from public forms of expression. Instead, they take to private spaces to discuss politics, either online or face-to-face. They resemble Amnå and

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[53] For further information on the methodology and the sampling frame used, please see Appendix B.

Ekman's (2014: 262) standby citizen model, as participants keep themselves informed about politics by bringing up political issues in everyday life contexts and are willing and able to participate if needed. When listeners do undertake acts of digital micro-activism they are not easy, low-threshold behaviours, but painstakingly deliberated over with the real and imagined audience in mind. For instance, sharing an e-petition on Facebook and Twitter has a high cognitive load given the reputational dynamics of social media. As such, the slacktivist critique may actually exacerbate disengagement online, as the more credibility and use the term gains, the more deeply rooted these inhibitions may become.

Finally, a service-specific logic exists that guides behaviour on Facebook and Twitter. For most diarists, Facebook is deemed to be a social space, one in which they are willing to consume political information but are reluctant to use for self-expression themselves. Meanwhile Twitter is perceived to be a service designed for sharing news and suited to thoughtful forms of political expression.

6.1 Access: Personalisation, Fragmentation and Collective Exposure on Social Media

As noted in Chapter 4, the research design for this study extends the methodology used by Couldry, Livingstone and Markham (2010) in *Media Consumption and Public Engagement: Beyond the Presumption of Attention*. Undertaken between February and July 2004, their research illustrates the nuanced relationship between media use at the micro-level and levels of political knowledge and engagement. Just over a decade later, the public's media habits have changed immeasurably. For example, in their study just four of the 21 diarists used the internet as a source of news (Couldry, Livingstone and Markham, 2010: 98). In this research 19 of the 26 participants who completed their diary use online media as their primary source of news, as shown in Figure 6.1.[54] Although the extent of this shift is somewhat indicative of the sampling frame used,[55] Ofcom's (2014: 27) annual survey of media use in Britain found that over half (54

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[54] In total, 30 participants were originally recruited. Four diarists withdrew from the study prior to completion. Of those four, Alan, Christian, and Ron gave permission for their partially completed diaries to be included in the research, contributing five, six, and seven entries respectively. As a result, none of these diarists took part in the exit survey. Please see Chapter 4 for further information on the research design.

[55] Those recruited for this study resemble the type of citizen identified by the slacktivist critique. As such, there was an overrepresentation of participants who use Facebook and Twitter. See Appendix B1 for further details of the sampling frame used.

percent) of the general public now use the internet to access news. These changes pose new questions about the type of news that users are exposed to online, and whether these new sources of information impact how citizens perceive public issues.

Figure 6.1. During the diary period where did you get the majority of your news from?
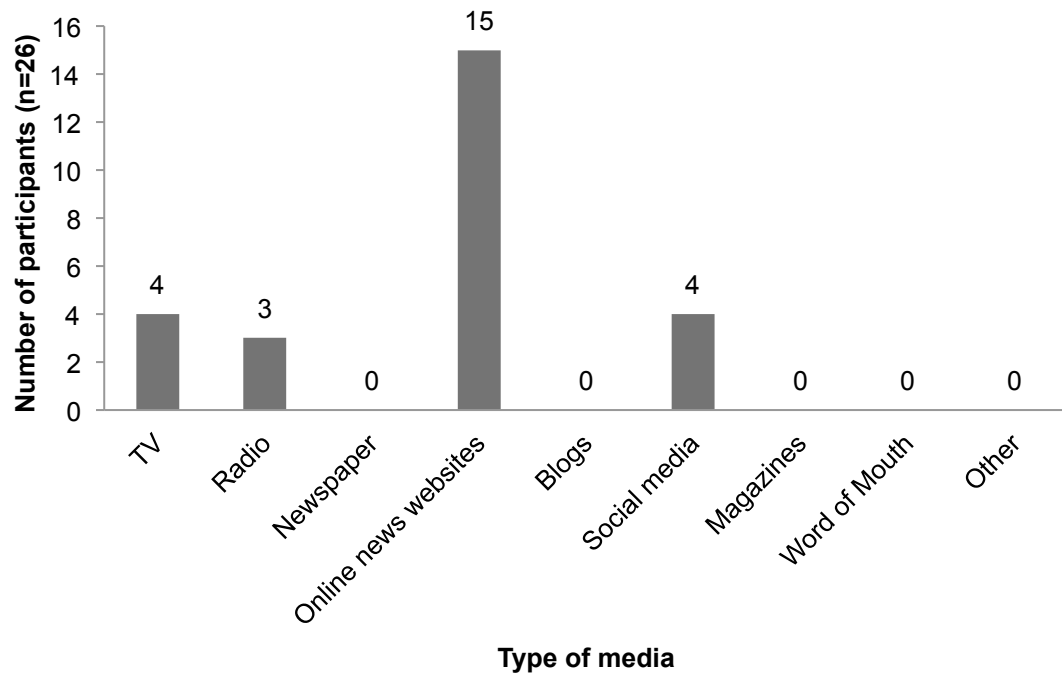
There was great variety in the sources that diarists turn to for news, as participants often combined digital sources with traditional mediums as part of their daily routines. As we may expect, the digital versions of a number of professional media outlets were very popular. Almost every diarist (26) accessed BBC News Online in some form, with "Angela," "Danny," and "Sam" all observing that the BBC was their first port of call for the latest updates on current affairs. The Mail Online, the digital arm of the British newspaper the *Daily Mail,* was also frequently mentioned in the diaries (42 references), albeit in a slightly different context. Both "Christian" (entry 1; 2) and "Marco" (entry 6) found that links to the website were often posted on social media as a reaction to the content itself, and it is this controversy that drives their attention. Others, like "Andrea" and "Joshua," visit the Mail Online for its showbiz coverage, described by "Abbey" as the "sidebar of shame" (entry 5). Rather than consulting the website for hard news, browsing the site was deemed to be a form of procrastination.

A number of diarists also used digital publishers. One such provider was Vice News, an international news organisation that specialises in broadcasting investigative documentaries online. Andrea (entry 11), a university student from the South East, visits the website to maintain an interest in stories that she felt did not receive adequate exposure in more traditional sources; those issues that are "a bit out of the norm." Likewise, "Liz" (entry 9) likes how the site's coverage blends political content with entertainment. Vice News were not the only new media organisation to be used by diarists during the study. Across the sample, entries also reflected on stories published by BuzzFeed (Charlie, entry 11; Louise, entry 12; Mallory, entry 11) and the Huffington Post (Abbey, entry 4; Amy, entry 12; Madeline, entry 1). Although some diarists did visit these sites directly, the majority were accidentally exposed to these digital publishers on social media.

Other participants populated their Facebook news feed and, more commonly, their Twitter feed with niche content by subscribing to updates from activists, journalists, and politicians. Marco, who has Lithuanian heritage, often discussed and re-shared tweets on foreign policy from Rolandas Kacinskas, a Lithuanian diplomat with over 24,000 followers on Twitter (Kacinskas, 2015).[56] Similarly, "Oliver" frequently reflected on Facebook updates from Mark McGowan in his weekly entries, an activist more commonly known as "The Artist Taxi Driver" (McGowan, 2015). In this way, diarists were able to personalise their news consumption through forms of social media.

The changing norms of news consumption online form part of the slacktivist critique, suggesting that users identify with emotive issues that gain traction on social media at the expense of more deserving concerns (H_3). Furthermore, this personalisation corresponds with wider concerns about audience fragmentation in political communication, in which a lack of agreement over what constitutes public issues may threaten societal bonds that are essential to a democracy (Sunstein, 2007: 6).

In order to explore the effects of news personalisation, an analysis was undertaken of the issues included in the weekly diary entries between November 2, 2013, and February 15, 2014. These issues were coded and cumulative values were calculated for all of the active diarists in a given week. These values were then weighted to account for the fluctuation in the number of active diarists from week-to-week. The two most frequently mentioned news items from each week were plotted onto a timeline to demonstrate the relative prominence of news items amongst the sample, as shown in Figure 6.2. A second timeline was created to compare the relative prominence of news

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[56] Follower count correct as of February 12, 2015.

items in the diaries with those in four major British newspapers during the same time period, as illustrated in Figure 6.3.[57] The front pages of the *Daily Mail*, the *Guardian*, the *Sun*, and the *Times* were coded over the same 16-week period and weighted values were calculated to look for evidence of issue fragmentation.[58]

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[57] Please see Appendix B6 for an overview of how I coded the diaries and calculated the weighted values for both timelines.

[58] These four sources were selected following the design offered by Couldry, Livingstone and Markham (2010: 22).

Figure 6.2. Diarist news timeline: 02/11/2013 – 08/02/2014
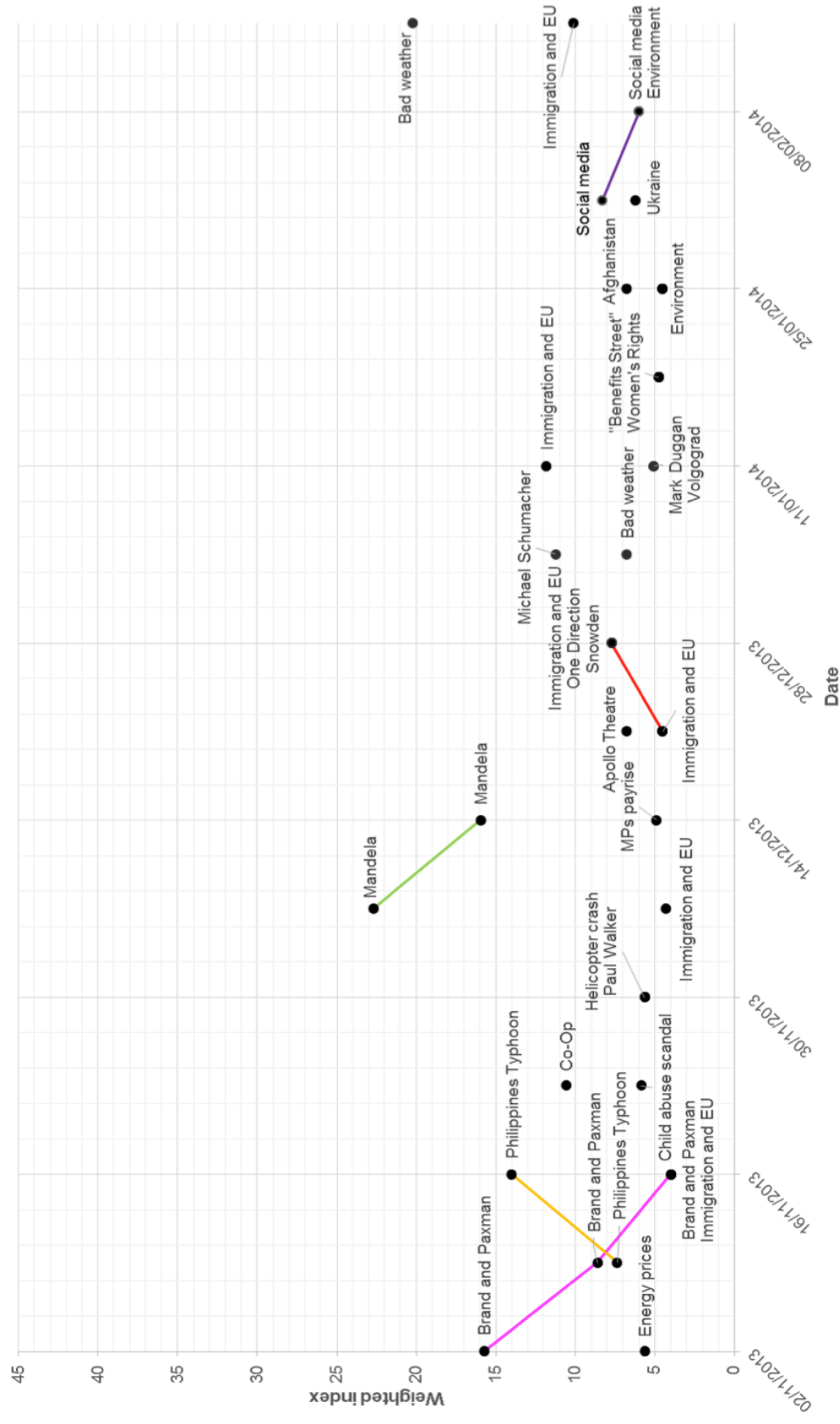
Figure 6.3. Newspaper news timeline: 02/11/2013 - 08/02/2014
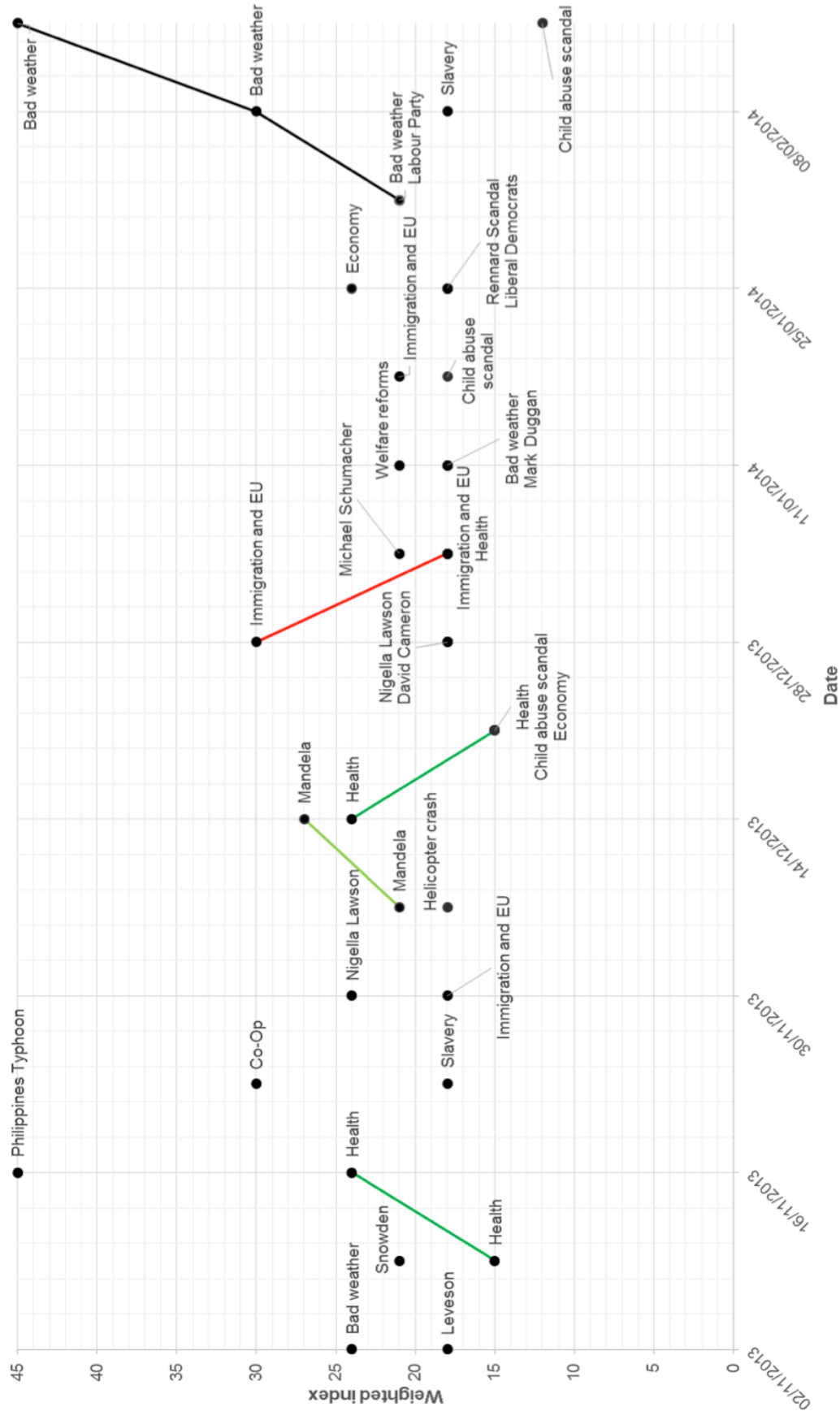
There was some overlap between the two most frequently mentioned issues within the diaries and the front page coverage. For example, in the week ending November 23, the alleged use of illegal drugs by former Co-op bank chairman Paul Flowers was featured most frequently in the diaries (10.57) and on the front pages of the four newspapers (30). Likewise, in the week ending December 4, Michael Schumacher's skiing accident featured prominently in both. However, with only 25 percent of the issues mentioned in the diaries corresponding with those leading the four newspapers over the 16-week period, there was significant deviation.[59] Furthermore, as the comparatively low weighted values on Figure 6.2 illustrate, there was less issue homogeneity in the weekly diary entries than in the press coverage.

Participants would often reflect on those issues that they deemed to be important to them on a personal level. "Simon," a student studying Economics based in the South East, was passionate about the rights of citizens online. He closely followed the leaks from the former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) employee Edward Snowden, relating the revelations of the American government's extensive surveillance programme to his own concerns about online privacy (entry 1; 2; 7; 8). Abbey, a clerical worker based in the East Midlands, focused on news items relating to women's rights, including reflections on abortion law (entry 1), media coverage of rape and sexual assault (entry 4), and a demeaning Facebook page in which users submit provocative photos of women (entry 5). In pursuing these interests, diarists prioritise issues that relate to their own personal political identity.

Does this selective exposure lead to harmful audience fragmentation, or, worse still, political ignorance? This study shows that, despite evidence of nuanced personalisation at the micro-level, there are still moments of collective exposure; certain events triggered attention across the sample. As Figure 6.4 illustrates, four examples of collective exposure can be identified. These news items are as follows: the *Newsnight* interview between the comedian-turned-activist Russell Brand and the journalist Jeremy Paxman; Typhoon Haiyan, the deadliest Philippine typhoon recorded in modern history; the death of Nelson Mandela; and a period of severe weather in Britain in early 2014, in particular the flooding of the River Thames in the South West of England.

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[59] Some of this deviation can be explained by how participants perceived the purpose of the diary project. This is discussed in Chapter 4, section 4.4.2.

Figure 6.4. Diarist news timeline - evidence of collective exposure
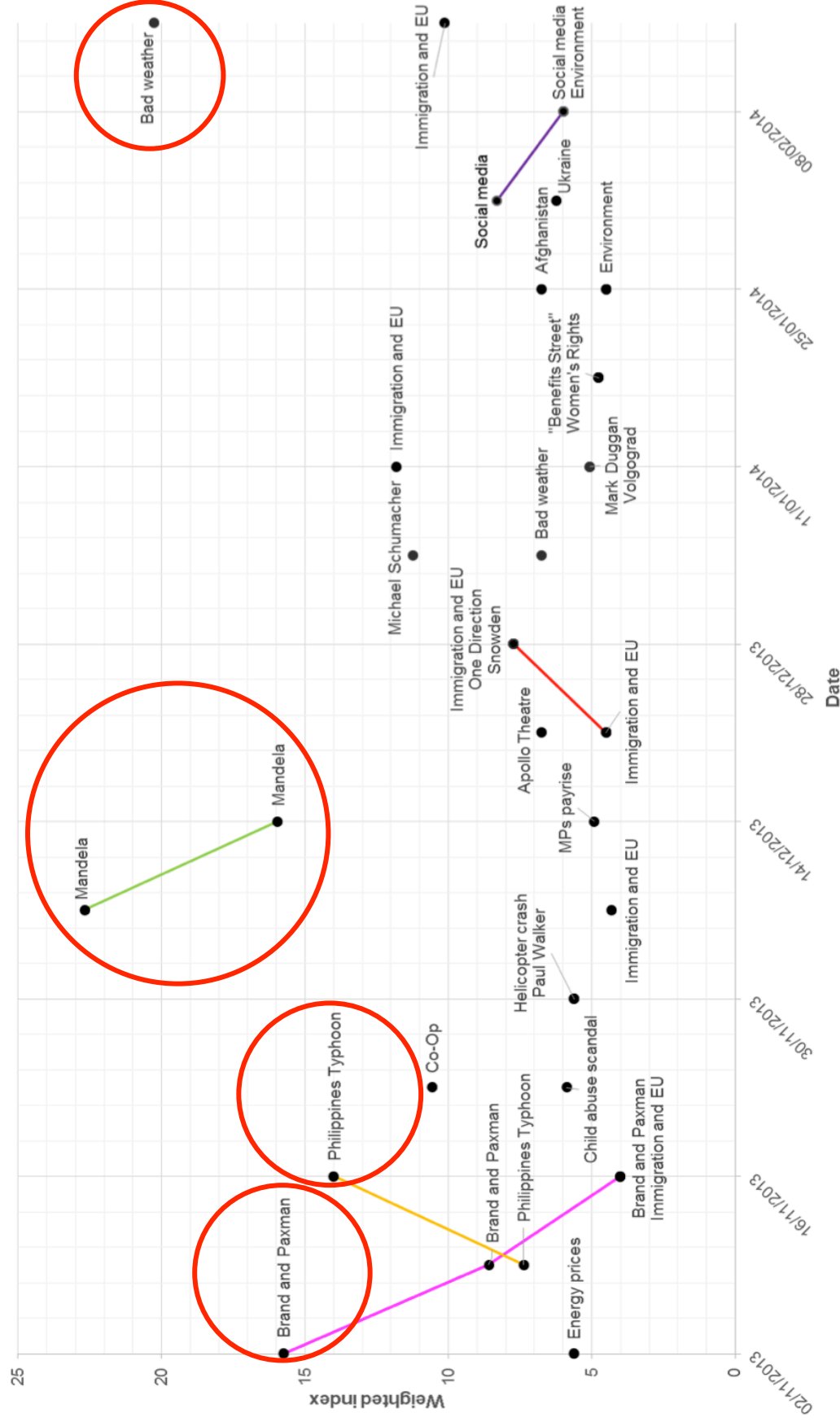
By comparing Figure 6.3 and Figure 6.4 it is evident that three of the four events that triggered collective attention amongst the diarists correlate with the front page news coverage. As such, the fear that social media exacerbates fragmentation seems to be unfounded in this study, as the diarists still share common experiences. Although it could be argued that a survey methodology would be better suited to exploring audience fragmentation, the self-reflection within the diaries provides a basis to investigate how participants envisage and understand these public issues. Rather than simply observing collective exposure, I examine two of these news items in detail to ascertain whether interpretation varies depending on the source of information.

On December 5, 2013, Nelson Mandela, the first democratically elected President of South Africa, died. Given Mandela's imprisonment and subsequent influence on reconciling post-apartheid South Africa, his death was keenly felt around the world. Nelson Mandela's passing was the most discussed topic in this study, as 23 participants mentioned this event at some point during their diary. Interest in this event was sustained by the state funeral held on December 15, 2013, and the subsequent scandal that surrounded the sign language interpreter at the funeral and a "selfie" taken by the President of the United States, Barack Obama, the Prime Minister of Denmark, Helle Thorning-Schmidt, and the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, David Cameron.[60]

As with an event of this nature, diarists first learnt of the news in a number of different ways: "Claudia," "Will" and Danny were informed of the news face-to-face; Andrea, "Charlie," Oliver, Liz, "Matt," and Christian learnt of the news on social media; "Cathy" overheard the news on the radio; Sam watched the breaking coverage on TV; and "Leo" received a message on WhatsApp. Such diversity in communication channels is not new when one factors in the different forms of interpersonal discussion available in past media systems (Norris, 2000). However, the information sources that are consulted *after* this initial point of exposure do illuminate unique behavioural shifts.

After learning of the news at her work's Christmas party, Claudia (entry 6) then consulted BBC News Online and took to Twitter to follow subsequent updates. "Madeline" (entry 8) switched her focus away from online news websites and turned to the ongoing coverage on the BBC News Channel while simultaneously reflecting on the news with her Mum over the phone. Christian (entry 4), who first learnt of Mandela's death on Facebook, immediately referred to a news website by way of verification:

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[60] A "selfie" is a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically taken with a smartphone or other portable device.

The first news I heard of his death was via Facebook. I quickly checked the BBC news website to verify its authenticity, I have seen numerous posts claiming that people have died when they haven't… Shortly after reading about his death on Facebook I received a notification on my iPhone from the BBC app, stating that Nelson Mandela, "the first black president and anti-apartheid icon" had died. I followed the link and watched a short video about his life, his imprisonment, and his achievements. Important to note that I still found out about this event via social media first, the news just slips in!

Charlie (pre-diary interview) expressed a similar sentiment in reference to Twitter: "it's probably where I find out about most things first and then I'll go over and look at it in more detail on another website, another news website." Two themes emerge from these examples. Firstly, users can become exposed to news as a by-product of using Facebook and Twitter, just as they can learn of news accidentally through other real space social settings. Secondly, the routines that diarists use to validate and understand current events are intrinsically personalised, both in terms of the tools used to access information and the level of trust placed in a particular form of media.

Despite this diversity, the way that diarists understand and give meaning to events was remarkably similar irrespective of what form of media they relied upon. For example, for most diarists the events acted as a learning experience regardless of the medium used to access information. Abbey (entry 6) and "Deborah" (entry 8) commented on Mandela's life, and how they weren't aware of the significance of his role in providing democratic rights to the citizens of South Africa. Others, such as Angela (entry 7), Danny (entry 7), and Matt (entry 7), used the event to reflect on the inequalities still rife in South Africa today.

A number of diarists also discussed the way in which death should be treated in mediatised spaces. Angela (entry 9), Cathy (entry 5), and Sam (entry 9) posed questions of the appropriateness of the live TV coverage of Mandela's funeral, citing the need for privacy for his family and loved ones. Others, like Oliver (entry 7), were critical of the public displays of grief by on Facebook. Joshua (entry 8), a recruiter from the East Midlands, complained that people were simply "jumping on the bandwagon" despite lacking any real knowledge of the significance of Mandela's life. Similarly, Abbey (entry 6) felt her networked contacts were posting updates on the service to gain reputational benefits:

It felt a little like a competition as to who could let everyone know that they found out first. I understand its human nature to express sadness when someone dies, but why must people do it so publicly… The way social media is making people attention-hungry oversharers pains me. Live your life for you, not a virtual thumbs up.

Despite diarists reflecting on specific forms of media in relation to Mandela's passing, the substance of their reactions were alike. Therefore, the information source seemingly had little bearing on how participants interpreted the event itself. For all intents and purposes, this event shares the same civic qualities as those that occurred in an era of relative media scarcity.

One event that triggered reflection across the sample but did not correlate with the front page coverage was the interview between Russell Brand and Jeremy Paxman on the BBC current affairs programme *Newsnight*. Undertaken following public interest in Brand's comments on voting in the British political magazine the *New Statesman* (Brand, 2014: 19)*,* the interview marked his first steps into political campaigning. The interview covered a number of topics, most controversially Brand's call for a "revolution" and a rejection of traditional political structures.[61] Unlike the other moments of collective exposure, only the *Guardian* (06/11/2013) featured the interview on their front page during the period of analysis. This lack of press coverage can be partially explained by the fact the interview itself took place prior to the start of this analysis, originally broadcast on October 23, 2013. Even so, the presence of this event across much of the sample over a week after its transmission suggests that this represents a qualitatively different kind of common experience.

This case exemplifies what Chadwick (2013) describes as hybrid media logic, in which older and newer media logics interact and cross-fertilise in unpredictable ways. The momentum of this story was helped by a response to the interview from the actor Robert Webb (2013), who took issue with Brand for actively dissuading young people from voting. However, Facebook and Twitter also played a key role in generating, sustaining, and transforming the controversy over the weeks that followed. As Figure 6.4 indicates, the interview had the longest life-span of any event within the diaries, featuring as one of the two most frequently mentioned news items for three consecutive weeks. It is noteworthy that, of the 13 participants who discussed this news item in their diaries, not a single one watched the interview when it when originally broadcast. Instead, all bar one diarist watched the interview on YouTube, with the video becoming

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[61] The interview can be watched in full here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YR4CseY9pk.

one of the most watched on YouTube in Britain in 2013.[62] "Annabeth" (entry 1), Charlie (entry 1), Christian (entry 1), Leo (entry 3), Madeline (entry 2), and Oliver (entry 1) were all exposed to the video by a networked contact sharing the video on their Facebook news feed. As Oliver (entry 1) observed, "I would not have seen the Brand interview were it not for Facebook." As such, in comparison to the last case study, social media becomes more than just a vehicle for diffusing those issues determined to be on the public agenda by professional news media; Facebook and Twitter can bring alternative issues to collective consciousness. Although the video originated on broadcast television, its purpose was adapted and transformed by those sharing it.

These moments emerge and are sustained, in part, due to the technological affordances and associated discursive norms on Facebook and Twitter. What differentiates this event to those that overlapped with the newspaper coverage was the response of the diarists; six took to Facebook to express their opinions on the subject matter, the largest number to do so in reaction to an event during the project.[63] Annabeth, "Joe," Madeline, Matt, and Oliver all shared or re-shared the YouTube video, as shown in Figure 6.5. "Thomas" took a different approach, posting his criticism of Brand's stance on voting.

The video resulted in wide-ranging reflections within the diaries. A number of participants felt that the interview was significant in shedding light on alternative political attitudes for a wider audience, be that new forms of participation (Madeline, entry 2), objections to party politics (Will, entry 2), or that voter apathy can represent a form of resistance in its own right (Simon, entry 2). Others debated the relative value of Brand's status as a celebrity. Charlie (entry 1) observed that celebrities have a distinctive power to generate interest in politics for those citizens who would not normally engage with political issues, and thus serve an important educative role. By her own admission, Annabeth (entry 1), a student from Sheffield, has little interest in politics, but she also felt compelled to explore the issues raised in the interview. As such, Brand's profile did seem to be an important factor in understanding the widespread interest in this story. As Joe (entry 7) observes, "If I see any stories on him, or anything orientated with his thoughts on politics, I will generally click on it and read." Some diarists were less complimentary. By using terms like revolution without

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[62] As of February 2015, the video has 10,830,442 views. Thomas watched the video on the BBC News website.

[63] Further information on the issues that triggered public and semi-public reactions are included in Table 6.7.

any precision, "Alan" (entry 1) felt Brand was "out of his depth." Christian (entry 1) took issue with his attempt to be both funny and serious at the same time; "I wish he would make a serious point without the need to 'Brandify' and speak so flamboyantly for dramatic effect." Finally, following Robert Webb's rebuttal, a number of diarists took to Facebook to debate the relative merits of voting. Thomas offered a robust defence (entry 1), while Oliver (entry 2) offered a critique of what he felt was an outdated form of democratic engagement.

Figure 6.5. Facebook posts from diarists reflecting on Russell Brand's interview on *Newsnight*, 2013

Note: Any information that could be used to identify the participants in this study has been removed.

In this way, this case study reflects Bennett's (2008) actualizing logic, as the lines between consumption and production become blurred; diarists moved seamlessly between watching the interview and moments of self-expression. However, as I will illustrate in the next section, these expressive behaviours were not representative of the general habits of the Facebook and Twitter users in this study.

These findings suggest that the diarists balance individually driven news consumption with an awareness of news and current affairs more generally, as moments of collective exposure still occur. This personalisation did not correlate with the degree to which a participant uses Facebook and/or Twitter, or any kind of media preferences, but was illustrative of a wider attitudinal trend (Dalton, 2008; Giddens, 1991; Norris, 2011). Even "Arnold", one of the two diarists who did not use either service, still offered highly personalised entries, relating current affairs to his involvement with a local community group. As Table 6.1 illustrates, personalisation was evident across

much of the sample. Those who did not personalise their entries tended to offer comment on those news stories that featured in professional news media.

Table 6.1. Evidence of personalisation within the diaries

Pseudonym	Evidence of personalisation	Personal orientation
Leo	Yes	Banking and financial (work)
Claudia	Yes	Education (work)
Madeline	Yes	Health; Ukraine (diaspora)
Angela	Yes	Charity sector (work)
Sam	No	N/A
Will	Yes	Technology (work)
Deborah	Yes	Banking and financial (work); Ukraine (diaspora)
Joshua	No	N/A
Charlie	Yes	Environment (issue-based)
Annabeth	Yes	Issues relating to university course (work)
Louise	Yes	China (diaspora); issues relating to university course (work)
Danny	Yes	Banking and financial (work)
Oliver	Yes	Activism (issue-based)
Joe	Yes	University course (work)
Abbey	Yes	Environment (issue-based); women's rights (issue-based)
Liz	Yes	Human rights (issue-based)
Thomas	No	N/A
Zoey	Yes	Charity sector (work); welfare (issue-based)
Andrea	Yes	Issues relating to university course (work)
Marco	Yes	Lithuania (diaspora); politics in third spaces (music; TV; video games)
Matt	Yes	Ideological orientation (socialism)
Mallory	Yes	Denmark (diaspora); Environment (issue-based)
Arnold	Yes	Community group (group-based)
Simon	Yes	Human rights (issue-based); Romania (diaspora)
Cathy	Yes	Local government (work)
Amy	Yes	Charity sector (work)

As Tewksbury and Rittenberg (2012: 161) highlight, this is not a new phenomenon; individuals have seemingly always brought their own sentiments to news consumption, but what has changed is their capacity to select and filter content.

This suggests that there are two types of personalisation at work. Table 6.2 shows the frequency of mentions for terms that relate to political parties and key parliamentary figures. Not one of these terms, which many would traditionally associate with politics, featured within the 100 most frequently used terms in the diaries. For instance, Russell Brand had more mentions (73) than the Coalition Government (65). This is surprising given the remit of this research. It illustrates the issue fragmentation evident across the sample. Diarists personalised their news consumption around those issues that relate to their personal identity. Secondly, there was evidence of a personal orientation to current affairs, in which participants commented on popular news items through a personalised frame of reference. As Table 6.2 shows, the frequency of mentions of the Coalition Government, David Cameron, and the Labour Party were relatively high. This was because participants would frame discussions of policy, or proposed policy in the case of the Labour Party, through a personal frame of reference. I argue this is not narcissistic, as considering one's own personal circumstances often acted as the starting point for much broader political reflection.

Table 6.2. Word frequency table - mentions of political parties and key parliamentary figures in the diaries

Term	Search terms	Frequency
Coalition	"Coalition"; "Government"	65
David Cameron	"Cameron"; "PM"; "Prime"	47
Labour Party	"Labour"	29
Ed Miliband	"Ed"; "Miliband"; "Milliband"	20
Nigel Farage	"Farage"	13
UK Independence Party (UKIP)	"UKIP"	11
Conservative Party	"Conservative"; "Tories"; "Torys"	8
Ed Balls	"Balls"	7
George Osborne	"George"; "Osborne"; "Chancellor"	6
Liberal Democrats	"Liberal"; "Dems"	5
Michael Gove	"Gove"	5
Nick Clegg	"Clegg"; "Cleggy"; "Nick"	5
Green Party	"Green"	0

Note: All words had a minimum of three letters.

This personalisation, coupled with the four examples of collective exposure, is indicative of a passive form of citizenship. As "Zoey's" (pre-diary interview) quote illustrates, the participants in this study were watchful, scanning political information across different mediums with substantive interest triggered by certain events; "I like celebrity news and things like that, but then there will be a news story that will really

make me think." Therefore, although social media tools enable personalised forms of news consumption, collective experiences still occur.

6.2 Connection and Expression: A Typology of Citizen Roles in Social Media Environments

The slacktivist critique is based on an assumed attitudinal logic. It is formed on the subjective interpretation of the actions of others, where the depth of one's engagement is based on the perceived difficulty of the act itself. This represents a form of technological determinism, as the characteristics of the technology shape political behaviour, rather than the intentions of the user. The following section explores how and why diarists use Facebook and Twitter for political connection and self-expression. While a small minority of participants do reflect the actualizing logic outlined by Bennett (2008), the majority of diarists were much more cautious than I predicted in Chapter 3. Many were unwilling to express themselves online unless personally compelled to. These citizens are conscious of their digital identity as they move between public, semi-public, and private spaces. As a result, I argue that the slacktivist critique fails to encapsulate the nuanced motivations that underpin online forms of participation. In doing so, this chapter outlines a that distinguishes between the different attitudinal and behavioural traits at the individual level.

These conclusions are not immediately evident at first glance. By coding all public and semi-public posts made by those diarists who use Facebook and Twitter over the duration of the project, the initial evidence seemed to support the existence of a self-expressive logic.[64] As Table 6.3 shows, almost a quarter of all posts on Facebook (135 posts) had a political orientation, while politics was the third most frequently mentioned topic within the Twitter dataset (157 posts).

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[64] Please see Appendix B8 for further details on how I collected the data, and Appendix B9 for the coding framework used.

Table 6.3. Volume of posts on Facebook and Twitter by topic

	Facebook		Twitter	
	Frequency	**%** **(*n*=560)**	**Frequency**	**%** **(*n*=1006)**
01 Personal	257	45.89	406	40.36
02 Humour	115	20.54	301	29.92
03 Music	67	11.96	117	11.63
04 Film	11	1.96	34	3.38
05 TV	27	4.82	80	7.95
06 Technology and video games	18	3.21	65	6.46
07 Other visual arts	8	1.43	11	1.09
08 Books and literature	9	1.61	15	1.49
09 Sports and exercise	22	3.93	41	4.08
10 Celebrity and gossip	26	4.64	90	8.95
11 Travel	50	8.93	22	2.19
12 Food and drink	40	7.14	95	9.44
13 Retail and commerce	19	3.39	60	5.96
14 Fashion	3	0.54	21	2.09
15 Religion and faith	4	0.71	32	3.18
16 Science and space	8	1.43	10	0.99
17 Environment	9	1.61	12	1.19
18 Animals and pets	7	1.25	28	2.78
19 Vehicles	6	1.07	32	3.18
20 Crime	7	1.25	18	1.79
21 Social media	5	0.89	22	2.19
22 Charity and social causes	39	6.96	14	1.39
23 Current events and news	90	16.07	125	12.43
24 Politics	135	24.11	157	15.61
25 Other	2	0.36	5	0.50
26 Health	13	2.32	25	2.49
27 Weather	3	0.54	24	2.39
28 Education	35	6.25	90	8.95

Note: Frequency based of manual coding. Posts may feature multiple codes.

However, although the total number of politically oriented posts seems to suggest a politically active sample when compared to other subject matter, these posts were shared by a small number of participants. As Table 6.4 illustrates, a handful of diarists were responsible for a significant proportion of these updates.

Table 6.4. Diarists who posted political content on Facebook and Twitter

Pseudonym	Frequency	%
	Facebook (*n*=135)	
Oliver	58	**78.38**
Joe	18	26.47
Thomas	14	35.00
Madeline	11	9.48
Matt	10	**90.91**
Simon	10	22.22
Deborah	3	6.52
Liz	3	27.27
Mallory	3	*30.00*
Marco	2	13.33
Annabeth	1	2.08
Joshua	1	*20.00*
Zoey	1	2.78
	Twitter (*n*=157)	
Joe	90	37.50
Marco	27	17.76
Madeline	21	32.81
Zoey	10	3.68
Abbey	2	*20.00*
Liz	2	12.50
Simon	2	*66.67*
Annabeth	1	0.54
Joshua	1	1.75
Will	1	*100.00*

Note: See Appendix B.11 for details of those diarists that did not post any political material. Percentages are italicised to highlight a total post count of less than 10. Percentages in bold signify diarists for whom over 50 percent of their updates included code 24: Politics and political events.

Matt and Oliver stand out from Table 6.4, as they were the only diarists to use social media primarily for political expression and discussion. Between them, they accounted for 43 percent of the political posts on Facebook during the diary period. They are representative of the actualizing citizen framework, in that they use Facebook to share personally expressive political content (Bennett, 2008; Bennett, Wells and Freelon, 2011: 840). Moreover, their posts often question the coverage of professional news media (Bennett, 2008: 14). However, they also display a unique characteristic that differentiates them from Bennett's citizen type. As Oliver's (pre-diary interview) quote illustrates, they wish to stimulate learning and further discussion by intentionally provoking others:

> I use it purely and solely for finding out information about political matters, sharing information on political matters, and rubbing it in people's faces. I know that people don't like it but that's exactly why I do it… the more issues that I create for my network on Facebook, in terms of how do they react to me and how do they engage with me, the better, because it's meant to be provocative.

Both Matt and Oliver are examples of what I describe as "civic instigators," citizens who actively share political material on social media and express their opinion by way of challenging others. For example, Matt shared a link to a BBC News article on the government's decision to sell public shares in the Royal Mail. He offered a robust criticism of this decision, arguing that more nationalisation was needed rather than less. Likewise, Oliver shared a post from the activist group UK Uncut, which criticised the Chancellor, George Osborne MP, for failing to ensure that Vodafone fulfilled their tax obligations. Oliver was highly critical of this, juxtaposing it with looming cuts in government spending. Both posts triggered a reaction from their networked contacts, as others contested their opinions. This provocation is not done with any ill intent but as a way of generating attention, awareness, and understanding for political issues that they deem to be important. Ultimately, they feel that their actions fulfil an educative function (Matt; Oliver pre-diary interview).

