



DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

POLITICAL CAMPAIGNING IN THE DIGITAL AGE

How the Right dominates digital campaigns
and what the Left needs to learn

Mike Buckley and Nolan MacGregor

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Targeted advertising is a powerful campaigning tool. It is crucial to understand who you are communicating to, what messages to communicate and what surrogates would maximise interest.



Parties of the Left need to invest time, energy and money in digital campaigning. It is no longer a »nice to have«. It is an essential tool for effective political campaigning in the modern era.

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Precision targeted outreach strategies, using data-driven audience analysis are being used by many right-wing and populist parties. In many countries the Left continues to rely on traditional campaign techniques, using digital campaigning sparingly or badly, with mixed results.

The most important innovation the Conservatives understood in the UK General Election 2019 was the value of targeted advertising. They understood that defining target audiences and utilising trusted surrogates specific to each audience is crucially important. They understood who they were communicating to, what messages to communicate and what surrogates would maximise interest. Communication is about audiences and audience segmentation. Campaigns must make assumptions about segmentation and what methods will work with one group which would not work for another. Labour wasted their entire campaign budget on misplaced assumptions. The Conservatives started with some educated assumptions but they made sure to test, validate and invalidate assumptions relentlessly until educated guesswork became data-backed, evidence-based understanding. Only then did they spend their millions. Targeted ads are therefore both promotional tools and a research method. They are how winning campaigns gather data in order to »describe« different online populations quantitatively to facilitate evidence-based messaging.

Parties of the Left need to invest time, energy and money in digital campaigning. They should also recognise the value of external experts in this and other fields, rather than preferring to use cheaper in-house teams. Parties of the Left need to know who they are appealing to, and which voter groups can be brought together to create a viable electoral coalition. Once they have defined their coalition, they need to define an overarching vision which appeals to the whole of this coalition or is at least acceptable to it. Specific messages must then be developed for each part of the coalition.

INTRODUCTION

The political Right has become highly effective in its use of digital campaign tools to amplify its message and build support. Both traditional Right wing and authoritarian or populist parties have learned to draw on the experience of the advertising industry to approach potential voters with precision-targeted outreach strategies designed using data-driven audience analysis.

The effectiveness of these strategies became evident in 2016 as the Leave campaign in the UK Brexit referendum and Donald Trump in the USA won against the odds. The use of digital media targeting was a significant factor in both victories. Parties have continued to use and develop these skills and tools, notably in the UK General Election of 2019, which this paper will use as a case study.

The Left has been slow to respond. This allows the Right to continue to dominate online campaign space. In many

countries the Left continues to rely on traditional campaign techniques, using digital campaigning sparingly or badly, with mixed results.

It is not only better use of online campaign tools that allows the Right to succeed, but the Right's dominance of the online space and its more highly developed ability to communicate simple, clear messages to specific voter groups is a real problem which the Left must address to succeed.

RIGHT-WING PROPAGANDA AND COMMERCIAL ADVERTISING

Online populations are not monolithic. People express identities through choices about who and what they engage with online. The diverse online groups or networks formed can be mapped and analysed, revealing much about where people live, their cultural background, ideological affinities and personal interests.

To understand how right-wing and authoritarian propagandists draw on the lessons of advertising we need to understand the theories which underpin its methodology. Since the early 20th century, innovations in advertising (mainly in the US) have been led by practitioners of a specific model of propaganda, outlined by Edward Bernays, the so-called »father of public relations«.

Bernays believed that societies have an »anatomy« – a distribution of groups, communities, and loyalties based on everything from demographics to personal interests. According to Bernays,

»[Scientific communication] takes account not merely of the individual, nor even of the mass mind alone, but also and especially of the anatomy of society, with its interlocking group formations and loyalties. It sees the individual not only as a cell in the social organism but as a cell organized into the social unit. Touch a nerve at a sensitive spot and you get an automatic response from certain specific members of the organism.« (1928)

Bernays built his reputation on campaigns that leveraged contacts with trusted groups, individuals and institutions within a target audience – the »sensitive spots« in a social organism. In his book *Propaganda* he documents, for example, how the velvet industry leveraged the influence of European fashion leaders to introduce velvet garments to the American market.

The Bernaysian propaganda model underlies all of today's advertising practices, especially the practice of influencer marketing which is one of the industry's most effective. Bernays' model contrasts with the more abstract, less rigorous yet more widely-disseminated understanding of propaganda, one which centres on broadcast communications via media as opposed to relationships between people. Political propagandists all over the world are coming to understand this.

