

Twitter: Communication tool or pointless vanity?

Over the last year, Twitter has emerged as an important tool in the wider milieu of digital politics. Less than 12 months ago, it barely featured on the political radar and has gone from two MPs (0.3%) twittering in December 2008 to 79 (12.2%) today. This rapid rise has often led to the portrayal of Twitter as a phenomenon; as either revolutionary or a pointless fad.

In reality, Twitter is not so much revolutionary as evolutionary, simply a continuation of the increasingly-rapid news and information cycle but one that, at the same time, enhances the potential for democratic dialogue. Twitter is more popular on the left of the political spectrum, with 61% of all MPs on Twitter being Labour and only 13% Conservative. Furthermore, 20% of twittering MPs are Liberal Democrats and, matching the trend seen in the adoption of other social media by MPs, they are proportionally more likely to use Twitter than members of other parties in the House of Commons (see Table 1 and Figure 1 below).

Table 1: Twitter users in the UK Parliament by party¹.

Party	Number of MPs	MPs on Twitter	%age of MPs on Twitter
Conservative	197	10	6%
Labour	353	48	13%
Liberal Democrat	63	16	24%
Plaid Cymru	3	1	-
SDLP	3	1	-
SNP	7	2	-
Respect	1	1	-

¹ Data sourced directly from twitter.com and was collected during September 2009.

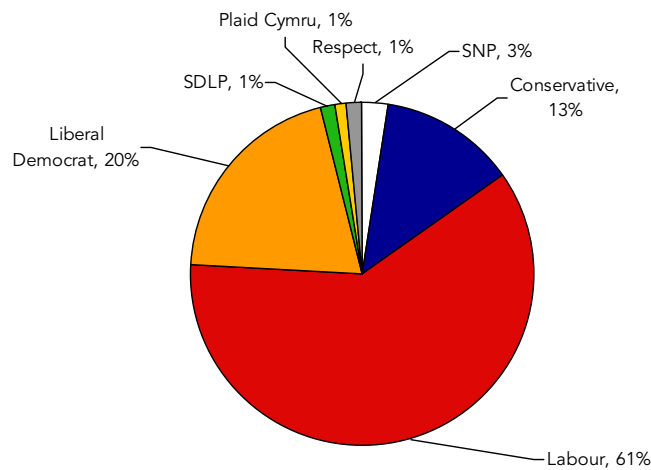


Figure 1: Twittering MPs by Party (percentages).

Ranking website 'Twitter.Grader.com'² ranks Twitter users and their top 10 of MPs shows only one Conservative. There are two Liberal Democrats and the remaining seven MPs are from Labour. It's been suggested that blogging is best done in opposition but this doesn't seem to be the case for Twitter: worldwide, opposition politicians are only about 3% more likely to twitter than those who are governing. When the UK analysis is extended to include members of the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales, the pattern is largely similar, however as Figure 2 shows, Plaid Cymru Members of the Welsh Assembly stand out as almost twice as likely to use Twitter as other elected representatives (40% of Plaid Cymru AMs use Twitter).

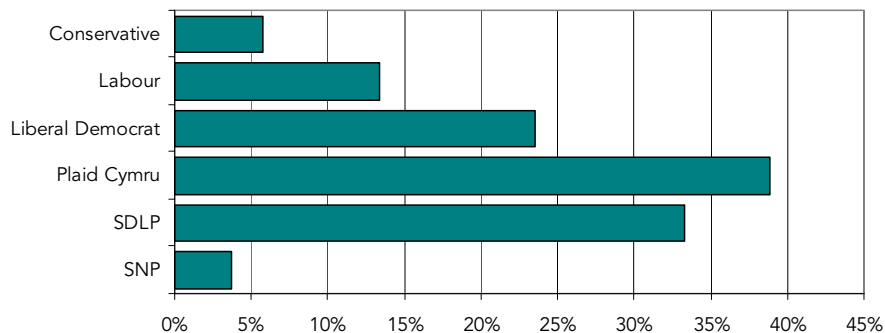


Figure 2: Percentage of Twitter users by party across UK Parliament, Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly

Party strategies for social media become more apparent when comparing the uptake of Twitter amongst prospective parliamentary candidates (PPCs). Where the Conservatives lag behind in Westminster the trend reverses for their prospective candidates (see Table 2). This reflects a wider approach within the party to push the use of social media as a campaigning tool for candidates.

2 Twitter.Grader.com ranks Twitter users based on factors that include: number of followers, perceived 'power' of those followers and the number of re-tweets (from other people and of that user by other people).

Table 2: Prospective parliamentary candidates using Twitter by party.