Madeline, a 25-year-old higher education professional, shared a number of similar behavioural traits. She was also an active user of Facebook and Twitter, contributing 32 posts with a political orientation in total. She also aims to inform her family, friends and other networked contacts through her use of both social networking sites:

> I think if you share something that's political then you're hoping that people who wouldn't know about it might see it, say people that I went to school with, worked with, or family members, those that aren't particularly politically engaged. I only really share things that are on an important subject. For example, something on feminism that my mum might not see but I know that she would be interested in… So it is kind of like, not to sound snobbish or bigheaded but, educating others.
>
> (Madeline, pre-diary interview)

However, she differed from Matt and Oliver as she would refrain from offering her opinion when posting updates, only doing so when personally compelled to by the content of the issue. In this way Madeline reflects what I characterise as a "contributor," a user who shares political material but does so without including any explicit personal

opinions.[65] Contributors often act on the basis of a different attitudinal logic. Madeline felt a certain sense of gratification when informing others, but she also wanted to be seen as a politically articulate individual (Gantz and Trenholm, 1979).

Joe, a student from the South East, was responsible for the largest volume of political updates in total, sharing 108 posts across Facebook (18) and Twitter (90). Like Madeline, he refrained from explicit forms of expression on Facebook. This reluctance to voice one's opinion stems from his perception of his audience. Joe (entry 8) feels that his networked contacts do not take political discussion seriously:

> Not everyone on Facebook is politicised. I think that if I wrote my political thoughts on it I would get stupid comments that aren't worth the light of day… In terms of my friends, I have witnessed a lot of people being vilified for their thoughts on specific issues.

Joe mitigates these fears by sharing content that is politically oriented but also has an overtly humorous frame. On Twitter he would frequently combine political comments with trending topics. By using humour, Joe felt he could entertain his audience while also making a more meaningful point. For example he used the hashtag #JLSMemories, created by fans of the British pop group JLS in the wake of their breakup, to question the impact of austerity on society. Furthermore, he used the hashtag #AskKingslandRoad, a question-and-answer session with the band Kingsland Road, to discuss immigration policy in Britain. As such, Joe's behaviour is akin to that of a contributor as he shares civically relevant material, not by way of explicit self-expression, but in an attempt to entertain his friends.

Contributors also reflect many of the characteristics of the actualizing citizen framework (Bennett, 2008). For instance, contributors, like civic instigators, were sometimes distrustful of newspapers and broadcast media news. A number of diarists used Facebook and Twitter to question the content and form of their coverage (Bennett, Freelon and Wells, 2011: 840). As Figure 6.6 illustrates, Oliver, Madeline, and Marco either posted or shared items that questioned the objectivity of British news media, including the BBC, the *Daily Express*, and the *Daily Mail*.

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[65] Contributors differ from civic instigators as their posts do not include an explicit statement of one's personal opinion. However, a contributor's attitudes towards an issue may be understood implicitly by the nature of the content shared.

Figure 6.6. Facebook posts from diarists illustrating mediatisation

These diarists also took part in new protest repertoires during the study; Oliver (entry 7) was involved in an occupation of his university's student union, Madeline (entry 4) maintained a blog to raise awareness of civic and political issues, and Joe (entry 11) took to Twitter to lobby a company to reduce unfair costs. There is also an implicit understanding of the agenda-setting influence that they, as citizens, can wield using social media (Chadwick, 2012). With this in mind, these diarists are representative of a new form of digitally enabled citizen (Papacharissi, 2010: 19).

They were, however, in the minority. As Will's (pre-diary interview) quote alludes to, the majority of diarists very rarely discussed politics in public or semi-public spaces online:

> I rarely post… I probably post, like, once every three months or something, if that. Maybe once every six months. I'm a lurker.

Some participants, like Alan and Leo, did not post anything publicly during the study, despite their diary entries indicating that they use social media on a daily basis. They are lurkers, regularly observing but rarely contributing, if ever. Despite the fact that past research has shown that the majority of internet users reflect the characteristics of lurkers, and that these attributes are beneficial to the emergence and development of online communities, the term invariably has negative connotations (Crawford, 2011: 63; Nonnecke and Preece, 2003). Crawford (2011: 64) presents listening as an alternative:

Once the activities defined as lurking are understood as forms of listening, they shift from being vacant and empty figurations to being active and receptive processes... It reflects the fact that everyone moves between the states of listening and commenting online; *both are necessary and both are forms of participation.* [Emphasis in original]

The majority of the participants in this study reflect what I describe as "listeners," citizens who use Facebook and Twitter to learn about news and political matters, either purposefully or as a by-product of their day-to-day use, but rarely engage in any form of public-political expression when using these tools.

Prior to applying this terminology to this study, it is necessary to reflect on how the process of listening differs on Facebook and Twitter as opposed to through face-to-face interactions. In a real space exchange, one is expected to listen attentively to each and every word; to not do so would be deemed socially unacceptable. However, social media users do not engage with each and every post, they are not listening in this conventional sense. Rather, they are "background listening," "allowing messages to come and go, and occasionally 'tuning in' and responding" (Crawford, 2011: 68). This dynamic of tuning in is precisely what Will (entry 8), an IT consultant from London, observed when reflecting on political videos that are posted on Facebook, as different messages compete for our attention in a state of informational exuberance (Chadwick, 2009; 2012):

If I don't get some instant gratification from it [a video posted on Facebook], then 1 or 2 minutes is the usual amount of time I'm prepared to waste before moving on.

This process of filtering and sifting through content represents a meaningful form of agency, suggesting that listening can be a means of political participation in its own right. Therefore, Crawford (2011: 73) encourages scholarly research to move beyond the reification of "voice," digital expression that we can easily observe, and instead use the theoretical device of listening to understand communication flows in and from spaces such as Facebook and Twitter.

Given the anxieties some feel towards any form of digital interaction, and the specific cognitive load that accompanies political discussion, this categorisation has two different conditions. There are some diarists who do not seem to be so-called listeners. For instance, Zoey (308 posts) and Annabeth (232 posts) were two of the most expressive users during the diary period, as shown in Figure 6.7. They are instead

reflective of what I describe as "active listeners," those who post content and contribute to discussion on social networking sites but do not post political material with the same degree of regularity.

Figure 6.7. Total number of public posts on Facebook and Twitter during the diary period
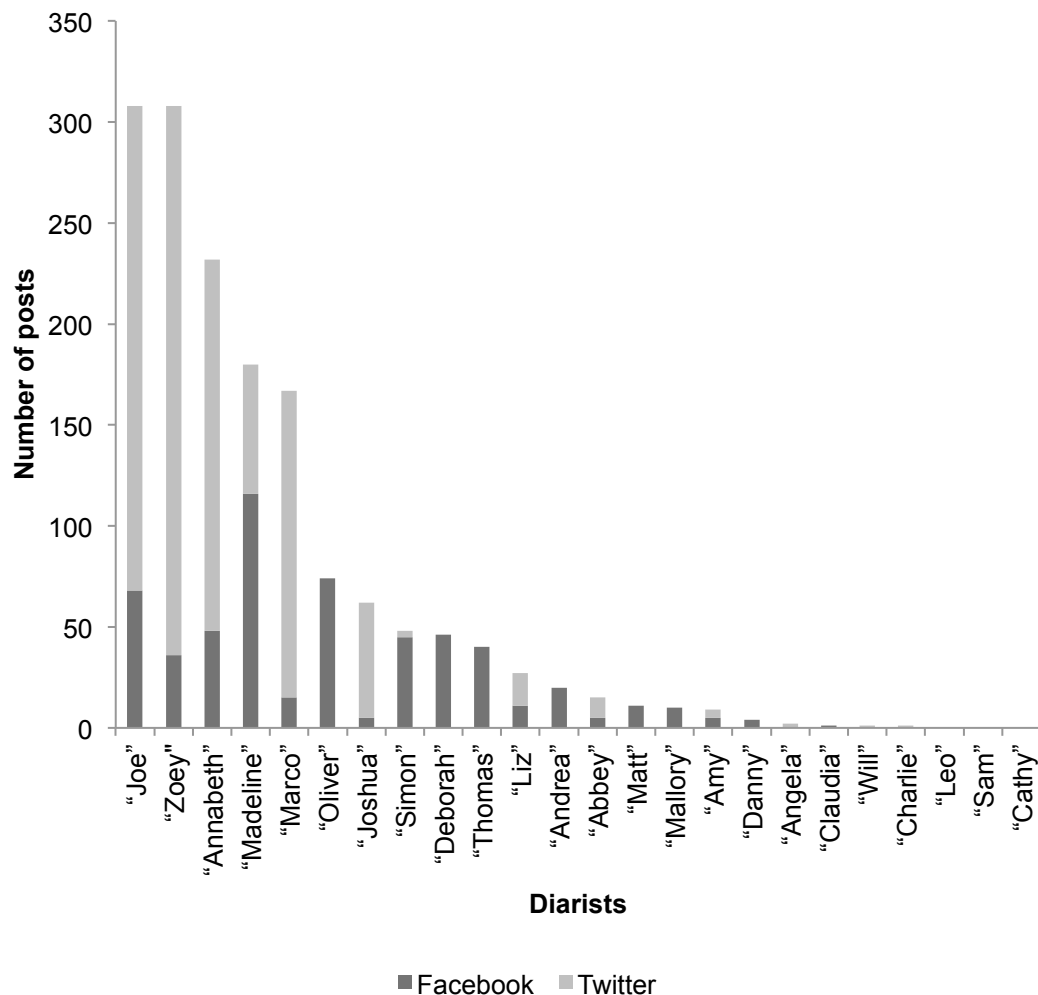
Other participants rarely posted any form of public or semi-public update.[66] These diarists reflect "passive listeners," users who do not post any content regardless of the subject matter. Table 6.5 shows the total number of posts from those diarists who did not share any public-political updates during the study. Despite their lack of activity,

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[66] Participants did not provide access to the activity log as part of this research. As a result, no likes and comments made by diarists were captured. This is problematic given that the Pew Research Center found that Facebook users frequently engage with content posted by other users but often don't change their own status; 25 percent of those surveyed claimed that they never change or update their own Facebook status, as opposed to 44 percent who like posts, 31 percent who comment on posts, and 19 percent who send private messages on a daily basis (Smith, 2014). Therefore, the listener role is undoubtedly more complex and diverse than proposed in this thesis.

the diary entries suggest that these participants still use social media on a regular, often daily, basis. Sam (entry 10), a healthcare worker in the East Midlands, used Twitter to follow the accusations of drug abuse and financial impropriety involving the celebrity-chef Nigella Lawson. "Amy" (entry 9) learnt of the debates surrounding the death of Mark Duggan, who was shot and killed by police in London in 2011, through a discussion on her Facebook news feed. Therefore, these passive listeners are often interested in current affairs, but they are averse to sharing their opinions in such a public space. Their quiet, discrete but focused behaviour challenges the slacktivist critique in its emphasis on observable political behaviour, ignoring how citizens listen and benefit from the contributions of others.

Table 6.5. Listeners: Total number of posts on Facebook and Twitter

Diarist	*n*
Andrea	20
Danny	4
Amy	3
Christian	3
Angela	2
Claudia	1
Charlie	1
Leo	0
Sam	0
Cathy	0

Note: These diarists did not post a political update on either Facebook or Twitter during the course of the diary period.

The final category refers to those citizens that reflect an "apathetic" citizen role. I use the term apathy to refer to those citizens who have no interest in politics, broadly defined, actively refusing to take part in any form of participation.[67] I hypothesise that these users deliberately ignore posts on social media that have a political orientation. However, no conclusions can be drawn on this citizen role as no diarist displayed these characteristics in this study. This is a result of the sampling frame used in this study, as participants were recruited who had some degree of political interest (see Appendix B1). I do not use apathy to refer to those citizens who are disillusioned with the traditional mechanisms of institutional politics, such as political parties or voting, as it

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[67] This does not mean that these citizens are disengaged, as silence can be a political act in its own right.

is possible to be an active citizen and still hold these views. For example, there were civic instigators (Oliver), contributors (Marco), and listeners (Charlie) in this study who were all disenchanted with conventional forms of politics.

Together, these four categories make up the typology of citizen roles in social media environments. The differences between these user types can be illustrated by making comparisons between them. Table 6.6 shows the subject matter of public posts on Facebook and Twitter for five diarists: two civic instigators, Matt and Oliver; one contributor, Madeline; and two active listeners, Zoey and Annabeth. This comparison exemplifies the tendencies of the different citizen roles. For instance, 58 of Oliver's 74 posts were political, as opposed to 11 of Zoey's 308 contributions. A similar trend can also be illustrated by contrasting the volume of posts on current affairs, as 12 percent of Madeline's updates referred to the news as opposed to just 3 percent of Annabeth's. As such, active listeners post updates on other topics. Over half of Annabeth's contributions were personal (134 posts), as she often reflected on her first year of university. Meanwhile Zoey touched upon a range of different subjects, from celebrity gossip (33 posts) to food and drink (34 posts).

Table 6.6. Civic instigators, contributors and listeners: Volume of posts by topic on Facebook and Twitter

| | Civic instigator | | | | Contributor | | | | Listener (Active) | | | |
| | Oliver | | Matt | | Madeline | | Zoey | | Annabeth | |
	Frequency	% (n=74)	Frequency	% (n=11)	Frequency	% (n=180)	Frequency	% (n=308)	Frequency	% (n=232)
01 Personal	9	12.16	5	45.45	103	57.22	122	39.61	134	57.76
02 Humour	10	13.51	2	18.18	29	16.11	98	31.82	78	33.62
03 Music	6	8.11	1	9.09	12	6.67	34	11.04	9	3.88
04 Film	1	1.35	0	0.00	3	1.67	7	2.27	13	5.60
05 TV	2	2.70	1	9.09	13	7.22	9	2.92	19	8.19
06 Technology and video games	3	4.05	0	0.00	8	4.44	10	3.25	9	3.88
07 Other visual arts	0	0.00	0	0.00	1	0.56	2	0.65	1	0.43
08 Books and literature	1	1.35	4	36.36	8	4.44	2	0.65	2	0.86
09 Sports and exercise	0	0.00	0	0.00	4	2.22	13	4.22	1	0.43
10 Celebrity and gossip	5	6.76	1	9.09	10	5.56	33	10.71	13	5.60
11 Travel	0	0.00	0	0.00	31	17.22	3	0.97	6	2.59
12 Food and drink	1	1.35	0	0.00	13	7.22	34	11.04	28	12.07
13 Retail and commerce (i.e. shopping)	5	6.76	0	0.00	7	3.89	10	3.25	11	4.74
14 Fashion	0	0.00	0	0.00	2	1.11	8	2.60	9	3.88
15 Religion and faith	2	2.70	0	0.00	2	1.11	24	7.79	2	0.86

Table 6.6 Civic instigators, contributors and listeners: Volume of posts by topic on Facebook and Twitter (Cont'd.)

| | Civic instigator | | | | Contributor | | | | Listener (Active) | |
| | Oliver | | Matt | | Madeline | | Zoey | | Annabeth | |
	Frequency	% (*n*=74)	Frequency	% (*n*=11)	Frequency	% (*n*=180)	Frequency	% (*n*=308)	Frequency	% (*n*=232)
16 Science and space	1	1.35	0	0.00	0	0.00	4	1.30	1	0.43
17 Environment	4	5.41	0	0.00	0	0.00	5	1.62	1	0.43
18 Animals and pets	1	1.35	0	0.00	2	1.11	14	4.55	5	2.16
19 Vehicles	0	0.00	0	0.00	4	2.22	3	0.97	7	3.02
20 Crime	1	1.35	0	0.00	1	0.56	5	1.62	1	0.43
21 Social media	1	1.35	0	0.00	5	2.78	7	2.27	0	0.00
22 Charity and social causes	4	5.41	0	0.00	18	10.00	3	0.97	0	0.00
23 Current events and news	31	41.89	4	36.36	22	12.22	20	6.49	7	3.02
24 Politics	58	78.38	10	90.91	32	17.78	11	3.57	2	0.86
25 Other	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	1	0.43
26 Health	3	4.05	0	0.00	7	3.89	18	5.84	1	0.43
27 Weather	0	0.00	0	0.00	3	1.67	12	3.90	1	0.43
28 Education	9	12.16	0	0.00	12	6.67	4	1.30	18	7.76

The absence of a self-expressive logic for those diarists categorised as contributors and listeners challenges the expected findings of this thesis, that social networking sites foster political conversation and communication by virtue of their design (EF$_2$; EF$_3$). Although diarists tailor news consumption around their personal interests using Facebook and Twitter, this did not lead to the use of these platforms for personal expression and discursive engagement. The typology of citizen roles in social media environments raises a number of questions over the attitudinal logics that underpin these different behavioural traits.

Firstly, why do passive listeners use Facebook and Twitter, if not for self-expression and conversation? As Figure 6.8 illustrates, over half of those involved (17) were either "very busy" or "busy" for the duration of the diaries. Many participants found difficulty in balancing the competing demands on their time, be they professional responsibilities (Liz, entry 7; Sam, entry 1), family commitments (Alan, entry 2), or leisure activities (Joshua, entry 9). Furthermore, the anxieties created by this perceived lack of time can further restrict temporal autonomy. Cathy (pre-diary interview), who held a management position at a charity in the Midlands, observed how she would often stress about deadlines at work when she was trying to unwind. These time pressures can make remaining informed difficult. As a result, listeners use social media as an informational shortcut, a process in which communication can reduce the access costs associated with finding news and politically relevant information. As Amy (pre-diary interview) notes, "I just see it as a quick way of finding out about news for people who don't have enough time." This is not a new phenomenon; citizens have long been using informational shortcuts. Just as Arnold (entry 1), Cathy (entry 1), and Sam (entry 7) used the radio to learn about current affairs while undertaking other activities, others, like Abbey (week 3) and Simon (week 4), used social media as a bridge to political information. These informational shortcuts on social media are beneficial across the typology. For those listeners who have lower levels of political interest, social networking sites can provide some awareness of current affairs, something that Alan (entry 2) and Angela (entry 8; 9) argued was vital given the social costs of not being informed. Likewise, social media can provide a sense of ongoing public concerns for those civic instigators with specific issue interests. However, as the first section of this chapter shows, diarists do not depend on these sources in isolation. They serve a specific function as part of a repertoire of media sources.

Figure 6.8. Thinking back to the period of time when you were completing your diary, what sort of time was it for you?
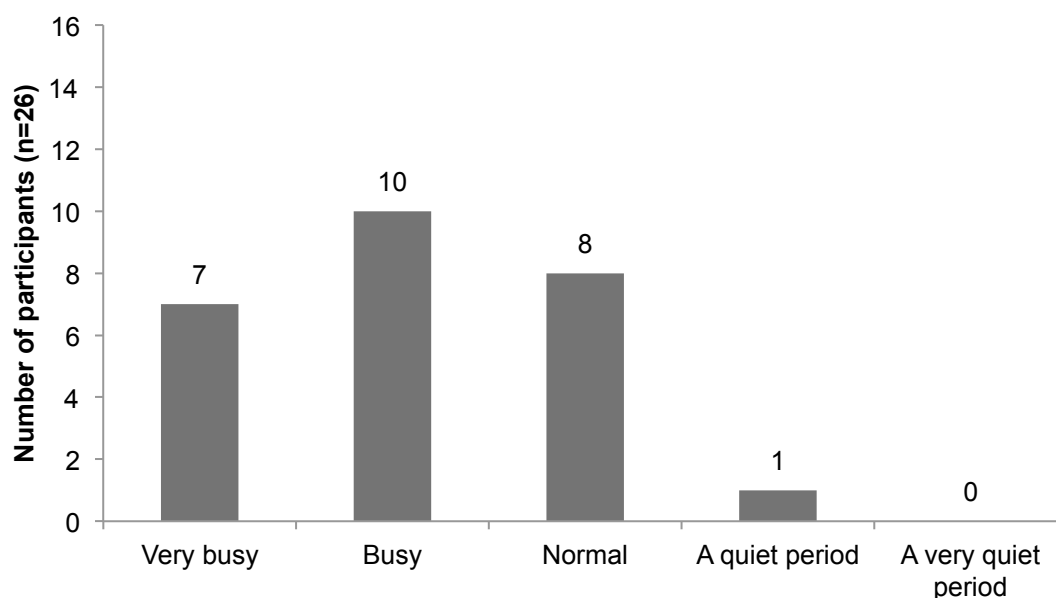
Secondly, if listeners are interested and willing consumers of news and current affairs, why do they refrain from contributing to discussion online? A number of diarists felt apprehensive about how they would be judged by other networked contacts. For example, Amy (pre-diary interview) had been deterred by the tense conversations she had seen on her news feed. Likewise, Christian (entry 5) felt that other users were quick to get abusive if they disagreed with your posts, referring to a particularly unkind comment thread in reference to George Osborne MP. Listeners are acutely aware of the real and imagined audience, mindful of the damage that could be caused to their reputation by a wayward comment. Some of this anxiety can be explained by the typology offered, as diarists associate political discussion on social media with the characteristics of civic instigators. Those who do take part tend to do so vociferously, as Andrea (pre-diary interview) notes, "it is very ranty and it can be a bit cringey." This is something Christian (entry 3) observed during a debate over the conduct of cyclists in London:

> I did not comment on this thread, as I never do, but read each new comment with intrigue. What bothers me about Facebook arguments is that everyone thinks they are right about whatever point they are making. I just want to say, it is possible to have an argument where you can see both sides!

Joshua (entry 12) was on the receiving end of such insults from other outraged users when he commented on a Facebook page, initially set up for local gossip, to intervene in

a discussion on immigration that he deemed to be racist. As such, listeners feel alienated by the aggressive manner in which these polarised discussions are conducted.

The adversarial nature of political conversation, coupled with uncertainty over the reach and potential implications of a public or semi-public post, give rise to forms of social anxiety when using Facebook and Twitter. As Zoey (pre-diary interview) observes, self-expression on social networking sites requires self-confidence, or at least confidence in your beliefs. Oliver, the participant most politically active on Facebook, demonstrates how forms of public expression can fuel these social anxieties. In his second entry Oliver noted his suspicions that some of his networked contacts on Facebook had unsubscribed from his posts as a result of his politically charged "rants." This led him to question his approach, as he felt that his "facetious, alarmist, and sometimes vulgar sentiments" may lead to fewer people engaging with him (Oliver, entry 4). This conflict between Oliver's (entry 6) desire to voice his opinions and his apprehension over the social implications of his communication left him in a difficult predicament:

> It annoys me that Facebook is used for short trivial interaction by my network. But what can I do? Either accept that and pander to it, or continue to challenge that form of engagement. But if I challenge people I risk further isolating myself from others in my network.

While Oliver ultimately continued to express his views on Facebook, regardless of the reactions that he may face, these inhibitions are key to understanding why listeners are reluctant to use these platforms to air their views.

This does not mean that listeners never post political material on Facebook and Twitter. As Table 6.4 shows, 15 participants shared political content at some point during the study. However, for many diarists these posts were low in volume when compared to their contributions on other topics. Seemingly, a public or semi-public form of political expression represents a qualitatively different experience. I argue that the reputational logic that is central to the slacktivist critique (H_3), in which users act on the basis of a desired image that they wish to portray to their network, works in reverse; users are impeded by a fear of social repercussions and avoid certain forms of expression online by way of managing their identity across public and semi-public spaces. Listeners, like Liz (entry 12) and Zoey (pre-diary interview), fear that they do not know enough about political topics to be able to hold a discussion within this volatile environment. In this way, listeners often only feel comfortable expressing themselves when they possess a comprehensive understanding of an issue.

Intuitively, these topics tend to be closely tied to an individual's private interests and personal circumstances. This personalisation can come in a number of forms. Zoey, who works for a charity in the Midlands, focused on her professional interests, raising awareness of issues relating to mental health care. Deborah, a banking professional from Yorkshire, shared three politically oriented posts that were based on her identification with the Ukrainian diaspora. Abbey used Twitter to share two tweets about threats to women's rights across the globe, an issue that she was evidently passionate about given the content of her weekly entries (entry 1; 3; 5; 7; 11; pre-diary interview). While the lack of posts on their public profiles during the study may suggest that these participants are apathetic or disengaged, the diary entries show evidence of attentive and articulate citizens who are activated into online forms of public participation on the basis of their personal interests.

This cognitive load challenges the premise that digital forms of engagement are effortless and instinctive, undertaken without any real consideration of their meaning or democratic value. By contextualising social media use with reflective diaries over a period of three months, it is possible to identify and understand the triggers for these moments of self-expression and digital micro-activism. For listeners, conscious of their audience and how they might perceive their character, a click or a status-update can be a high-threshold behaviour. Publicly voicing one's political opinions can require a great deal of consideration, time, and effort. For instance, Will (entry 12) took part in question and answer session with Edward Snowden on Twitter. While this may seem like a relatively innocuous contribution, this 125-character tweet was carefully deliberated over. As such, the low-effort nature of such actions masquerade these complex cognitive processes.

This trend is reflected in an analysis of the political subject matter that diarists most frequently shared posts over during the diary period, as shown in Table 6.7. The most frequently mentioned topic on Facebook was the Conservative Party (18 posts), all of which were critical contributions from Oliver, a civic instigator. Similarly, immigration (18 posts) was the most discussed subject matter on Twitter, as Joe, a contributor, frequently shared links to news articles debating the merits of the open border policy of the European Union. However, what the table doesn't show is perhaps of more interest. In total there were 41 different topics discussed on Facebook and 45 on Twitter, supporting the notion that listeners often give voice to those events and issues that are of particular importance to them personally.

Table 6.7. Most frequently mentioned topics on Facebook and Twitter

Topic	Facebook Frequency (*n*=135)	Topic	Twitter Frequency (*n*=157)
Conservative Party	18	Immigration and EU	18
Brand and Paxman	9	UKIP	12
Ukraine	8	Criticism of broadcast media	10
Snowden	8	Snowden	8
Criticism of broadcast media	8	Welfare reforms	8

Note: Key of terms provided in Appendix B7.

These results point to a more pressing concern regarding connection and communication on social media; do those who shout the loudest dominate conversations on these services? If civic instigators post the most frequently and listeners rely on social media for informational shortcuts, does this mean that there is a "spiral of silence" on Facebook and Twitter in which civic instigators shape how other users perceive public issues?

The spiral of silence, first proposed by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1974), occurs when a citizen does not share their own opinion due to an underlying fear that they are in the minority, as they do not wish to risk social isolation. Findings from a study by the Pew Research Center suggest that social media may exacerbate the spiral of silence, as they "do not provide new forums for those who might otherwise remain silent to express their opinions and debate issues" (Hampton et al., 2014). However, drawing inferences on general user behaviour based on this survey is problematic, as the study focused on the leaks from Edward Snowden. As such, the issue itself may act as an intervening variable as it involves government surveillance of the very tools in question.

Evidently, this theory has relevance to the findings of this study as the majority of participants were listeners, wary of public forms of communication, while only a small minority were willing to share political content. Furthermore, posts from civic instigators tend to have highly distinctive frames. For example, Matt would often share links from BBC News Online and the Mail Online by way of asserting the relevance of socialism in contemporary politics (entry 1; 8; 9; 10). The reflective diaries show that others pay attention to contentious posts like these (Annabeth, entry 2; Christian, entry 5; Joshua, entry 10). However, despite their interest and the controversial themes, other users were often unwilling to engage in discussion and correct perceived inaccuracies.

Of the 135 political posts on Facebook in this study, 24 posts had no likes or comments in response. Furthermore, 82 posts had a low number of interactions, where the cumulative total of likes and comments was less than nine. The five politically oriented posts that had a very high level of interactions, defined as those posts with over 30 likes and/or comments, had either a personal orientation, such as when Oliver (entry 8) put forward a proposal to his local council, or were related to an event that triggered collective attention, as illustrated by the 13 likes and 19 comments when Joe (entry 2) shared Jeremy Paxman's interview with Russell Brand. This comment thread consisted of a visceral debate about the merits of voting between two civic instigators (Joe, entry 2). Given the frequency of posts from civic instigators, the strength of their political ideals, and the reluctance of listeners to offer a response, the opinions of those most vocal often go unchallenged. As such, these findings do show evidence of political polarisation online, raising questions as to the content and conditions of consumption on Facebook and Twitter (Bennett and Iyengar, 2008; Conover et al., 2011; Prior, 2007). As Munson and Resnick (2010) suggest, "increased polarization would make it harder for society to find common ground on important issues."

However, the use of Facebook and Twitter as an informational shortcut did not result in listeners simply adopting the opinions offered by civic instigators. Rather, the diaries demonstrate a multi-step flow of communication that occurs after the point of consumption on a social networking site. These often unseen processes work in contrast to how they were originally conceived by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), in which opinion leaders, shaped by mass media, influence the wider population. In this study, those active users who are comparable to opinion leaders, the civic instigators, are challenged in private spaces. Listeners take to private modes of communication to contextualise, discuss, and sometimes challenge the information they receive on social networking sites. For example, Christian, a graphic designer from London, discussed the ongoing crisis in Syria at work following a post that he had seen on his Facebook news feed. In the conversation that followed, Christian (entry 2) reflected on the possibility of military intervention given the defeat of the British government's motion to support US-led air strikes against President Bashar al-Assad's regime:

This week I had a very long conversation with a girl at work about the issues surrounding why Britain should not get involved with the conflict in Syria. The conversation started because we both saw statements on Facebook, and this prompted her to tell me that her fiancé was in the Royal Artillery and had seen two tours of Iraq and one of Afghanistan. I asked her what she thought about the prospect of him going to Syria, and she told me that in his barracks, his squad was prepped and told to go into work with the imminent threat of being shipped out to Syria. Obviously she was shocked and extremely worried in fighting another pointless war. I asked her why she thought it was pointless, she responded with "I accept they are killing innocent people, but can we really justify the cost of war in our current situation." I asked what the current situation was, and we spoke about the cuts to the NHS and policing, and the cost of the war in Iraq, both in monetary value and the cost to innocent lives. The whole conversation was prompted through social media, it sparked a greater discussion about politics and war.

There was evidence of a multi-step flow of communication across the entire sample, as participants often turned to those with whom they had a strong tie relationship to discuss politics. These conversations took place in private, either online or face-to-face. Amy spoke with her husband at home about a range of political issues that she was exposed to online (entry 1; 2; 4; 5; 7; 8; 9; 12). Similarly, Leo (entry 7) used WhatsApp to challenge a Facebook post that criticised the influence of the EU on policy making in Britain. Using WhatsApp to discuss and contest content posted on social media with others, either one-to-one or in private groups, was relatively common (Abbey, entry 12; Danny, entry 5; 6; Joshua, entry 5; Will, entry 6). The private messaging functionality of Facebook was also used in this way (Charlie; Christian, pre-diary interview), challenging the perception of Facebook as a public facing mode of communication. Consequently, the threat of political polarisation cannot simply be inferred from the content on social networking sites that is visible. Such judgements ignore the rich forms of private and semi-public communication that take place, as listeners challenge and contest information they receive on Facebook and Twitter, but also from professional media sources.

In summary, the typology of citizen roles in social media environments illustrates the complex attitudinal characteristics that underpin political behaviour online. By focusing on public-political acts online in isolation, the slacktivist critique disregards the agency of users and the different cognitive loads that are associated with public forms of self-expression. Furthermore, the critique offers a one-dimensional analysis of Facebook and Twitter as it disregards the multi-step flow of communication as it that moves between public, semi-public, and private spaces. Even in these private

exchanges, the lines between producer and consumer become blurred, posing new questions about the nature of mediated citizenship.

While the typology identified in this study illuminates some of the complex attitudinal motivations that underpin behaviour on social media, this is further complicated by distinctions that exist between the two social networking sites in focus, Facebook and Twitter.

6.3 Connection and Expression: A Service-Specific Logic

> I see Facebook as more like friends, and pictures, whereas Twitter is more current and relating to political things.
>
> (Claudia, pre-diary interview)

> I think most of the things that I see on Facebook are fairly superficial and I don't delve deeply into Facebook at all. It all seems to be froth and tittle and tattle… Twitter is different.
>
> (Sam, pre-diary interview)

As the quotes from Claudia and Sam suggest, there was evidence of a service-specific logic in this study; Facebook is deemed to be a social space while Twitter is an overtly politicised and news-oriented service. This logic was evident in the way that diarists used each platform to access political information, but also in how each site was used for self-expression.

By exploring the diaries and public posts of the 16 participants who used both services it is evident that this sub-sample predominantly used Twitter, rather than Facebook, for posting political content. Facebook was often associated with specific concerns relating to reputation management. As Liz (pre-diary interview) observes, "I think it's interesting to look at politics on Facebook but I wouldn't do it myself. It's very public and I wouldn't do it." The use of the term "public" in this quote is significant given the default settings on both social networking sites. All posts on Twitter are publically accessible, whereas Facebook is a closed service, as updates are only accessible to those contacts that you approve. As such, Liz is not apprehensive of the public in a literal sense, an abstract term referring to all people, but a distinctive set of groups that trigger similar fears of other forms of openness. It is the makeup of the audience on Facebook that makes sharing sensitive posts seem more daunting. The public that Liz refers to on Facebook often includes an eclectic mix of close friends, work colleagues, and family members. Users can often feel overwhelmed as these

diverse sets of social circles overlap, in what Marwick and boyd (2011) describe as a "context collapse."[68]

The disparities between the audience on Facebook and Twitter can be demonstrated by Zoey (pre-diary interview), the only diarist to have her Facebook and Twitter account linked. This sometimes had unintended consequences, as Zoey (pre-diary interview) felt much more at ease expressing herself on Twitter:

> I've got my two accounts linked so if I put something on Twitter it automatically puts it onto Facebook. It is a bit of a nightmare because sometimes I'll put something on Twitter without thinking and then my Mum, who is friends with me on Facebook, will ask, 'What's the matter? What have you put that for?' I forget that the two are linked.

Even Oliver (entry 2), a civic instigator who frequently used the service to air his views, recognised the presence of a certain etiquette on Facebook; "Facebook is seen as a social tool, purely for entertainment and fun. There is a kind of 'don't talk politics at the dinner table' mentality embedded within its use." Other diarists supported this viewpoint. Claudia (pre-diary interview) and Leo (pre-diary interview) feel that clear distinctions exist over the kind of serious discussion that a user can engage in on Facebook, deeming personal achievements and significant events appropriate but politics as a topic to avoid. As such, the composition of the audience on Facebook shapes user behaviour.

An analysis of all political posts made by participants with accounts on both social networking sites illustrates this service-specific logic. As Table 6.8 shows, there were considerably more contributions with a political subject matter on Twitter (157 posts) than on Facebook (50). While this is expected given that Twitter is a microblogging platform, posts on the service were also more expressive; almost half of all political tweets (47.13 percent) contained evidence of a user's opinion, as opposed to just over a quarter (26 percent) of updates on Facebook. Diarists in this sub-sample were more likely to share information on Facebook without offering their own judgements.

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[68] "A context collapse occurs when people are forced to grapple simultaneously with otherwise unrelated social contexts that are rooted in different norms and seemingly demand different social responses" (boyd, 2014: 31).

Table 6.8. Comparison of the type of political posts on Facebook and Twitter

Type of post	Facebook		Twitter	
	Frequency	% (*n*=50)	Frequency	% (*n*=157)
1 Sharing information from a broadcast or print media source	16	32.00	45	28.66
2 Sharing information from an alternative source (i.e. new media outlets; a blog etc.)	23	46.00	56	35.67
3 Sharing information from a networked contact	2	4.00	13	8.28
4 Expression of opinion (contained within a status update)	13	26.00	74	47.13
5 Expression of opinion: link to user generated content (e.g. blog post; vlog)	1	2.00	2	1.27
6 Sharing evidence of / promoting an action: e-petition	2	4.00	0	0.00
7 Sharing evidence of / promoting an action: donating to civic or political cause	1	2.00	0	0.00
8 Sharing evidence of / promoting an action: consumer activism (e.g. boycotting and boycotting)	1	2.00	1	0.64
9 Sharing evidence of / promoting an action: contacting political actors	0	0.00	5	3.18
10 Sharing evidence of / promoting an action: contacting the broadcast or print media	0	0.00	1	0.64
11 Sharing evidence of / promoting an action: volunteering	0	0.00	0	0.00
12 Sharing evidence of / promoting an action: activity related to group membership	0	0.00	1	0.64
13 Sharing evidence of / promoting an action: forms of public demonstration	3	6.00	3	1.91
14 Sharing evidence of / promoting an action: forms of illegal protest activity	1	2.00	1	0.64
15 Sharing evidence of / promoting an action: voting	2	4.00	3	1.91
16 Organising or contributing to the organisation of a political action	1	2.00	0	0.00
17 Other	2	4.00	6	3.82
18 Sharing information from a political party / politician	3	6.00	6	3.82
19 Sharing evidence of / promoting an action: contribution to a public meeting or consultation	0	0.00	1	0.64

Note: Comparison only includes data from those diarists with an account on both Facebook and Twitter.

Joe, a contributor, provides perhaps the most fitting example of the expressive norms associated with Twitter. During the diary period there was a significant discrepancy between the volume of political posts that he made on Twitter (90) in comparison to Facebook (18). Joe explained this deviation in his diary (entry 5), noting that Twitter was a more fitting platform because of his audience; he believed those who follow him tend to take political material seriously, whereas he feared that his Facebook network would mock any attempts to talk about his beliefs. Marco, another contributor, took a similar approach, as the majority of his political contributions were shared on Twitter (27) rather than Facebook (2). Like Joe, Marco (pre-diary interview) visualised a different audience when moving between the two social networking sites, noting that those who follow him on Twitter tend to do so because of shared interests.

Even amongst those who did not have an account on the service, the majority of diarists perceived Twitter to be a space better suited to political discussion. I argue that this interpretation is a result of the real and imagined audience on each service. On Facebook, users struggle to balance their various identities: friend, family member, colleague, acquaintance, hookup and so on. Formulating a voice that speaks to each of these identities is difficult. On Twitter, the audience tends to be more defined, based around specific interests that the user joined the service to pursue. For instance, Amy (pre-diary interview) joined the service to follow her professional interests, using the platform to keep abreast of developments in the charity sector. Similarly, Christian (pre-diary interview) uses the site to network with fellow designers, while Leo (pre-diary interview) joined Twitter to become better informed on local news. In each of these cases, the diarist has a clear perception of what their expressions represent. Therefore, this service-specific logic can impact the content and form of political expression (Bernstein et al., 2013; Marwick and boyd, 2011; Papacharissi, 2012).

6.4 Action… and Lack Thereof

The typology of citizen roles in social media environments describes how civic instigators, contributors, and listeners possess distinct attitudes towards political expression on Facebook and Twitter. These characteristics also result in different behavioural traits. Figure 6.9 shows the forms of participation that diarists were

involved in over the three-month period.[69] While over half of participants signed a petition and donated money to a civic or political group, there was little evidence of diarists participating in goal-orientated public-political action. As such, there were many more examples of expressive engagement than instrumental action throughout the study. However, I argue that this does not necessarily reflect the substitution thesis, in which low-effort online forms of engagement are replacing "tried and tested" offline methods (H_2). Such a conclusion would depend on equating online self-expression with forms of real space instrumental action as if they are like-for-like. This is conceptually misleading, as online expression often represents discursive engagement in a new space. These behaviours therefore refer to different stages on the continuum of participation.

Figure 6.9. During the time spent completing your diary did you do any of the following to influence political representatives, public decisions, laws, or policies?

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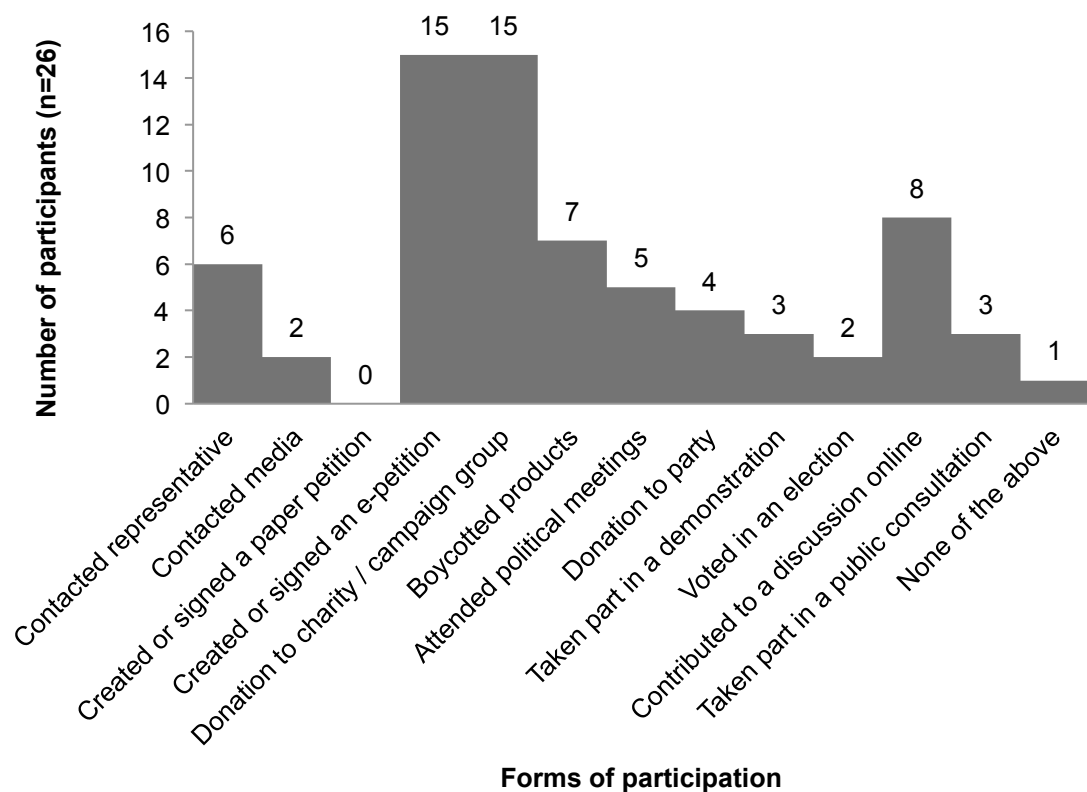
[69] Outside of this overview of political behaviour, these results also illustrate methodological issues. For instance diarists sometimes omitted public-political actions from their weekly entries, as they focused on their use of media for information consumption or did not perceive these acts to be political. Sam noted in his exit survey that he had taken part in a public consultation on healthcare reform, but felt that this was in keeping with his professional interests rather than any political aspirations. There was also evidence of a discrepancy in how the participants interpreted the survey statements. Only eight diarists confirmed that they had contributed to a discussion online, despite the data collected from their public profiles suggesting otherwise.