Wilson Center researcher Nina Jankowicz's book *How to Lose the Information War* provides a panoramic view of influence operations based on her extensive experience advising governments on how to combat anti-democratic propaganda, particularly in the digital realm (2020).

Her research shows that propaganda machines do a lot more than operate Twitter bots. The real behaviour-changing impact of targeted influence operations takes place at the intersection of digital advertising and offline activity.

Targeted campaigns can leverage contacts with established individuals, organisations and other actors in order to deliver a desired message by way of trusted surrogates, ones who crucially often do not realise they are being manipulated. What makes this a uniquely digital strategy is the tactical step of funding digital targeted ads (such as Facebook ads) *on behalf of* these surrogates, promoting things like events and activities and thus increasing diffusion of their messages.

Offering to pay for ads is precisely how strategists build relationships with desired surrogates. This strategy of manipulating the »anatomy of society« via influencers and surrogates – far more than brute force »targeted advertising« alone – relies on audience-specific architectures of trust and influence rather than simply putting a piece of text and an image on a person's screen.

Influence campaigns aim to manipulate local actors to deliver a divisive message, increasing its viability and believability, and making the problem far more challenging to solve. These homegrown actors amplify discord and emphasise that merely deleting fake accounts and posts is but a small part of winning the information war.

It's not only disinformation strategists behind this kind of work. Others including the Biden campaign of 2020 have tapped into the experience and practices of the digital advertising industry, which is one of the reasons Trump failed to win re-election.

Biden's reliance on surrogates has been reported as a by-product of the all-digital campaign made necessary by pandemic restrictions; emphasis is also placed on his star-studded roster of high-profile proxies. But behind the A-list glamour, the Biden campaign spent as much time cultivating contacts with trusted figures on an audience-by-audience basis, working to leverage influence with specific groups of voters through targeted outreach rather than relying on one-size-fits-all solutions. And as Biden campaign workers themselves made clear in an interview with *Vox*,

»Some of the best support ... come[s] from influencers who speak to comparatively smaller but targeted audiences, like persuadable voters from a particular community or people living in a specific swing state. So even if Biden is doing an Instagram Live chat with an influencer you've personally never heard of, it's likely that influencer is speaking with an

audience that could be uniquely useful to his campaign.« (Interview by Heilweil, 2020).

These are techniques ripped straight from the digital ad industry and the practices of »influencer marketing«. While the language of »influencers« and »audiences« is foreign to much of the global left, there is a reason the multi-billion-dollar ad industry relies on it.

Biden's 2020 effort was the first political campaign in the world to have a dedicated, data-driven »audience development team«, staffed by experienced professionals trained to think in terms of highly-specific audience segments. Even after his victory and inauguration, Biden (in contrast with Trump) continues to see the value in communicating through surrogates.

The rise of populism and personality-driven politics has not simplified political communication to the extent often claimed: strong, charismatic candidates still need to leverage the architecture of influence among audiences they want to develop in order to speak in their own right and be listened to. The European and global Left would do well to follow Biden's lead. The example of the UK election in 2019 shows how the political right uses these new tools to influence the democratic competition.

THE DIGITAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN – UK 2019

CONTEXT: THE 2019 UK GENERAL ELECTION

The 2019 parliamentary election came at the end of a long period of political instability following the 2016 Brexit referendum. The Conservative campaign had messaging clarity from the outset, targeted at specific voter groups. The pledge to »Get Brexit done« appealed to Leave voters and to others tired of parliament's inability to resolve the issue. Their pledge to »level up« Britain, evidenced by promises to recruit 50,000 nurses and 20,000 police officers, and to build 40 new hospitals, added further appeal to voters in poorer areas and those concerned about the state of public services after years of cuts.

The resulting voter coalition united traditional Conservative voters in the South – many of whom opposed Brexit but refused to vote for left wing Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn – with socially conservative, economically left and right leaning voters in the North. In contrast Labour's campaign lacked clarity. Their Brexit offer of a referendum but without a commitment to campaign for EU membership disappointed both Leave and Remain voters. The party lost a similar number of voters to Remain parties (Greens, Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru and Scottish National Party) as it did Leave voters to the Conservatives and Brexit Party. The result was a Conservative majority of 80, the first significant majority since Tony Blair's final victory in 2005.

RESEARCH BEFORE SPENDING – HOW TO DO TARGETED ADVERTISING RIGHT

But message clarity alone is not sufficient to persuade such a broad block of voters all over the country. The most important innovation the Conservatives understood in 2019 was the value of targeted advertising. They understood that defining target audiences and utilising trusted surrogates specific to each is crucially important. They understood who they were communicating to, what messages to communicate and what surrogates would maximise interest. Instead of generic messaging posted blindly they used advertising spending and capacity more carefully, and more effectively.