Party	Number of PPCs using Twitter
Conservative	45
Labour	44
Liberal Democrat	29
Green Party	6
UK Libertarian Party	3
SNP	1
UKIP	5

International Trends

In numerical terms, only the US has more nationally elected representatives twittering than the UK (174 across both the Senate and Congress). Current Hansard Society research shows that, in percentage terms, UK twittering MPs lag behind the US, Norway, New Zealand, and Canada (see Figure 3) despite the fact that Twitter has more registered users in the UK than anywhere except the US. Worldwide, too, the political difference in Twitter users dissipates, with approximately 10% more MPs on the left twittering than those on the right.

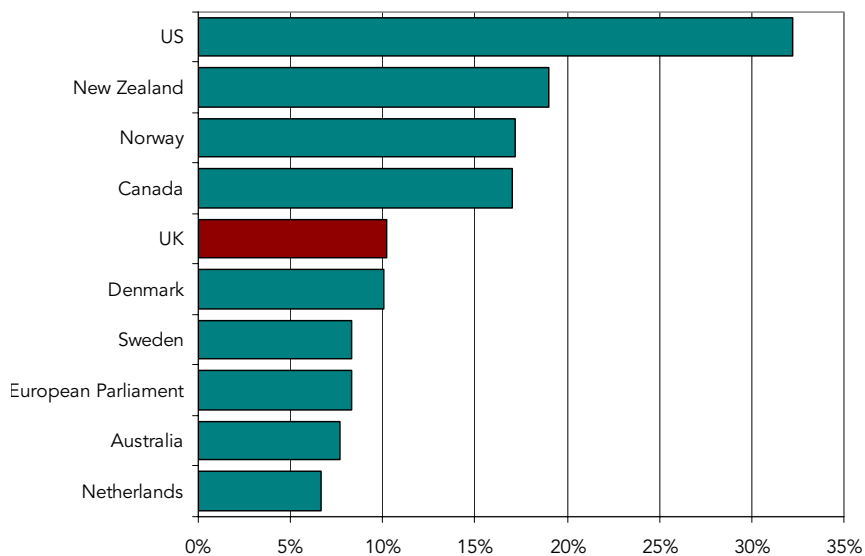


Figure 3: Percentage of elected representatives using Twitter by country.

Abbreviating the comment cycle

An MP's audience on Twitter would seem to bear little if any resemblance to their geographical constituency. The granularity of Twitter means that its reach and potential are far wider, as is also the case with blogs. Such dislocation from the traditional constituency can be a boon for politicians wishing to raise their wider profile or air their views on specific topical issues. As Tom Harris MP noted at a Hansard Society event earlier this year, blogging was a chance to have a say beyond his constituency and beyond his portfolio. The extent to which a Twitter constituency is cultivated and maintained clearly varies and our observation of post-election New Zealand suggests that MPs and candidates used Twitter during the campaign to rally support only to switch off afterwards as their online presence suddenly went quiet.

Twitter's 140 characters are most widely used as a broadcast medium, replicating the use of other web tools.³ Having a presence on Twitter potentially gives MPs so much more: used well, it is an additional platform to keep people up-to-date, and provides a place to air their views, to engage and to listen. Tweets fall into a number of distinct categories, a simplified example of these are shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3: The nature of tweets.

Mode	Content	Example ⁴
Broadcasting	Political	@DouglasCarswell Crown Prosecution Service and assisted suicide - when did we vote for this change?
	Policy	@nick_clegg The Liberal Democrats & political change #ldconf http://bit.ly/SNlSd
	Events	@ParmjitDhanda 'Parmjit opens new hotel at the quays ' page on: http://bit.ly/5CW0z
	Constituency	@iancawsey With the Mayor cutting the first sod for the new learning needs centre in Brigg http://yfrog.com/0gwivhj
Personal	Personal reflection	@NadineDorriesMP Really need to learn to deal with the stress better when stood on station platform and cancellation No 3 in a row is announced.
	General comment	@MikeFosterMP train nightmare on way to london
	Status update	@DMiliband Walking over to un nuclear non proliferation meeting. POTUS lockdown means NY stopped.
Conversational	Replies	@NadineDorriesMP @Parlez_me_nTory. I hope so, as the discussion is about blogging.
	Questions & requests	@Andrew_GwynneMP @CllrTim - how's your by-election going? Polling day must be soon??

Twitter provides for near-synchronous communication. Newspapers have always stimulated letters to the editor, sometimes eliciting counter-responses by columnists. But this is a slow process. Internet discussion forums and blogs shorten the post and response cycle and Twitter has accelerated this once again, almost to the point of it being a real-time conversation. Twitter shrinks not only time and distance but quantity of information; a conventional newspaper column is between 500 to 1,000 words long, a typical blog is 250 to 500 words whereas a tweet can not be more than 140 characters.