The substitution thesis can be explored through a comparison of the levels of digital micro-activism and real space action. In this study those who were most active on social media, by posting political material and engaging in low-threshold forms of online activism, also took part in forms of substantive political action. As Table 6.9 shows, there was a correlation between citizen role and the depth of one's engagement. The civic instigators, Matt and Oliver, were two of the most active participants in the study, investing their time in a wide range of activities from political meetings to demonstrations. Contributors, such as Joe and Madeline, also participated in instrumental forms of action. Listeners, however, were less active, only triggered into action under specific circumstances. As such, those who most closely resembled the characteristics specified in the slacktivist critique were the most politically active citizens in this study.

Table 6.9. Level of participation based on a typology of citizen roles in social media environments

Citizen role	Pseudonym	Forms of participation
Civic instigator	Matt	• Donation to charity / campaign group • Boycotted products • Attended political meetings • Contributed to a discussion online
	Oliver	• Contacted representative • Created or signed an e-petition • Donation to charity / campaign group • Boycotted products • Attended political meetings • Donation to a party • Taken part in a demonstration • Contributed to a discussion online • Taken part in a public consultation
Contributor	Joe	• Contacted representative • Created or signed an e-petition • Voted in an election • Contributed to a discussion online
	Madeline	• Created or signed an e-petition • Donation to charity / campaign group • Taken part in a demonstration
Listener (Active)	Annabeth	• Donation to charity / campaign group
	Zoey	• Created or signed an e-petition
Listener (Passive)	Amy	• Donation to charity / campaign group
	Leo	• None of the above

Note: The forms of participation listed in this table are based on those provided in the *Audit of Political Engagement* (Hansard Society, 2014: 90). See Appendix B1 for further details.

There was further evidence to support the reputational logic on Facebook. Despite 15 diarists signing an e-petition during the diary period, only three participants promoted a petition on their public profile during this time. Deborah (entry 4) signed a petition that her daughter posted on the service but did not share this with her own networked contacts. Similarly, Simon (entry 2; 7) reflected on a number of petitions that he had signed on Avaaz, none of which he shared on Facebook or Twitter. As such, this casts doubt on the claim that citizens engage in digital micro-activism for social benefits, rather than genuinely held personal beliefs (H$_3$).

The three participants who did share an e-petition on Facebook were Oliver, Madeline, and "Mallory." Each of these diarists participated in campaigns that were based on their own personal interests. Oliver, who shared four petitions in total, seemed

to follow the distinctive attitudinal patterns that were evident in his reflective diaries and public posts. During the study he encouraged his friends on Facebook to: sign a petition lobbying the Secretary of State for Health, Jeremy Hunt, to abolish a legal clause that allowed the government to close hospital services without consultation;[70] stop the ban on real space demonstrations at the University of Sussex;[71] and encourage online retailer Amazon to increase pay for its workers.[72] With each of these petitions, Oliver expressed his own views by way of encouraging others to sign. This approach differed to Madeline and Mallory, who simply shared the petition without any personal sentiment. An example of this can be seen directly, as both Oliver and Madeline shared the same petition. This campaign, led by 38 Degrees, was designed to stop the Transparency of Lobbying, Non-Party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Bill becoming law. As Figure 6.10 shows, Oliver, a civic instigator, offered his own rationale for signing the petition, arguing that the legislation would restrict political campaigning in the run up to the 2015 general election. In comparison Madeline, a contributor, offered no such indication of her motivations; her support was inferred from the fact that she shared the petition. This further illustrates the differences between the citizen roles.

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[70] For further information: "38 Degrees: Jeremy Hunt: Axe the Hospital Closure Clause"
https://you.38degrees.org.uk/petitions/jeremy-hunt-should-resign-and-take-his-hospital-closure-clause-with-him.
[71] For further information: "Change.org: Stop the protest ban at Sussex University"
https://www.change.org/p/stop-the-protest-ban-at-sussex-university.
[72] For further information: "Change.org: AmazonUK: Deliver the Living Wage in 2014"
https://www.change.org/p/amazonuk-deliver-the-living-wage-in-2014.

Figure 6.10. Examples of micro-activism from Oliver, a civic instigator, and Madeline, a contributor

"Madeline"

5 November 2013 via ShareProgress

Stop the gagging law
secure.38degrees.org.uk
Sign the petition to tell government to stop the gagging law which will damage freedom of speech.

"Oliver"

5 November 2013 via ShareProgress

Some time ago, Guildford campaigned hard to stop the hospital from closing. The proposed legalisation would in effect stop such campaigning in an election year. For some reason, corporations are exempt. Stop the gag, and tell the Lib Dems (and of course the Tories) to go shuv it up their arse.

Stop the gagging law
secure.38degrees.org.uk
Sign the petition to tell government to stop the gagging law which will damage freedom of speech.

This reluctance to post personally expressive material, or political content entirely in the case of listeners, is problematic for campaign groups and political parties. Described as informational shortcuts in Chapter 5, the leadership of political groups depend on users sharing evidence of their political behaviour by way of encouraging others to participate. By providing easy access to political information for wider publics, the costs associated with involvement are reduced. While this does not necessarily lead to instrumental action, under certain conditions it can. For instance, Marco (exit survey) became aware of the debates surrounding electoral reform in Britain following exposure to a Change.org petition on his Facebook news feed. This interest resulted in Marco contacting his local MP on this issue. In this way, digital micro-activism can act as a gateway to new issues and enhanced political interest. Abbey (pre-diary interview) epitomises this process through her interest and involvement in women's issues, which was evident through her weekly entries (entry 1; 3; 5; 7; 11):

The first time I saw *No More Page 3* [http://nomorepage3.org/] was when someone posted a link to the petition on Facebook saying 'sign this petition, this is what its about.' And the more I started to think about it, the more it was like, well, I have never been comfortable with Page 3 and, to find that I am not a weirdo in finding it a bit strange, was quite enlightening really. It just seems to be very basic. For some reason, it really appeals to me. I don't know if its because I used to work in a warehouse… The things that they used to say about women, and the way that they would treat Page 3, was embarrassing. So I am glad that this is coming out. I love it because it's slowly leading me down the road to feminist enlightenment.

This quote illustrates two conditions that explain when access and exposure on social media transform into more substantive forms of engagement. Firstly, this chance sighting of an e-petition on Facebook resonated with Abbey's own pre-existing sentiments and personal experiences. This is typical for listeners who, like those members of 38 Degrees in the last chapter, share characteristics with the standby citizen model (Amnå and Ekman, 2014). Social media acts as a site of activation for these seemingly passive citizens. Secondly, Abbey's involvement was strengthened by the knowledge of a wider community of other like-minded citizens. Here, social media provides a space for connection over a diverse range of issues. The presence of these communities helps foster political participation.

6.5 Conclusion: Experiential Learning, Standby Citizens and the Redundancy of the Slacktivist Critique

The rationale for this study was to observe and analyse how citizens use social networking sites for political participation in an everyday context. By drawing on data collected from Facebook and Twitter, and then contextualising these actions with rich ethnographic data in the form of diaries and interviews, this study offers a unique insight into the attitudes that guide political behaviour online. In doing so, it is clear that neither the slacktivist critique nor the theoretical framework proposed by thesis (EF_2; EF_3) fully explain the individual level attitudes that guide online self-expression and digital micro-activism. I propose a typology of citizen roles in social media environments to identify the different ways in which users engage with political material on social media. The findings, structured around the four stages of the continuum of participation, provide evidence to illustrate how these different citizen roles act in practice.

Firstly, by comparing the content of the diaries with the lead stories of four British newspapers, I show that personal identity increasingly drives more individualised forms of news consumption. Both Twitter and, to a lesser extent, Facebook are used to tailor news consumption around a user's own interests. However, these tools do not substitute professional media coverage, as social networking sites complement traditional modes of communication. This represents a hybridisation of media consumption habits (Chadwick, 2013). The extent to which diarists relied on these personalised sources of news varied amongst the sample. For some, it was the focal point of their news consumption. Marco and Oliver, two of the more politically active participants, emphasised the value of social media in providing information on alternative issues. While others were sceptical of the usefulness of social networking sites for maintaining an awareness of current affairs, even Sam and Thomas, whose weekly entries rigidly followed those issues that were featured in professional news media, used Twitter to monitor specific issues. As such, Facebook and Twitter were used to access information on topics that were personally relevant (Papacharissi, 2010: 22; Tewksbury and Rittenberg, 2012: 172). These characteristics are reflective of an actualizing logic, in which self-actualisation shapes media consumption (Bennett, 2008; Bennett, Wells and Freelon, 2010; Bennett, 2012).

The implications of this personalisation for democratic engagement do not reflect the ominous forecasts of the slacktivist critique; in this study there was no evidence of selective exposure leading to harmful audience fragmentation. The comparison between the diaries and newspaper coverage illustrates that this personalisation was balanced by moments of collective exposure, as citizens focused their attention on public issues. Therefore, while the dynamics of media consumption have irreversibly changed, citizens still participate in democratically beneficial shared experiences. This collective exposure may occur conventionally, as illustrated by the passing of Nelson Mandela, or by cascades on social media. The interest shown by diarists in the interview between Russell Brand and Jeremy Paxman demonstrates how social networking sites can disrupt and transform the norms of news making. However, the diarists did not simply adopt the views shared by Brand, a dynamic suggested in those critiques of the #Kony2012 campaign. Instead they referred to professional news media and other citizens to contextualise and process this information. While these findings cannot be generalised across broader populations given the small sample on which they are based, the content of these news items and the way that they are shaped and sustained on social media pose important questions for future research.

Secondly, this chapter proposes a typology of citizen roles in social media environments that outlines the different ways in which citizens engage with politics on Facebook and Twitter. This typology challenges the attitudinal (H_3) and behavioural (H_2) hypotheses derived from the slacktivist critique. A small number of diarists reflect what I describe as civic instigators or contributors, both of which signify active producers of political content on social networking sites.[73] While these diarists were more likely to participate than listeners, there was no evidence of a causal relationship between public forms of online self-expression and goal-orientated instrumental action. However, despite this absence of causation, I argue that these citizens are not slacktivists. By tracking political attitudes over the course of three months using a multi-method approach, I found evidence to suggest that these digitally active citizens learn through self-expression and digital micro-activism. According to Kolb (1984: 38), an educational theorist, "learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience." Civic instigators and contributors hone their personal identity through these low-threshold online interactions as part of an "experiential learning cycle," as shown in Figure 6.11. These diarists reflect on their behaviour on social media, interpret and make sense of discursive exchanges when they occur, and then use this as a basis for future political engagement. Therefore, self-expression and digital micro-activism do not represent vacuous and ephemeral banalities, but are connected to the development of a citizen's political identity.

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[73] As noted earlier in the chapter, these two citizen roles are distinguished by the motivations that underpin their political activity online. Civic instigators seek to challenge other users by exposing wider publics to provocative views, while contributors share content without an explicit indication of their own opinions.

Figure 6.11. Kolb's experiential learning cycle
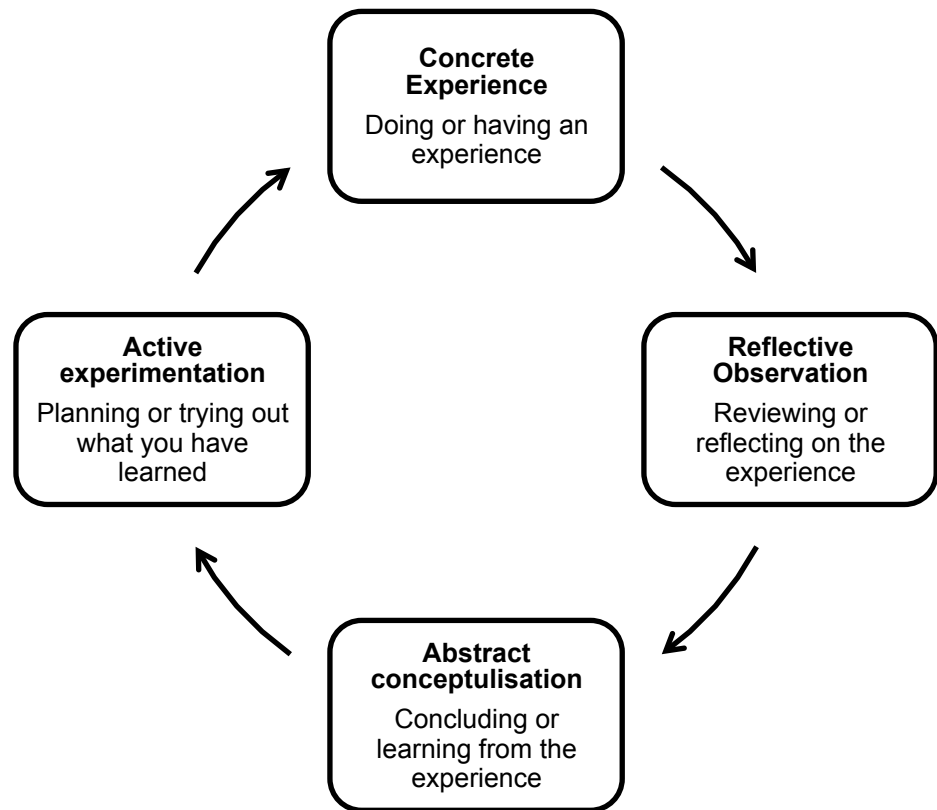
Source: Kolb (1984)

Facebook and Twitter become sites of learning for these politically interested citizens. Unlike listeners who benefit from the informational shortcuts provided online, social networking sites reflect what Flanagan (2013: 18) describes as "mini-polities": through their experiences in these spaces, civic instigators and contributors "formulate ideas about their membership, rights, and obligations as citizens in the broader polity." Oliver's diary exemplifies this experiential learning cycle. He often used Facebook to express his criticism of institutional politics in Britain. A theme running through his diary was the emergence of a politically active Russell Brand. At first Oliver (entry 1) was encouraged by the political vision offered in Brand's interview, as the ideas resonated with his own personal frustrations; "this video was cathartic, assuring me that I am not alone in my ideas and aspirations." However, after sharing a subsequent interview with the comedian-turned-political activist on his Facebook profile (entry 2), the reaction from other users made Oliver question Brand's authenticity; "it soon dawned on me that the focus on Brand's very general message of political deviancy came at the expense of its substance." Ultimately, Oliver (entry 4) deemed Brand to be a "commodity of rebellion" that was undermining more serious political activism. Oliver discussed his own behaviours in reaction to this, reflecting on how he could tap into the

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interest shown by his friends in Brand. This experiential learning creates the conditions for future mobilisation.

When considering the behavioural claims of the slacktivist critique, it is clear that those completing the diaries were not representative of the committed activists that Gladwell (2010) and Morozov (2011) identify. While there was evidence of political learning and discussion in private spaces, examples of instrumental action were few and far between. Those who did participate in substantive forms of political action were civic instigators and contributors, those who most closely resemble slacktivists. This correlation challenges the substitution thesis, the claim that digital micro-activism displaces tried and tested forms of real space participation. These findings support those of Christensen (2011; 2012) and others (Ogilvy Public Relations Worldwide & Center for Social Impact Communication at Georgetown University, 2011; Vaccari et al., 2015) who have also shown that expressive forms of digital activism are positively associated with goal-oriented public-political action.

I did not find evidence of an active model of citizenship amongst the majority of participants in this study, certainly not one that is purposive in terms of political action. However, as outlined in Chapter 1, such expectations are unrealistic and ultimately unhelpful. As Dalton (2007: 1) argues, rather that focusing on how good citizenship has been defined in the past we must ask "what does it mean to be a 'good citizen' in today's society?" I argue that those citizens that I characterise as listeners are beneficial to a democracy. Listeners represent citizens who use these services to learn about news and political matters, either purposefully or as a by-product of their day-to-day use, but rarely engage in any form of public-political expression. They can further be distinguished as either active listeners, those who frequently post content on non-political topics but consciously avoid anything that they deem to be political, or passive listeners, those who avoid public forms of expression entirely. For these diarists, politics still represents a taboo topic within public spaces, much like in Eliasoph's (1998) influential study *Avoiding Politics: How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday Life*. Although they value the informational shortcuts provided by social networking sites, the lines between content consumption and production were resolutely drawn; public-political actions still require a public face.

Therefore, their lack of online self-expression is not indicative of disinterest but represents a distinctive attitudinal logic, one that challenges the very premise of slacktivism (H_3). For listeners, what may seem like a simple click of a button, such as sharing a petition, is part of a complex decision-making process. This is because of the

reputational risks on social networking sites, and the threats posed by the real and imagined audience. The slacktivist critique is correct in suggesting that image management online does play a significant role in shaping behaviour, but it constrains citizen action rather than promoting it. This is particularly true on Facebook, as the multiple audiences present on the service heighten cognitive anxieties. Those involved in this study were conscious that their posts would be deemed to be indicative of their character. As such, the slacktivist critique may even exacerbate participatory inequalities, as the more credibility and use the term gains, the more deeply rooted these inhibitions may become.

When listeners do participate in self-expression and digital micro-activism these acts are not triggered by inauthentic reputational management, or the ease of the act itself, but by something much more meaningful. They overcome these cognitive loads on those issues that resonate with their deeply held personal beliefs. As such, listeners, both active and passive, reflect the characteristics of Amnå and Ekman's (2014: 262) standby citizen, those citizens who "appear passive" but "in reality are prepared for political action, should circumstances warrant." Just because they lack the same behavioural data trail as their contemporaries does not mean they are disinterested. They use Facebook and Twitter in a different way to civic instigators and contributors. As Joshua (entry 9) notes, "I always have it on, but I'm never using it." Listeners are purposive in the selection of political materials that they consume, and they actively express themselves on political issues in everyday life. Self-expression occurs in private spaces, either online or offline, with strong tie connections often in the form of family or close friends. As such, this chapter shows evidence of a multi-step flow of communication across public, semi-public, and private spaces (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955). The conditions of this cross-fertilisation between access to information on public and semi-public social networking sites and discussion in private spaces further strengthens calls for research across different media. In particular, the cross-platform mobile messaging app WhatsApp was used by a number of diarists to discuss news and current affairs. It is only through multi-method, individual level research that we can observe and unearth these complex behavioural patterns.

Although this thesis has illustrated the democratic benefits of informational shortcuts in an activist context and within day-to-day life, it is important to remember that Facebook and Twitter are not unmoderated spaces. Algorithms influence what a user is "accidentally" exposed to, with certain news stories or providers gaining prominence. These algorithms are unseen—only Charlie (pre-diary interview),

commented on their impact—yet they are having important consequences for news dissemination online. Bell (2014) argues that the absence of editors can be dangerous if citizens rely on social media for news. This is particularly true on Facebook, where popularity is one of the key determinants of content prioritisation (Constine, 2014). As a result, new media organisations such as BuzzFeed have begun to use social networking sites to distribute their content. Annabeth, Abbey, Madeline, Joe, Mallory, and Zoey all discussed articles from BuzzFeed over the course of the diary research. The influence of information type and popularity on political behaviour will be explored in the next chapter, through two laboratory experiments that are designed to directly intervene in user behaviour on Facebook.

7. Laboratory Experiments: An Experimental Intervention to Explore Slacktivism

This chapter will examine the slacktivist critique through two laboratory experiments designed to directly intervene in user behaviour on Facebook. The findings from the ethnography of the hybrid mobilization movement 38 Degrees, and the diary research, suggest that digitally active citizens use social networking sites for informational shortcuts. Those involved in this research share similar characteristics to Amnå and Ekman's (2014) standby citizen model, as they are triggered to participate on the basis of exposure to personally relevant political issues. Given the passive model of citizenship evident, the conditions in which they acquire this political information are significant.

Those advocating the slacktivist critique hypothesise that political content shared on social networking sites is distorted, as users seek to manage their reputation online (H_3). This social presentation results in online cascades. As Sunstein (2007: 84) notes, there are two types of cascades online. Firstly, informational cascades, in which users cease to rely on private information and instead depend on the issues that become established within a social group (Velasquez, 2012: 1287-1288). This can lead to emotive and inconsistent information becoming viral on social networking sites at the expense of other, more deserving or urgent, causes (Gladwell, 2010; Morozov, 2009; 2011: 190). Secondly, reputational cascades can also occur on social media, as audiences are susceptible to trends or the sway of popular opinion. As discussed in the #Kony2012 case study, some argue that the visible metrics embedded within platforms like Facebook and Twitter affect political behaviour, as users go along with the crowd to maintain the good opinion of others (Morozov, 2011; White, 2010; 2011). These experiments probe the conditions in which informational and reputational cascades occur on Facebook.

As such, ensuring that the experimental news feeds closely represented something akin to everyday user experience was paramount to the design of this study. As McDermott (2011: 27) notes, "the purpose of an experiment informs the degree to which emphasis should be placed on internal versus external validity." As outlined in Chapter 3, mundane realism took precedence over experimental realism in the design of these experiments. Therefore, this is a quasi-experimental study; it is an attempt to understand user behaviour on Facebook in relation to the slacktivist critique.

The first experiment focuses on informational cascades, by exploring the relationship between information type and the likelihood of future political mobilisation. Information type refers to the style, genre, and format of content, with evidence of considerable diversity in the political materials that are shared on Facebook. By exposing participants to four different types of information on the same issue from a range of content providers, this experiment will investigate what type of source material triggers attention and engagement. I focus on two digital publishers, BuzzFeed and Upworthy. Both organisations blur the boundaries between entertainment, news, and activism to maximise their reach on social media. Their content distribution revolves around what Morozov (2013: 159) describes as "meme logic," "the tendency to assess everything in terms of how the intended audience is likely to react according to what is known about that audience." According to the slacktivist critique, this type of journalism represents a threat to the norms of democratic engagement as it favours receiver satisfaction and easy dissemination over information accuracy. It produces what White (2010) describes as "a race to the bottom," as actors seek to compress political information to suit the granular medium. As such, both BuzzFeed and Upworthy have been criticised for distracting citizens from serious political news and lowering the tone of political debate through coverage that prioritises clickthrough rates (Ball, 2014; Preston, 2014; Zara, 2013).

The second experiment investigates reputational cascades, examining whether publicly visible social recommendations from other users on Facebook drives attention and engagement. I test the willingness of subjects to click on and sign an e-petition on the basis of the number of Facebook likes on the post, a proxy measure for social information (Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004: 606).

The findings from these experiments suggest that young internet users do not participate on the basis of stylistic information or popularity (H_3), but respond to information that resonates with their own pre-existing political attitudes (EF_5). The results from the first experiment show that while subjects were attentive to both the BuzzFeed and Upworthy stimuli, they were conscious of and, at times, critical of their unique journalistic style. In particular, participants felt uneasy at the attempt by BuzzFeed to blur the boundaries between soft news and political journalism. While any form of information had some affect on a participant's future willingness to engage in comparison to the control group, the strength of this association was dwarfed by evidence of a positive correlation between pre-existing political attitudes and political engagement across all treatment conditions. The results from the second experiment

suggest that visible signs of popularity do not impact a participant's willingness to sign an e-petition, or to participate on the same issue in the future (H₃). Rather, a participant's pre-existing interest in the treatment issue was a more plausible explanatory variable for micro-activism, supporting the claim that individual autonomy and self-efficacy are the overriding motivational logics for online participation (Bennett, 2008; Papacharissi, 2010).

7.1 Rationale for Experiment 1: Testing for the Effect of Information Type

As the evidence from the media diaries has shown, users are exposed to a vast array of political stimuli on social networking sites. Given this diversity, concerns have been raised over the type of informational stimuli that influence political engagement (Mirani, 2011; Morozov, 2011; White, 2010). Two factors led to these concerns. Firstly, the boundaries between what we categorise as news, opinion, entertainment, humour, and advocacy content are now essentially fluid. This collapse in media genres has been widely documented within the literature (Chadwick, 2013; Delli Carpini and Williams, 2000; Jenkins, 2006). Secondly, the hybridisation of genres and norms has led to the creation of a number of new organisations online that appeal to younger audiences by virtue of their unique journalistic style. BuzzFeed and Upworthy epitomise these new media organisations (Ball, 2014; Gorkana, 2014). They use social media as their main vehicle for content delivery, with notable success; in November 2013 BuzzFeed and Upworthy were the second and third most popular publishers on Facebook, calculated by the cumulative total of likes, shares, and comments on content published on their Facebook page (Corcoran, 2013). By using social networking sites, these organisations can challenge the reach of professional news media. For instance, BuzzFeed have much higher levels of audience interaction on Facebook. In February 2015 BuzzFeed UK had 7,845,965 interactions on Facebook, more than double the total received on content published by the *Daily Telegraph* (telegraph.co.uk).[74] This was despite the *Daily Telegraph* publishing over 18 times more content over this period (Corcoran, 2015).[75] BuzzFeed and Upworthy organisations are phenomena in viral media.

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[74] The total number of interactions is calculated by the total number of likes, shares, and comments on content during a specific period. During the same period the Daily Telegraph had 3,638,379 total interactions on Facebook (Corcoran, 2015).
[75] During February 2015 BuzzFeed UK published 554 articles, while the Daily Telegraph published 10,249 (Corcoran, 2015).

BuzzFeed, an internet news media company, was founded in 2006 by current CEO Jonah Peretti. With articles such as "18 Reasons Cats Think Humans Are Terrible At Being Cats" (Main, 2013) and "11 Delightful Poems Found In PornHub Comments" (Mallikarjuna, 2013), the most fitting characterisation of BuzzFeed is perhaps "soft news," a journalistic style that blurs the lines between information and entertainment. The website is renowned for its cat memes, quizzes and "listicles," short-form articles that are structured as a list. Although this type of content may seem trivial, its design helps to illustrate the website's meteoric rise and exemplifies an important dynamic of news consumption on Facebook and Twitter. The overriding objective for the editors at BuzzFeed is to produce and deliver content that is shareable. As Peretti (quoted in Shontell, 2012) states, "I care a lot about whether we're consistently creating content that people think is worth sharing."

While the website initially focused on publishing light-hearted content, over the past two years the company has diversified into news and political journalism. In 2011 the company hired Ben Smith, formerly of Politico, as the site's editor-in-chief. In doing so BuzzFeed began producing long-form, original-content with an emphasis on politics and breaking news. Despite a plagiarism scandal involving one of their writers in 2014, their output has been positively received (Cresci, 2014). In 2013 BuzzFeed launched a dedicated UK arm. Jim Waterson, formerly of business newspaper City A.M., was hired as the website's political editor, with Jamie Ross joining from BBC Scotland shortly after. Like their American contemporaries, the UK subsidiary has had favourable reviews. Bell (2014) argues that the website's news coverage could provide an important entry point for younger audiences into a range of complex geopolitical stories.

However, the distinctive approach adopted by BuzzFeed is not without criticism. A number of commentators have accused the website of distracting citizens from serious political topics, especially given their success in securing prime "real estate" on the Facebook news feed, a constantly updating list of posts from connected contacts and pages that a user follows on Facebook (Maynor, 2014: 11). Preston (2014) has also cast doubt on whether the tone and style that BuzzFeed adopts is suited to rigorous investigative journalism. Likewise, questions have been asked of the democratic benefits accrued by their audience, as evidence of sharing does not necessarily equate to evidence of political learning.

Social sharing is also the key method of content distribution for Upworthy. Formed in March 2012 by Peter Koechley, formerly of the news satire website The

Onion, and Eli Pariser, Board President of the hybrid mobilization movement MoveOn.org, the staff at Upworthy curate and share pre-existing content online. They do this with three principles in mind, that subject material must be "awesome," "meaningful," and "visual" (Koechley, 2012). Consequently, the material they publish blends the publishing styles adopted by the founders' former employers; political content that entertains. This often has an overt ideological orientation, something that the staff at Upworthy (2014) do not try to hide:

> We're a mission-driven media company. We're not a newspaper — we'd rather speak truth than appear unbiased… But we do have a point of view. We're pro-gay-marriage, and we're anti-child-poverty. We think the media is horrible to women, we think climate change is real, and we think the government has a lot to learn from the Internet about efficiency, disruption, and effectiveness.

Despite the website's popularity, Upworthy has been criticised for using emotive clickbait headlines.[76] With titles such as "4 things you should do when you're told 'Black Lives Matter'" (Wanjuki, 2015) and "You don't want to get involved in changing the world? Here's 90 seconds that might give you pause" (Kelley, 2014), the staff at Upworthy provides just enough information to pique the reader's curiosity, but not enough to satisfy it without clicking through to the linked content (Waldman, 2014). With over 87 million unique visitors during November 2013, the website has been successful at achieving user engagement (Meyer, 2013). As a result, other professional news media have begun to employ the "Upworthy style" (Bryan, 2013). For some, the use of emotion and the "curiosity gap" to spark attention is disingenuous and undermines the organisation's lofty aims (Powers, 2013; Silver, 2014). As a result, Upworthy is often the object of scorn from those sympathetic with the slacktivist critique. Some argue that the videos they share promote "backpatting" at the expense of real activism, as citizens who share the website's content achieve a certain sense of emotional and political fulfilment (Powers, 2013; Silver, 2014).

While I have outlined the criticisms of both media organisations, it is necessary to state that an alternative reading may argue that BuzzFeed and Upworthy offer widely accessible political content that can challenge the dominant frames typically set by political elites or broadcast media (Chadwick, 2011; 2013; Pariser in Salam, 2014; Maynor, 2014). The fact that BuzzFeed and Upworthy do not resemble the gatekeepers

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[76] However, it is important to recognise that emotive framing is not something unique to these new hybrid media organisations, but a technique used throughout the recent history of news making in order to make information accessible to citizens (Graber, 2001; 2004). Further research is therefore necessary to explore if and how these organisations differ in their strategic use of emotion in comparison to traditional forms of professional news media.

of old does not mean that we should automatically assume that they debase the values and norms of news making. As such, this experiment will not produce substantive conclusions on the democratic value of either BuzzFeed or Upworthy in providing informational goods to citizens.

This experiment is designed to observe and analyse the motivational context for those behaviours derided as slacktivism. The slacktivist critique claims that viral content can vary significantly in terms of its reliability, leading to political actions being formed on the basis of erroneous information (H_3; Morozov, 2011: 179-186). However, information accuracy is a difficult variable to operationalise. For example, BuzzFeed (Peretti, 2014) and Upworthy (Savener, 2014) both have strict editorial guidelines in place. Therefore, as exemplified by the Hollywood-style editing of the #Kony2012 video created by Invisible Children, it is more the style, type, and format of content that forms the basis of the critique. This experiment will present participants with varying types of information on the same issue, the People's Climate March that took place in London on September 21, 2014, and then measure what effect this exposure has on the likelihood of future political mobilisation. BuzzFeed and Upworthy are contrasted with two other sources, BBC News Online and Change.org. BBC News Online is the most popular news website in the UK (Newman, Levy and Nielsen, 2015: 25). Change.org is a global petition website that provides users with the tools to set up their own petition. By drawing on these four contrasting sources this experiment explores whether information type, and the way in which the content is presented, affects engagement.

7.2 Results for Experiment 1: Testing for the Effect of Information Type

The findings for both experiments are structured around two outcome variables: attention and engagement. Attention is explored in this experiment to observe how subjects respond when exposed to the treatment. This corresponds with the first stage of the continuum of participation model, "access." Prior to reporting the findings it is necessary to highlight the need for caution when interpreting the results of these experiments, as the mean values may be unreliable given the low number of participants in each treatment condition. I provide the standard deviation for all averages to show the variation within the data. A rigorous participant debrief was undertaken following each experiment in order to address some of the methodological shortcomings outlined in Chapter 4. These discussions provided an opportunity to discuss the information types used as the treatment. These reflections are included within the results.

The first measure of attention is clickthrough rate, referring to the percentage of subjects that clicked on the treatment post in each group. Typically used by those within the advertising industry, the clickthrough rate is used to measure the effectiveness of a piece of information in capturing attention. As Table 7.1 shows, the clickthrough rate was highest for the two websites that rely on social media to distribute their content, BuzzFeed and Upworthy. The titles of both pieces were notably different to the more conventional approach adopted by the BBC. BuzzFeed blurred the boundaries between politics and entertainment by mentioning the celebrities involved with the protest, while Upworthy used clickbait as a device to attract page views. However, the difference in clickthrough rate between the three media organisations was minimal when we factor in the small sample size. In contrast, the petition on Change.org had a noticeably lower clickthrough rate. In the debrief three participants in this experimental group explained their noncompliance, noting that they would normally only click on a petition for an issue that related to their own interests or personal experiences.

Table 7.1. Clickthrough rate on the treatment

Treatment: Information Type	Page views	Group size	Clickthrough %
BBC News	7	10	70.0
BuzzFeed	7	8	87.5
Change.org	4	7	57.1
Upworthy	7	8	87.5

Clickthrough rates only provide rather shallow evidence of initial exposure; they do not provide any clarity on the depth of someone's attention. I also calculated the amount of time a user spent browsing each web page on the news feed. Figure 7.1 shows the inter-quartile range for the amount of time that participants spent browsing each treatment post. Calculated using the median average, subjects spent the most time on the BBC News article (110 seconds), followed by the Upworthy post (96 seconds), and the BuzzFeed piece (88 seconds). These results are somewhat representative of the format and length of these articles. The BBC News article featured the highest volume of text, with an estimated read time of 137-seconds.[77] The article also featured a 53-second video, meaning that the average time spent on the page under experimental

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[77] This is based on an average reading speed of 300 words per minute (Noyes and Garland, 2008). However, this is a workaround. Reading times vary dramatically depending on the individual (see Nelson, 2012). For further information on this tool: http://www.edgestudio.com/production/words-to-time-calculator.

conditions was 80 seconds lower that than the 190 seconds required for a person of average reading speed to read the text and watch the video. This was not the case with the Upworthy post, as subjects spent longer browsing the page than was required to watch the 85-second video.[78] Participants spent longer on the BuzzFeed piece (88 seconds) than the average amount of time required to read the text (68 seconds), although this is most likely due to the large number of images of celebrities at the protest on the web page. Subjects only spent 48 seconds on the Change.org petition page, despite the 82 seconds required for a person of average reading speed to read the rationale for the petition.

Figure 7.1. Amount of time spent on the treatment

■ BBC News (N=7)

■ BuzzFeed (N=7)

□ Change.org (N=4)

■ Upworthy (N=7)

Time (seconds)
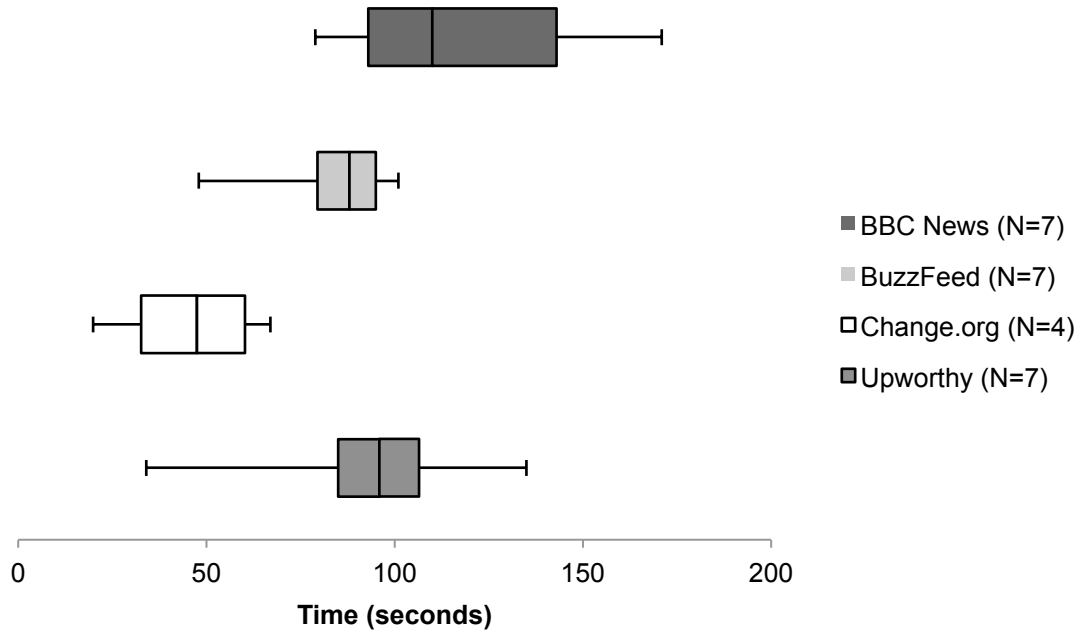
User attention was also measured through two post-test survey questions, as the sentiment of the receiver cannot be inferred on the basis of the amount of time spent browsing the treatment. These questions offer some insight into the subjects' attitudes towards the different content providers. As Table 7.2 highlights, all of the users who viewed the Upworthy post either agree or strongly agree that the post was interesting. This, along with the high clickthrough rate, suggests that participants were attracted to content produced by Upworthy. In comparison, the image heavy and celebrity focused

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[78] The staff at Upworthy have since changed the video on the page. For the original video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tWgALnxc8D4.

style adopted in the BuzzFeed piece was more divisive. Six of the seven participants who accessed the BBC News article deemed it to be interesting.[79]

Based on Chadwick's (2009; 2012) hypothesis of accidental exposure and by-product learning on social media, participants were also asked if the treatment post made them want to learn more about the environment. There was evidence of potential by-product learning for those subjects who were exposed to the BBC News article and, interestingly, the Upworthy post, as shown in Table 7.3. This challenges the substitution thesis, in that sharing emotive viral video content displaces other political acts. As noted in Chapter 1, viral videos can amplify interest in a civic or political cause and sometimes act as a gateway to further engagement. By comparison, five of the seven participants exposed to the BuzzFeed piece either disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. During the debrief for this experimental group a number of participants indicated that they perceived BuzzFeed to be an entertainment space and, as such, apolitical. The hypothesis that users click onto the website for lolcats and then stay for the news content was dismissed for those in this experiment (Peretti, 2014). This wasn't the case for Upworthy, with a number of participants in the debrief stating the source was both educational and informative.

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[79] I have omitted Change.org from this discussion due to the low clickthrough rate in that experimental condition.

Table 7.2. Level of interest in the treatment

"This post was interesting"	Treatment: Information type							
	BBC News	%	BuzzFeed	%	Change.org	%	Upworthy	%
Strongly agree	1	14.3	1	14.3	1	25.0	5	71.4
Agree	5	71.4	3	42.9	2	50.0	2	28.6
Disagree	0	0.0	2	28.6	1	25.0	0	0.0
Strongly disagree	1	14.3	1	14.3	0	0.0	0	0.0
n	7		7		4		7	

Table 7.3. Desire to learn more about the issue based on exposure to the treatment

"This post made me want to learn more about the environment"	Treatment: Information type							
	BBC News	%	BuzzFeed	%	Change.org	%	Upworthy	%
Strongly agree	0	0.0	1	14.3	0	0.0	4	57.1
Agree	6	85.7	1	14.3	2	50.0	2	28.6
Disagree	0	0.0	2	28.6	2	50.0	1	14.3
Strongly disagree	1	14.3	3	42.9	0	0.0	0	0.0
n	7		7		4		7	

The second set of analyses focus on the relationship between information type and political participation. Engagement is operationalised through a range of post-test survey measures.[80] While the 11-point scale used to measure the likelihood of future engagement is highly interpretive, as confidence levels in political attitudes can vary from person-to-person, the data does provide some indication of whether media effects occur. Seven forms of political participation are used to account for the other three states on the continuum of participation model: "expression," "connection," and "action." These forms of engagement are included to account for the scaled nature of political involvement. These include low-threshold forms of "expression" and "connection," such as discussing an issue with others or sharing campaign materials, and high-threshold "actions," like taking part in a demonstration.