Isaac Levido, an Australian political strategist, has been credited with Johnson's victory (Karp, 2019). Following Brad Parscale's 2016 Republican campaign Levido used big spending (and big data) to scale the campaign's *learning process* to obtain more information about more target audiences than any political campaign before it.

Until the final days of the campaign Labour was outspending the Conservatives on Facebook ads but using its spending far less effectively. At one point half of all political Facebook ads bought in the UK were from Labour. The picture changed dramatically in the final week of the campaign, with the Conservatives launching a spending blitz that saw as much as £20,000 spent on a single ad on a single day. This seemed to defy logic: why »waste« all that time in the run-up?

Until the final week »the Conservative strategy leaned on running large volumes of adverts while spending less on [reach] ... Instead, they have been using Facebook to test messages«, according to Benedict Pringle of *Political Advertising*. As Pringle writes, »The Conservatives have been testing the efficacy of various messages at a fraction of the cost and time than if they had recruited and conducted research in real life« (Field, Cameron-Chileshe and Cook, 2019).

»Real-life« methods would have included slow-moving focus groups and polling, both known to introduce biases, the most debilitating of which is selection bias: people who take part in polling and focus groups, regardless of background, represent highly-specific samples of the voting population. Whatever demographic or other groups they fit into, as focus group attendees they are by definition a unique subset of these groups. In contrast the online population is highly representative of the overall population.

Levido's team and helpers from Topham Guerin leveraged this fact. Like the Trump campaign before them, the Conservatives used digital advertising as a research tool, not just as a communications tool. The traditional approach would have seen Levido's team »bet big« on a campaign message worked out in advance through old-school techniques like focus groups and polls. In letting this guide their

campaign spending up to election day they would have been in the dark until after polls closed as to whether they had a message that would resonate with target voter groups. This was largely the method employed by Labour.

A/B TESTING

Instead, Levido's team ran a »live« campaign based on data, using the advertising industry technique of A/B testing *at scale*. A/B testing is a research methodology used in science, marketing and business development. A/B tests consist of an experiment with two variants. Typically, A/B tests are meant to measure a subject's response to variant A against variant B, attempting to determine which of the two is more effective.

Levido's team had a specific set of audiences they wanted to experiment with. Every time they ran an ad they collected feedback from the corresponding audience. They did this slowly, changing their approach on the fly as the election drew closer. This helped them build a picture of what worked and what did not, ultimately giving them a rich picture of each audience, allowing them to go all in at the end of the campaign with a set of messages they knew their target audiences were primed for.

Targeted ads are therefore both promotional tools and a research method. They are how winning campaigns gather data in order to »describe« different online populations quantitatively to facilitate evidence-based messaging. While Labour briefly experimented with these techniques, it badly misjudged what A/B testing is for by front-loading its ad spend in the initial period of the campaign. By the time any meaningful amount of data had been obtained huge amounts of money had already been spent, much of it wasted. Regardless of what may or may not have been learned, by the time Labour's campaign had gathered relevant information it was too late to change tack.

SPEND – BUT SPEND EFFECTIVELY

By the end of the campaign the Conservative Party spent £959,329 on Facebook ads to Labour's £552,035. These figures do not take into account money spent on Google, Snapchat or YouTube banner ads. But the story here is not that more money necessarily means more effective messaging. In 2017 the Conservatives spent £2.3 million on Facebook ads to Labour's £500,000 with far less return on investment than in 2019.

In 2019 Labour *could* have matched the Conservatives. Boris Johnson's record-breaking war chest of £37 million was only narrowly trailed by Labour's £33 million election fund. What made the difference is that the Conservatives spent far more intelligently than in 2017. This time they waited until they had the strongest evidence basis they could before making major spending decisions in the final weeks of the campaign.

What Levido's team understood, unlike Labour, is that it is not enough to target a large number of people with ads. Communication is about audiences and audience segmentation; an understanding of one audience being meaningfully different from another. Campaigns must make assumptions about segmentation and what methods will work with one group which would not work for another. Labour wasted their entire campaign budget on misplaced assumptions. The Conservatives started with some educated assumptions but they made sure to test, validate and invalidate assumptions relentlessly until educated guesswork became data-backed, evidence-based understanding. Only then did they spend their millions.