Minimal space means minimal complexity, making Twitter the personification of the soundbite generation. The result is a constant cycle (and recycling) of tweets and responses which, some would argue, has a tendency to produce froth; for example, David Cameron's comments on 'too many tweets...'.⁵ Indeed, a US study⁶ concluded that 40% of tweets were 'pointless babble' but would 60% of typical face-to-face conversations be seen as meaningful? As some of the examples in Table 3 show, abbreviating your message does not have to mean losing the meaning. However, condensing what you have to say into a succinct but meaningful 140 characters is definitely a skill.

Socially and culturally society has changed and, as traditional party-politics dwindles, politicians and citizens have looked for new ways to engage. In an age of weak political ties, where party loyalties are less meaningful and individual engagement is driven by issues not ideology, Twitter is a perfect platform for light engagement. It is somewhere for conversations to start but not a place for in-depth deliberative

3 Williamson, A. (2009). MPs Online: Connecting with constituents. London: Hansard Society.

4 These examples are all taken from live tweets on September 24, 2009

5 The Times, 30July, 2009. 'David Cameron turns the air blue in radio rant over Twitter'.

6 See: www.pearanalytics.com/2009/twitter-study-reveals-interesting-results-40-percent-pointless-babble

discourse. Twitter offers opportunities for MPs to gauge wider public perceptions and to shape their own opinions through the views of others. This aspect of Twitter is significant not because it is revolutionary but because it is age-old.

Medium or Message?

There are some good examples of where Twitter has had influence and impact within democratic debates. One obvious example of this is the aftermath of the 2009 Iranian presidential election. In this case, Twitter became an important conduit to maintain contact outside the country but many commentators argue that it raised hopes only to prove incapable of effectively realising them. Online activism does not directly translate into offline action. Yet without the rapidity of the online collaborative information cycle that Twitter made possible, it is conceivable not only that the levels of offline action would have been lower but that the government response might well have been swifter and harsher. Twitter might not have been life-changing in Iran but it was ground-breaking.

A second example of Twitter-led online activism, this time from the UK, was the '#welovetheNHS' campaign. This campaign gained the attention and support of both the government (from the Prime Minister down) and the opposition. Most importantly, Twitter facilitated something more than a simple online petition and resulted in a broad raising of consciousness around the issue and support for the NHS. Rather than simply signing their name in support of a cause, people reaffirmed their support by citing examples of why the NHS matters. '#welovetheNHS' started with the air of an autonomous and spontaneous, viral and relatively short-lived collective, the epitome of a web-based campaign, although it became obvious too that political agendas were manipulating the issues behind the scenes once it reached the mainstream.

These examples point to an interesting dilemma for politicians, more used to being at the centre of a conversation: on Twitter (and on other social networking media) effective use means following and listening as much, or perhaps more so, than leading and talking.

Twitter can give the public a different view into Parliament with twittering directly from the House of Commons during Prime Minister's Questions becoming commonplace and a considerable number of tweets being made during the election of the new Speaker in June. Twitter too was used to support the role of Parliament when it became the tool of choice to challenge and effectively invalidate attempts by lawyers acting for an oil trading firm that would have prevented newspapers from reporting a question being asked in Parliament by Labour MP Paul Farrelly⁷. The blocked question and related reports were quickly circulated through Twitter, as well as on prominent blogs and through the site wikileaks.org.

7 See: www.guardian.co.uk/media/2009/oct/13/trafigura-drops-gag-guardian-oil

Twitter: Ephemeral?

Twitter, then, is not revolutionary but one small step towards a more collaborative information environment in which opinion is formed by the rapid exchange of views amongst a wider public, rather than by experts alone. Twitter is not the primary cause of a more conversational approach, simply an element in and symptom of an appetite for more collaborative political exchange. As Labour MP and the party's Twitter strategist, Kerry McCarthy, suggests, an MP who uses Twitter 'is doing what we've always done in a new setting'.⁸

Twitter allows conversations to take place between diverse people virtually and almost instantaneously and can bridge a variety of opinions, allowing people to bring together relevant information in a different way. However, it must be noted most analyses of online political discourses highlight a tendency to move towards those with like minds, rather than to seek out difference and at the moment political twitterers are perhaps preaching to the already engaged.

One may well disparage the 'pointless babble' for which Twitter is a channel but it would be a mistake to disregard Twitter itself – it is a useful tool that can, when used properly, enable better communication between citizens and their elected representatives. It has given MPs the chance to create more intimate dialogues directly with the public without the need for intermediaries.

Twitter has the potential to become a bridge between citizens and their elected representatives, especially when it is used as more than a broadcast media. It appears to be a largely positive and valuable addition to the complex milieu of communication tools and channels accessible to politicians today. However, this potential is not always exploited by the MPs who use it. In Twitter, those who have always aimed to engage the public in constructive discussion will find a new space and a valuable new tool but it's not the 'killer app' of digital politics and unlikely of itself to transform the political landscape.

8 See: news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/8205081.stm

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



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