Figure 7.2 illustrates the mean values for the subjects' future intention to participate across each experimental condition. Two indicators are used that reflect those acts most closely associated with the slacktivist critique; the likelihood a subject will write or sign a petition, and the possibility a participant will distribute or share information over social media. The findings show that exposure to any form of information from a media organisation leads to a higher likelihood of micro-activism, regardless of the information type. The one exception was that those in the control group were more likely to write or sign a petition relating to the environment than those who were exposed to the Upworthy post. There is one comparison that is particularly interesting in respect of the slacktivist critique; those exposed to the Upworthy post were less likely to engage in self-expression and digital micro-activism than those who clicked on the BBC News article. This suggests that an emotive viral video does not necessarily translate into digital micro-activism, as witnessed in the #Kony2012 case study. Even more surprisingly given the nature of the information, those that clicked on the petition on Change.org were less likely to participate in these acts than the control group. However, the prohibitively small sub-sample limits the inferences that can be drawn from this comparison.

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[80] I used an 11-point likert scale in order to analyse the data using measures of central tendency. However, there are intense disputes surrounding the suitability of treating ordinal data as if it were interval data. Jamieson (2003: 1214) argues that the mean and standard deviation are inappropriate for ordinal data, as we cannot presume that participants perceive the differences between adjacent levels to be equal. However, as Kostoulas (2013) argues, these criticisms typically apply to a four or five point scale. A likert scale where central tendency can be measured is usually composed of a series of four or more likert-type items that represent similar style responses, but are instead combined into a single composite score. The 11-point scale used required participants to position themselves on a scale with 11 equidistant anchors. These were unlabelled radio buttons. Participants were only informed that 0 refers to "very unlikely" and 10 refers to "very likely." The scale also had an unseen midpoint. As Norman (2010) argues, this type of likert scale is widely used for calculating the mean and standard deviation.

Figure 7.2. Mean score for future intention to participate in digital micro-activism based on treatment
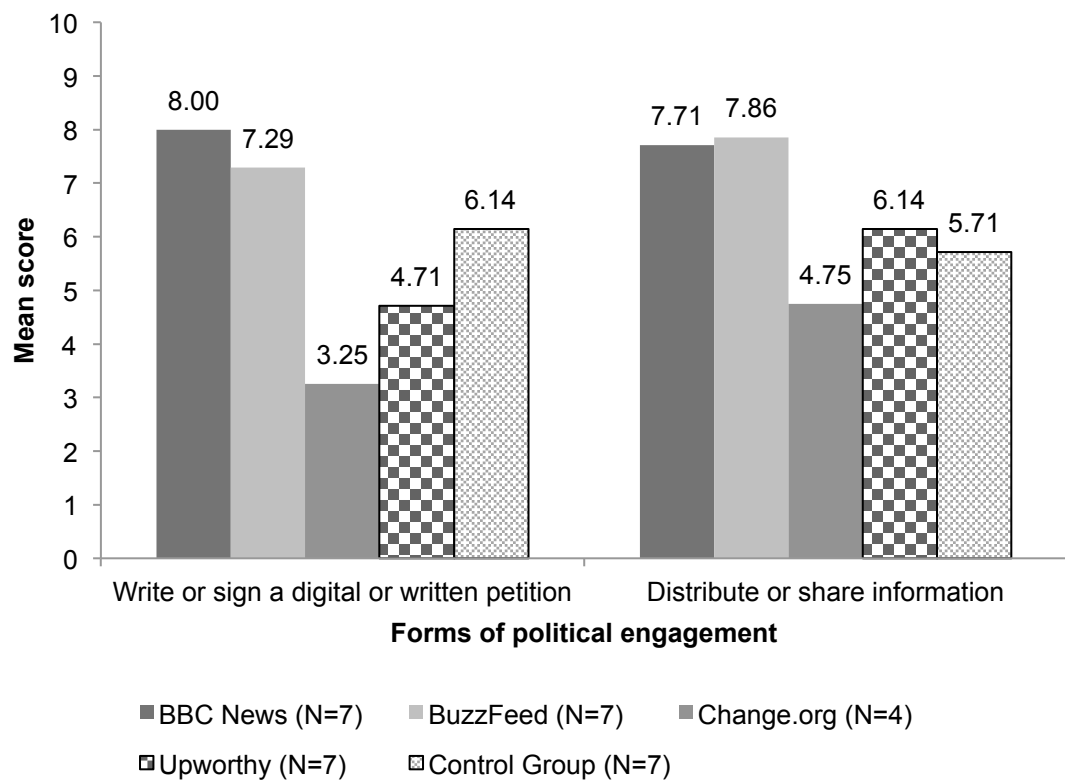
Table 7.4 shows the mean scores for each of seven modes of engagement across the treatment groups, the control group, and also for those subjects within the experimental groups who were not exposed to the treatment (i.e. noncompliance). As in the previous figure, the average mean score for all measures of engagement, bar one, were lower in the control group than in the experimental conditions with content from BBC News Online, BuzzFeed, and Upworthy. This suggests that information of any kind, excluding the e-petition, correlates with the likelihood of engagement. Those exposed to the BuzzFeed piece were most likely to participate across three indicators, despite this stimulus focusing on celebrity involvement in the People's Climate March. At first glance, this may seem to support the slacktivist critique. However, as Table 7.4 demonstrates, one should be sceptical of these averages as this experimental condition had the highest level of standard deviation amongst all of the treatment groups. Furthermore, by comparing the results from the BBC news article to the Upworthy video, those exposed to the video were actually more likely to engage in high-threshold forms of participation, such as taking part in a demonstration. Finally, the low mean scores from the e-petition on Change.org are also surprising, given that the very nature

of the source is to persuade others to act. This, alongside the low mean scores for those participants that did not click on the treatment, suggests that other variables may offer a more plausible explanation for this relationship.

Table 7.4. Mean scores for future intention to engage based on exposure to the treatment

Future intention to engage mean score (0-10)	Treatment: Information type					
	BBC News	BuzzFeed	Change.org	Upworthy	Control Group	No click
Discuss the issue with family, friends and acquaintances	6.71	8.43	7.75	8.86	7.86	5.25
Std deviation	3.45	1.72	2.22	1.46	3.18	3.37
Take part in a protest/rally/demonstration	3.00	4.14	1.75	3.29	2.00	1.63
Std deviation	2.16	3.98	1.71	1.80	2.08	2.33
Write, call or email a newspaper, magazine, or television news organisation	1.71	2.00	1.50	2.00	0.57	1.50
Std deviation	1.50	2.52	1.00	1.00	0.79	2.14
Contact an official	1.71	1.57	1.75	1.43	1.14	0.50
Std deviation	1.50	2.57	0.96	1.40	1.07	0.76
Donate money to a charity or campaigning organisation	4.71	4.57	3.00	5.29	2.14	3.75
Std deviation	2.36	2.70	1.83	2.81	2.12	3.77
Write or sign a digital or written petition	8.00	7.29	3.25	4.71	6.14	3.63
Std deviation	1.41	3.35	1.71	3.45	3.18	3.25
Distribute or share information over social media	7.71	7.86	4.75	6.14	5.71	4.88
Std deviation	2.14	2.73	3.30	2.41	3.55	3.14
n	7	7	4	7	8	8

Levels of interest in a range of different issues were also measured for this experiment in the pre-test survey. As Figure 7.3 illustrates, there was evidence of a positive linear relationship between the level of interest a participant had in the environment and the likelihood they would participate in forms of digital micro-activism in the future.[81] This suggests support for the expected findings (EF$_5$) and those who argue that online forms of participation are driven by private, personalised beliefs.

Figure 7.3. Mean score for future intention to participate in digital micro-activism based on the level of interest in the environment
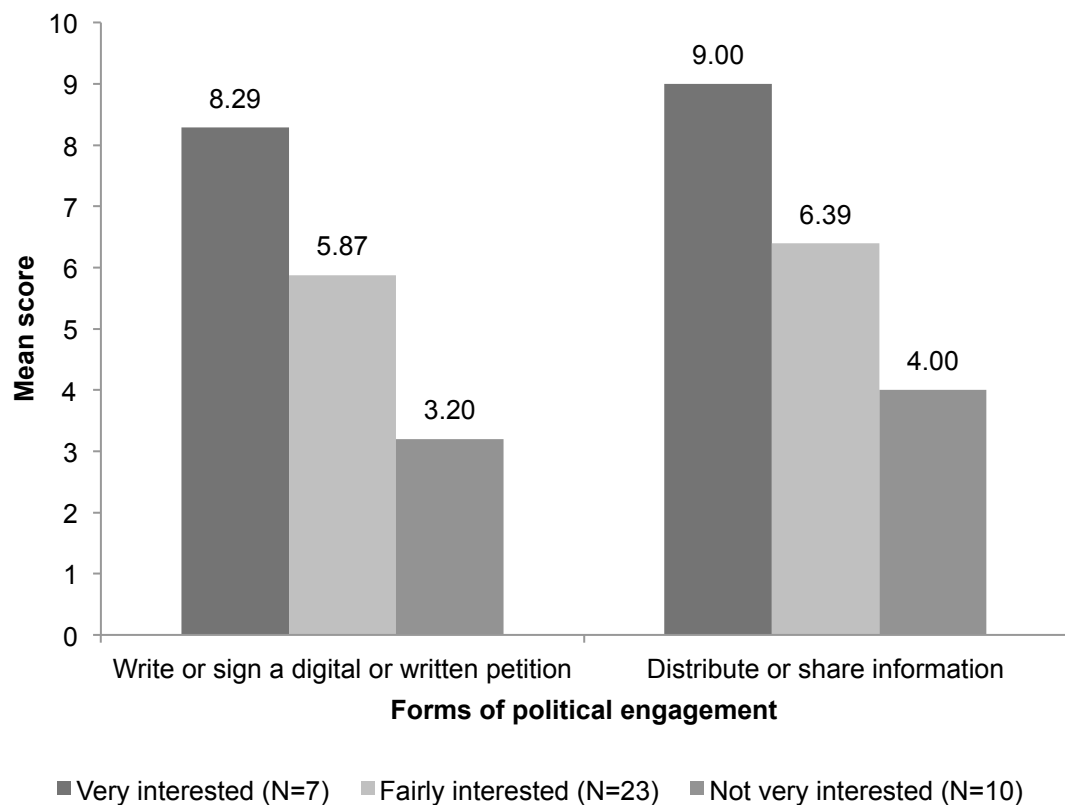
As Table 7.5 shows, this positive correlation is present across four of the seven different measures. There are three forms of engagement that do not reflect this trend: (1) contact the media; (2) contact an official; and (3) donate money to a charity or campaign. Those subjects who declared themselves to be "fairly interested" were more likely to undertake these acts than those who described themselves as "very interested" in the environment. This finding reflects a broader trend across both experiments, in that, regardless of the level of interest in the issue, subjects seemed highly unlikely to

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[81] I did not undertake any correlation analysis to determine the strength of the association between the two variables due to the sample size. As De Vaus (2014: 258) notes, it is much easier to obtain a spuriously large correlation coefficient with a small sample.

engage in any form of correspondence with elected representatives or with forms of broadcast media. One may hypothesise that this is a result of low levels of public trust in these actors, especially evident amongst this age demographic (see Hansard Society, 2014). This is reflective of Bennett's (2008: 14) actualizing citizen framework, in which young citizens turn their back on the media and politicians in favour of connections formed with like-minded others online. These results also show evidence of a positive correlation between pre-existing issue interest and the likelihood of digital micro-activism, casting doubt on the hypothesis that low-threshold online actions are undertaken inauthentically (H_3).

Table 7.5. Mean scores for future intention to engage based on level of interest in the environment

Forms of engagement	Level of interest (environment)		
	Very interested	Fairly interested	Not very interested
Discuss the issue with family, friends and acquaintances	8.71	7.57	6.10
Std deviation	1.80	2.84	2.92
Take part in a protest/rally/demonstration	3.71	2.87	1.50
Std deviation	3.45	2.44	1.65
Write, call or email a newspaper, magazine, or television news organisation	1.43	1.74	1.20
Std deviation	1.13	2.03	1.14
Contact an official	1.00	1.43	1.20
Std deviation	1.15	1.80	1.03
Donate money to a charity or campaigning organisation	3.29	4.87	2.40
Std deviation	2.56	2.90	2.37
Write or sign a digital or written petition	8.29	5.87	3.20
Std deviation	2.56	3.36	2.20
Distribute or share information over social media	9.00	6.39	4.00
Std deviation	1.91	2.75	2.79
n	7	23	10

Note: Mean scores are calculated on the basis of an 11-point, 0-10 scale.

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7.3 Conclusion for Experiment 1: Critical Citizens

This experiment found no clear evidence to suggest that young internet users participate on the basis of information type (H_3). On the contrary, subjects respond to those issues that resonate with their own pre-existing personal preferences (EF_5). While the results show that young citizens are interested in the content provided by new media producers like BuzzFeed and Upworthy, they do not simply accept the views that they are exposed to. The university students that took part in this experiment are critical citizens. I borrow this term from Norris (1999: 24), who introduced it to characterise the rise of citizens who question traditional sources of authority. I argue that those involved in this experiment, recruited because of their similarities to those deemed to be "slacktivists," maintain the same scepticism when consuming political information on social media.

The findings from this experiment and from the debrief suggest that, while they both drive attention on social media, BuzzFeed and Upworthy differ in terms of their perceived function. During the debrief a number of participants stated that BuzzFeed as a media organisation is not particularly suited to political reporting. We can see evidence of this, as participants were not motivated to learn more about the treatment issue. Subjects felt that the website has clearly defined boundaries; users visit the site for enjoyment and to procrastinate. Participants felt uneasy at the possibility of a convergence of styles, with BuzzFeed combining their knack for creating viral content on social platforms with the norms, customs, and expectancies that young citizens expect from political journalism. This scepticism was also evident in the diary research. As "Charlie" (entry 11) notes, chasing clickthrough rates may come at the expense of journalistic quality:

> The thing I think I dislike about it most is that BuzzFeed will be successful at selling news, well it will when it measures its articles in clicks and shares… What it might not be successful in is presenting a balance. News isn't supposed to be clickable content, it is supposed to be news coverage.

This suspicion, evident in both the media diaries and the experiment debrief, challenges the slacktivist critique, as those young social media users who took part are not as impressionable as feared (Morozov, 2011: 81-82; White, 2010; 2011). On the contrary, they critique the information they consume online.

In contrast, participants considered the emotive video shared on Upworthy to be both engaging and informative. This was illustrated by the average time spent on the

page lasting over the full length of the video, the high level of interest shown in the post based on the survey responses, and the desire to learn more about the environment following exposure. As such, while Upworthy may have been criticised for their use of clickbait headlines to gain attention, what differentiated the website from BuzzFeed in the debrief discussion was the clear purpose with which content is curated and published. The coherence of the ideological frame adopted by Upworthy was noted during the participant debrief. This was true for those who were familiar with the organisation, but also for participants who were visiting the website for the first time. Upworthy benefit from boundary drawing (Chadwick, 2013: 185), as the transparency of their motives and political biases seemed to resonate with participants. Upworthy successfully blend the roles and functions associated with both an activist group and a legacy news producer. This sheds some light on how the organisation may have been misinterpreted. Rather than viral video campaigns displacing more traditional forms of engagement, it may be the case that Upworthy represents a new type of media producer, one that uses the personalised narratives outlined in Bennett and Segerberg's (2013) logic of connective action by way of challenging the established norms of agenda setting. Their tagline—"Things that matter. Pass 'em on."—suggests they are an organisation of attention, not of mobilisation. In this way, the scaled continuum of participation offers a useful starting point for exploring their democratic function. In doing so, the case studies identified by the slacktivist critique as examples of laziness become a very different phenomenon. In this experiment, this quick fix did not result in a lack of deep thinking; those who viewed the video wanted to learn more about the issue. As Massing (2015) notes, even the #Kony2012 viral video brought an alternative point of view to international attention. The findings from Chapter 6 and this experiment show that the presentation of content can increase exposure but not shape attitudes; young, digitally active citizens are purposive in their information consumption.

As for the second outcome variable, the findings were somewhat unclear on whether information type and content presentation can influence political engagement. There was some evidence of correlation, but the reliability and validity of this association is questionable. In comparison to the control group, participants that accessed the BuzzFeed and Upworthy stimuli were more likely to participate in activities relating to the environment. Surprisingly, when compared to the reaction to the #Kony2012 video described in Chapter 1, those exposed to the Upworthy video were less likely to take part in digital micro-activism and more likely to take part in

effort-intensive acts than those shown the article from BBC News Online. However, these results are somewhat unconvincing given the challenges of noncompliance and the other contradictory results. One cannot make a confident assessment on the findings from those primed with the Change.org petition, as just four participants were exposed. Likewise, although those in the treatment group containing the BuzzFeed piece were most likely to engage across four of the indicators for participation, there were high levels of standard deviation associated with these means. This was common across all of the experimental groups, most likely a result of the prohibitively small number of participants in each group. Therefore, while the results illustrate evidence of a correlation between information type and engagement, this is not reliable.

The results also provide evidence of possible explanatory variables. On finding the low mean scores for those participants that did not click on the treatment, I also found evidence of a positive linear relationship between the level of pre-existing interest in the environment and four indicators of future participation. It may be the case that the level of one's interest in the environment acts as an intervening variable. However, I am unable to undertake elaboration analysis to determine what lies behind the correlations due to the limitations imposed by the sample size.

7.4 Rationale for Experiment 2: Testing for the Effect of Facebook Likes

Understanding why an individual undertakes an act of digital micro-activism is central to this thesis. The slacktivist critique offers two hypotheses. Firstly, Morozov (2011: 194) argues that popularity cascades may result in certain causes gaining a disproportionally higher place on one's agenda, as the opinions and actions of a citizen can be swayed by the popularity of an issue rather than its normative value. This can be a result of technological design, as algorithmic prioritisation on Facebook can result in content that is more popular featuring more prominently on a user's news feed.[82] Secondly, the networked characteristics of social media foster an environment in which digital micro-activism is undertaken on the basis of self-interest, as users neglect private opinion and pursue the will of the majority (see H_3). This is a digital manifestation of the spiral of silence, as users are aware that their online behaviour is visible and alter it to appeal to their networked peers even if sometimes they may not privately agree with such attitudes or behaviours (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). This is problematic, as opinions

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[82] Although the precise algorithm for the Facebook news feed is not publically known, Facebook have revealed that content popularity is a contributory factor (Constine, 2014).

can become normalised when citizens turn away from minority views in fear of social isolation.

The second experiment examines the willingness of participants to engage in an act of digital micro-activism on the basis of its popularity. An e-petition was designed, calling for the expense claims made by MPs to be kept in the public domain. This was based on an ongoing campaign coordinated by 38 Degrees, responding to a consultation established by the IPSA asking whether those MPs under investigation for the improper use of expenses should be granted anonymity (see Chapter 4). By using an e-petition, I was able to observe how the popularity of content affects the level of attention, in terms of clicks and time spent on the petition page, and whether that attention then converts into political action. Political engagement will be measured in two ways. Firstly, by virtue of a participant signing the petition. Secondly, through a series of likert-style questions that measure each subject's future intention to engage on the treatment issue.

This experiment uses the Facebook "Like" button, a function in which users can express their approval of content posted on the service, to explore the influence of social information on participant behaviour. This feature is included on status updates, comments, photos, advertisements and links shared by friends.[83] The like button also displays the total number of Facebook users who approve a post. This includes a full or partial list of each user's name, their profile picture, and a link to their Facebook profile.[84]

Unlike Twitter, Facebook is not a "neutral" platform. The timeline on Twitter includes all updates from accounts that the user chooses to follow. On Facebook, a complex algorithm is used to prioritise content on the news feed for each individual user (Constine, 2014). By using a range of indicators to determine the relevancy of a post to a user, Facebook can offer more targeted advertising. The commercial goals of Facebook are important to understanding the context of this experiment, as brands and media organisations are a key growth area for the social networking site. In 2013 the average user liked 50 percent more Facebook pages than in the previous year, where pages are defined as profiles for businesses, brands, and other organisations (Constine, 2014). As users are encouraged to like more pages, space on the news feed becomes an increasingly valuable commodity. Posts from friends and pages compete against each

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[83] For further information on the Facebook like button:
https://www.facebook.com/help/452446998120360.
[84] This list of users may be full or partial depending on privacy settings. The button also displays a list of any mutual friends and provides a button to add the user as a friend.

other for exposure on a user's news feed. As the number of brands and organisations willing to pay for sponsored updates has increased, the organic reach of posts has fallen.

As Facebook seek to prioritise the content that is most important to a user, the need for a robust algorithm becomes acute. At present, the algorithm used to determine what is shown on a user's news feed relies on "over 100,000 highly personalised factors" (Constine, 2014). In an interview with the technology website TechCrunch, Will Cathcart (as cited in Constine, 2014) the Director of Product Management at Facebook disclosed that popularity, in the form of likes, comments, clicks, and shares, is a powerful determinant of whether a post is shown on a user's News Feed:

> Essentially, everyone has to earn their space in the news feed. If they publish posts that are interesting enough to get likes, comments, shares, and clicks, their reach increases. If their posts bore people and are ignored and scrolled past by anyone who sees them, their reach decreases.

As such, the algorithm fulfills an automated gatekeeping role, in which certain posts receive additional exposure (Bell, 2014a).

The conclusions drawn from the diary research illustrate how the issues and stories that people are exposed to day-to-day can vary depending on their primary means of news consumption. Concerns exist that those who depend on social media miss important civic and political issues due to algorithmic prioritisation (Dewey, 2015; Jurgenson, 2015). This argument is exemplified in the dissemination of news relating to the 2014 protests in Ferguson, which followed the fatal shooting of Michael Brown by a police officer. Tufekci (2014b) highlighted how, on August 14 with the unrest at its peak, Twitter provided a constant stream of updates from both journalists and citizens on the ground. However, she found that the story received very little coverage on Facebook. This is what Tufekci describes as "algorithmic censorship," as popular content supersedes more pressing political and social issues. Crucially, these are topics that an editor of a newspaper would prioritise. Instead, news feeds were inundated with users sharing examples of the Ice Bucket Challenge, a fundraising activity in which someone is filmed pouring ice and water onto their head to raise money for research into Motor Neurone Disease (McDermott, 2014; Zuckerman, 2014). While the normative value of this civic engagement in comparison to coverage of the unrest in Ferguson is a point for debate, the importance of popularity as a determinant of prioritisation and subsequent attention is significant.

Facebook likes are therefore used as the treatment in this experiment by virtue of their role in determining news feed prioritisation. This experiment explores whether

subjects are more attentive to popular content, and if evidence of social approval leads to political engagement. The experiment will also further explore one of the findings from the diary research, that diarists pay attention to popular or controversial content but do not simply adopt the opinions or attitudes that they are exposed to. I investigate these conclusions by analysing the post-test responses of those that clicked on the treatment, to see if exposure shapes the likelihood of future engagement.

7.5 Results for Experiment 2: Testing for the Effect of Facebook Likes

As in the previous experiment, the results are structured around the two outcome variables, attention and engagement. The first measure of attention is the clickthrough rate on the e-petition in each experimental condition. In total 22 participants clicked on the treatment, accounting for around 58 percent of the entire sample. As Table 7.6 shows, there was some correlation between the level of likes and the probability that a participant would view the treatment. The treatment with the highest number of likes had a higher clickthrough rate (70 percent) than in the other treatment conditions. In comparison the control group, where no posts had any likes, also had a clickthrough rate of 70 percent. The findings suggest that observable social information has an influence on the clickthrough rate on an e-petition when the threshold of likes on the post is comparatively lower than the other items within a news feed.

Table 7.6. Clickthrough rate on the treatment

Treatment: Threshold of likes on e-petition	Page views	Group size	Clickthrough %
None (0)	4	9	44.4
Low (3)	4	9	44.4
High (16)	7	10	70.0
Control group	7	10	70.0

In order to further explore the relationship between the threshold of likes and the clickthrough rate, I also analysed how participants interacted with all of the other items on the news feed. These nine posts, outlined in Chapter 4, were constant across the three treatment groups, providing a larger sample to analyse. As Figure 7.4 shows, there was no evidence of a relationship between observable social information and clickthrough rate. Using Pearson's correlation (r=0.08) just 1 percent of the variation in clickthrough rate is due to the level of likes on a Facebook post. This suggests that there are other

variables that explain why Facebook users engage with content, such as the level of interest in the subject matter, the relationship of the receiver to the sharer, and the placement of the item on the news feed.

Figure 7.4. Clickthrough rate on all non-treatment posts in the news feed
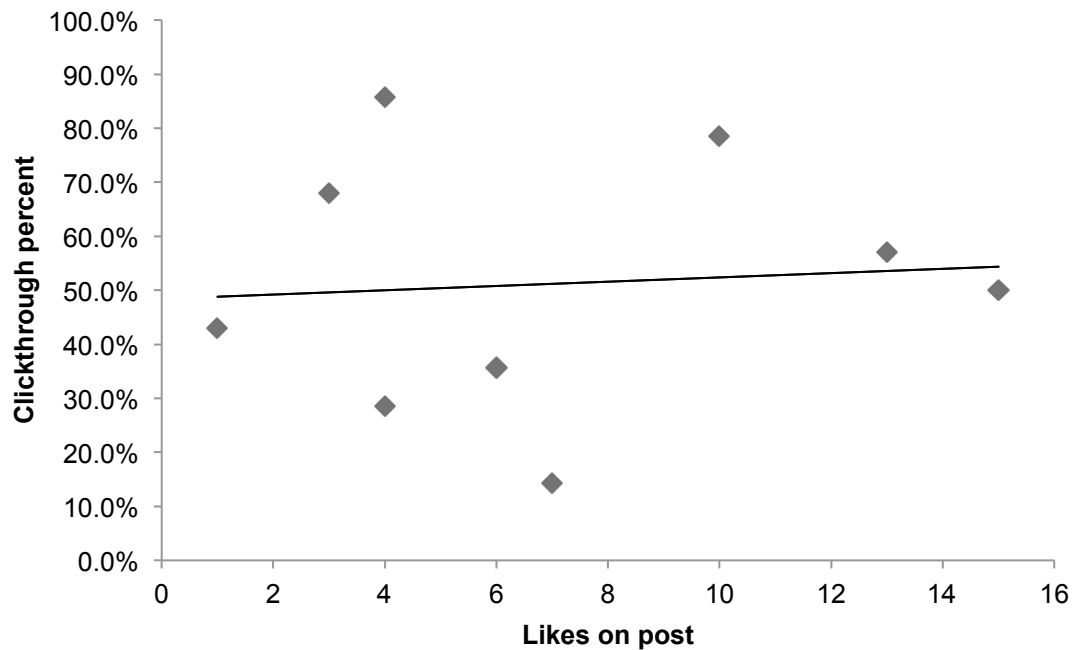
In addition, if we compare the combined clickthrough rate on all non-treatment posts in each experimental condition with the control group, which had the same posts without any social information, the clickthrough rate is largely mirrored. The only exceptions are three posts that have a comparatively lower level of likes. As Figure 7.5 illustrates, there were two posts for which there was at least a 10 percent difference in clickthrough rate, both of which had a low number of likes in comparison to the rest of the news feed; a BBC News article with three likes and a post on Digital Spy with four likes. This trend was also evident on the Bleacher Report article, which had one like, albeit to a lesser degree. Therefore, as with the treatment posts, the number of Facebook likes on a post only has an influence on click-though rate when the total number of likes is comparatively lower than on other posts. However, there was one exception to this association; the article from Upworthy only had four likes, but received a higher clickthrough rate in the treatment groups than in the control group. As noted in the first experiment, this suggests that the form of content provided by Upworthy can attract attention.

Figure 7.5. Comparison of clickthrough rate in treatment groups and control group
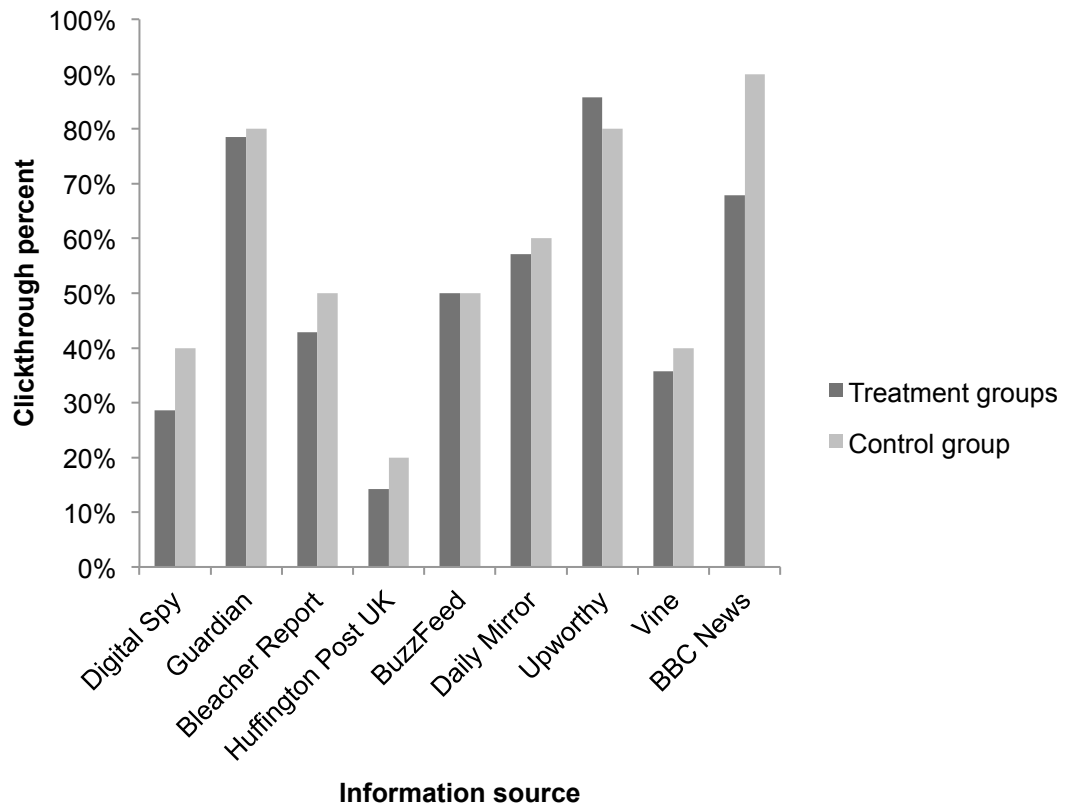
In order to further explore how the level of likes influenced attention, I also quantified the order in which participants clicked on non-treatment items. These results investigate whether the number of Facebook likes influence how participants prioritise content on the news feed.[85] The values in Figure 7.6 were calculated by assigning a rank-value to each article according to when the participant accessed it during the experiment. This was based on the data provided by the browser history for each participant. Those articles clicked first were assigned a value of ten, with subsequent items given a value decreasing in increments of one as priority decreased. A total was calculated for each item, which was then divided by the number of clicks on that post. This provided a mean score for the priority that users assigned to items on the news feed. Using Pearson's correlation (r=0.46), there was evidence of a moderate positive relationship between the number of likes on a Facebook post and the order that participants interacted with each post. Those posts with a higher number of likes were slightly more likely to be given higher priority in terms of attention. However, this relationship is negligible when we consider the sample sizes involved.

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[85] All posts included in this analysis had at least 10 clicks. Therefore, none of the treatment posts were included.

Figure 7.6. Content prioritisation scores for items on the news feed in treatment groups
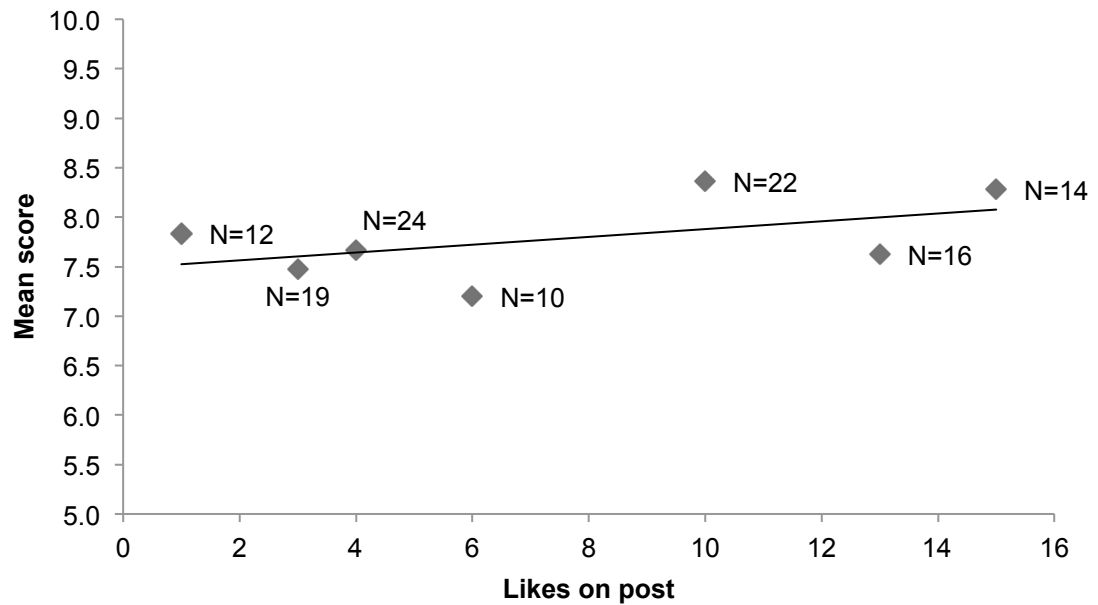
Given that the number of likes did not have a clear influence on attention, I also explored another possible explanatory variable; the level of interest in the MPs' expenses scandal. As Table 7.7 shows, there is evidence of an association between the level of interest in the issue and the clickthrough rate, with those most interested in the cause more likely to click on the petition. This seems to suggest that a pre-existing interest in the scandal was a determinant of attention during the experiment, although the low number of participants who declared themselves as "not at all interested" makes the reliability of these results somewhat questionable. This supports the personalised forms of political action that run through this thesis. In particular, it illustrates the organisational management of digital micro-activism in action. For 38 Degrees, sharing evidence of ones involvement helps to trigger like-minded others. This correlation is investigated further during the analyses of the second outcome variable, engagement.

Table 7.7. Clickthrough rate on the treatment based on the level of interest in MPs' expenses

Level of interest in MPs' expenses	Page views	*n*	Clickthrough %
Very interested	10	11	90.9
Fairly interested	8	16	50.0
Not very interested	3	8	37.5
Not at all interested	1	3	33.3

Engagement in the second experiment is measured in two ways. Firstly, participants were able to sign the e-petition that was used as the treatment post. Only 8 participants signed the petition across all experimental groups, accounting for around 21 percent of the sample. Given the low number of participants who signed the petition, it is difficult to offer any definitive conclusions about participant behaviour. As Table 7.8 shows, the experimental condition with the most signatories was the treatment post with no Facebook likes. This table also shows the results for the sub-sample who clicked onto the petition, rather than the entire group. In the high-threshold condition and the control group just 28.6 percent of those who accessed the e-petition went on to sign it, suggesting that other explanatory variables account for why subjects participate. As such, there was no correlation between the threshold of likes and the number of petition signatories across the different experimental groups.

Table 7.8. Petition signatories in each treatment group

Treatment: Threshold of likes on e-petition	Signatories	Entire group		Clickthrough only	
		Group size	%	Group size	%
None (0)	3	9	33.3	4	75.0
Low (3)	1	9	11.1	4	25.0
High (16)	2	10	20.0	7	28.6
Control group	2	10	20.0	7	28.6

There was evidence to suggest a weak correlation between the level of interest in the MPs' expenses scandal and the likelihood of a subject signing the petition. While bearing in mind the limitations of the sample size, seven of those that signed the petition were either very interested or fairly interested in the issue. Interpreting the results in a purely descriptive manner, Table 7.9 shows that those subjects who were more interested in the MPs' expenses scandal were slightly more likely to sign the petition. However, this association is problematic given the inconsistent sample proportionality for each band of interest. There were a number of limitations in using an e-petition as the treatment. Some participants felt that they were not permitted to sign the petition, as this would break the rules of the experiment. Likewise, others felt uneasy signing a petition in an experimental setting because of the Hawthorne effect, when participants change their behaviour because they know they are being monitored (McDermott, 2011: 35).

Table 7.9. Petition signatories based on level of interest in MPs' expenses

Level of interest in MPs' expenses	Signatories	*n*	%
Very interested	3	11	27.3
Fairly interested	4	16	25.0
Not very interested	1	8	12.5
Not at all interested	0	3	0.0

The amount of time that a participant spent browsing the treatment page before signing the petition raises some questions in relation to the slacktivist critique. Although the length of time participants spent on the page was more varied for those that did sign, the median value was actually marginally higher for those that did not sign the petition (47.5 seconds) than for those subjects that did (45.5) as shown in Figure 7.7. Both of these median values are lower than the average reading time for the page, calculated at 56 seconds for 282 words. Of the eight participants that did sign the e-petition, only three spent more than 56 seconds browsing the page. This would seem to support the slacktivist critique in that the ease of the action displaces the care and attention that are necessary for other more demanding acts (H_2). Furthermore, none of the subjects clicked on the links to further information included on the petition page. These links to professional news media provided information on the suggested changes by the IPSA. However, this was likely a result of the experimental conditions, as subjects were asked to only click and engage with the links included on the news feed (see limitations in Chapter 4).

Figure 7.7. Amount of time spent on the treatment
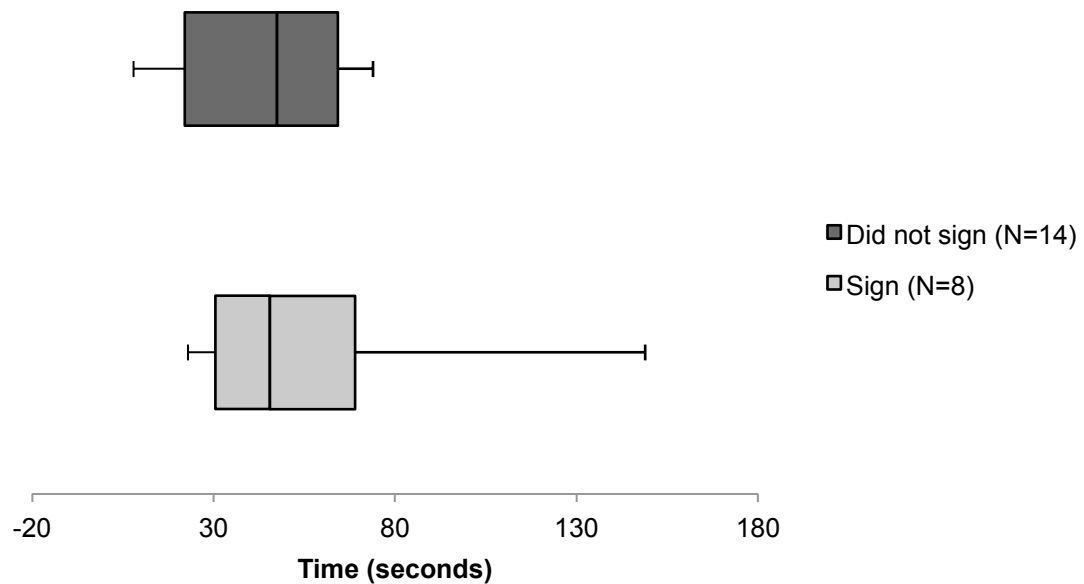
However, we must not take this at face value. As Nelson (2012) notes, undergraduate-level students tend to read at 450 words per minute (wpm), a faster rate than the average citizen (300 wpm). If accurate, a university student would need 42 seconds to read the petition rationale, thereby reducing the number of subjects who read the petition page faster than this to just three. Furthermore, reading habits online are quite unique; as citizens adapt to the mass of information online, they increasingly scan material rather than read it in-depth. Described as a "lean forward" medium (Will, 2012), the audience are active in the sense that they are able to interact with the medium, controlling the information they consume by switching to different web pages. This differs with "lean back" medium, like television, which is a more passive experience.

The experiment also did not account for each participant's knowledge of the treatment issue. While one participant spent 33 seconds browsing the petition page prior to signing it and a further two only spent 23 seconds, they all described themselves as being "very interested" (N=2) or "fairly interested" (N=1) in MPs' expenses. It is not possible to discount the possibility that these subjects were already well informed on the issue and therefore signed the petition on that basis. Still, irrespective of this potential expertise it is questionable whether it is possible to pay an e-petition due diligence in such a small amount of time, especially when we consider that this petition was not established by a trusted campaign group. In the same way that Morozov (2011: 179-181) refers to the Colding-Jorgensen experiment as an example of slacktivism in action,

some may deem this experiment to be supportive of the critique given that eight participants were willing to provide their personal details to a petition that was not legitimate. However, as four of the eight signatories noted during the debrief, they were willing to trust the petition because of the controlled, experimental conditions, and they would be more distrustful of an online campaign in an everyday setting. Consequently, there is a pressing need for further research in this area in order to understand both the motivational context and the level of campaign awareness when a citizen signs an e-petition. If it is the case that people sign without any real understanding of who is leading the campaign, this could have dangerous implications for the validity of e-petitions as a campaign tactic.