LEARN FROM THE PAST – AND FROM OTHER CAMPAIGNS AND CAMPAIGNERS

Unlike Labour, the Conservatives learned the lessons of the past. Isaac Levido, the Topham Geurin duo and the Lynton Crosby machine which they all emerged from won major victories in the closely-fought May 2019 Australian election in which the same tactics helped Liberals snatch a narrow victory from the jaws of a potential defeat. Most of all, they learned from the Trump campaign as led by Brad Parscale, the Republican Party's leading digital strategist between 2016 and 2019. In an interview with CBS *60 Minutes*, Parscale (formerly a digital marketing professional) stressed his relentless commitment to testing. According to the *New York Times*:

»The campaign [is] churning out targeted ads, aggressively testing content and collecting data to further refine its messages. [In 2016] the Trump campaign sought to tailor its ads more precisely to specific voters, with a typical Trump message targeted at 2.5 million people compared with eight million for the Clinton campaign. And the Trump team simply made more unique ads – 5.9 million versus 66,000. »We were making hundreds of thousands' of variations on similar ads ... Changing language, words, colors« (Rosenberg and Roose 2019)

The most successful right-wing parties in the world, including in the US, Australia and the UK, all share at least one common feature: an understanding, based on their strategists' extensive experience in the advertising industry, that digital communication is about reaching people where they are.

This requires above all *data* and the ability to interpret it. It demands extensive research into which narratives move people and which do not and (increasingly, as evidence mounts that the persuasiveness of any given political ad is minimal) an ability to leverage trusted surrogates, especially in the earlier periods of a campaign before massive spending on ads becomes cost-effective.

WHAT THE LEFT CAN LEARN

THE CONSERVATIVE CAMPAIGN WAS SIMPLE, TARGETED, AND DISCIPLINED

The lessons of the Conservatives' 2019 election campaign are both simple and targeted. Simple, because their campaign promises could be recited without the need for whole sentences: Get Brexit Done, levelling up, 50,000 nurses, 20,000 police officers, 40 hospitals.

Targeted, because between them these pledges were intended to appeal to voter groups the Conservatives needed in order to take large numbers of voters from Labour in specific parts of the country. Specific numbers promised for nurses, police officers and hospitals helped them, making promises appear concrete and providing the perfect rebuttal when challenged about previous Conservative cuts to the same services.

Brexit appealed to socially conservative, anti-immigration voters, while levelling up and public service pledges appealed to voters who wanted to see improvements in their communities, ironically improvements needed after ten years of Conservative-led austerity.

Johnson's campaign did not win many more votes than Theresa May's campaign of 2017. Just over 300,000 more people voted for Johnson than had voted for May out of an electorate of over 47 million. The key difference was who, and crucially where, those people were.

THE CONSERVATIVE CAMPAIGN WAS PLANNED AND AGILE – BUT DEPENDENT ON LABOUR WEAKNESS

In other ways the campaign was complex and the result of at least two years hard work. The campaign had been meticulously planned by Conservative central office following the 2017 debacle, then with renewed energy by Johnson and his team.

The 2019 Conservative campaign did what the 2017 campaign failed to do: capitalise on Labour weakness to take wavering former Labour voters. Parties of the Left must learn from the Conservative campaign. They should also take solace from the fact that it would have failed had Labour run an effective campaign of its own.

In 2017 Labour successfully united the Remain vote against Theresa May's pledge to deliver a hard Brexit. In 2019 Labour failed, losing millions of potential votes to minor parties. Labour's leader, Jeremy Corbyn, was far more unpopular in 2019 than 2017, becoming the least popular main party leader since records began. Labour's vote fell by eight per cent; without this the Conservative campaign would have failed.

Labour failed too to adjust to changing voter demographics, which are not all to do with Brexit. The importance of class as a predictor of voting intention has waned over time, partially replaced by education, age, housing tenure and a largescale move of young people from towns to cities. Had it acknowledged and responded to these changes it could have fared better.

ONLINE AUDIENCES

Online populations are structured like networks in ways not dissimilar to offline networks. Just as people in the offline world find like-minded sports, politics or professional networks, people online sort themselves into self-contained networks, often isolated from one another. People's online networks can be highly dissimilar to their offline worlds; there are many stories of people who are mild mannered offline expressing extreme views online.