Engagement was also measured across seven indicators that measured the likelihood of future participation. The mean scores for these forms of engagement for those participants that clicked on the e-petition in each group are shown in Table 7.10. The condition with the highest likelihood of future action across six of the seven measures was the experimental group with no social information expressed through Facebook likes. Conversely, the group with the highest threshold of likes had the lowest mean scores for four modes of engagement. This seems to demonstrate that the number of likes forms a negative association with political engagement. However, the validity of these results is problematic given that only four people clicked on the treatment in two of the experimental conditions.

Table 7.10. Mean scores for future intention to engage based on exposure to the treatment

Forms of engagement		Exposure to treatment: Threshold of likes		
	None	Low (3 likes)	High (16 likes)	Control group
Discuss the issue with family, friends and acquaintances	6.50	3.43	5.29	6.57
Std deviation	2.08	2.58	3.90	3.26
Take part in a protest/rally/demonstration	4.00	2.75	1.29	2.00
Std deviation	1.83	2.87	1.60	2.65
Write, call or email a newspaper, magazine, or television news organisation	2.75	2.75	2.14	1.43
Std deviation	1.50	4.19	2.91	2.15
Contact an official	2.75	2.50	0.86	1.71
Std deviation	0.96	3.70	1.07	2.87
Donate money to a charity or campaigning organisation	2.50	3.00	1.57	0.71
Std deviation	2.52	3.37	2.37	1.89
Write or sign a digital or written petition	9.50	5.00	6.29	6.43
Std deviation	0.58	3.74	3.77	4.28
Distribute or share information over social media	8.25	6.00	5.71	6.29
Std deviation	1.50	2.71	4.11	3.77
n	4	4	7	7

Note: Mean scores are calculated on the basis of an 11-point, 0-10 scale.

If we extend the sample to include all participants in each experimental group, assuming that participants were exposed to the petition on their Facebook news feed, there is evidence of a remarkable level of similarity. While a significant proportion of these subjects did not click on the link to the petition (N=16), they were almost certainly exposed to the treatment: the number of likes on the treatment post. The e-petition was the fourth item on the news feed, meaning subjects would have had to scroll past the treatment post when navigating to the links listed below. As Table 7.11 shows, there was no evidence in this experiment of a relationship between the number of likes on the treatment post and the likelihood of future engagement. The mean scores across all seven forms of engagement are relatively varied. Unlike in the previous table, those participants in the high level of likes condition were most likely to share information on social media, while those in the low like condition were most likely to sign a petition relating to MPs' expenses. However, the standard deviation of these averages raises questions about the reliability of this data. In contrast, there is evidence of a correlation between the level of interest in the MPs' expenses scandal and the likelihood of future engagement. Table 7.12 presents a cross-tabulation of issue interest and the mean scores for future engagement. The more interested a subject was in the MPs' expenses scandal, the more likely they were to participate across all seven indicators, with a strong association for those political acts included within the scope of slacktivism (signing a petition; sharing information on the issue on social media). However, the accuracy of these mean scores is questionable as the standard deviation was higher for those who declared themselves to be very interested.

Table 7.11. Mean scores for future intention to engage based on experimental group

Forms of engagement	Experimental group: Threshold of likes			Control group
	None	Low (3 likes)	High (16 likes)	
Discuss the issue with family, friends and acquaintances	5.56	6.89	5.40	6.80
Std deviation	3.43	2.71	2.60	2.90
Take part in a protest/rally/demonstration	2.22	1.89	1.00	1.50
Std deviation	1.41	2.15	2.22	2.32
Write, call or email a newspaper, magazine, or television news organisation	1.33	2.11	1.50	1.10
Std deviation	2.59	3.22	1.66	1.85
Contact an official	1.33	2.00	0.60	1.20
Std deviation	0.97	2.96	1.50	2.49
Donate money to a charity or campaigning organisation	1.44	1.89	2.00	0.50
Std deviation	2.22	2.52	1.94	1.58
Write or sign a digital or written petition	6.11	3.56	4.40	4.90
Std deviation	4.33	3.54	3.76	4.31
Distribute or share information over social media	4.78	4.89	5.70	4.90
Std deviation	3.87	3.44	3.80	3.84
n	9	9	10	10

Note: Mean scores are calculated on the basis of an 11-point, 0-10 scale.

Table 7.12. Mean scores for future to intention to engage based on level of interest in MPs' expenses

Forms of engagement	Level of interest (MPs' expenses)			
	Very interested	**Fairly interested**	**Not very interested**	**Not at all interested**
Discuss the issue with family, friends and acquaintances	8.09	5.67	5.63	0.67
Std deviation	*1.87*	*2.82*	*2.13*	*1.15*
Take part in a protest/rally/demonstration	3.09	1.22	1.13	0.00
Std deviation	*2.95*	*1.22*	*0.83*	*0.00*
Write, call or email a newspaper, magazine, or television news organisation	3.36	0.44	0.75	0.00
Std deviation	*3.20*	*1.54*	*1.04*	*0.00*
Contact an official	2.45	0.67	0.63	0.00
Std deviation	*2.98*	*1.63*	*1.06*	*0.00*
Donate money to a charity or campaigning organisation	2.36	0.44	1.63	0.00
Std deviation	*3.04*	*1.01*	*1.92*	*0.00*
Write or sign a digital or written petition	7.73	5.11	2.25	2.00
Std deviation	*3.88*	*3.46*	*2.76*	*3.46*
Distribute or share information over social media	7.18	4.44	3.25	0.00
Std deviation	*3.57*	*3.34*	*2.12*	*0.00*
n	11	16	8	3

Note: Mean scores are calculated on the basis of an 11-point, 0-10 scale.

7.6 Conclusion for Experiment 2: Likes Don't Save Lives, or Dictate Them

These results show evidence of a correlation between the threshold of Facebook likes and user attention in some contexts, but no such association with engagement. As the analysis of the non-treatment items in the news feed shows, I did not find evidence of a linear relationship between the level of likes and the clickthrough rate. However, by undertaking comparisons with the control group, the clickthrough rate did decrease for those items with a proportionally lower number of likes than other posts on the same feed. Other explanatory variables were also considered, with evidence of a positive correlation between pre-existing issue interest and clickthrough rate. Therefore, the results of this experiment challenge the causal assumptions of the slacktivist critique. By arguing that content popularity dictates attention, those who support the critique overlook the complexity of individual level decision-making.

The results from this experiment challenge the hypothesis derived from the slacktivist critique; digital micro-activism was not based on popularity cascades (H_3). There was no correlation in this study between the level of likes on the e-petition and the likelihood of signing it. Furthermore, there was no evidence of a relationship between visible social indicators and the likelihood of future engagement, regardless of the difficulty of these actions. On the contrary, prior interest in the MPs' expenses scandal seemed to offer a much more plausible explanation for both measures of participation. Subjects seem to be acting on the basis of their own pre-established personal preferences rather than on the basis of visible social approval from others (EF_5). This would seem to cast doubt over the hypothesis that acts of micro-activism are inauthentic or narcissistic. However, these results did not reject the hypotheses of the slacktivist critique entirely. Of the eight participants that did sign the e-petition, three spent only 33 seconds or less browsing the rationale before committing their support to the campaign. Further research is therefore required to explore and understand the factors and conditions that result in a citizen signing an e-petition.

A theme running throughout this thesis is to encourage researchers to avoid over-emphasising the easily observable. Acts of slacktivism are precisely this. Without contextual understanding it may seem rational to assume that these easy actions are fundamentally irrational, that their ease of use makes them trivial and prone to the undue influence of popularity. Yet, just as the media diaries show how exposure to political material on social media can trigger rich deliberative exchanges in private spaces, the slacktivist critique also does not account for those who do not act when

faced with these stimuli. Political campaigns gain traction and user attention on Facebook and Twitter on a regular basis, but that does not necessarily lead to widespread engagement. When the real space mobilisation failed to materialise following the widely shared #Kony2012 video, this was heralded as proof of the futility of digital micro-activism. But perhaps this overlooks the reasons why those who had shared the video did not decide to engage further. The research on the hybrid mobilization movement 38 Degrees, and the results from the media diaries show that citizens act on the basis of complex personal judgements. The findings from this experiment develop this logic, showing that the assumption that popularity dictates user behaviour is flawed and vastly underestimates the role of the individual's own reasoning or identifications.

7.7 Evaluation: The Conditions of Personalised Activation

> The algorithms used by Facebook to filter news posts have an effect on the information seen by users – but not nearly as much as the choices made by users themselves.
>
> (Bakshy, Messing and Adamic, 2015)

This chapter has found evidence of a correlation between pre-established personal preferences and political participation, rather than the form in which political content is presented or its popularity with wider publics (H_3). As such, digitally active students are more information savvy than the slacktivist critique gives them credit for (Morozov, 2011: 190). The correlations that emerged from this quasi-experimental study show that users respond to information on Facebook that resonates with their own private political beliefs (EF_5).

These results further develop the interpretive findings from Chapter 5 and Chapter 6, demonstrating that personal identity is a significant explanatory variable for political participation. In an activist context, members of 38 Degrees pick and choose the campaigns to which they relate; their activism is formed around their own issue interests. In day-to-day life, those diarists that I categorise as listeners overcome the cognitive loads associated with public behaviour on social media when faced with an issue that resonates with their own privately held beliefs. Consequently, these experiments support the causal claim raised by the slacktivist critique: users can be triggered into political action by material that they are exposed to on social media. However, they show that this behaviour is not inauthentic. Rather, the conditions of

activation at the individual level revolve around personal identity; subjects monitor the information space and wait for an issue that they identify with (Amnå and Ekman, 2014).

These findings provide evidence for the description of mediated citizenship provided in the theoretical framework (Bennett, 2008; Bennett and Segerberg, 2013; Papacharissi, 2010) and further illustrate the typology of citizen roles in social media environments. Across both experiments there was evidence of a correlation between issue interest and the two outcome variables, attention and engagement.

Firstly, in showing that content presentation (Table 7.1) and popularity (Table 7.6) correlate with attention but not engagement, the results offer further support for the findings from Chapter 6; digitally active citizens do not act on the basis of informational shortcuts alone. On the contrary, young, university-educated citizens maintain a healthy scepticism of the political information that they access on social networking sites. Although the #Kony2012 case study in Chapter 1 shows how an emotive campaign can lead to questions over the information literacy skills of young people, these case-specific concerns should not be applied to an entire medium.

By analysing the triggers of attention in these experiments, this chapter explores the conditions in which accidental exposure and by-product learning occur on Facebook (Chadwick, 2012). The findings from Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 both illustrate that users are accidentally exposed to political content on social networking sites, but differ in how this access relates to attention and political action. In the media diaries, participants would reflect upon a range of political issues they had been exposed to on social media, some of which they disagreed with. The trigger for attention was often the controversial nature of the post or the specific circumstances surrounding an issue, such as the presence of a celebrity like Russell Brand. As such, diarists learnt of opposing views which opposed their own.[86] However, when the content shared is a call to action, subjects are more purposeful. Members of 38 Degrees often become activated and involved in the movement when exposed to evidence of digital micro-activism. Similarly, in the second experiment there was a correlation between a subject's level of interest in the MPs' expenses scandal and clickthrough rate (Table 7.7). This is also illustrated in the first experiment, as the Change.org petition had a lower clickthrough rate when compared to the other sources of information (BBC News Online; BuzzFeed;

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[86] There is a pressing need for further research on the effects of political polarisation on day-to-day media habits, with substantial debate over the prevalence of echo chambers in the literature (Bakshy et al., 2015; Barberá et al., 2015; Conover et al., 2011; Kosinski; Stillwell and Graepel, 2013). No conclusions can be drawn on political polarisation in this study as, although issue interest did not correlate with clickthrough rate in the first experiment, the diversity in information providers acts as an intervening variable.

Upworthy). In itself, this is intuitive; citizens pay attention to campaign material on issues that they are interested in.

The second experiment also develops our understanding of the conditions in which digital micro-activism occurs, as there was a correlation between the level of interest in MPs' expenses and the likelihood of signing an e-petition or contributing to a discussion on social media. This suggests support for the theoretical framework offered in this thesis. This individualisation is representative of Bennett's (2008: 13) actualizing citizen model, as young citizens become more responsible for the production and management of their own political identities. Furthermore, by triangulating the findings across the three empirical studies in this thesis there is evidence to support Papacharissi's (2010: 131-132) conceptualisation of the private sphere, as these digitally active citizens participate in both public and private spaces around individualised motivations.

By equating motivation to technological design, the slacktivist critique is an example of technological determinism. As I outlined in Chapter 1, "cognitive mobilization," in which the public's ability to process information has increased due to improvements in education provision and a reduction in the cost of acquiring information, has fundamentally changed how the public conceives and acts upon their citizenship (Dalton, 1984; 2008; Giddens, 1991; Inglehart, 1970; 1990; Norris, 2011). However, the slacktivist critique ignores these attitudinal shifts. As the empirical research in this thesis shows, if we look beyond publically visible actions and account for individual level political attitudes, there is evidence of rich forms of mediated citizenship.

Finally, the experiments also provide further support for the typology of citizen roles in social media environments introduced in Chapter 6. Civic instigators and contributors engage in digital micro-activism by way of refining their political identity. For them, engaging in these acts is relatively easy. However, few diarists reflect these categories. The majority were listeners, using social media to consume political information but refraining from public forms of expression. This divergence in online behaviours was evident in the experiments, which is surprising given that the sampling frame was designed to recruit those who fit the description of a "slacktivist"; participants were heavy Facebook users and held an interest in politics. Despite this homogeneity there was evidence of a stark dissimilarity in the willingness to participate in the indicators most closely associated to slacktivism, that is, signing an e-petition and raising awareness by sharing information on social media. I first noticed this trend

during my analysis of the second experiment. As Figure 7.8 shows, there is a higher standard deviation for the mean scores for these two indicators in comparison to the likelihood that subjects would engage in other forms of political engagement in the future. This variance was evident across each of the three treatment groups and the control group. This dispersion shows that the mean does not accurately represent what is typical.

Figure 7.8. Standard deviation of mean scores for future intention to engage on MP's expenses
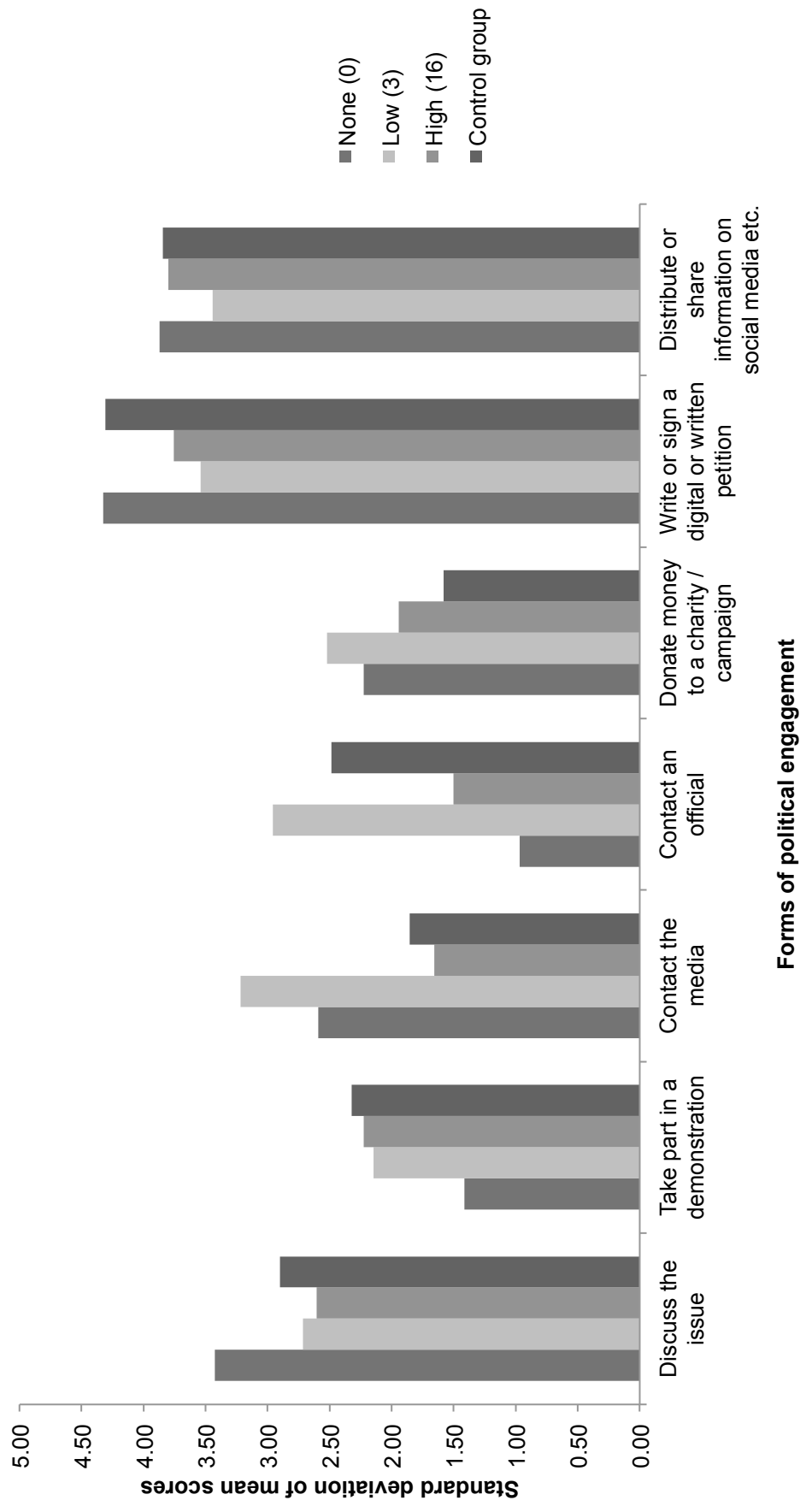
In order to ascertain if this trend was isolated to this specific issue I explored the two dummy issues used in each experiment in order to mask the treatment, as shown in Table 7.13. As the stimulus for these issues was the same across all experimental conditions, there was a larger sub-sample to analyse. For three of the four dummy issues, these two indicators have the highest level of standard deviation, although the dispersion is not as distinctive as in the previous illustration. Therefore, even amongst a relatively homogenous sample of digitally active young people, there is still evidence of a real divide in the willingness to engage in digital micro-activism.

Table 7.13. Standard deviation of mean scores for intention to engage based on the control issues

| Forms of engagement | Control issues | | | |
	LE1: Women's rights	LE1: Immigration	LE2: Rights of persons with disabilities	LE2: Immigration
Discuss the issue	2.75	1.86	2.64	1.73
Take part in a demonstration	2.39	2.82	2.51	**3.52**
Contact the media	2.35	2.24	2.09	1.98
Contact an official	1.60	2.48	2.67	2.62
Donate money to a charity / campaign	2.19	2.55	2.97	3.46
Write or sign a digital or written petition	**2.91**	**3.34**	**3.51**	**3.81**
Distribute or share information on social media	**2.80**	**2.88**	**3.00**	3.30
n	34	38	32	30

Note: The two forms of engagement with the largest standard deviation for each issue are in bold.

While these conclusions contravene the hypotheses of the slacktivist critique (H_3), there are some reliability issues. Both experiments were exploratory in their design, and therefore do not offer causal inferences on user behaviour. As outlined in Chapter 4, a significant limitation of these experiments is that they are small-N, with a maximum of 10 participants in each experimental condition. While this may seem to detract from the norms of experimental research, in that experiments are generally used to generate powerful empirical claims (Druckman et al., 2011: 9), the aim of this experiment was not to generalise a pre-existing theoretical assumption. These experiments were designed to explore the hypotheses of the slacktivist critique outlined

in Chapter 3, while also observing how users engage with the Facebook news feed more broadly.

The difficulties of collecting data on Facebook should not detract from our efforts to research it. Although it may be easier to collect data from Twitter in a valid and reliable way, Facebook is still the most widely used social networking site in the UK, with over 30 million users.[87] It is imperative that those who study the service continue to work towards new and innovative research designs, detailing both their successes and flaws so that we can collectively offer solutions to the complex methodological questions posed by social media research (see Dennis, Gillespie and O'Loughlin, 2015). As this thesis has shown, if we move past the reification of the easily observed offered by slacktivist critique, we can find rich forms of democratic engagement taking place across the continuum of participation in hybridised, often private, spaces.

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[87] For further information on the Facebook UK user base: http://www.statista.com/statistics/268136/top-15-countries-based-on-number-of-facebook-users/.

8. Conclusion: The Candle Burns Bright

> These symbolic, epistemic acts online —derided as "slacktivism"— may well be among the most important effects of the Internet.
>
> (Tufekci, 2014a)

Set in the ongoing debates around slacktivism, a pejorative term that refers to inauthentic, low-threshold forms of political engagement online, this thesis examined the effect of routine social media use on political participation in Britain. By generating thick, descriptive data on individual level political attitudes and behaviours, this study provided an account of how the use of Facebook and Twitter can bring benefits to forms of democratic citizenship.

I argue that the slacktivist critique has an overly narrow focus, isolating those routine actions which users undertake day-to-day from other forms of communication and modes of engagement. An alternative theoretical approach—the continuum of participation—was proposed to understand what happens before collective, or connective, action. A series of research questions were formulated based on this: What political information do citizens consume on Facebook and Twitter? Do these social networking sites provide a space for discursive engagement, and if so, what is the nature of this discussion? And, crucially, do these low-effort interactions evolve into further participatory acts? When they do, what are the attitudinal motivations driving this involvement?

An experimental, mixed-methods research design was used to explore these questions in three different settings. Firstly, in an activist context, through an ethnography of the political movement 38 Degrees. Secondly, within day-to-day life, by combining evidence of participant behaviour online with reflective diaries. Thirdly, in those conditions in which slacktivism is hypothesised to thrive, through a series of laboratory experiments conducted on Facebook.

The main findings of this study suggest that Facebook and Twitter create new opportunities for cognitive engagement, discursive participation, and political mobilisation. 38 Degrees uses social media to support engagement repertoires that blend online and offline tactics. This organisational management of digital micro-activism provides participatory shortcuts for wider audiences, enabling their grassroots members to shape campaign strategy. But, in contrast to both proponents and critics of online participation, there is no evidence of a widespread self-expressive logic. Instead, this study identifies a typology of citizen roles in social media environments. "Civic

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instigators" and "contributors," those who most closely represent slacktivists, engage in digital micro-activism by way of refining their political identity. Meanwhile, "listeners" use social media to consume political information but refrain from public forms of expression. Instead, they take to private spaces for political discussion. When listeners do act it is not effortless, but carefully considered. According to the results of the experiments, this is based on pre-established personal preferences, rather than the stylistic presentation of information or visible indicators of popularity. As such, I argue that these symbolic acts should not be dismissed as slacktivism but understood as forms of active citizenship.

This chapter begins by firstly outlining the main findings from this study. Secondly, by comparing the results of this micro-level analysis to those from macro-level studies, I consider the limitations of this thesis and suggest the need for future comparative research. Finally, the most significant contributions of this thesis are discussed in relation to the utopian-dystopian divide at the heart of this field. I reflect on how these disputes stem from fundamental differences in how participation is conceptualised.

8.1 Main Findings

This thesis challenges slacktivism as a judgement on contemporary political action. Each of the expected findings and the hypotheses derived from the slacktivist critique will be revisited, to illustrate the limitations of the concept as a representation of how citizens use social networking sites for political engagement.

Firstly, there was evidence that Facebook and Twitter users are exposed to political information as a by-product of using either service (EF_1). In an activist context, 38 Degrees members depend on the movement for political information on topics that they deem to be "alternative," ignored by professional media (e.g. Interview 8, June 2013; Interview 22, November 2013). In everyday use, the diaries demonstrate a service-specific logic in which Facebook users are more likely to be accidentally exposed to political information online, supporting Chadwick's (2012) hypothesis, while Twitter users tailor their news consumption around their own personal interests. However, this personalisation does not mean that these citizens bypass important political issues, as a comparison of the content of the diaries with the lead stories of four British newspapers showed that moments of collective exposure still occur. Rather than social media being used as an alternative to other sources of news (H_2), the diaries show

how Facebook and Twitter are used to complement long-standing sources of information; a hybridisation of media habits.

Secondly, participants in this research did have political conversations that were based on their use of Facebook and Twitter, but not in the way that I expected based on the theoretical framework (EF$_2$); they were not what I characterised as "Facebook activists," ready and willing to express themselves and deliberate in public and semi-public online spaces. Although in a campaign setting 38 Degrees members were more willing to share political information, the diaries showed little evidence of a widespread self-expressive logic on social media. However, this does not mean that these users simply passively consume the information that they are exposed to online, as suggested by the slacktivist critique, but rather that they take to private spaces to discuss this material. This can either take place online, with WhatsApp playing a prominent role for some diarists, or face-to-face. This shows that although technological boundaries may be porous, social boundaries are not (EF$_6$). Furthermore, this thesis supports the findings of Bakshy, Rosenn, Marlow and Adamic (2012), as participants were often exposed to political information shared by weak ties. These were predominantly civic instigators and contributors, those who frequently post about politics. However, rather than challenge this user or discuss the issue with them, listeners discuss the topic with strong tie contacts in a private environment. Although these forms of discursive engagement are not public, they are still examples of active citizenship, as posts on social media trigger political talk.

This evidence paints a picture far removed from those accounts decrying a crisis of political apathy in Britain (Hatfield, 2015). However, it should be noted that much of this rich political discussion took place in private spaces and did not result in public-political actions. If this typology can be applied to the target population more generally, does this lead to significant inequalities in terms of who shapes political discussion within semi-public spaces, like Facebook? Does the presence of civic instigators explain the polarised and fractious nature of some political discussion online (Baek, Wojcieszak and Delli Carpini, 2012; Valenzuela, Kim and Gil de Zúñiga, 2011)? Furthermore, algorithmic prioritisation on Facebook and asymmetric visibility on Twitter, neither of which were considered in this study, also affect a user's reach. These questions suggest that exploring the dynamics of the typology of citizen roles in social media environments represents a fruitful avenue for future research. Coleman and Blumler (2009) have suggested one potential solution to the disparities in influence. They recommend that a dedicated, publicly funded "civic commons" could be created to

facilitate a more equal, deliberative space. However, the feasibility of this is questionable given that many of the democratic benefits found in this thesis were a by-product of using social media for *personal* use.

Thirdly, participants used Facebook and Twitter for private expression on public-political agendas, but in ways that were surprising and more nuanced than I predicted (EF$_3$). Only a minority of the sample supported the theoretical framework due to the inhibitions that some felt in expressing their private self in public spaces online; Goffman's theatrical metaphor still holds true (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Chadwick, 2012; Papacharissi, 2010). The purpose and frequency of these forms of public and semi-public expression were related (EF$_3$). Civic instigators and contributors—those most reflective of slacktivists—hone their political identity through frequent public-political interactions. Meanwhile, listeners act infrequently on the basis of deeply held private motivations.

The ethnography of 38 Degrees demonstrated how staff strategically use the low-threshold functions on Facebook and Twitter in a variety of ways across the continuum of participation: social media is used as a discursive space, so that members can influence issue selection and campaign strategy; members are encouraged to share material to raise awareness amongst wider publics; and, Facebook and particularly Twitter can be an effective space for forms of online activism. These logics are often intertwined in a single campaign. I saw this practice first hand as the movement tried to gain support for an amendment to the Energy Bill to decarbonise the UK's electricity generation by 2030. As point 1 on Figure 8.1 illustrates, 38 Degrees initially asked the membership for their views on the bill and how the movement should respond to it. Following this consultation, point 2 demonstrates how social media was used as a means of raising public awareness of the bill and widening support for the cause. Finally, point 3 illustrates how, on the day of the vote, the movement mobilised members to tweet their MP and apply pressure on them to vote in support of the decarbonisation target. The amendment was narrowly defeated by just 23 votes.

Figure 8.1. Examples of the organisational management of digital micro-activism from the Energy Bill campaign, 2013
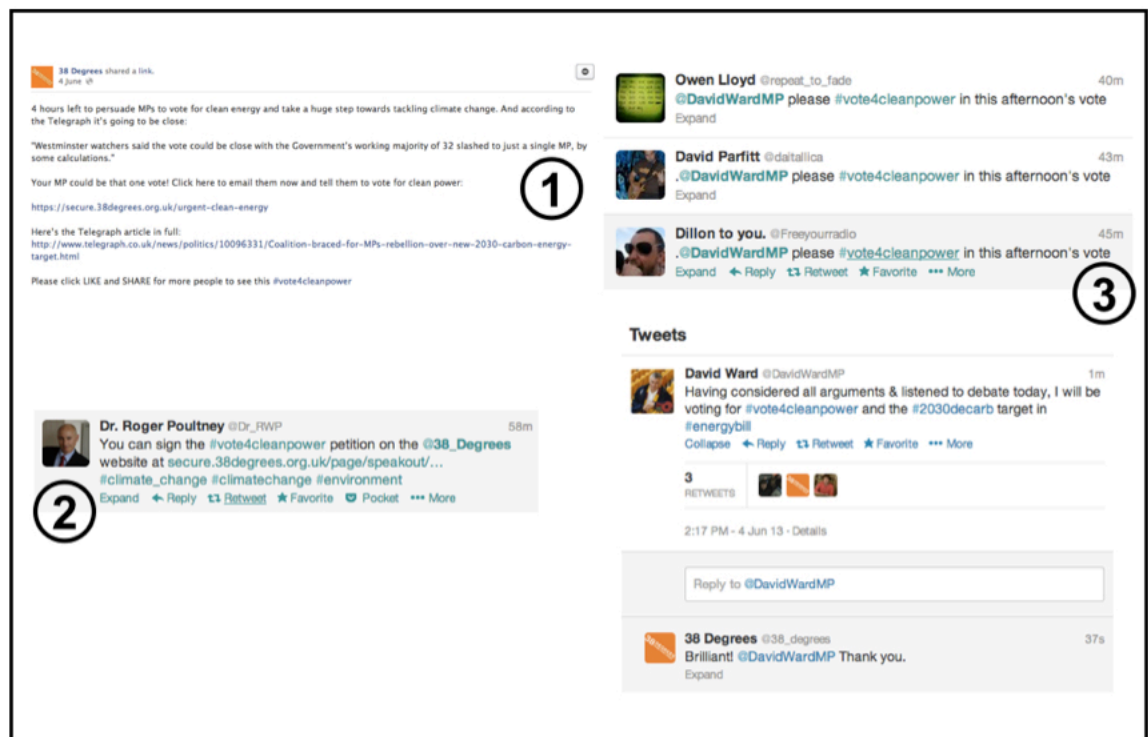
Fourthly, although there were examples of 38 Degrees members and diarists signing e-petitions and contacting their representatives digitally, the argument that low-threshold political acts on Facebook and Twitter simply replace equivalent low-effort, offline forms of engagement obfuscates more complex participatory processes (EF$_4$). For some diarists, the antecedents of political behaviour online were not low-threshold.[88] The real and imagined audience on Facebook and Twitter pose a unique obstacle for listeners as they navigate the various transfigurations of public, semi-public, and private spaces. This can raise the threshold of micro-activism. At the organisational level, my findings indicate that these tools are being used to cultivate a new type of netroots activism: political activism organised through social media. The leadership at 38 Degrees believes that this granular approach makes it easier for those citizens who are on the periphery of the "Westminster Bubble"[89] to get involved (Interview 4, May 2013; see Grant and Warhurst, 2014). While further research is required to verify this claim, this thesis suggests that member-led, hybrid mobilization movements use social networking sites to provide a variety of substantive ways in

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[88] Doubt must also be raised over whether sending a postcard or placing a sticker on you car bumper also represent easy, low-threshold acts, as similar social anxieties may be present.

[89] The Westminster Bubble is a characterisation those working in Parliament as being isolated from life outside it. The politicians, civil servants, and journalists working in and around Westminster are considered as a community removed from the experiences and concerns of the general public.

which members can both shape and take part in campaigns. This organisational management of digital micro-activism connects digitally mediated actions to real space action repertoires, rather than replacing them as hypothesised by the slacktivist critique (H_1). There was no evidence of this at the individual level either, as those who contributed the most online were also the most involved offline. This supports the hypotheses of Christensen (2011; 2012) within a British context.

Fifthly, engagement in this study was based on a reflexive, individually defined notion of political identity (EF_5). This was in stark contrast to the hypothesis that acts of slacktivism on social media are inauthentic, undertaken by users on the back of cascades to cultivate a managed identity online (H_3). While the slacktivist critique is correct to suggest that Facebook and Twitter can act as a site of activation, in which interest for an issue is ignited, this is formed by more than just incidental exposure. Based on the experiments undertaken as part of this thesis, stylistic information and popularity do not spark engagement. Instead, this activation requires a confluence of pre-existing interests and private experiences. For those diarists I describe as listeners, public expression and action is based on those issues that they are most passionate about. Given the audience dilemma, these actions are only undertaken when they are compelled to do so, most commonly on topics that relate to them personally. Conversely, civic instigators and contributors engage in low-threshold public actions online as part of a sense-making process, as they continue to formulate and adapt their own personal, political identity. What unifies these citizen roles is this emphasis on the individual.

In line with those that argue that personal efficacy is driving citizen activists from ineffective traditional structures of group-based politics to new activist groups (Dalton, 2008; Norris, 2011; Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley, 2004), members of 38 Degrees mobilise around campaigns that resonate on an individual level. This is despite the deep ideological divisions that I encountered during a fractious, and at times very awkward, members meal that I organised as part of my fieldwork (see Chapter 5). The identity framing by which members take collective action is inherently private. It is through exposure to emotionally salient information that the leadership brings together its ideologically disparate and geographically dispersed membership. Therefore, emotive forms of self-expression, which are derided by the slacktivist critique as inauthentic, act as an identity frame. These personal action frames provide momentum for further digital and real space action (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013).

Their involvement is sustained by the ways in which the leadership prioritises member influence. Those 38 Degrees members that I interviewed are reflective of Bennett's (2008) actualizing citizen framework, as their participation is framed by their pursuit of individual autonomy.[90] Members influence the selection of each campaign, shape tactics, and ultimately choose which actions to be part of and to what degree, but depend on the leadership at 38 Degrees for its campaigning expertise. This was evident in the early adoption of the Campaigns By You service, as members sought to create and manage their own campaigns, but were frustrated by the technological restrictions that the website imposed on them.

Although the overall findings from this thesis suggest a positive interpretation of the value of Facebook and Twitter for democratic engagement, there were a number of cases that support some of the concerns raised by the likes of Gladwell (2010) and Morozov (2009; 2011). One is the quality of information that micro-activism is based on, given the speed of dissemination on social networking sites (H_3). As the 38 Degrees petition to stop the Conservative Party restricting public access to GP appointments shows, social media dramatically accelerates the speed of campaigning. While this agility can sustain the momentum of a campaign, it can also risk the movement's legitimacy if the rationale for an action is not clear. The results from the experiments also raise questions about the decision-making processes that citizens undertake when deciding to sign a petition. Of the eight participants that signed the e-petition in the second experiment, three spent less than 33 seconds browsing the petition text before committing their support to the campaign. Further research is therefore required to understand what factors lead citizens to support a petition.

Perhaps surprisingly, the final expected finding proved to be the most important (EF_6). As the typology of citizen roles in social media environments indicates, social boundaries proved to be the story of this thesis, rather than interconnectivity. The slacktivist critique assumes that all those who engage in forms of micro-activism do so from the same state; that these actions are universally low-threshold for all participants. As the research on 38 Degrees, the media diaries, and the results from the experiments show, this is not the case. Even within a relatively homogenous sampling frame, as used in the experiments, there was still widespread divergence in the participants' willingness to engage in public forms of self-expression and micro-activism.

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[90] My interviews predominantly focused on those members who would be described as active within the movement. These form the minority and, as such, this argument cannot be extended to all those citizens that the leadership describe as "members."

8.2 Limitations and Future Research: Contextualising Digital Micro-Activism Nationally and Globally

The results from two large-scale, representative survey projects provide a basis to contextualise these findings, both nationally and globally. The annual *Digital News Report* (http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/), provided by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, tracks digital news consumption internationally. The *Audit of Political Engagement* (http://www.auditofpoliticalengagement.org/), undertaken by the Hansard Society, provides a yearly benchmark to measure political participation in Britain. The results from both demonstrate that the sampling frame used throughout this thesis is not representative of the attitudes and behaviours of the wider British public. However, these surveys also demonstrate how the contributions of this thesis offer a starting point for further research on general behavioural trends.

Firstly, although the content published by BuzzFeed and Upworthy feature amongst the most shared on Facebook, they are not amongst the most widely used news sources in the UK. Both are still niche content providers. As Figure 8.2 illustrates, BuzzFeed only has a very small slice of the online news audience, with BBC Online accounting for a substantial proportion of weekly visits to news websites. This trend was illustrated in Chapter 6, where it was found that many of the diarists relied on a variety of BBC sources. However, as the latest instalment of the Digital News Report (Newman, Levy and Nielsen, 2015: 25) notes, BuzzFeed UK only launched their news arm in 2013. That their online audience share is already larger than the *Independent* online and ITV News is quite remarkable. With significant investments in their news operations being made following the appointment of Janine Gibson as editor-in-chief in June 2015, the role of BuzzFeed and similar organisations who rely on social media as a vehicle for content distribution remains an important area for future research.

Figure 8.2. Percentage distribution of weekly visits to online publishers in the UK, 2015
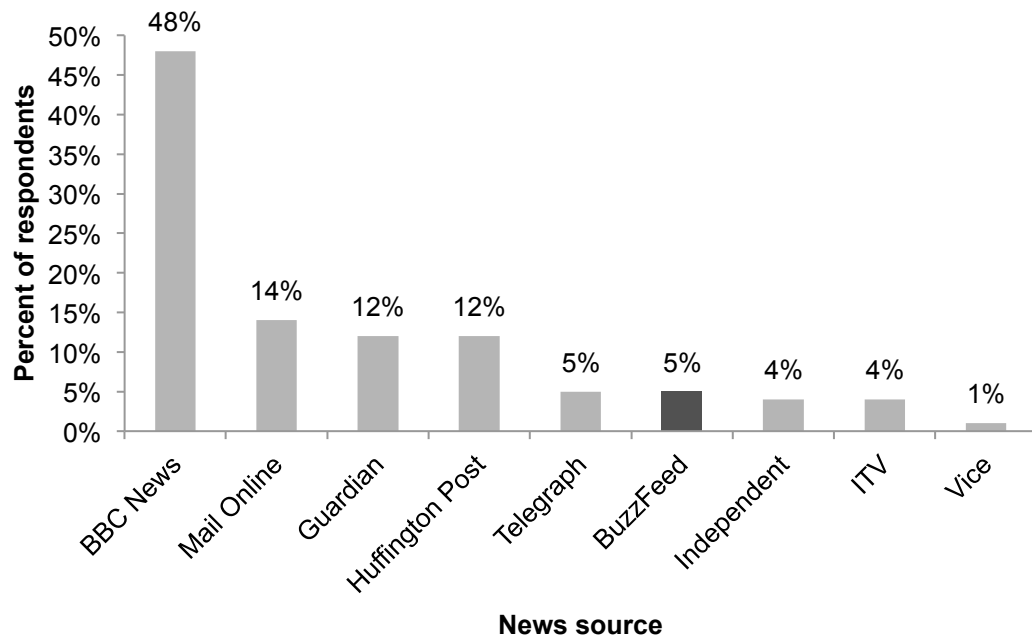
When we consider the use of social media for news consumption more broadly, there is evidence to suggest that an increasing number of citizens in the UK are using Facebook and Twitter as a source of news. As Figure 8.3 shows, there was a significant increase in those respondents who accessed news content on social networking sites in the latest Digital News Report (2015). Precisely how social media is being used depends on the service, with the report supporting the service-specific logic introduced in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6, as more citizens "seek news on Twitter but bump into it on Facebook" (Newman, Levy and Nielsen, 2015: 14). This would suggest that the literature on news personalisation and accidental exposure on social media applies to specific services (Chadwick, 2012; Prior, 2007).

The size of this increase is a cause of concern for those sceptical of the benefits of social networking sites for political learning. For example, Dewey (2015) and Jurgenson (2015) argue that the algorithms used on Facebook tend to filter out content that the user would disagree with. However, it is important to not confuse use with dependency. It is not the case that social media is becoming the main source of news for British citizens, as just 6 percent of those surveyed in the Digital News Report use it as their primary source (Newman, Levy and Nielsen, 2015: 11). Even the most prolific users of social media in this study still combine these platforms with other mediums. These micro-level characteristics, indicative of uses and gratifications theory, exemplify

the need for further research to understand the complex ways in which these different spaces become entwined, and whether or not these conditions are beneficial for political learning and further democratic engagement.

Figure 8.3. Social media as a source of news in the UK, 2012-15
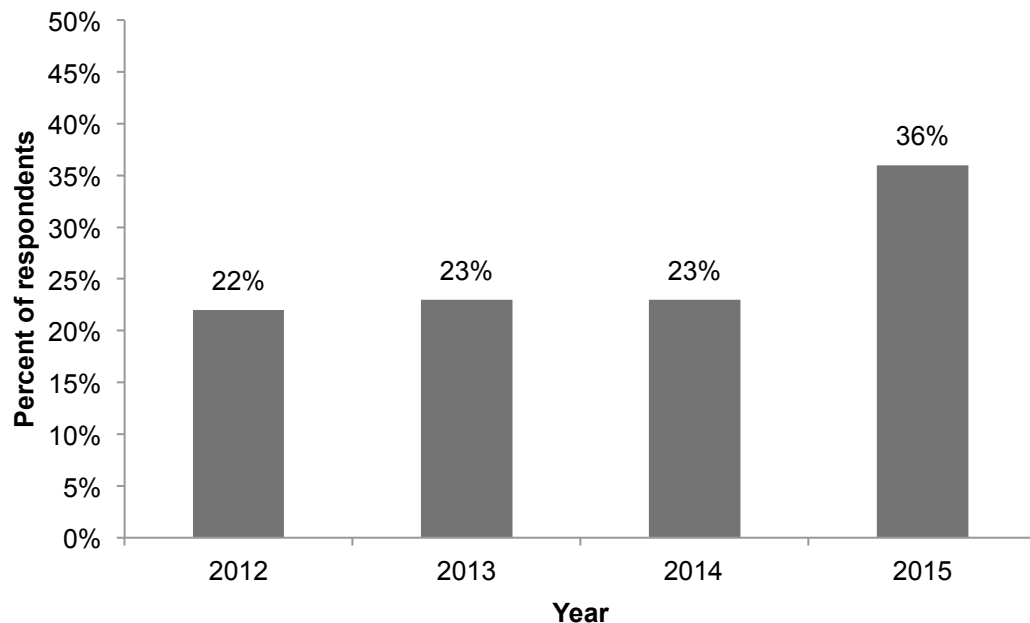
Although access to news and political information online is increasing, forms of self-expression and public discussion on social media are relatively stagnant in the UK. This seems to be at odds with the general consensus across this research area. While vociferous debates are still raging about the nature of information consumption and political expression on social media (Bennett 2008; Chadwick, 2012; Fuchs, 2014; Morozov, 2011; Papacharissi, 2010; see Boulianne, 2015 for an overview), there seems to be a common assumption that the volume of public-political posts is increasing. However, this does not necessarily equate to an increase in the number of participants. The Digital News Report project also includes a range of indicators that measure whether respondents share news content online, and if they interact with others. Figure 8.4 shows little to no evidence that interaction with news content on social media has become more commonplace amongst citizens in the UK. Furthermore, respondents in this study were much more likely to discuss news face-to-face than engage in any form

of digital participation. These findings, interpreted alongside the typology of citizen roles in social media environments introduced in Chapter 6, exemplify how behaviours related to news consumption and political expression on social media are not symbiotic. This challenges the premise that social networking sites cultivate self-expression and political discussion by virtue of their design. Further research should focus on the increasing levels of news consumption on social media, analysing the type and form of private interactions that occur post-consumption.

Figure 8.4. Engagement with news coverage on social media in the UK, 2013-15

Sources: Data adapted from Newman and Levy (2013: 66), Newman and Levy (2014: 73), and Newman, Levy and Nielsen (2015: 84).
Note: Results are based on the following survey question; during an average week in which, if any, of the following ways do you share or participate in news coverage? N=2078 (2013); 2082 (2014); 2149 (2015).

It is important to stress that the adoption of social networking sites for public expression is context dependent. The Digital News Report project includes insights on 10 countries. Table 8.1 shows the percentage of respondents who have either shared or discussed news on social media for six countries: the UK, Germany, Italy, Spain, the US, Denmark, and France. Data is provided from the last three reports, published between 2013 and 2015. While respondents from the UK and Germany tend to be more

reserved on social media, in other cultural contexts there is support for the hypothesis that online expression is growing. In Denmark and France for example, the willingness of citizens to publicly share and comment on news content has increased alongside the growth of news consumption on social media. By comparison, the results from Italy, Spain, and the US show that citizens are already actively sharing and commenting on news material. In Italy almost one-in-three respondents shared a news story on a social network in 2015, while in Spain almost one-in-five posted a news-related picture or video to a social networking site.

These findings can be compared to the typology of citizen roles in social media environments. On a macro-level, citizens in the Italy, Spain and the US seem to share the behavioural traits of civic instigators and contributors, taking to public spaces to discuss and debate current events. Those in the UK seem to share the characteristics of listeners, consuming news through social media but taking to private spaces for discussion. This indicates that distinctive cultural contexts could affect online forms of political engagement. Further comparative research is therefore required to explore the relationship between political socialisation and public forms of digital expression.

Table 8.1. Percentage distribution of participation on social media by country, 2013-15

Forms of participation		*As % of respondents (n)*						
		UK	**Germany**	**Italy**	**Spain**	**USA**	**Denmark**	**France**
Share a news story via SNS	2013	11	8	33	30	22	13	14
	2014	12	13	35	30	22	17	11
	2015	14	13	30	34	21	19	18
Comment on a news story in a SNS	2013	10	8	26	27	21	11	10
	2014	13	11	23	25	21	14	11
	2015	13	11	25	32	21	16	15
Post a news-related picture or video to a SNS	2013	4	5	10	10	12	5	6
	2014	5	6	11	11	10	6	6
	2015	1	6	10	17	10	9	9
Rate or like a news story	2013	6	9	29	26	14	12	11
	2014	8	17	31	25	15	17	10
	2015	8	14	16	32	16	20	18
Talk to friends online	2013	16	11	30	30	31	10	16
	2014	16	13	19	24	29	8	15
	2015	16	15	20	32	26	21	18
Talk about news face to face	2013	44	39	50	55	51	49	34
	2014	39	39	40	48	44	51	30
	2015	42	40	42	48	45	58	33
n	2013	2078	1062	965	979	2028	1007	979
	2014	2082	2063	2010	2017	2197	2036	2017
	2015	2149	1969	2006	2026	2295	2019	2026

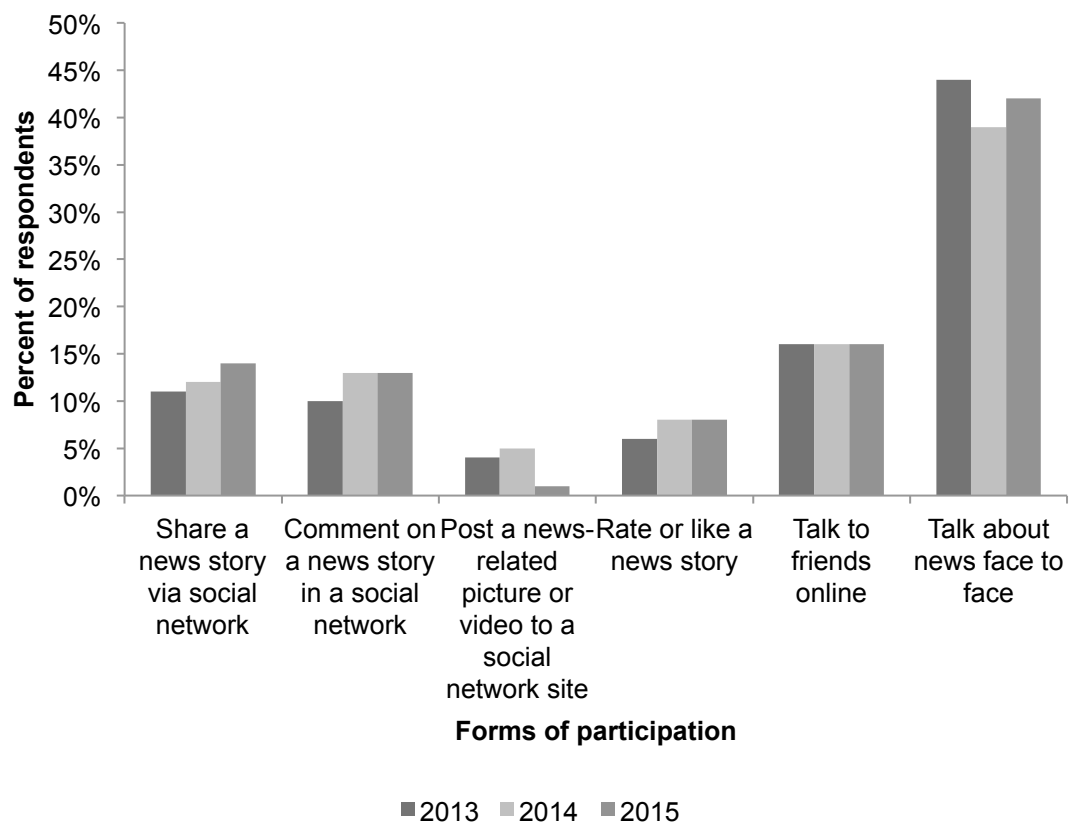*Sources*: Data adapted from Newman and Levy (2013: 66), Newman and Levy (2014: 73), and Newman, Levy and Nielsen (2015: 84).

Note: Results are based on the following survey question; during an average week in which, if any, of the following ways do you share or participate in news coverage? The wording for each action was altered slightly in each report but the meaning remained the same.

Finally, using measures from the *Audit of Political Engagement*, it is also possible to trace political action on social media over the same time period. While there has been an increase, as shown in Figure 8.5, citizens who have signed an e-petition or discussed politics online still account for a small proportion of the wider UK population. As such, given that the sampling frame for this research was designed with slacktivists in mind, caution should be exercised when generalising these findings more broadly.

Figure 8.5. Political participation in the UK, 2013-15
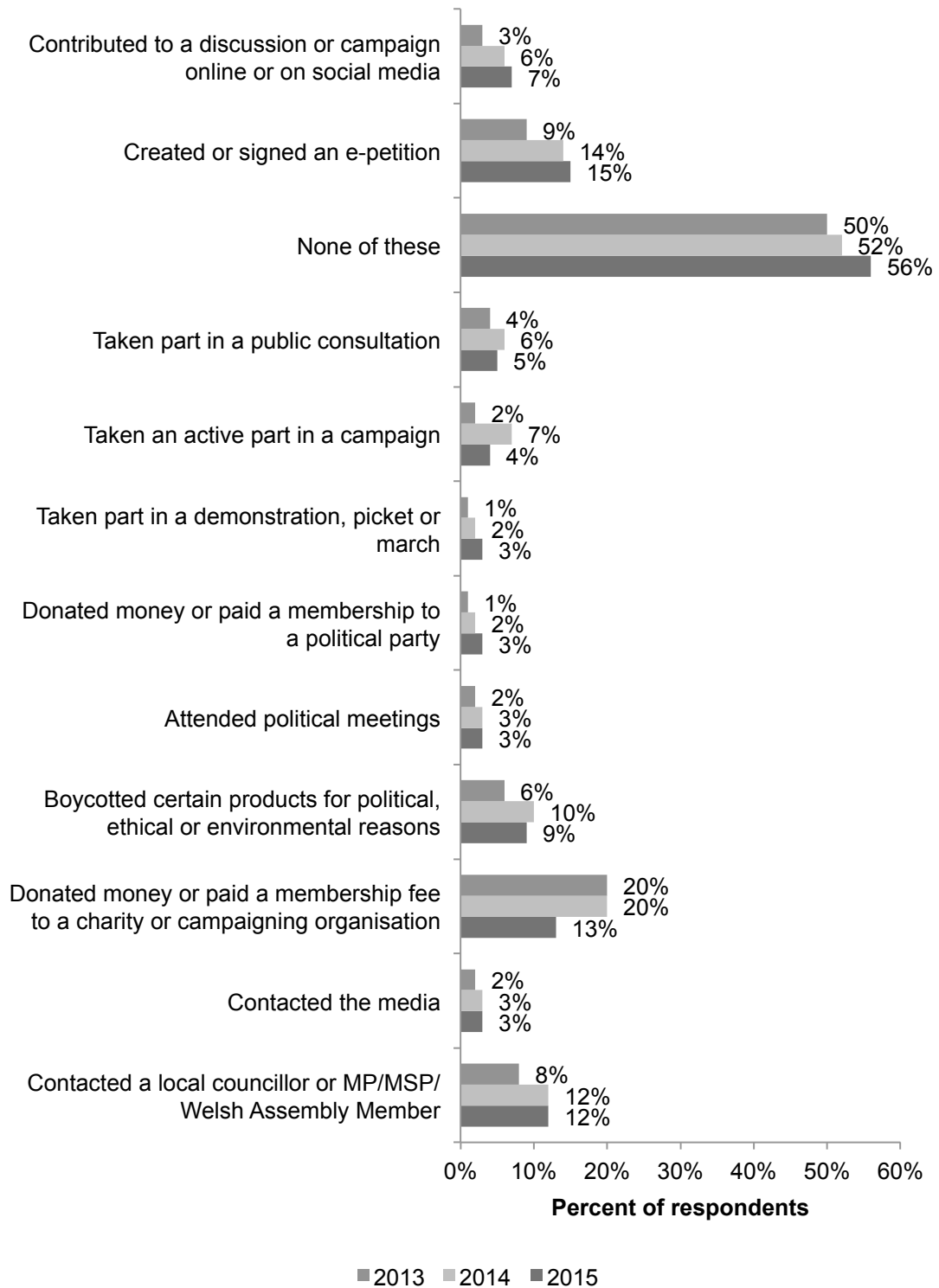
Category	2013	2014	2015
Contributed to a discussion or campaign online or on social media	3%	6%	7%
Created or signed an e-petition	9%	14%	15%
None of these	50%	52%	56%
Taken part in a public consultation	4%	6%	5%
Taken an active part in a campaign	2%	7%	4%
Taken part in a demonstration, picket or march	1%	2%	3%
Donated money or paid a membership to a political party	1%	2%	3%
Attended political meetings	2%	3%	3%
Boycotted certain products for political, ethical or environmental reasons	6%	10%	9%
Donated money or paid a membership fee to a charity or campaigning organisation	20%	20%	13%
Contacted the media	2%	3%	3%
Contacted a local councillor or MP/MSP/Welsh Assembly Member	8%	12%	12%

Percent of respondents

■2013 ■2014 ■2015

These trends show that the findings of this thesis are contextually dependent. They apply to a relatively narrow group of citizens who are *active* users of social

media.[91] Understood within the wider context of the UK, there is evidence to suggest that the opportunity to benefit from digital tools is skewed based on the level of education (Sloam and Kisby, 2015), or where a person lives (Hansard Society, 2015). As such, further research is essential to understand whether these demographic factors affect user behaviour online.

8.3 The Personal is Political: Outlining the Contributions of the Thesis

As Figure 8.4 shows, if 56 percent of those citizens surveyed in the latest *Audit of Political Engagement* (2015) report have not undertaken any political action in the last 12 months, one may argue that this shows evidence of widespread political apathy in Britain. Such criticism alludes to a theme running throughout this thesis, one that is controversial and likely to divide scholars working in both political science and media and communication; how *should* we define participation? Your response to this question will frame the value that you assign to this research.

Some scholars argue that participation must be public and seek to change the goal-orientated behaviour of others (see Carpentier, 2011b for an overview). It is this action-focused definition of participation that sustains the slacktivist critique. If you approach the concept from this perspective, then the findings of this research may seem to have little value. However, by adopting this logic one equates participation with cause and effect, disregarding the democratic benefits that are accrued prior to instrumentalist forms of political engagement. Such an interpretation ignores the pre-conditions that are necessary for substantive forms of activism. For example, Dahlgren (2011: 8) argues that "participation has a clear material and actionist dimension, and cannot be reduced to how we think or feel." I disagree. We cannot truly understand political action unless we attempt to unpick the experiences, interactions, and emotions that result in mobilisation.

This limitation can be demonstrated if we consider the concept of power. If, as Hay (2007: 168) suggests, "power is to political analysis what the economy is to economics," then power is the currency of political participation; different actors seek to exercise power, or influence those who possess it, in order to affect change. Carpentier (2011b: 69) argues that it is the absence of conflict over decision-making that distinguishes participation from information consumption or political discussion.

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[91] Italicised in order to note that active can be understood in the sense of both consumption and production traits.

However, by adopting this narrow conceptualisation of participation we revert back to a one-dimensional view of power, in which power is behavioural and can only be understood in terms of its effects (Dahl, 1957; 1961; Hay, 2007: 173). Actions do not occur spontaneously. As decades of rights-based movements have shown, activism is deeply engrained within everyday experiences. These protest movements often target both material and symbolic goals, as political elites also wield influence over the ways in which individual level preferences are formed (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962; Lukes, 2005). Indeed, the literature on media effects, which comprises some of the most important theoretical contributions to political communication as a discipline, is reliant on such a definition. As such, I argue that the processes that citizens take prior to forms of public-facing action also have value.

Therefore, the findings of this thesis dispute the notion that political participation is a public-only phenomenon. Each empirical chapter illustrates how politics is increasingly understood through the prism of everyday, personal experiences: 38 Degrees members mobilise around the campaigns that are personally relevant; the evidence from the diaries suggests that citizens understand news and current affairs through the lens of their own individually-driven interests; and the measures for future engagement in both experiments correlate positively with pre-existing issue interest. This personalisation is representative of a distinct generational shift in citizenship within Western democracies (see Amnå and Ekman, 2014; Bennett, 2008; 2012; Dalton, 2008; Inglehart, 1990; Zukin et al., 2006). These findings suggest that we cannot separate our private, everyday experiences from our public actions. As such, participation should be conceptualised as a process, whereby listening, everyday political conversations, and private forms of expression are all indictors of the health of a democracy. While these private political interactions do not always result in instrumental forms of action, these behaviours *are* empirically significant. I argue that they should not be analysed separately.

Future research should avoid using easily accessible, publicly available data as a reflection of the routine, day-to-day use of social media. Public modes of expression form just one function of the many different ways that citizens use these tools in everyday life. Private and semi-public forms of digitally mediated self-expression can still be beneficial for cultivating active citizenship. Whether it was "Claire," a member of 38 Degrees, whose interest in a number of issues was triggered by casually browsing the movement's posts on her newsfeed (Interview 8, June 2013), or "Deborah" who was motivated to sign a petition based on a link shared by her daughter on Facebook (entry

4), social media can act as a site of activation in which interest for an issue is ignited or strengthened. This activation is an important dynamic when we consider the characteristics of contemporary citizenship, such as Schudson's (1999) concept of the monitorial citizen and Amnå and Ekman's (2014) notion of the standby citizen. The digitally active citizens in this study use Facebook and Twitter in a similar way, as they monitor the information space, waiting for an issue that they identify with. This logic is supported by the data from the latest *Audit of Political Engagement* (Hansard Society, 2015), with 69 percent of respondents stating they would take part in some form of action if they felt strongly enough about an issue. To this end, listening[92] and private forms of communication are significant for understanding digital citizenship.

In this way, these findings support Papacharissi's (2010: 167) hypothesis that the convergence of the private-personal and the public-political facilitates new forms of collective action between like-minded individuals. Fuchs (2014: 186) is critical of this approach, arguing:

> Papacharissi reduces collective action to individual action and the public sphere to the private sphere. She ignores the materiality of protest action. Her approach is individualistic, reductionist and philosophically idealistic.

However, Fuchs' criticisms are unfounded as he and Papacharissi are theorising about intrinsically different phenomena.

Papacharissi (2010: 89) offers an explanation as to how the norms of democratic citizenship are evolving in light of the development of online digital media. Such work is based on the idea that political identity in advanced industrial democracies is no longer collective in a traditional sense, but privatised, a result of years of social fragmentation (Bauman, 2001; Giddens, 1991; Inglehart, 1990). In this way, social media acts as a facilitator, enabling autonomous citizens to craft political identity and connect with others. In contrast, Fuchs (2014: 186) stresses the value of real space activism, arguing that such interpretations overlook the importance of "co-presence and physicality." He contends that a cohesive political movement relies on the social bonds that are built face-to-face, rather than online, and that offline forms of protest are more effective than digitally mediated action.

This argument is symptomatic of the slacktivist critique. Both claims are examples of "either/or" propositions, ones that ignore the relationships that are formed between the internet and offline activism. Although Fuchs (2014: 186) does

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[92] "Listening" in this context is used to refer to role of the receiver online. It encapsulates all forms of information consumption online, such as reading, watching, and listening (see Crawford, 2011).

acknowledge that social media can be beneficial as an organisational tool, by rejecting Papacharissi's hypothesis he tacitly equates participation to public-political action. In doing so he negates the value of digital technologies, as they are not deemed capable of cultivating the strong tie connections required for high-cost activism. However, such actions account for a tiny proportion of the many ways in which citizens can participate. For example, The Big Tax Turnoff campaign, in which those 38 Degrees members who were also npower customers changed their energy provider to a competitor, only required a weak tie network. Furthermore, Fuchs disregards the ways that citizens become activists. The local mobilisation efforts to minimise the impact of the United Kingdom's 2012 Health and Social Care Act, discussed in Chapter 5, are an example of this. In the first instance a weak tie network between like-minded individuals was necessary, formed through the leadership's use of e-petitions and Facebook groups. This then provided the infrastructure for local collective action, as over 150 groups formed, meeting face-to-face to lobby their CCG. The strong tie bonds that formed were therefore dependent on the weak tie networks. Crucially, the success of this campaign was not the result of *just* face-to-face interactions, or *just* digital communication, but it was part of a process that required both; private and semi-public connection can foster public action.

Secondly, Fuchs (2014: 186) argues that "social media cannot replace collective action that involves spatio-temporal presence." He is correct to suggest that social media cannot, and will not, replace the role of real space political mobilisation. But, on the basis of this thesis, there is no evidence to suggest that groups like 38 Degrees use social media by way of replacing traditional engagement tactics. Facebook and Twitter are used to support and sustain diverse repertoires of online and offline political actions. Some of the innovative forms of on-the-ground activism organised by 38 Degrees are only made possible by the technological affordances of these social networking sites. For example, the "Save Our NHS" campaign illustrates how Facebook can be used to rapidly transform the movement's structural form, from a national collective to over 150 localised groups. This emphasis on offline actions obfuscates these rich forms of interdependence. As Chadwick (2013: 4) argues, we need to reject these dichotomies and adopt more hybrid thinking.

8.3.1 The Continuum of Participation Model

An alternative descriptive model is proposed in this thesis. In order to critically evaluate the relationship between social media and political participation, it is necessary to form an understanding of the contexts in which these new forms of social and political self-expression take place. The continuum of participation is designed to capture the nuance of mediated citizenship at the individual level. By adopting this descriptive device we can observe how the work of both scholars discussed above reflect different stages of the same process, as the private forms of identity construction that Papacharissi describes are necessary pre-conditions for the forms of real space political action that Fuchs prioritises.

This is a key contribution of this thesis; what happens before collective, or connective, action? This was not necessarily my intention when embarking on this research project. Instead, this focus emerged from the conceptual weaknesses of the slacktivist critique. Slacktivism is used to represent those actions that are indicative of normal, day-to-day use. However, the critique is inherently disconnected from the norms of everyday life. It is hardly surprising that examples of slacktivism are deemed to be pointless when they are isolated from other forms of engagement, modes of communication, and private experiences.

The continuum of participation is based on the idea that engagement is a process rather than an outcome. This, in itself, is not new. Despite its normative orientation, Sherry Arnstein's seminal article "A Ladder of Citizen Participation" (1969) introduced the notion that participation is a fundamentally scaled phenomenon. Others have expanded upon this logic in light of the development of interactive digital media. See, for example, the "four categories of civic learning" (Bennett, Wells and Freelon, 2011).

The continuum of participation, introduced in Chapter 2 (see Table 2.1 for an overview), consists of four stages. Access refers to cognitive engagement, and the ways in which citizens pay attention to politics and public affairs. Expression encapsulates forms of political communication between citizens, inclusive of the various transfigurations of the audience, such as: one-many; real-imagined; online-offline; public-private. Connection represents the process of political organisation, as citizens join other like-minded actors to coordinate political action. Finally, action signifies goal-orientated, public-political acts. [93] By adopting this theoretical orientation,

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[93] See Table 4.3 for an overview of the indicators represented by each stage of the continuum of participation.

connections can be observed between how citizens use social media to shape their political identity and the kind of political behaviour, if any, that occurs as a result.

There are two important conditions when using this theoretical device for empirical research. Firstly, behaviours under each category are inclusive of those undertaken in public, semi-public, and private settings. By emphasising the role of public-political actions in isolation we ignore the role of the receiver, and the positive democratic goods that can be accrued through private forms of communication. Secondly, Chadwick's (2013) hybrid media system marks the parameters for media use, providing the context for media consumption and production at the individual level. In this hybrid logic, information is increasingly fragmented and consumption is personalised. Within this thesis hybridity is used alongside this model to analyse how citizens mix their use of social media with other forms of online and offline communication (Anstead and O'Loughlin, 2011; 2012; Jenkins, 2006; Wohn and Eun-Kyung, 2011).

By contrast, the slacktivist critique refers to just a tiny proportion of those indicators that I define as routine, low-threshold actions on social media. Liking a Facebook post, posting a tweet, or sharing campaign material on Facebook may seem inconsequential when contrasted with the lofty political ambitions of the actor engaging in these practices. But these actions are often not isolated. What Fuchs (2014: 186-187) dismisses as harmless online politics can be tied to more substantive forms of real space activism.

As noted in the discussion of the main findings of this thesis, Gladwell (2010) and Morozov (2009; 2011) shed some light on valid concerns within the context of this continuum. However, these get lost in the sensationalist, polarised debate between those that deem social media to be democratising by virtue of its networked design, and the equally redundant slacktivist critique. While this dichotomy has been critiqued and widely dismissed by a number of scholars (Kreiss, 2012: 194; Wright, 2012a), it is still evident in popular discourse (Glenday, 2015; McElvoy and Parkinson, 2015; Miller, 2014; Ranasinghe, 2015). These so-called utopians and dystopians narrowly focus on social media in relation to monumental political change, such as the 2009 Iranian presidential election protests (Morozov, 2011), or the use of Facebook and Twitter to overthrow the Communist Party in Moldova in 2009 (Shirky, 2011). In the context of the title of this thesis, they treat social media as a sun—a panacea for democracy across the globe—ignoring other incremental acts along the continuum. Rather than simply dismissing these acts as ineffectual, or assuming that they are inauthentic, a process-

based approach raises new questions regarding the conditions in which digitally mediated action becomes chaotic and unproductive.

It is important to note that this framework is descriptive and does not advocate that a deterministic relationship exists; access to information and discursive opportunities do not guarantee that further civic or political actions follow. As Couldry, Livingstone and Markham (2010: 3) argue, "no amount of communication, however stylish and informative, will engage people in politics, unless they are paying attention." This model is designed precisely to identify the conditions in which social media triggers attention, and its effects. By adopting this theoretical device throughout this thesis I have shown that Facebook and Twitter do create opportunities for cognitive engagement, discursive participation, and political mobilisation.

8.3.2 The Organisational Management of Digital Micro-Activism

For campaign groups like 38 Degrees, forms of micro-activism form part of interconnected engagement repertoires, which blend online and offline engagement tactics. This is what I describe as the organisational management of digital micro-activism; the leadership use social media to enable their membership to guide the strategic direction of the movement, from choosing what they should be fighting for, to crowdsourcing their advice on how it should be done. In this activist context, Facebook and Twitter are important sites of activation. Members only choose those campaigns that they are passionate about, using personal action frames to motivate wider publics on social networking sites. In this way, the organisational management of digital micro-activism helps to facilitate the movement's objective of "people-power," by enabling members to participate on the basis of their own political identity.

This absence of ideology has been criticised in the past. As Dean (2005: 70) argues:

> By sending an e-mail, signing a petition, responding to an article on a blog, people can feel political. And that feeling feeds communicative capitalism insofar as it leaves behind the time-consuming, incremental and risky efforts of politics. MoveOn likes to emphasize that it abstains from ideology, from division… this sort of non-position strikes me as precisely that disavowal of the political I've been describing: it is a refusal to take a stand, to venture into the dangerous terrain of politicization.

While this criticism is perhaps relative to the time in which it was made, more recent evidence illustrates how MoveOn connects these e-petitions to a range of online and offline action requests, such as localised activism and forms of representative contact (Karpf, 2012a: 32-33). In the same way as the legacy pressure groups and social movements that preceded them, members of 38 Degrees are also thrust into the political arena and some become involved in high-cost activism. During the 2015 general election campaign, over 11,000 members took to high streets across the length-and-breadth of Britain to campaign against the privatisation of the NHS (Dennis, 2015b).

I argue that this, at times risky, politicisation happens precisely because of the fragmented and individualised nature of hybrid mobilization movements; 38 Degrees is able to mobilise such large numbers of impassioned citizens because individuals can choose those campaigns they wish to promote and support. Social networking sites, in combination with email, offer an important tool for facilitating this, providing the weak tie networks and feedback loops that allow members to influence campaign strategy. Therefore, the organisational management of digital micro-activism is a rejection of Gladwell's (2010) hypothesis that "weak ties seldom lead to high-risk activism."

Although substantive forms of action tend to be taken up by a small proportion of their overall membership, the granular nature of Facebook and Twitter enables the leadership at 38 Degrees to provide informational and participatory shortcuts for wider audiences. This is recognised and valued by its membership, many of whom are time-poor and feel that the movement provides a collective, powerful voice for "ordinary" citizens (Interview 18; Interview 20; Interview 21, October 2013).

The slacktivist critique overlooks personal context. Citizens have to manage their political interests with the demands of modern life. The diaries encapsulate this, as the majority of diarists, from students to those of retirement age, complained of an acute time pressure. Irrespective of whether this time pressure is real or imagined, its influence exists. It is through this organisational management of digital micro-activism that campaign actions become granular. This is not "small change" as Gladwell (2010) argues, but a democratising feat in its own right. Where Gladwell's critique does have substance is regarding CBY, where campaigns seldom progressed beyond ineffectual e-petitions. Without the expertise of the leadership at 38 Degrees, who use social platforms to craft opportunities for involvement, members lack the time or campaigning proficiencies to create meaningful forms of political action.

These findings add value to the rich scholarly literature exploring how digital media logics have fostered the evolution of existing organisational forms, and the

growth of entirely new ones (Beyer, 2014; Bimber, Stohl and Flanagin, 2009; Bimber, Flanagin and Stohl, 2012; Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; 2013; Chadwick, 2007; 2013; Gerbaudo, 2012; Karpf, 2012a).

8.3.3 The Typology of Citizen Roles in Social Media Environments

By adopting a mixed-method approach, that combines reflective diaries with evidence of user behaviour online, this thesis offers an analysis of how digitally active citizens use social media within their day-to-day lives. Despite the hypotheses derived from the slacktivist critique and the expected findings developed from the theoretical framework (Bennett, 2008; Bennett, Wells and Freelon, 2011; Chadwick, 2012; Papacharissi, 2010), this thesis rejects the assumption that social networking sites cultivate public and semi-public expression by virtue of their design. The findings from this thesis suggest that the reality is much more complex than this, as participants were acutely aware of the real and imagined audience.

A typology of citizen roles in social media environments is offered by way of identifying the different ways in which users engage with political material on Facebook and Twitter, as shown in Table 8.2. This challenges the assumption that forms of micro-activism and online expression are lazy and easy forms of self-gratification.

Table 8.2. A typology of citizen roles in social media environments

Citizen role	Description	Corresponding citizenship theory
Civic Instigator	Frequently share information, offer their opinion, and engage in forms of digital micro-activism by way of refining and honing their own political identity. Most likely to engage in more substantive forms of political action.	Actualizing citizen (Bennett, 2008) Digitally-enabled citizen (Papacharissi, 2010)
Contributor	Share political content but do so often without including any personal opinions. Contributors seek to inform or entertain other users.	
Active Listener / Passive Listener	Active listeners frequently post content on non-political topics, but consciously avoid anything that they deem to be political. Passive listeners use Facebook and Twitter to consume information but avoid public forms of expression entirely. Use social media to consume political information. Take to private spaces to discuss politics, either online or face-to-face. Micro-activism deliberated over given the reputational dynamics of social media.	Monitorial citizen (Schudson, 1999) Standby citizen (Amnå and Ekman, 2014) Thin citizenship (Howard, 2006)
Apathetic	Indifference towards political activities and politics more broadly.	N/A

The typology of citizen roles in social media environments illustrates the complex attitudinal characteristics at the individual level, and contributes to the literature on mediated forms of citizenship (Bennett, 2008; Bennett, Wells and Freelon, 2011; Coleman and Blumler, 2009; Dahlgren, 2009; Graber, 2004; Howard, 2006; Papacharissi, 2010). Lance Bennett's (2008) actualizing citizen framework formed the basis of what I expected to find during my fieldwork. Although the majority of participants in the diary study did not reflect this, a small minority did. These citizens were the most likely to engage in instrumentalist forms of political action. In contradiction with the substitution thesis, they were also the most vocal online. As proposed by Bennett, Wells and Freelon (2011: 840), these citizens use Facebook and Twitter to shape their information consumption around individual political preferences

and frequently share political content, as the lines between content production and consumption become blurred. However, it is clear that participants' motivations, and the democratic benefits their actions accrued, differed significantly. Civic instigators share personally-expressive posts in order to challenge others. They refine their political identity based on this feedback. As such, micro-activism forms part of an experiential learning cycle, as low-threshold interactions shape political attitudes.

Contributors also share political material to stimulate political learning amongst wider networks, but they do not share their opinions under normal circumstances. They are apprehensive of how they will be perceived by their audience. Even amongst those committed 38 Degrees activists that I interviewed during a protest against the "Gagging Law"[94] outside the Houses of Parliament in 2013, some felt uncomfortable at the prospect of expressing their political opinions on Facebook. Instead these members perceive social media to be a space to inform others and to learn, rather than to debate. On the basis of my interviews there was a clear sense that generating awareness of these issues fulfilled a distinctive civic function, separate from self-expression.

The majority of participants in this research refrained from public forms of political expression, either online or offline. Using the methodological orthodoxy of social media research, which emphasises publicly observable interactions, these listeners would not be accounted for. But such an interpretation overlooks how information consumption on Facebook and Twitter is deeply ingrained within wider citizen practices in a hybrid media system. By operationalising the continuum of participation it is possible to see how this consumption links to a variety of different forms of communication, which merge across different public, semi-public and private settings. These are examples of Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) "multi-step flows of communication," with private modes of digital communication like Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp becoming sites for political talk.

While these processes rarely manifest in public-facing actions, there was evidence of cognitive engagement and discursive participation. Listeners are, in effect, on standby. They are politically interested and ready to mobilise under specific circumstances. These findings offer further support for Amnå and Ekman's (2014) notion of "standby citizenship," where citizens engage with civic and political issues that resonate with their own private beliefs and personal identity.

Future research should focus on the implications of "listening" for democratic citizenship. Does this aversion to public forms of expression and discursive engagement

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[94] The Transparency of Lobbying, Non-Party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Act, 2014.

have implications for the type of political information that is shared on social media? If so, does this provide an opportunity for the commodification of these tools by political parties and mass media news organisations? Further research is also needed to understand the threshold and conditions for activation.

8.3.4 The Value of Everyday Communication

As my friends and colleagues will attest, outside of political communication my biggest passion is Derby County, an English football club. The club's most famous coach was Brian Clough, who guided the club to their first ever league championship in 1972. Affectionately nicknamed "Ol' Big head," Clough was a polarising figure, renowned for his outspoken opinions; he is perhaps the archetypal civic instigator. Despite his domineering demeanour, Clough placed much of his managerial success down to a spirit of mutuality that he fostered between himself and his playing staff. Communication was a key facet of his managerial style. As he noted during an interview with David Frost:

> I believe in communicating… I believe in talking to people. You would be amazed how many people want to talk and never get a chance.
> (Clough, 1974)

The majority of participants involved in this thesis were interested in politics and well-informed on those issues that they deemed to be important; yet they were uncomfortable in expressing these opinions in public spaces. Despite the development of interactive forms of online media, there is still evidence of a stark difference in both the style and substance of political conversations in public and private places (Eliasoph, 1998: 6). The difference today, as opposed to 1974 when Clough made these remarks, is that those who wish to talk now have more and more diverse opportunities to do so. Through their everyday use of platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and private messaging applications like WhatsApp, these listeners can connect with like-minded others in new and unique ways. The slacktivist critique ignores these lifestyle-based forms of political talk and self-expression. This is problematic, as these experiences shape the dynamics of collective action. As Eliasoph (1998: 8) argues, "the ability to discuss politics allows citizens to generate power together." This is not to say that this relationship between private connection and public action did not exist before social media, but platforms

such as Facebook and Twitter can certainly make the process easier for citizens to act collectively on their personal preferences.

Ironically, the emphasis on effort within the slacktivist critique is emblematic of the very technological determinism that cyber-pessimists seek to counter. Emphasising the individual level costs associated with a technological function, such as clicking a button, disregards the cognitive processes that result in such an act. While it may be the case that some of these actions are done on the basis of very little forethought or planning, to assume that all are done on this basis is inaccurate. For some, these actions can be deliberated over at great length. Likewise, it seems quite perverse to suggest that just because these actions require less effort than other forms of activism did in the past, these citizens are somehow acting inauthentically. If these actions help to reduce costs at the individual level and enable a larger, more diverse range of citizens to participate in substantive action repertoires, should they not be valued? These tools are evidently not designed to "save the world," and to judge them in such terms is disingenuous. No form of communication will bring about systemic political change, but, in both activist contexts and in day-to-day life, social media can be of benefit to citizens.

As the title of this thesis suggests, it is only when we adjust our focus away from deterministic, impossibly grand claims about the impact of social media that we begin to see the symbolic possibilities for democratic enrichment in the milieu of everyday life; the candle burns bright.

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Appendix A. Supporting Information for Chapter 5

A1. List of 38 Degrees Emails

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action@38degrees.org.uk, 2012. A reminder about tomorrow's 5.00pm reception. [email]. Sent 23/04/2012. Retrieved 29/05/2013.

action@38degrees.org.uk, 2012. What happened last night. [email]. Sent 25/04/2012. Retrieved 29/05/2013.

action@38degrees.org.uk, 2012. NHS - vote now. [email]. Sent 30/04/2012. Retrieved 29/05/2013.

action@38degrees.org.uk, 2012. NHS. [email]. Sent 04/09/2012. Retrieved 29/05/2013.

action@38degrees.org.uk, 2012. NHS in [your area]. [email]. Sent 14/09/2012. Retrieved 29/05/2013.

action@38degrees.org.uk, 2012. NHS in [your area]. [email]. Sent 20/09/2012. Retrieved 29/05/2013.

action@38degrees.org.uk, 2012. NHS in [your area]. [email]. Sent 24/09/2012. Retrieved 29/05/2013.

action@38degrees.org.uk, 2012. Are you free [date] to meet up with other 38 Degrees members? [email]. Sent 02/10/2012. Retrieved 29/05/2013.

action@38degrees.org.uk, 2012. NHS in your area. [email]. Sent 04/10/2012. Retrieved 29/05/2013.

action@38degrees.org.uk, 2012. Save our NHS: [your area] get-together. [email]. Sent 16/10/2012. Retrieved 29/05/2013.

action@38degrees.org.uk, 2012. NHS: Your name is missing. [email]. Sent 18/10/2012. Retrieved 29/05/2013.

action@38degrees.org.uk, 2012. [Your area] is missing. [email]. Sent 23/10/2012. Retrieved 29/05/2013.

action@38degrees.org.uk, 2012. Are you free [date] to meet up with other 38 Degrees members? [email]. Sent 26/10/2012. Retrieved 29/05/2013.

action@38degrees.org.uk, 2012. [First name], how was your get-together? [email]. Sent 31/10/2012. Retrieved 29/05/2013.

action@38degrees.org.uk, 2012. Are you free on [date]? [email]. Sent 01/11/2012. Retrieved 29/05/2013.

action@38degrees.org.uk, 2012. NHS: next steps. [email]. Sent 15/11/2012. Retrieved 29/05/2013.

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action@38degrees.org.uk, 2012. NHS - stopping privatisation. [email]. Sent 23/11/2012. Retrieved 29/05/2013.