Much has been written in the media about the potentially destructive effects of these »filter bubbles« on democratic societies. Writing in *Nature*, a team of researchers from Oxford University, MIT and other institutions helped substantiate these claims (Bergstrom and Bak-Coleman, 2019). In addition to describing how filter bubbles »reinforce political views or even make them more extreme and drive political polarization«, the study showed that today's polarised online communities are highly vulnerable to manipulation by malign actors through a process of information gerrymandering:

»When social networks become primary conduits of information, the pattern of network connections influences what voters believe about others' voting intentions. This influence matters, because people shift their own perspectives and voting strategies in response, either through behavioural spread known as social contagion or on the basis of strategic considerations.«

Democratic societies are thus vulnerable not only to »naturally« increased political polarisation as a result of filter bubble effects, but also to potential manipulation by undemocratic actors. Progressive parties therefore have a role to play in protecting democracy by conducting their politics in such a way as to break down filter bubbles and bridge the gap between different sectors of the population. They can do this by running evidence-based, data-driven campaigns designed to reach target groups where they are, but (unlike their adversaries) with a universalist, progressive political vision that unites rather than divides.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Parties of the Left need to invest time, energy and money in digital campaigning. It is no longer a »nice to have«. It is an essential tool for effective political campaigning in the modern era.
- It is not only the Right which has capable, experienced professionals working in this space – however the Left often fails to recognise the value of external experts in this and other fields, preferring to use cheaper in-house teams without the necessary experience.
- Parties of the Left need to know who they are appealing to, and which voter groups can be brought together to create a viable electoral coalition.
- Once they have defined their coalition, they need to define an overarching vision which appeals to the whole of this coalition – or is at least acceptable to it.
- Specific messages must then be developed for each part of the coalition.
- As the Conservatives learned in 2019, the advantage of digital campaigning is that it allows parties to test messaging, and with that done target the most effective form of a pitch to specific voter groups.
- Learn from the experts within and beyond national boundaries.

CONCLUSION

Labour did not lose the 2019 election solely because of the strength of the Conservative digital strategy, however the latter's online campaign played a significant role in allowing them to capitalise on Labour's weakness, understand their audiences and which messages would be most effective, and in the final days confirm and turn out their vote. Without it, Johnson's majority would undoubtedly be smaller than it is today, and Labour in a stronger position to win next time.

Yet parties of the Left should not be intimidated by the success of the Conservative campaign or by the previous victories of Leave, Trump or Australia's Liberals. The same tools and techniques used by these campaigns can be developed and used by the Left. The techniques themselves are hardly innovative; they have been used in the advertising industry for years. The insight of the Right was that they can be used to win votes as much as to attract buyers. However, as the Tory campaign shows, they use it by promoting polarization and creating separate filter-bubbles and thus fragmentizing society. The insight into the technology but also the dangers of this tactic can be useful for the Left in building a more cohesive public sphere also in the digital realm.

But the Left will not win with cutting edge digital advertising alone. The 2019 campaigns show too that leadership – and trust in that leadership – is essential. A party is unlikely to win with an unpopular leader, all the more so one as unpopular as Jeremy Corbyn. The Left needs too to develop a clear statement of its values and vision – of what the Left is for in the 21st century – and then to evidence those

values with a clear set of policies which will clearly improve the lives of voters in tangible ways.

All this can be done. The challenge for the Left is that in most nations it remains to be done. We can start by learning a lesson the Right learned long ago – we will all be more successful if we work together.

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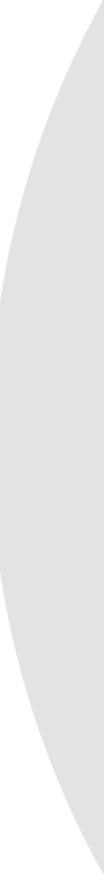
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The Democratic Futures Foundation is a pan-European think tank focused on the future of European social democracy and innovation in political campaigning.

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The most important innovation the Conservatives understood in the UK General Election 2019 was the value of targeted advertising. They understood that defining target audiences and utilising trusted surrogates specific to each is crucially important. They understood who they were communicating to, what messages to communicate and what surrogates would maximise interest. Communication is about understanding audiences and good use of audience segmentation. Methods and messages which work with one group are unlikely to work with another.



Labour wasted much of their campaign budget on misplaced assumptions. The Conservatives started with educated assumptions but made sure to test, validate and validate assumptions relentlessly until educated guesswork became data-backed, evidence-based understanding. Only then did they spend their millions. Targeted ads should be used as both promotional tools and a research method. They are how winning campaigns gather data in order to »describe« different online populations quantitatively to facilitate evidence-based messaging which will be effective in winning voters.



Parties of the Left need to know who they are appealing to, and which voter groups can be brought together to create a viable electoral coalition. Once they have defined their coalition they need to define an overarching vision which appeals to the whole of this coalition or is at least acceptable to it. Specific messages must then be developed for each part of the coalition. The Left can match and go beyond the Right in campaign expertise, innovation and effectiveness, but to do so it needs to move beyond established methods, do what the Right does well and find ways to go further.

Further information on the topic can be found here:
www.fes.de/en/stiftung/international-work