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action@38degrees.org.uk, 2012. NHS: let's get writing. [email]. Sent 13/12/2012. Retrieved 29/05/2013.

action@38degrees.org.uk, 2013. Haringey: local NHS campaign success. [email]. Sent 27/02/2013. Retrieved 29/05/2013.

action@38degrees.org.uk, 2013. NHS. [email]. Sent 05/04/2013. Retrieved 29/05/2013.

action@38degrees.org.uk, 2013. npower. [email]. Sent 17/04/2013. Retrieved 29/05/2013.

action@38degrees.org.uk, 2013. npower: Can you help? [email]. Sent 26/04/2013. Retrieved 29/05/2013.

action@38degrees.org.uk, 2013. Scandalous. [email]. Sent 30/04/2013. Retrieved 29/05/2013.

action@38degrees.org.uk, 2013. npower update. [email]. Sent 03/05/2013. Retrieved 29/05/2013.

action@38degrees.org.uk, 2013. FW: npower. [email]. Sent 14/05/2013. Retrieved 29/05/2013.

action@38degrees.org.uk, 2013. npower vote now. [email]. Sent 15/05/2013. Retrieved 29/05/2013.

action@38degrees.org.uk, 2013. npower: Switch now. [email]. Sent 16/05/2013. Retrieved 29/05/2013.

action@38degrees.org.uk, 2013. npower. [email]. Sent 17/05/2013. Retrieved 29/05/2013.

action@38degrees.org.uk, 2013. npower: Switch now. [email]. Sent 17/05/2013. Retrieved 29/05/2013.

action@38degrees.org.uk, 2013. npower. [email]. Sent 21/05/2013. Retrieved 29/05/2013.

action@38degrees.org.uk, 2013. npower: Join in now. [email]. Sent 21/05/2013. Retrieved 29/05/2013.

action@38degrees.org.uk, 2013. npower. [email]. Sent 22/05/2013. Retrieved 29/05/2013.

action@38degrees.org.uk, 2013. npower: Join in now. [email]. Sent 22/05/2013. Retrieved 29/05/2013.

action@38degrees.org.uk, 2013. npower. [email]. Sent 28/05/2013. Retrieved 29/05/2013.

action@38degrees.org.uk, 2013. NHS: A serious threat. [email]. Sent 28/05/2013. Retrieved 28/05/2013.

action@38degrees.org.uk, 2013. NHS victory. [email]. Sent 30/05/2013. Retrieved 30/05/2013.

action@38degrees.org.uk, 2013. This is Tom Woolley's story. What's [Firstname] [Surname]?. [email]. Sent 05/08/2013. Retrieved 05/08/2013.

action@38degrees.org.uk, 2013. Just 1 vote for our climate [email]. Sent 04/06/2013. Retrieved 04/06/2013.

A2. List of Interviews

Anonymity was offered as part of the agreement allowing internal access to 38 Degrees. The gender of interviewees should not be implied from their pseudonyms.

Interviews with 38 Degrees staff members:

No.	Pseudonym	Role	Date
1	Jessica	Member Services Manager	May, 2013
2	Anna	Campaigns By You Manager	May, 2013
3	Jonathan	Campaigns Manager	May, 2013
4	Amy	Campaigns Director	May, 2013
5	Adam	Technology Manager	May, 2013
6	Paul	Campaigner	May, 2013
7	David Babbs	Executive Director	June, 2013

Note: Given his role within 38 Degrees, David agreed to be interviewed without anonymity.

Interviews with 38 Degrees members:

No.	Pseudonym	Age	City	Profession	Date
8	Claire	25	Leicester	Archive centre operative	June, 2013
9	Mike	24	London	Engineering	June, 2013
10	Daniela	21	London	Student	June, 2013
11	Siobhan	20	London	Student	June, 2013
12	Nina	22	London	Unemployed	June, 2013
13	Geraldine	68	Liverpool	Retired	June, 2013
14	Helen	49	Essex	Civil servant	July, 2013
15	George	63	Birmingham	Retired	August, 2013
16	Mary	63	Hertfordshire	Retired	October, 2013
17	Ian	60	Brighton	Teacher	October, 2013
18	Jack	56	London	Civil Servant	October, 2013
19	Liam	38	London	Charity sector	October, 2013
20	Joanna	57	Essex	Volunteer	October, 2013
21	Joan	73	London	Artist	October, 2013
22	Danni	24	London	Advertising	November, 2013

A3. Ethical Considerations

This project received ethical approval from the Research Committee at the Department of Politics and International Relations at Royal Holloway. All staff and members were aware of my status as a researcher. I provided clearance forms for all those involved in the study, which clearly outlined the focus of the research and how any data collected would be stored and used. These forms are available on request. All information provided has been anonymised, excluding the interview with David Babbs, the Executive Director of 38 Degrees.

Appendix B. Supporting Information for Chapter 6

B1. Sampling Frame and Demographic Information

This convenience sample was designed to identify participants with media habits that were reflective of the slacktivist critique. The sample is heavily skewed towards citizens who use digital media. Of the 29 diarists, 24 had a Facebook account and 20 used Twitter. Just two participants, Arnold and Ron, did not use either service. Furthermore, 15 diarists stated that they used online providers as their main source of news, while four participants use social networking sites. This does not mirror general trends, as television is still the most widely used medium for news consumption in Britain (Ofcom, 2014: 2). As a recent study by Ofcom illustrates, the dependency on online forms of news is perhaps reflective of the age bias of the sample, with 21 diarists aged 34 or under:

> Nine in ten (90%) people aged 55 and over use TV as a platform for consuming news, compared to three in five (59%) of the 16-24 age group. The same pattern is observed for consumption of news through newspapers (54% in the 55+ age group vs. 33% for those aged 16-24) and for consumption of news through the radio (41% vs. 27%). Conversely, consumption of news through any internet or app is three times higher for those in the 16-24 age group (60%) than in the 55 and over age group (21%).
>
> (Ofcom, 2014: 2)

No quotas for age, gender, or socio-economic groupings were used during recruitment. As a result there was a slight overrepresentation of young people with either a Facebook account, as shown in Figure B.1, or a Twitter account, illustrated in Figure B.2. This has implications for the conclusions drawn from this research given the youth-oriented focus of the theoretical framework (see actualizing citizen framework, Bennett, 2008; Bennett, Wells and Freelon, 2011).

Figure B.1. Number of diarists with a Facebook account by age group
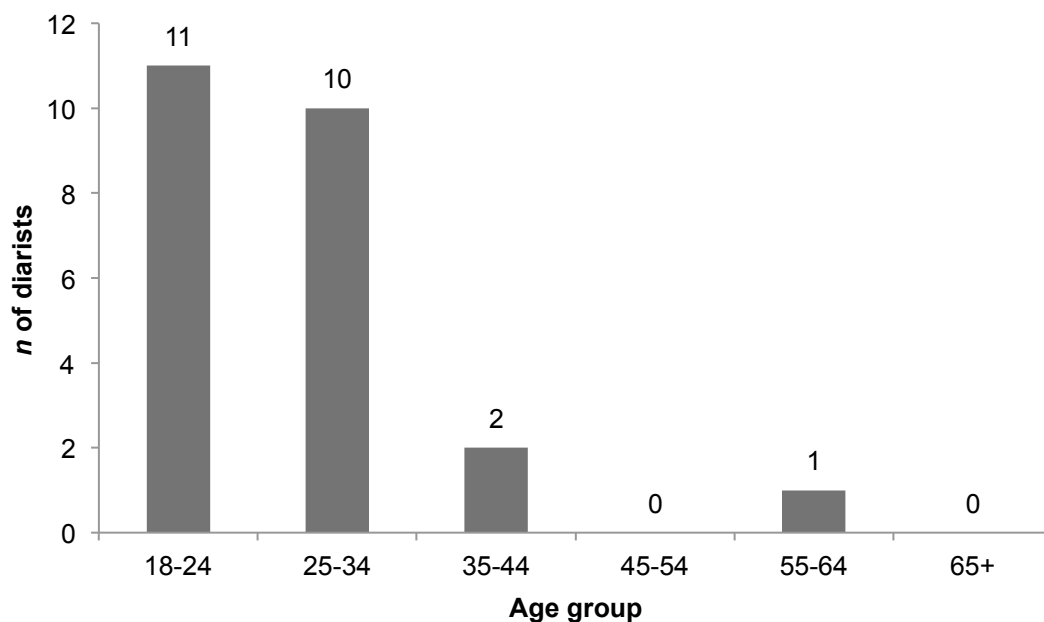
Figure B.2. Number of diarists with a Twitter account by age group
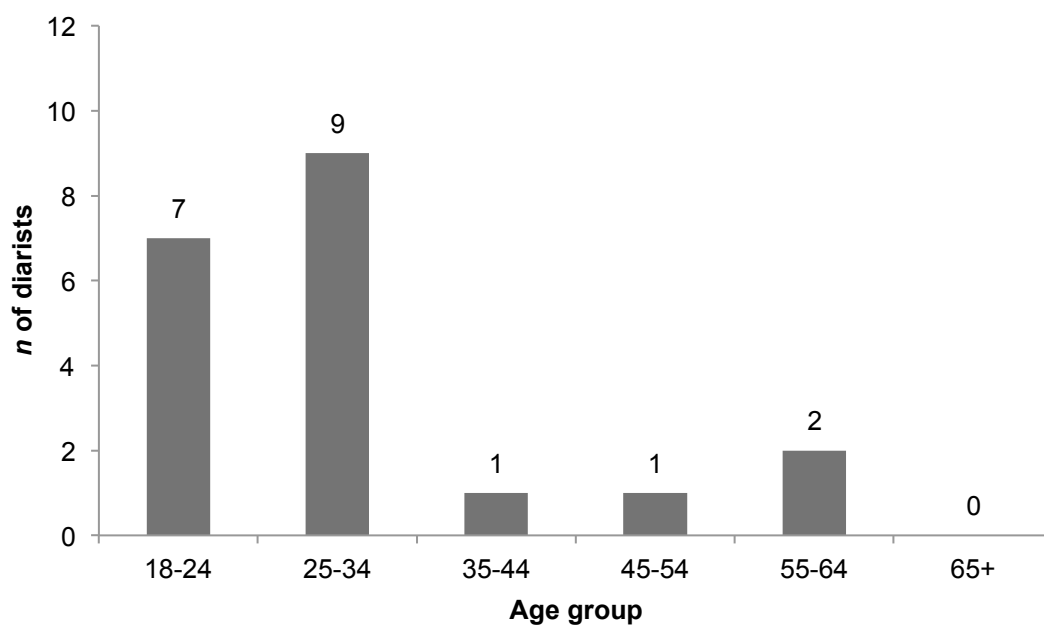
However, as Figure B.3 shows, this bias does not pose too much of a problem when we consider the adoption of social media by the British public, with younger internet users more likely to have set up an account on a social networking site (Ofcom, 2013a: 25). Therefore younger citizens are generally a more accurate representation of the target population, i.e. social media users in Britain. Although eight diarists in this

project are aged 35 or over in order to offer some comparability across age groups, any conclusions must be cautiously interpreted with an understanding of this sampling bias.

Figure B.3. Percentage of internet users in Britain who have set up a profile on a social networking site by age group
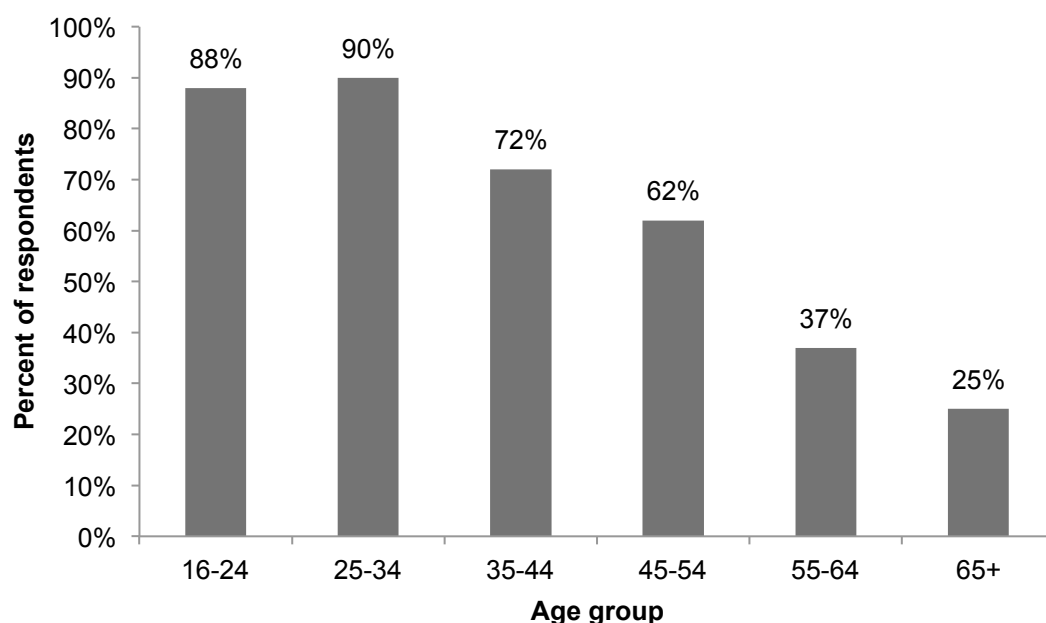
Source: Ofcom (2013a: 25)
Note: Results are based on the following survey question; which, if any, of these things have you ever done online: Set up your own social networking site page or profile on a site or app such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, Tumblr or Pinterest. N=1346

The sample also had a gender and socioeconomic status bias. There was a slight overrepresentation of males with 16 male and 13 female participants. Three male diarists dropped out of the project before completion, meaning that an equal number of men and women completed the study. Secondly, as shown in Appendix B2, there was a significant overrepresentation of citizens who were either in the process of undertaking or had already completed an undergraduate degree when compared to UK census data. Likewise, the occupational status of those involved was not representative of the wider population, with all but one diarist in work and many with incomes higher than the national average (£26,500). As Sloam (2012a) argues, this has implications for the findings of this research as new repertoires of political engagement tend to be structured in favour of citizens with higher levels of education and higher levels of household income.

The convenience sample was also designed to recruit citizens with an interest in politics. As with media habits, political interest was an important variable in order to identify participants who may represent the slacktivist critique. As such, this means that

the findings of this study are limited to those citizens with some level of interest in politics. Political interest was calculated through a measure of political activity. Participants were asked what political actions they had completed over the previous 12 months. This question, and the responses offered, were based on those included in the *Audit of Political Engagement* (Hansard Society, 2014: 90). As the comparison between Figure B.4 and B.5 shows, there are two measures in which the sample had significantly lower levels of political activity; singing a paper petition and taking part in a public consultation. Otherwise, the participants in this research are generally representative of the target population, i.e. politically active individuals in Britain.

Figure B.4. Diarists: In the last 12 months have you done any of the following to influence political representatives, public decisions, laws or policies?
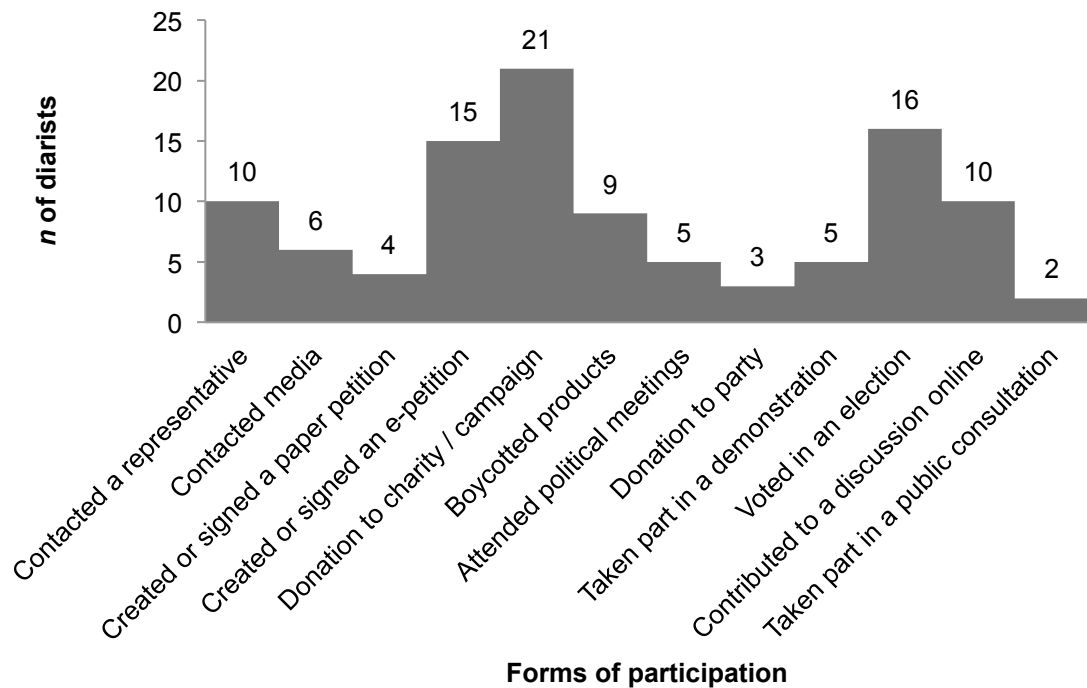
Figure B.5. *Audit of Political Engagement* (2014): In the last 12 months have you done any of the following to influence political representatives, public decisions, laws or policies?
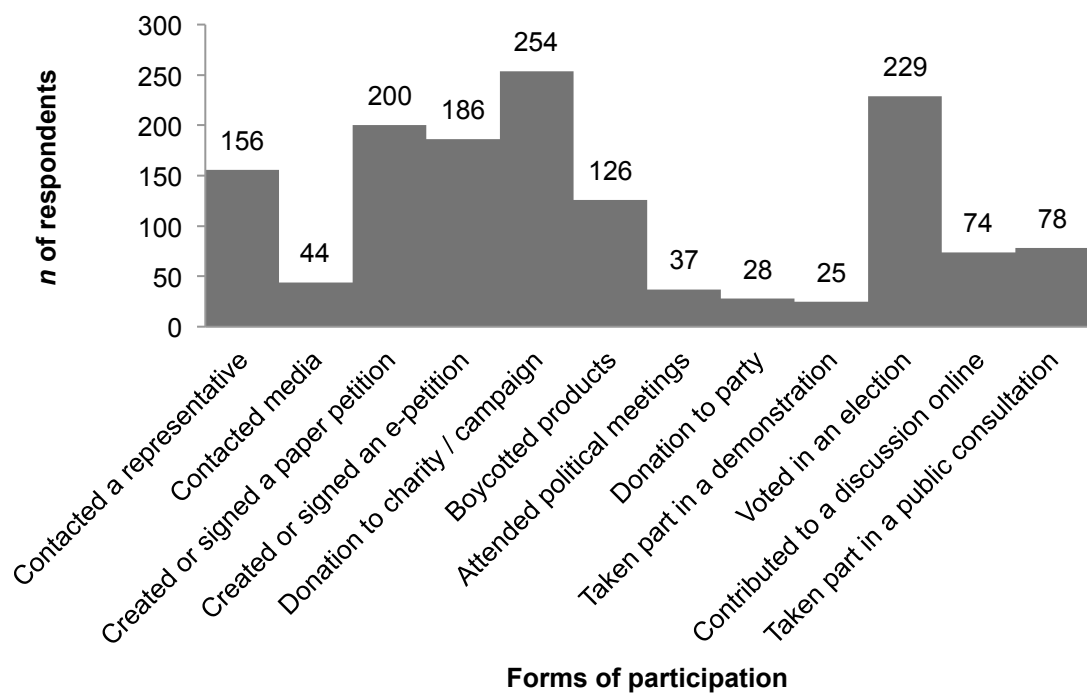
Source: Hansard Society (2014: 47)
Note: This Figure does not include the majority of respondents (n=670) who selected "None of the above." This data was omitted given the sampling frame for this thesis required citizens with some level of interest in politics. N=616.

B2. Details of Diarists

Pseudonym	Age group	Gender	Region	Profession	Highest completed level of education	Facebook user	Twitter user	Diary medium
Leo	25-34	M	London	Financial sector	University or college degree (e.g. BA; BSc)	Yes	Yes	Email
Claudia	25-34	F	London	Charity and voluntary sector	University or college degree	Yes	Yes	Word document
Madeline	25-34	F	South East	Higher education	Higher university or college degree (e.g. MA; MSc; PhD; PGCE)	Yes	Yes	Shared Evernote notebook
Angela	55-64	F	East Midlands	Clerical work	Lower secondary school qualification (e.g. O levels; GCSEs)	No	Yes	Email
Sam	55-64	M	East Midlands	Healthcare sector	University or college degree	No	Yes	Shared Evernote notebook
Will	25-34	M	East of England	Financial sector	University or college degree	Yes	Yes	Email
Deborah	55-64	F	Yorkshire and the Humber	Retail sector	Lower secondary school qualification	Yes	No	Email
Joshua	18-24	M	East Midlands	Recruitment	University or college degree	Yes	Yes	Email
Charlie	25-34	M	London	Charity and voluntary sector	University or college degree	Yes	Yes	Shared Google Drive document

Pseudonym	Age group	Gender	Region	Profession	Highest completed level of education	Facebook user	Twitter user	Diary medium
Annabeth	18-24	F	Yorkshire and the Humber	Student	Upper secondary school qualification (e.g. A levels; Highers)	Yes	Yes	Email
Louise	18-24	F	South East	Student	Upper secondary school qualification	Yes	No	Shared Evernote notebook
Danny	25-34	M	East of England	Civil servant	University or college degree	Yes	Yes	Word document
Oliver	25-34	M	South East	Higher education	University or college degree	Yes	No	Word document
Joe	18-24	M	South East	Student	Upper secondary school qualification	Yes	Yes	Email
Abbey	25-34	F	East Midlands	Clerical work	University or college qualification below a degree (e.g. Higher National Diploma; Higher National Certificate; City and Guilds Advanced Certificate; Nursing Diploma)	Yes	Yes	Facebook message
Liz	18-24	F	South East	Student	Upper secondary school qualification	Yes	Yes	Word document
Thomas	18-24	M	South East	Student	Upper secondary school qualification	Yes	Yes	Email
Zoey	35-44	F	East Midlands	Charity and voluntary sector	Upper secondary school qualification	Yes	Yes	Email
Andrea	18-24	F	South East	Student	Upper secondary school qualification	Yes	No	Word document

Pseudonym	Age group	Gender	Region	Profession	Highest completed level of education	Facebook user	Twitter user	Diary medium
Marco	18-24	M	South East	Student	Upper secondary school qualification	Yes	Yes	Shared Evernote notebook
Matt	18-24	M	South East	Student	Upper secondary school qualification	Yes	No	Word document
Mallory	18-24	F	South East	Student	Upper secondary school qualification	Yes	Yes	Word document
Arnold	55-64	M	East Midlands	Construction	Lower secondary school qualification	No	No	Handwritten
Simon	18-24	M	South East	Student	Upper secondary school qualification	Yes	No	Word document
Cathy	45-54	F	East Midlands	Charity and voluntary sector	Upper secondary school qualification	No	Yes	Email
Amy	25-34	F	East of England	Charity and voluntary sector	University or college degree	Yes	Yes	Email
Ron	*65+*	*M*	*Yorkshire and the Humber*	*Retired*	*Lower secondary school qualification*	*No*	*No*	*Word document*
Alan	*35-44*	*M*	*East Midlands*	*Unemployed*	*Lower secondary school qualification*	*Yes*	*No*	*Word document*
Christian	*25-34*	*M*	*London*	*Digital and creative services*	*University or college degree*	*Yes*	*Yes*	*Email*

Note: Louise did not consent to the researcher using her Facebook data during the diary period. Ron, Alan and Christian withdrew from the project before completion. Thomas deleted his Twitter account during the project.
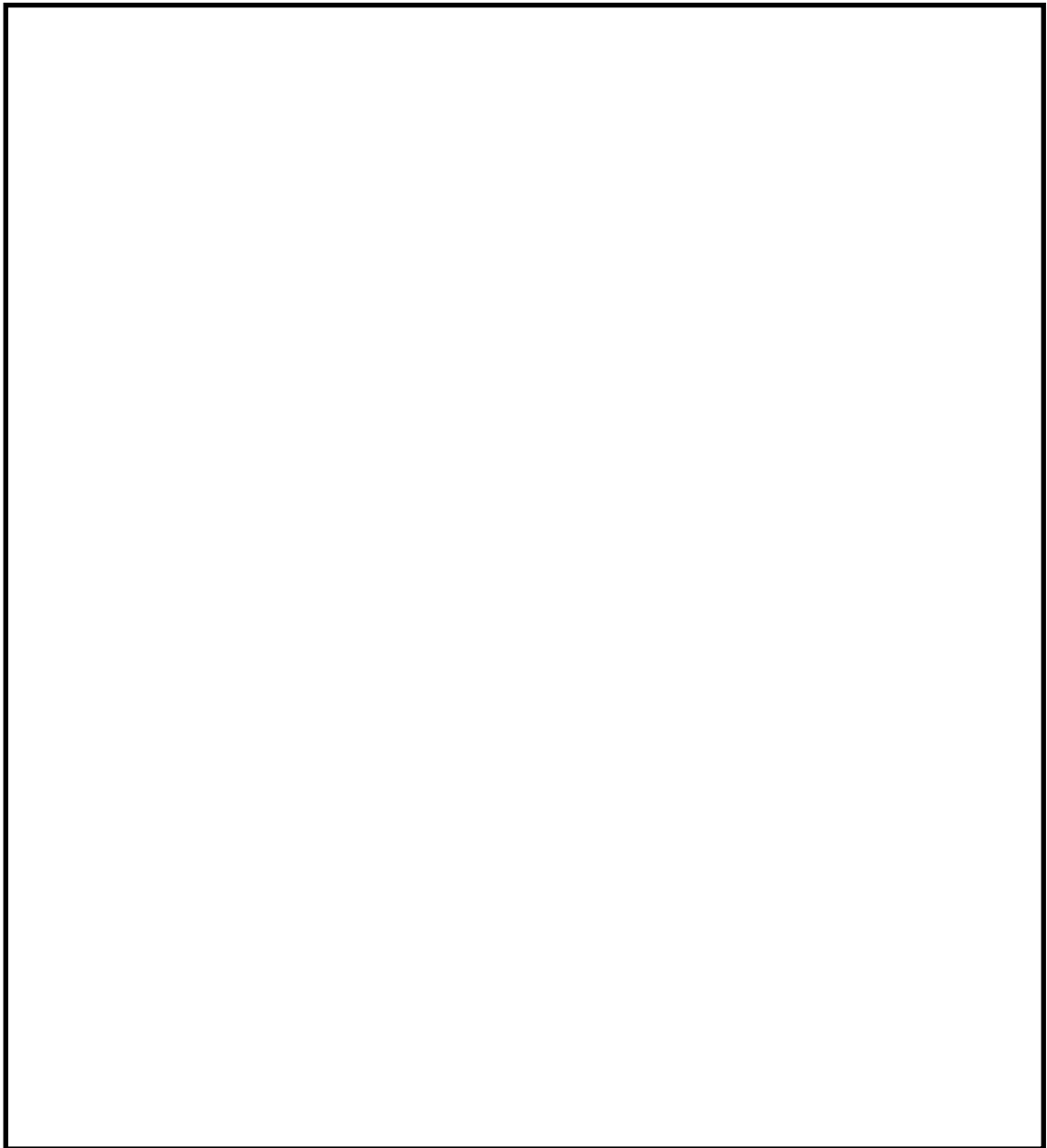
B3. Exemplar Diary Format

This form is based on the template provided by Couldry, Livingstone and Markham (2010: 48).

<u>**Using Media Diaries to Explore Political Participation**</u>

Diarist number:
Week number: / 12

Date:

Please turn over if you want to add more & feel free to attach extra pages

B4. Pre-Diary Interview Questions

All interviews took place between October and November 2013. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, over the phone, or over Skype. All interviews were transcribed and coded inductively using NVivo during the data analysis phase of the research. These questions are adapted from Couldry, Livingstone and Markham (2010).

A: Introduction

This study aims to explore how social media is changing the way in which we learn about civic and political information, communicate with others about public matters, and express ourselves. This project has two underlying goals:

Firstly, this study seeks to explore how different people use different forms of media in different ways.

Secondly, this project seeks to trace each diarist's civic and political actions over a period of three months.

Before we discuss the diary itself, I have a few questions to try and help me understand you, your relationship with media, and your relationship with politics.

B: Opening questions - understanding the time pressures of modern life

1. How much of your time does your occupation take up each week? What about family demands, domestic chores and so on - how much time do these take up?
2. How much time, if any, does that leave you with free for yourself?
3. What do you like to do with your free time?

C: Moving onto questions on media consumption

4. In a typical week, what sorts of media do you use? [Prompt if necessary - TV, radio, newspaper, internet, social media, novels, magazines, video games]
5. Is there a particular form of media you couldn't do without?
6. What sort of [newspaper reader] [internet user] etc. would you describe yourself as?
7. Would you say your use of media has changed much over the past few years? If so, how?
8. Thinking about social media… Do you use Facebook? [if yes]
9. What do you use Facebook for?
10. Has this changed at all in the last few years?
11. What sort of things do you post? How do you feel about political content or news on Facebook?
12. Do you use Twitter? [if yes]
13. What do you use Twitter for?
14. Has this changed at all in the last few years?
15. What sort of things do you post? How do you feel about political content on Twitter?

D: Questions on political engagement / civic involvement

To begin with I'd like to ask some very broad, conceptual questions. There is no right or wrong answer to these, they are an attempt to understand your personal take, so feel free to answer them whatever way you like.

16. For you, what is political participation?
17. For you, what is citizenship?
18. Within this research I am interested in how you perceive politics, political participation, and civic matters – what sort of things do you consider as political?
19. What things do you consider as civic?
20. Would you say that you are politically engaged?
21. Would you say that you are civically engaged?
22. Can you tell me whether you vote in elections? If yes / no, why?

E: Questions on personal identity

23. I'm also interested in understanding what political and civic matters you are personally interested and involved in. Are there any issues that you have a long standing interest in?
24. If we take the type of public issues or themes that interest you, where do you generally get your information about it from?
25. Do you belong to any group or organisation linked to these issues? [prompt: any charity, self-help group, national organisation, political party, forum, Facebook group]
26. Why did you become interested in this/these issue/s?

F: Introducing the diary

This study aims to generate citizens' own reflections on civic and political issues. Throughout the process you are encouraged to describe behaviours, actions, conversations, and reflect on them.

In doing so diarists are asked to track and reflect on the following:

Firstly, your use of media. This includes both consumption activities, such as watching the television or reading a newspaper, and production activities, such as posting a tweet or expressing an opinion to a friend. Where this consumption and expression takes place is important (e.g. at work; on Facebook; with your family at home etc.). We have touched on the type of public issues and activities you're interested in and think are important and it is your sense of what's important that I am interested in, not necessarily the thoughts of others.

Secondly, any civic or political acts that you may undertake during the three-month period (e.g. attend a public meeting; donate to a charity; share a news story on Facebook).

Finally, a rough estimate of the time that you devote to certain activities is also useful. Our understanding of time has an important role on our relationship with media and with political engagement. If you find yourself constantly checking your Facebook feed or Twitter feed, make a note of it and highlight what you are doing. Likewise, if reading a newspaper from cover-to-cover or watching the 6pm news broadcast fits in with your routine, reflect on why you do this.

B5. Post-Diary Survey Questions

This survey was shared with participants in June 2014. This provided a period of reflection so that diarists could consider their involvement in the project. The survey was designed using Google Sheets and all data was stored on Google Drive.

1. How did you find completing the diary? Did you enjoy it? Did it cause you any problems?
2. Thinking back to the period of time when you were completing your diary – what sort of time was it for you?
    a. Very busy
    b. Busy
    c. Normal
    d. A quiet period
    e. A very quiet period
3. While you were filling in the diary did you notice anything that surprised you regarding your media habits?
4. In your diary did you find yourself commenting on topics you wouldn't have expected to comment on?
5. During the diary period where did you get your news from? Please indicate all that apply.
    a. TV
    b. Radio
    c. Newspaper
    d. Online news websites (e.g. BBC; The Huffington Post)
    e. Blogs
    f. Social media (e.g. Facebook; Twitter; Reddit; YouTube)
    g. Magazines
    h. Word of mouth
    i. Other - please specify
6. During the diary period where did you get the majority of your news from? Please select one option only.
    a. TV
    b. Radio
    c. Newspaper
    d. Online news websites (e.g. BBC; The Huffington Post)
    e. Blogs
    f. Social media (e.g. shared on Facebook and Twitter)
    g. Magazines
    h. Word of mouth
    i. Other - please specify
7. During the diary did you undertake any political actions, such as contacting an MP or signing a petition?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. I don't know
8. Has doing the diary changed your media use at all?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. I don't know
9. Has doing the diary changed your view about:

a. The role that media play in your life?
b. What public issues are important?

10. In the last 12 months have you done any of the following to influence political representatives, public decisions, laws, or policies?[95] Please tick all of those that apply:
   a. Contacted a local councillor or MP/MSP/Welsh Assembly Member
   b. Contacted the media
   c. Created or signed a paper petition
   d. Created or signed an e-petition
   e. Donated money or paid a membership fee to a charity or campaigning organisation
   f. Boycotted certain products for political, ethical or environmental reasons
   g. Attended political meetings
   h. Donated money or paid a membership fee to a political party
   i. Taken part in a demonstration, picket or march
   j. Voted in an election
   k. Contributed to a discussion or campaign online or on social media
   l. Taken part in a public consultation
   m. None of the above

11. If yes, please tick all those that occurred while you were completing your diary:
   a. Contacted a local councillor or MP/MSP/Welsh Assembly Member
   b. Contacted the media
   c. Created or signed a paper petition
   d. Created or signed an e-petition
   e. Donated money or paid a membership fee to a charity or campaigning organisation
   f. Boycotted certain products for political, ethical or environmental reasons
   g. Attended political meetings
   h. Donated money or paid a membership fee to a political party
   i. Taken part in a demonstration, picket or march
   j. Voted in an election
   k. Contributed to a discussion or campaign online or on social media
   l. Taken part in a public consultation
   m. N/A

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[95] Question adapted from the Audit of Political Engagement survey (Hansard Society, 2014: 90). "Taken an active part in a campaign" has been removed as I deemed this to be too vague.

B6. News Comparison: Research Notes

A timeline was used as to compare the relative prominence of news stories in the British press with those issues raised in the diaries. To do this I adopted the same approach as used in *Media Consumption and Public Engagement*:

> For the diaries, each mention of a news story was recorded and dated, and references to news items across the sample were added up and calculated week-to-week. In some cases the specific date of diary entries was not clear, and had to be inferred by previous and subsequent entries as well as the content of the entry. These totals were then weighted so as to control for the number of diarists writing in any given week.
>
> Couldry, Livingstone and Markham, 2010: 212

A weighted value was calculated to account for the fluctuation in the number of active diarists each week. To do this, the maximum number of diarists active during a single week was identified; there were 27 diarists active during the week ending November 16, 2013. During those weeks in which there were fewer than 27 diarists active, the weighted value was calculated using this formula:

$$\text{Weighted value} = \text{Observed counts} \times \frac{27}{\text{No. active diarists}}$$

There were three weeks during the project where the formula may have oversimplified the prominence of certain stories, as the total number of diarists was fewer than 10.[96]

The press timeline is based on data collected over the course of the diary period from the front pages of four British newspapers: the *Sun,* the *Daily Mail*, *The Times* and the *Guardian.* These four sources were selected in order compare the prominence of stories in this study with those in *Media Consumption and Public Engagement.* This study collated the front pages of these publications using Paperboy,[97] a free-to-access digital archive of image files of newspapers from around the globe. When an image of a front page was not available, or not of a high enough quality, a combination of LexisNexis and Twitter were used to identify news items. BBC journalist Nick Sutton (@suttonnick) shares the front page of British newspapers on a daily basis. These include the hashtag #tomorrowspaperstoday. By using a combination of different

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[96] These are as follows: the week ending December 28, 2013 – 7 diarists active; the week ending February 8, 2014 - 9 diarists active; the week ending February 15, 2014 – 8 diarists active.
[97] For further details on Paperboy: http://www.thepaperboy.com/uk/.

Boolean word searches in the Twitter search tool, I was able to identify all of the news items required.

In order to compare the press timeline with the diarist timeline, the volume of mentions of news items in the newspapers had to be weighted. As in the design used by Couldry, Livingstone and Markham (2010: 213), a news reference point was selected; this was the news item that received the most mentions by diarists in a single week. This occurred during the week ending December 7, 2013, in which 21 diarists discussed the passing of Nelson Mandela. The number of references made by diarists to this event was then divided by the number of mentions on the same issue in the four selected newspapers; 7 mentions. As such, a ratio of 3 was used to weight mentions of news items.

The timelines are structured on a weekly basis, with each week starting on a Saturday. While this may seem unorthodox, this is because participants often sent their weekly entries on a Saturday. The timelines span four months and, as such, do not cover the entire diary period. This decision was made to avoid those weeks in which only a handful of diarists were active.

All three timelines (Figures 6.2, 6.3 and 6.4) only include the two codes that had the largest weighted volume for each week. Codes emerged inductively from an initial analysis of the diaries and were then systematically applied to both the diaries and the newspaper front pages. The news items were categorised through precise references, but also amalgamated into broader topics when appropriate (see Appendix B7 for further details).

B7. News Comparison: Key to Timelines

Abbreviation	News item
Bad weather	Storms, flooding and heavy snowfall in Britain
Leveson	"The Leveson Inquiry," a judicial public inquiry into the culture, practices, and ethics of the British press following the phone hacking scandal
Snowden	Edward Snowden, an American computer professional who leaked classified information from the National Security Agency (NSA)
Health	Specific items relating to healthcare in the UK, including debates surrounding the legal status of drugs, NHS reforms etc.
Philippines Typhoon	Typhoon Haiyan, a tropical cyclone that devastated Southeast Asia
Co-Op	Allegations of drug abuse and financial impropriety against the former Co-operative Bank chairman, Paul Flowers
Slavery	Cases of slavery in the UK and USA
Immigration and EU	Immigration and items relating to European Union, in particular the lifting of migration restrictions for Bulgarian and Romanian citizens
Nigella Lawson	A series of stories relating to the celebrity chef Nigella Lawson, including allegations of drug abuse, the trial of two of her personal assistants, and her divorce from Charles Saatchi
Helicopter crash	A police helicopter crash at a pub in Glasgow
Mandela	Death of Nelson Mandela, who served as President of South Africa from 1994 to 1999
Child abuse scandals	Child abuse allegations, including both mentions of cases relating to "Operation Yewtree," an investigation into the historical sexual abuse of children, and the trial of the musician, Ian Watkins
Economy	Items relating to the state of the British economy
David Cameron	Specific items relating to the Prime Minister, David Cameron
Michael Schumacher	A skiing accident involving the Formula 1 driver, Michael Schumacher
Welfare reforms	Items on reforms of the welfare system in the UK, including the Under Occupancy Penalty, popularly branded the Bedroom Tax, child tax credits etc.
Mark Duggan	Inquest into the death of Mark Duggan
Rennard scandal	Allegations of sexual abuse aimed at the Liberal Democrat peer, Lord Chris Rennard
Liberal Democrats	Specific items relating to the Liberal Democrats
Labour Party	Specific items relating to the Labour Party, including the party's relationship with the union, Unite
Brand and Paxman	BBC *Newsnight* interview with celebrity-activist Russell Brand, by journalist Jeremy Paxman
Energy prices	Items on the cost of energy in the UK

Abbreviation	News item
Paul Walker	Death of Paul Walker, actor
MPs' pay rise	Stories on a suggested 11 percent pay rise for MPs
Apollo theatre	Collapse of the Apollo Theatre in London
One Direction	Liam Payne, a member of One Direction, apologises for a dangerous photo
Volgograd	Terrorist attack at the Winter Olympics in Russia
"Benefits Street"	Channel 4 documentary series exploring the life of people on benefits
Women's rights	Items on the rights of women, including equal pay
Afghanistan	Exit strategy for UK armed forces in Afghanistan
Environment	Items relating to the environment
Ukraine	Protests and conflict in Ukraine
Social media	Items on social media, including Twitter abuse and "Neknominate," an online drinking game in which the participant must film themselves drinking a beverage and upload the footage online before nominating others

B8. Details of Data Scraping

All diarists with a Facebook and Twitter profile were asked to provide evidence of their public interactions. All but one diarist, Louise, agreed to this. In order to collect this data I added all of their diarists as a friend on Facebook and then sorted them into a private list. This functionality enabled me to access all public posts made without algorithmic restrictions. I collected all public posts made by the diarists during their involvement in the project. This did not include comments or likes on the content of other Facebook users or private interactions.

A number of data scraping tools were considered for use during this project, such as OutWit and import.io. However I encountered difficulties with both tools when scraping the data required from Facebook, as neither could differentiate between the various post types (e.g. textual updates; embedded video). As such, I manually captured all of the data posted by participants using the Mac OSX print screen function. These images were added to a PDF file for each diarist and imported into NVivo for manual coding using the select region function. While this process was time consuming, it ensured that all visual stimuli were included and gave me a clearer understanding of the content posted by diarists (Karpf, 2013).

All diarists gave permission for their posts on Twitter to be used in the research. However, one diarist was excluded from the analysis. Although Thomas originally provided consent, he left the service before the data collection took place. The data collected from Twitter included all public interactions made by diarists during the diary period, including public responses to other accounts (@mentions).

B9. Coding Framework

All data collected from Facebook and Twitter was coded on NVivo using this framework.

Facebook:

A   Type of post *(discrete coding)*

1. Status-update: text only
2. Status-update: image
3. Status-update: video
4. Sharing content: text only or link
5. Sharing content: image
6. Sharing content: video
7. Changing profile picture
8. Changing cover photo
9. Creating / sharing an event
10. Re-sharing content from a Friend, Page or application: text only or link
11. Re-sharing content from a Friend, Page or application: image
12. Re-sharing content from a Friend, Page or application: video
13. Adding photo(s) to album / uploading an album
14. Location tag

B   Content of post *(non-discrete coding)*

1. Personal: friends and family; health; careers and work etc.
2. Humour
3. Music and radio
4. Film
5. TV
6. Technology and video games
7. Other visual arts
8. Books and literature
9. Sports and exercise
10. Celebrity and gossip
11. Travel
12. Food and drink
13. Retail and commerce
14. Fashion
15. Religion, faith, and spirituality
16. Science and space
17. Environment and energy
18. Animals and pets
19. Vehicles
20. Crime and legal
21. Social media (e.g. reflecting on the service itself, or on the behaviour of users on the service)
22. Charity, community and social causes
23. Current events and news
24. Politics and political events

25. Other
26. Health (non-personal)
27. Weather
28. Education

C   Level of interaction on post *(discrete coding; cumulative total)*

1. None: No likes, comments, or shares
2. Low: Between 1-9 likes, comments, and shares
3. Medium: Between 10-19 likes, comments, and shares
4. High: Between 20-29 likes, comments, and shares
5. Very high: Above 30 likes, comments, and shares

D   Politics: Type of post *(non-discrete coding)*

1. Sharing information from a broadcast or print media source (recognised media outlets)
2. Sharing information from an alternative source, including new media outlets (e.g. BuzzFeed, Upworthy, Vice) an advocacy group; a citizen activist
3. Sharing information from a networked contact (e.g. a Friend on Facebook)
4. Expression of opinion contained within a status update
5. Expression of opinion: link to user generated content (e.g. blog post; vlog)
6. Sharing evidence of / promoting an action: e-petition
7. Sharing evidence of / promoting an action: donating to a civic or political cause
8. Sharing evidence of / promoting an action: consumer activism (e.g. boycotting and buycotting)
9. Sharing evidence of / promoting an action: contacting political representatives
10. Sharing evidence of / promoting an action: contacting the broadcast or print media
11. Sharing evidence of / promoting an action: volunteering
12. Sharing evidence of / promoting an action: activity related to group membership
13. Sharing evidence of / promoting an action: forms of public demonstration
14. Sharing evidence of / promoting an action: forms of illegal protest activity
15. Sharing evidence of / promoting an action: voting
16. Organising, or contributing to the organisation of, a political action
17. Other
18. Sharing information from a political party or political representative
19. Sharing evidence of / promoting an action: contribution to a public meeting, consultation, or debate

Twitter:

A   Type of tweet *(discrete coding)*

1. Tweet – no link, no user mentions, and not a Retweet (RT)
2. Tweet – interaction (@mention) with another user(s)
3. Retweet of another user (done natively or in the traditional style)
4. Modified tweet (MT) from another user
5. Tweet - @reply

B   Content being shared *(discrete coding)*

1. No links
2. Embedded content (e.g. images; YouTube videos)
3. Link to external content (e.g. blogs; e-petition; news)

C   Content of post *(non-discrete; links are included in the coding if they are still accessible)*

1. Personal: friends and family; health; careers and work etc.
2. Humour
3. Music and radio
4. Film
5. TV
6. Technology and video games
7. Other visual arts
8. Books and literature
9. Sports and exercise
10. Celebrity and gossip
11. Travel
12. Food and drink
13. Retail and commerce
14. Fashion
15. Religion, faith, and spirituality
16. Science and space
17. Environment and energy
18. Animals and pets
19. Vehicles
20. Crime and legal
21. Social media (e.g. reflecting on the service itself, or on the behaviour of users on the service)
22. Charity, community and social causes
23. Current events and news
24. Politics and political events
25. Other
26. Health (non-personal)
27. Weather
28. Education

D   Politics: Type of post *(non-discrete coding)*

1. Sharing information from a broadcast or print media source (recognised media outlets)
2. Sharing information from an alternative source, including new media outlets (e.g. BuzzFeed, Upworthy, Vice) an advocacy group; a citizen activist
3. Sharing information from a networked contact (e.g. another user on Twitter)
4. Expression of opinion contained within a tweet
5. Expression of opinion: link to user generated content (e.g. blog post; vlog)
6. Sharing evidence of / promoting an action: e-petition
7. Sharing evidence of / promoting an action: donating to a civic or political cause
8. Sharing evidence of / promoting an action: consumer activism (e.g. boycotting and buycotting)
9. Sharing evidence of / promoting an action: contacting political representatives

10. Sharing evidence of / promoting an action: contacting the broadcast or print media
11. Sharing evidence of / promoting an action: volunteering
12. Sharing evidence of / promoting an action: activity related to group membership
13. Sharing evidence of / promoting an action: forms of public demonstration
14. Sharing evidence of / promoting an action: forms of illegal protest activity
15. Sharing evidence of / promoting an action: voting
16. Organising, or contributing to the organisation of, a political action
17. Other
18. Sharing information from a political party or political representative
19. Sharing evidence of / promoting an action: contribution to a public meeting, consultation, or debate

B.10 Data: Diarist Activity on Facebook and Twitter

Pseudonym	Total number of posts during the diary period			Total number of posts referring to political subject matter		
	Facebook	Twitter	Total	Facebook	Twitter	Total
Leo	0	0	0	0	0	0
Claudia	1	0	1	0	0	0
Madeline	116	64	180	11	21	32
Angela	0	2	2	0	0	0
Sam	0	0	0	0	0	0
Will	0	1	1	0	1	1
Deborah	46	N/A	46	3	N/A	3
Joshua	5	57	62	1	1	2
Charlie	0	1	1	0	0	0
Annabeth	48	184	232	1	1	2
Danny	4	0	4	0	0	0
Oliver	74	N/A	74	58	N/A	58
Joe	68	240	308	18	90	108
Abbey	5	10	15	0	2	2
Liz	11	16	27	3	2	5
Thomas	40	N/A	40	14	N/A	14
Zoey	36	272	308	1	10	11
Andrea	20	N/A	20	0	N/A	0
Marco	15	152	167	2	27	29
Matt	11	N/A	11	10	N/A	10
Mallory	10	0	10	3	0	3

Pseudonym	Total number of posts during the diary period			Total number of posts referring to political subject matter		
	Facebook	**Twitter**	**Total**	**Facebook**	**Twitter**	**Total**
Simon	45	3	48	10	2	12
Cathy	N/A	0	0	N/A	0	0
Amy	5	4	9	0	0	0
Alan	0	N/A	0	0	N/A	0
Christian	1	2	3	0	0	0
n	561	1008	1569	135	157	292

Note: Louise did not consent to the researcher using her Facebook data during the project. Thomas deleted his Twitter account during the diary period. Alan and Christian did not complete the diary period.

B.11 Ethical Considerations

This project received ethical approval from the Research Committee at the Department of Politics and International Relations at Royal Holloway. During the initial interview all diarists were asked to sign a research consent form. This clearly outlined the focus of the research and how any data collected would be stored and used. These forms are available on request. All the data collected was stored on a password-protected external hard drive, with a backup on a password-protected cloud facility. Diarists had the option to request that their personal data be destroyed upon completion of the research. The identity of all diarists has been anonymised throughout the research.

Appendix C. Supporting Information for Chapter 7

C1. Sampling Frame and Demographic Information

Over 80 percent of all participants were aged between 17 and 24, and no participants were aged over 35, as shown in Table C.1. Although age may seem to have little relevance to acts of slacktivism,[98] the critique, especially in the aftermath of #Kony2012, often relates to the actions of younger citizens. For example, questions have been raised over whether young people are critical enough of the information they consume online (Bartlett and Miller, 2011). Subsequently, this has led to renewed calls for an increased focus on information literacy in schools (McDougall and Livingstone, 2014). Furthermore, young users comprise the most politically active age group on social media. A survey conducted by the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project found that 72 percent of all users aged between 18-24 are politically active on social networking sites, the highest of all age cohorts surveyed (Smith, 2013: 32). Thus, although recruiting participants of a similar age was necessary for internal validity, it also bolstered external validity too given the target population.

Table C.1. Participants by age

Age category	Overall		Experiment 1		Experiment 2	
	n	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*
17-24	64	82.1	34	85.0	30	78.9
25-34	14	17.9	6	15.0	8	21.1
35-44	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
45-54	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
55-64	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
65+	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Total	78	100	40	100	38	100

Secondly, it was necessary to recruit those students who are politically interested and open to engaging in acts of digital micro-activism. Table C.2 shows which department each participant is affiliated to, with 46 of the 78 participants undertaking their degree in the Department of Politics and International Relations and Philosophy. Furthermore, all of the nine students from the Department of Economics are registered to joint honours degrees that include politics.

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[98] Originally the term was applied specifically to young people, referring to "bottom up activities by young people to affect society on a small personal scale" (Christensen, 2011).

Table C.2. Participants by university department

Department	Overall		Experiment 1		Experiment 2	
	n	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*
Biological Sciences	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Classics	1	1.3	1	2.5	0	0.0
Criminology and Sociology	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Computer Science	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Earth Sciences	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Economics	9	11.5	5	12.5	4	10.5
English	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
European Studies	4	5.1	3	7.5	1	2.6
Geography	3	3.8	3	7.5	0	0.0
History	2	2.6	1	2.5	1	2.6
Information Security	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Management	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Mathematics	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Media Arts	5	6.4	0	0.0	5	13.2
Modern Languages, Literatures and Cultures	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Music	1	1.3	0	0.0	1	2.6
Politics and International Relations and Philosophy	46	59.0	23	57.5	23	60.5
Psychology	2	2.6	1	2.5	1	2.6
Social Work	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Other	5	6.4	3	7.5	2	5.3
Total	78	100	40	100	38	100

Finally, the convenience sample was designed to identify citizens who are active social media users. Within the sample over 90 percent of participants access Facebook at least twice a day. Moreover, as Table C.3 shows, almost half of the participants in the experiment (47.4 percent) make over ten visits to the social networking site each day.

Table C.3. Participants by frequency of visits to Facebook

How often do you visit Facebook?	Overall		Experiment 1		Experiment 2	
	n	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*
More than 10 times a day	37	47.4	27	67.5	10	26.3
2-10 times a day	36	46.2	13	32.5	23	60.5
Once a day	3	3.8	0	0.0	3	7.9
Every other day	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
A couple of times a week	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Once a week	1	1.3	0	0.0	1	2.6
Less often	1	1.3	0	0.0	1	2.6
Don't know	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Total	78	100.0	40	100.0	38	100.0

Participants also use social media to access news and political information. This was important given that content providers such as BuzzFeed and Upworthy often tailor their output for dissemination across social media. In total 74 participants, 94.9 percent of the sample, use some form of social media to access news content in a typical week, as shown in Table C.4.

Table C.4. Participants: In a typical week, which of these do you use to access news?

Source of news	Overall		Experiment 1		Experiment 2	
	Frequency	*%* *n=78*	Frequency	*%* *n=40*	Frequency	*%* *n=38*
Television	31	39.7	15	37.5	16	42.1
Radio	21	26.9	10	25.0	11	28.9
Newspaper	29	37.2	12	30.0	17	44.7
Online news websites	73	93.6	38	95.0	35	92.1
Blogs	21	26.9	12	30.0	9	23.7
Social media	74	94.9	39	97.5	35	92.1
Magazines	13	16.7	5	12.5	8	21.1
None of the above	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0

As Figure C.1 shows, the media habits of those taking part in this experiment reflect a distinctive kind of information consumer, with almost all participants regularly using online news websites (93.6 percent) and social media (94.9 percent) and relatively few using newspapers (37.2 percent) or radio (26.9 percent). These trends differ from the preferences of the wider British population. Ofcom's (2014) annual report on news consumption trends in Britain revealed that 75 percent of adults use the TV as a source

of news, notably higher than the sample in this experiment. The report also found that just 41 percent of the respondents use any form of online news source. As such, the findings from these experiments cannot be generalised to the wider British population. They are indicative of a small proportion of younger, digitally active citizens who use forms of social media for news consumption.

Figure C.1. Participants: In a typical week, which of these do you use to access news?
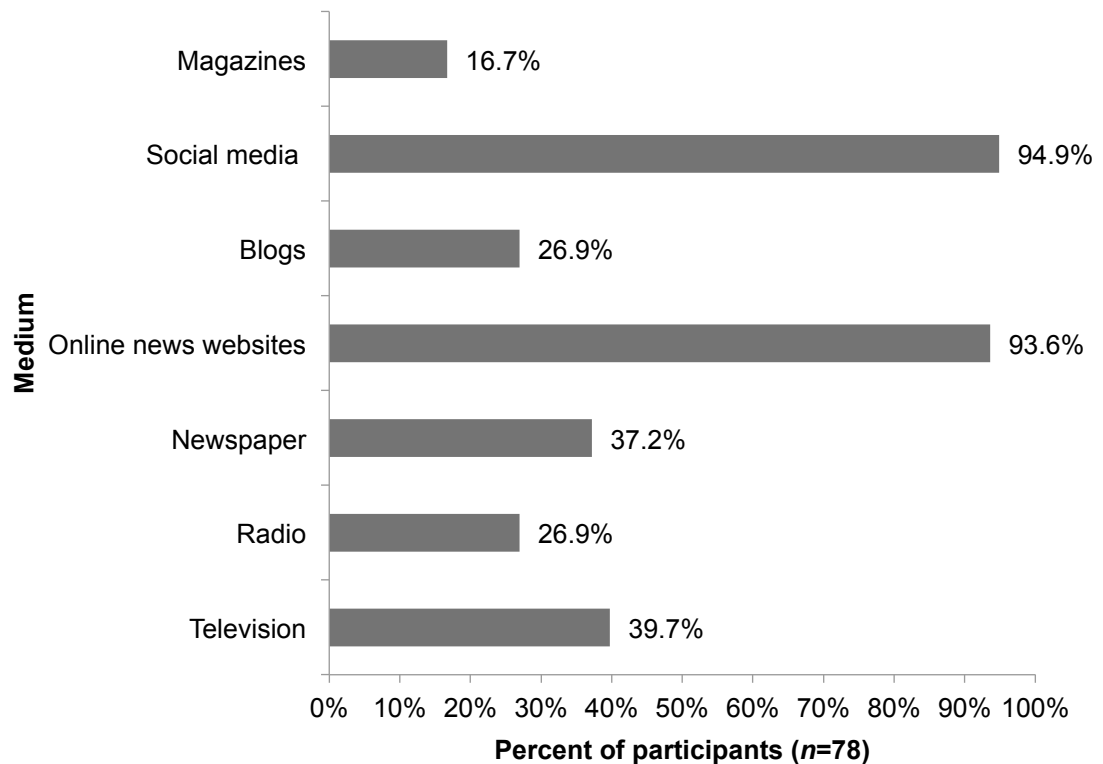
This shift in the population of interest also diverges from that used in the ethnographic research. An interesting finding from the participant observation of 38 Degrees was that those who were most involved were older than I had anticipated prior to undertaking this research; many of the most active and engaged members that I interviewed were retired (see Chapter 5). Therefore, the sampling frame used within these experiments limits what I can infer comparatively when trying to triangulate the findings across the thesis.

Given this emphasis on digitally active and politically interested young people, participants were not excluded based on other criteria, such as their ethnicity, gender, or socio-economic background. As a result there were a number of discrepancies when comparing the sample to the target population. These demographic traits are important,

as the meaning conveyed by the information within the news feed can vary depending on one's social background and personal circumstances (Dalton, 2008; Dahlgren, 2009). Firstly, as Table C.5 shows, the sample was more ethnically diverse, with 66.7 percent of participants identifying as white as opposed to 86.0 percent of the British population who identify as white in the latest census data.

Table C.5. Participants by ethnicity

Ethnic group	Overall		Experiment 1		Experiment 2	
	n	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*
White	52	66.7	28	70.0	24	63.2
Mixed / Multiple ethnic groups	10	12.8	5	12.5	5	13.2
Asian / Asian British	9	11.5	3	7.5	6	15.8
Black / African / Caribbean / Black British	3	3.8	2	5.0	1	2.6
Other Ethnic Group	4	5.1	2	5.0	2	5.3
Total	78	100	40	100	38	100

The sample also featured an overrepresentation of women (60.3 percent), as shown in Table C.6. However, while this is not reflective of past research on the gender gap in levels of political activity (see Furlong and Cartmel, 2012), this is in keeping with the desired sampling frame as di Gennaro and Dutton (2006: 305) found women to be slightly more likely to engage in online activism than men.

Table C.6. Participants by gender

Gender	Overall		Experiment 1		Experiment 2	
	n	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*
Female	47	60.3	25	62.5	22	57.9
Male	31	39.7	15	37.5	16	42.1
Total	78	100	40	100	38	100

While efforts were taken to try and measure the socio-economic status of participants, designing a survey question that accurately measures a student's background proved challenging. Given that the majority of the sample were first-year students embarking on their studies during the 2014/15 academic year, participants were asked about their household income for 2013. This was an attempt to understand their social background. However, this proved to be problematic given that 38.5 percent of participants either did not know what this was, or did not feel comfortable in providing

this information, as shown in Table C.7. This is significant when we consider that new repertoires of online political engagement tend to be dominated by well-off citizens (Sloam, 2012a: 10).

Table C.7. Participants by estimated annual income in 2013

Annual household income in 2013	Frequency	%	Cumulative percent
£0- £5,000	4	5.1	5.1
£5,000 - £10,000	6	7.7	12.8
£10,000 - £20,000	17	21.8	34.6
£20,000 - £30,000	8	10.3	44.9
£30,000 - £40,000	3	3.8	48.7
£40,000 -	10	12.8	61.5
Don't know	17	21.8	83.3
Prefer not to say	13	16.7	100.0
Total	78	100.0	

In summary, this study recruited digitally active, politically-engaged students for two reasons. Firstly, this sampling frame benefits the internal validity of the experiments. As randomisation from a wider population was not feasible, this homogenous sample offered a control for the effect of demographics. Secondly, the sample was also generally representative of the actors who are deemed to be slacktivists.

C2. Survey Design

The full surveys and debriefing forms for both experiments can be found online: https://db.tt/y5rk27v2

Laboratory experiment 1: Information Type

Questionnaire (1): Your Media Use

The following questions have been designed to understand how you use different forms of media, especially Facebook, and what news and information you consume regularly.

In a typical week, which of these do you use to access news? Please tick all those that apply:
- Television
- Radio
- Newspaper
- Online news websites (e.g. BBC; The Huffington Post)
- Blogs
- Social media (e.g. Facebook; Twitter)
- Magazines
- None of the above

If you do access news, which of these is your main source of news? Please select one option:
- Television
- Radio
- Newspaper
- Online news websites (e.g. BBC; The Huffington Post)
- Blogs
- Social media (e.g. Facebook; Twitter)
- Magazines

How often do you visit Facebook? Please select one option:
- More than 10 times a day
- 2-10 times a day
- Once a day
- Every other day
- A couple of times a week
- Once a week
- Less often
- Don't know

People can access and post links to information from a range of sources on Facebook. These include entertainment blogs, news organisations, and sports websites. Which of these sources are you aware of? Please tick all those that apply:
- BBC News
- BuzzFeed
- College Humour
- Daily Mail
- The Daily Dot
- The Daily Mash
- Daily Mirror
- Digital Spy

- E! Online
- ESPN
- Eurosport
- The Guardian
- IGN
- The Independent
- Heatworld
- Huffington Post
- Mashable
- Metro
- NME
- The Onion
- Perez Hilton
- Pitchfork
- Rolling Stone
- SB Nation
- Sky Sports
- Telegraph
- Thought Catalog
- TMZ
- Upworthy
- None of the above

Which of these sources have you seen on your Facebook news feed? The news feed is the constantly updating list of stories in the middle of your Facebook home page. It includes status updates, photos, videos, links, app activity and likes from people, pages and groups that you follow on Facebook. Please tick all those that apply:

- BBC News
- BuzzFeed
- College Humour
- Daily Mail
- The Daily Dot
- The Daily Mash
- Daily Mirror
- Digital Spy
- E! Online
- ESPN
- Eurosport
- The Guardian
- IGN
- The Independent
- Heatworld
- Huffington Post
- Mashable
- Metro
- NME
- The Onion
- Perez Hilton
- Pitchfork
- Rolling Stone
- SB Nation
- Sky Sports
- Telegraph
- Thought Catalog
- TMZ
- Upworthy
- None of the above

Of the sources you have seen on your Facebook News Feed, which of these sources do you Like and/or Follow on Facebook? i.e. You have personally chosen to subscribe to their updates by clicking Like or Follow on their page. Please tick all those that apply:

- BBC News
- BuzzFeed
- College Humour
- Daily Mail
- The Daily Dot
- The Daily Mash
- Daily Mirror
- Digital Spy
- E! Online
- ESPN
- Eurosport
- The Guardian
- IGN
- The Independent
- Heatworld
- Huffington Post
- Mashable
- Metro
- NME
- The Onion
- Perez Hilton
- Pitchfork
- Rolling Stone
- SB Nation
- Sky Sports
- Telegraph
- Thought Catalog
- TMZ
- Upworthy
- None of the above

Questionnaire (2): Your Facebook News Feed This Week

These questions concern your level of interest and opinions on popular topics on Facebook this week.

How interested would you say you are in women's rights? Please select one option:
- Very interested
- Fairly interested
- Not very interested
- Not at all interested
- Don't know

Are you aware of media critic Anita Sarkeesian cancelling a speech at Utah State University due to death threats? Please select one option:
- Yes
- No

If yes, have you seen any posts about this news story on Facebook? Please select one option:
- Yes
- No

How interested would you say you are in the environment? Please select one option:
- Very interested
- Fairly interested
- Not very interested
- Not at all interested
- Don't know

Are you aware of the People's Climate March? Please select one option:
- Yes
- No

If yes, have you seen any posts about this news story on Facebook? Please select one option:
- Yes
- No

How interested would you say you are in immigration? Please select one option:
- Very interested
- Fairly interested
- Not very interested
- Not at all interested
- Don't know

Are you aware of the proposal to place quotas on the migration of European Union workers to Britain? Please select one option:
- Yes
- No

If yes, have you seen any posts about this news story on Facebook? Please select one option:
- Yes
- No

Post-test survey

Thank you for participating in this study. We now have several questions regarding your interaction with the news feed.

Using the scale of 0 to 10 where 0 means very unlikely and 10 means very likely, please indicate how likely it is that in the next six months you will personally engage in the following activities directly related to women's rights? Mark only one oval per row:
- Discuss the issue with family, friends or acquaintances
- Take part in a protest/rally/demonstration
- Write, call or email a newspaper, magazine, or television news organization
- Contact an official
- Donate money to a charity or campaigning organisation
- Write or sign a digital or written petition
- Distribute or share information over social media

Using the scale of 0 to 10 where 0 means very unlikely and 10 means very likely, please indicate how likely it is that in the next six months you will personally engage in the following activities directly related to the environment? Mark only one oval per row:
- Discuss the issue with family, friends or acquaintances
- Take part in a protest/rally/demonstration
- Write, call or email a newspaper, magazine, or television news organization
- Contact an official
- Donate money to a charity or campaigning organisation
- Write or sign a digital or written petition
- Distribute or share information over social media

Using the scale of 0 to 10 where 0 means very unlikely and 10 means very likely, please indicate how likely it is that in the next six months you will personally engage in the following activities directly related to immigration? Mark only one oval per row:
- Discuss the issue with family, friends or acquaintances
- Take part in a protest/rally/demonstration
- Write, call or email a newspaper, magazine, or television news organization
- Contact an official
- Donate money to a charity or campaigning organisation
- Write or sign a digital or written petition
- Distribute or share information over social media

During the experiment did you see a post on media critic Anita Sarkeesian cancelling a speech at Utah State University due to death threats? Please select one option:
- Yes
- No

If yes, thinking about the post, please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements? Please select one option per row:
- The post was interesting

- The post made me want to learn more about women's rights

Scale:
- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know

During the experiment did you see a post on the People's Climate March? Please select one option:
- Yes
- No

If yes, thinking about the post, please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements? Please select one option per row:
- The post was interesting
- The post made me want to learn more about the environment

Scale:
- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know

During the experiment did you see a post on the proposal to place quotas on the migration of European Union workers to Britain? Please select one option:
- Yes
- No

If yes, thinking about the post, please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements? Please select one option per row:
- The post was interesting
- The post made me want to learn more about the immigration

Scale:
- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know

Laboratory experiment 2: Facebook Likes

Questionnaire (1): Your Media Use

The following questions have been designed to understand how you use different forms of media, especially Facebook, and what news and information you consume regularly.

In a typical week, which of these do you use to access news? Please tick all those that apply:
- Television
- Radio
- Newspaper
- Online news websites (e.g. BBC; The Huffington Post)
- Blogs
- Social media (e.g. Facebook; Twitter)
- Magazines
- None of the above

If you do access news, which of these is your main source of news? Please select one option:
- Television
- Radio
- Newspaper
- Online news websites (e.g. BBC; The Huffington Post)
- Blogs
- Social media (e.g. Facebook; Twitter)
- Magazines

How often do you visit Facebook? Please select one option:
- More than 10 times a day
- 2-10 times a day
- Once a day
- Every other day
- A couple of times a week
- Once a week
- Less often
- Don't know

People can access and post links to information from a range of sources on Facebook. These include entertainment blogs, news organisations, and sports websites. Which of these sources are you aware of? Please tick all those that apply:

- BBC News
- BuzzFeed
- College Humour
- Daily Mail
- The Daily Dot
- The Daily Mash
- Daily Mirror
- Digital Spy
- E! Online
- ESPN
- Eurosport
- The Guardian
- IGN
- The Independent
- Heatworld
- Huffington Post
- Mashable
- Metro

- NME
- The Onion
- Perez Hilton
- Pitchfork
- Rolling Stone
- SB Nation

- Sky Sports
- Telegraph
- Thought Catalog
- TMZ
- Upworthy
- None of the above

Which of these sources have you seen on your Facebook news feed? The news feed is the constantly updating list of stories in the middle of your Facebook home page. It includes status updates, photos, videos, links, app activity and likes from people, pages and groups that you follow on Facebook. Please tick all those that apply:

- BBC News
- BuzzFeed
- College Humour
- Daily Mail
- The Daily Dot
- The Daily Mash
- Daily Mirror
- Digital Spy
- E! Online
- ESPN
- Eurosport
- The Guardian
- IGN
- The Independent
- Heatworld

- Huffington Post
- Mashable
- Metro
- NME
- The Onion
- Perez Hilton
- Pitchfork
- Rolling Stone
- SB Nation
- Sky Sports
- Telegraph
- Thought Catalog
- TMZ
- Upworthy
- None of the above

Of the sources you have seen on your Facebook News Feed, which of these sources do you Like and/or Follow on Facebook? i.e. You have personally chosen to subscribe to their updates by clicking Like or Follow on their page. Please tick all those that apply:

- BBC News
- BuzzFeed
- College Humour
- Daily Mail
- The Daily Dot
- The Daily Mash
- Daily Mirror
- Digital Spy
- E! Online
- ESPN
- Eurosport
- The Guardian
- IGN
- The Independent
- Heatworld

- Huffington Post
- Mashable
- Metro
- NME
- The Onion
- Perez Hilton
- Pitchfork
- Rolling Stone
- SB Nation
- Sky Sports
- Telegraph
- Thought Catalog
- TMZ
- Upworthy
- None of the above

Post-Test survey

Thank you for participating in this study. We now have several questions regarding your interaction with the news feed.

How interested would you say you are in the rights of persons with disabilities? Please select one option:
- Very interested
- Fairly interested
- Not very interested
- Not at all interested
- Don't know

How interested would you say you are in MPs' expenses? Please select one option:
- Very interested
- Fairly interested
- Not very interested
- Not at all interested
- Don't know

How interested would you say you are in immigration? Please select one option:
- Very interested
- Fairly interested
- Not very interested
- Not at all interested
- Don't know

Using the scale of 0 to 10 where 0 means very unlikely and 10 means very likely, please indicate how likely it is that in the next six months you will personally engage in the following activities directly related to the rights of persons with disabilities? Mark only one oval per row:
- Discuss the issue with family, friends or acquaintances
- Take part in a protest/rally/demonstration
- Write, call or email a newspaper, magazine, or television news organization
- Contact an official
- Donate money to a charity or campaigning organisation
- Write or sign a digital or written petition
- Distribute or share information over social media

Using the scale of 0 to 10 where 0 means very unlikely and 10 means very likely, please indicate how likely it is that in the next six months you will personally engage in the following activities directly related to MPs' expenses? Mark only one oval per row:
- Discuss the issue with family, friends or acquaintances
- Take part in a protest/rally/demonstration
- Write, call or email a newspaper, magazine, or television news organization
- Contact an official
- Donate money to a charity or campaigning organisation
- Write or sign a digital or written petition
- Distribute or share information over social media

Using the scale of 0 to 10 where 0 means very unlikely and 10 means very likely, please indicate how likely it is that in the next six months you will personally engage in the following activities directly related to immigration? Mark only one oval per row:
- Discuss the issue with family, friends or acquaintances

- Take part in a protest/rally/demonstration
- Write, call or email a newspaper, magazine, or television news organization
- Contact an official
- Donate money to a charity or campaigning organisation
- Write or sign a digital or written petition
- Distribute or share information over social media

In the last 12 months have you done any of the following to influence political representatives, public decisions, laws, or policies?
- Contacted a local councillor or MP/MSP/Welsh Assembly Member [any elected representative]
- Contacted the media
- Created or signed a paper petition
- Created or signed an e-petition
- Donated money or paid a membership fee to a charity or campaigning organisation
- Boycotted certain products for political, ethical or environmental reasons
- Attended political meetings
- Donated money or paid a membership fee to a political party
- Taken part in a demonstration, picket or march
- Voted in an election
- Contributed to a political discussion online or on social media
- Taken part in a public consultation
- None of the above

C3. News Feed Design

Table C.8 lists all of the articles that were included in the news feed for the first experiment.[99] These articles are listed in the order that they appeared in each of the experimental groups. All sources were selected on the basis of trending news articles on Facebook and trending topics on Twitter on October 21, 2014, one day prior to the experiment. The comments accompanying the posts on Facebook were the titles for each article. While this is not necessarily reflective of normalised use, as users tend to post a personalised message or omit a message altogether, this measure was essential as it ensured that the comment wording did not act as an intervening variable when exploring the relationship between information type and political attitudes.

A similar set of procedures were employed for the second experiment, designed to examine if the level of likes on an e-petition influences participant behaviour. However, there were some slight modifications made given the challenge of populating the feed with Facebook likes. As before, all sources were selected on the basis of trending news articles on Facebook and trending topics on Twitter, on October 25, 2014. This approach differed to the first experiment, as articles were collected four days before the experiment took place. This additional time was necessary to allow for volunteers to populate the treatment groups with Facebook likes. As Table C.9 illustrates, I increased the number of items included on the feed to ten. This was to provide more choice by way of understanding if visible identifiers of social information influence browsing behaviour. I based the comments that accompanied each post on publically available tweets, rather than using the headline on each article as in the first experiment. This was an attempt to make the news feed seem more realistic. This also helped to mask the content providers for each article.

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[99] Each treatment post was only included in the corresponding experimental group.

Table C.8. Links included on the news feeds in laboratory experiment 1

Article title on news feed	URL: Live page
Pistorius gets five years – but may serve less than one	http://goo.gl/OmxQkE
Climate change: Thousands march across the UK (Treatment: BBC News Online)	http://goo.gl/yfM3dR
Russell Brand, Emma Thompson And Cara Delevingne Join Thousands At London Climate Rally (Treatment: BuzzFeed)	http://goo.gl/EXQ15t
The world needs US leadership on climate change (Treatment: Change.org)	http://goo.gl/MvGvzs
People In 162 Countries Went For A Walk. Together. (Treatment: Upworthy)	http://goo.gl/ayUi8A Original video: https://goo.gl/MKTt2L
Champions League : A controversial penalty earns CSKA Moscow a 2-2 draw with Manchester City	http://goo.gl/L4vLk5
Doctor Who: 13 exciting pictures from 'In the Forest of the Night'	http://goo.gl/Wj7L1u
Feminist video game critic cancels speech after mass shooting terror threat	http://goo.gl/fvY4tz
Renée Zellweger Looks Unrecognisable As She Arrives At Elle Women In Hollywood Awards In LA (PICS, VIDEO)	http://goo.gl/vrptts
Kanye West, Chvrches, Bat For Lashes, Haim, Pusha T, Charli XCX Appear on Lorde's The Hunger Games: Mockingjay, Pt. 1 Soundtrack	http://goo.gl/rFhTay
David Cameron to propose cap on number of low-skilled European workers in the UK as part of negotiation talks with Brussels'	http://goo.gl/ADWxav
Triple H takes over from Randy Orton in hilarious new WWE vine	http://goo.gl/8t2u5a

Table C.9. Links included on the news feeds in laboratory experiment 2

Tweet text on news feed	Tweet URL	Article title	URL: Live page	Facebook likes
Jack Whitehall and James Corden tweet about apparent spat… and not one person worldwide cares…	https://goo.gl/G3aJfL	Jack Whitehall and James Corden tweet about apparent spat	http://goo.gl/SbysAF	4
What I glean from this is that 1/3 of people have no concept of policy, just want anyone who hasn't been in before.	https://goo.gl/lfJmKf	Nearly a third of voters prepared to support Ukip	http://goo.gl/nh2IRq	10
Real Madrid vs. Barcelona: Winners and Losers from El Clasico. What I missed and more.	https://goo.gl/Fp44n4	Real Madrid vs. Barcelona: Winners and Losers from El Clasico	http://goo.gl/SfEGL3	1
Apparently the IPSA plans MP's expense investigations to be kept secret. If you want transparancy then please sign	https://goo.gl/lpbebv	MPs' EXPENSES: KEEP THEM PUBLIC	http://www.mypetition.org.uk (Treatment: URL no longer active)	High: 16 Low: 3 None: 0
In other news, Beady Eye Have Split Up	https://goo.gl/bVvG7Y	Beady Eye Have Split Up, Says Liam Gallagher	http://goo.gl/KAEkWG	7
This is true.	14 Reasons Animals Are Better Than Humans	https://goo.gl/ngeAY1	14 Reasons Animals Are Better Than Humans	http://goo.gl/tcBwMb	15
It's about time…	https://goo.gl/uPKgcx	Fuel set to fall to £1 a litre as supermarket war spreads to the forecourts	http://goo.gl/j7JvQN	13

Table C.9. Links included on the news feeds in laboratory experiment 2 (Cont'd.)

Tweet text on news feed	Tweet URL	Article title	URL: Live page	Facebook likes
Race the tube - In a wheelchair	https://goo.gl/9ad6q1	This Guy Is Going To Make A Point About The London Subway System That Will Make You Think	http://goo.gl/9t7zwp	4
#DUDLEY BOYZ!!! Best 3-D ever	https://goo.gl/g9uI9T	#wwe #randyorton #rkovines #outtanowhere #rko #3D #dudleyboys comment who you want next and follow	https://goo.gl/z6tfyT	6
And just like that, with the lowering of the flag, the UK ends its involvement in Afghanistan after 13 years of war	https://goo.gl/V0uSiu	UK ends Afghan combat operations	http://goo.gl/G9bBRl	3

The proportion of news content included within each newsfeed is based on a survey conducted by the Pew Research Centre. The survey asked respondents the following question, "How about the people you are friends with on social networking sites? How much of what they share and post is related to politics, political issues or the 2012 elections?" (Rainie and Smith, 2012: 12). Participants had the choice of five different responses: (1) all / almost all; (2) most; (3) some; (4) just a little; and (5) none at all. These responses were coded and a mean was calculated as a guide for the average amount of political content on a user's news feed, as shown in Table C.10. As a result, three posts that include political content were included in each news feed. Although the coding of these survey responses is yet another "kludge" (Karpf, 2012b), it is an example of my intent to design a news feed that is representative of normal use.

Table C.10. The volume of political content on social networking sites

Proportion of political content on news feed	Coded proportion %	Survey respondents %	Mean total value
All / almost all	100	3	300
Most	80	6	480
Some	50	30	1500
Just a little	20	36	720
None at all	0	23	0
Don't know	N/A	2	N/A
Total		100	3000
Average	30.61%		

Source: Adapted from Rainie and Smith (2012: 11).
Note: Results are based on the following survey question; how about the people you are friends with on social networking sites? How much of what they share and post is related to politics, political issues or the 2012 elections? N=1047.

C4. Petition Design: Number of Likes on 38 Degrees Petitions

Title of petition	Date posted	Number of Facebook likes
Take Action Against The Sun Newspaper	29/07/2014	1327
End The Unlawful Freeze On Asylum Support Rates	26/07/2014	404
Change UK Immigration Practices That Deter Talented International Students	25/07/2014	260
Write To Read! Stop Library Closures In Cornwall	24/07/2014	59
Liz Truss - Call An Immediate End To The Badger Cull	18/07/2014	1129
No Legal Duty To Pollute	12/07/2014	1222
Please Save Our Antibiotics	02/07/2014	1577
Stop Privatisation Of The Land Registry**	02/07/2014	1634
Tesco: Pay Your Workers A Wage They Can Live On**	24/06/2014	2072
Call For A Public Debate Into The Death Of 7 Year Old Zane	20/06/2014	323
Infrastructure Bill Allows Ministers To Sell Off Public Land*	18/06/2014	1079
Shut Dungeness B Nuclear Plant Now	13/06/2014	377
Get The England Team To Play The Kayapó Tribe After The World Cup	12/06/2014	950
Prevent The Use Of Water Cannon By Police In Mainland UK	11/06/2014	1473
Tesco: Pay Your Workers A Wage They Can Live On	10/06/2014	2244
Remove Metallica From Glastonbury Line Up	07/06/2014	505
End Circus Animal Cruelty	06/06/2014	713
Recall: Put Power In Voters' Hands**	04/06/2014	2357
Save Our GP Surgeries	03/06/2014	927
Recall: Put Power In Voters' Hands**	30/05/2014	1640
Publish The Iraq War Inquiry Results Now	30/05/2014	1607
Facebook: Do Not Release Your New App Feature That Listens To Users' Conversations	29/05/2014	517

Title of petition	Date posted	Number of Facebook likes
Recall: Put Power In Voters' Hands**	27/05/2014	1635
Recall: Put Power In Voters' Hands	26/05/2014	1661
Stop Privatisation Of The Land Registry	22/05/2014	1033
Re-Nationalise Energy	21/05/2014	2138
Keep Profit Out Of Child Protection	17/05/2014	736
Ban Dangerous Herbicides In Hackney	16/05/2014	165
Let's Call Time On The Great British Pub Scandal	13/05/2014	342
Ban Outdoor Advertising In Exeter	13/05/2014	20
HMRC: Don't Sell Off Our Tax Details**	13/05/2014	1346
HMRC: Don't Sell Off Our Tax Details**	09/05/2014	664
Fair Pay For Nurses And Hca's!	09/05/2014	760
Letter To The ICC At The Hague Re Mistreatment Of The Disabled And Sick	30/04/2014	1845
Save Dean Park Cricket Ground	29/04/2014	36
Police: Stop The March For England Bringing Violence To Brighton	29/04/2014	91
HMRC: Don't Sell Off Our Tax Details	24/04/2014	1571
Save Community Assets From Change Of Use	24/04/2014	34
Every Teacher To Be Properly Qualified To Teach	24/04/2014	737
Operation Kailand*	23/04/2014	471
Make The Mail On Sunday Apologise	22/04/2014	2208
Stop The Government Blocking Uk Wind Farms	15/04/2014	796
Give Us A Voice, Not A Speaker!	03/04/2014	411
Move Parliament To Manchester	02/04/2014	138
Get The BBC To Stop Giving An Equal Platform To Climate Change Deniers	01/04/2014	483
Karl McCartney MP Should Apologise	31/03/2014	436

Title of petition	Date posted	Number of Facebook likes
Stop The Mod From Building At Stonehenge, Resulting In Blocking Out The Sunrise	31/03/2014	885
Save Little Oasis DIY Skatepark	28/03/2014	53
Stop The British Army Killing Live Pigs For Training!	27/03/2014	278
Save The Bombed Out Church In Liverpool	25/03/2014	105

Note: *Petition page no longer active as of September, 2014. **Repeat posting. ***Link to external petition.

C5. Survey Results

The results from both experiments can be found online:

Laboratory experiment 1: Information Type   https://db.tt/3L3Iu4Ol
Laboratory experiment 2: Facebook Likes   https://db.tt/cLHnvvYo

C6. Ethical Considerations

This project received ethical approval from the Research Committee at the Department of Politics and International Relations at Royal Holloway. All participants were provided with a consent form prior to their involvement. Subjects underwent a debrief on completion of the experiment. All participants were made aware of how the data collected from the experiments would be used and stored. No information has been used in this thesis that may identify the subject. All data collected during the research has been anonymised and stored on a password-protected, cloud based storage facility.