

## Viral advertising and new pathways to engagement with the British National Party

Dr Benjamin J Lee\*, University of Northampton, Dr. Mark Littler, University of Hull

### Abstract

This paper identifies and analyses the use of social media by the British National Party (BNP) – a far-right party based in the UK. The analysis centres on changing forms of political participation, suggesting that the BNP, as well as other political parties both on the far-right and in the political mainstream, are using social media to provide the opportunity for casual or even accidental engagement by sharing or engaging with material over social networks. To illustrate this point, the author draws on an extensive sample of visual material posted by the BNP on the social network Facebook. Engaging with material produced by far-right groups such as the BNP potentially opens audience members up to a number of personal, professional and legal risks. The paper concludes by linking the potential for casual or accidental far-right engagement online to wider calls to support more rounded and digitally literate citizenship education.

### Introduction

The question of who involves themselves with far-right groups and why remains relatively open (Goodwin, 2010). Academic consensus has been slow to form, with competing explanations embracing the impact of aspects as diverse as psychological factors, (Fromm, 1942; Adorno et al, 1950), social and economic circumstance (Billig, 1978), life history, and ideological factors (Goodwin, 2010).

While the approaches and focusses adopted by different studies have varied enormously, an important unifying aspect may be found in the assumptions made about the nature of engagement with far-right organisations, and in particular in the focus on individuals considered 'members' or 'activists' of extreme groups. In general, qualitative analyses of the British far-right have focussed on those who participate formally at the expense of other categories of involvement and

support. Billig's (1978) seminal study of the National Front, for example, used evidence gathered through semi-structured interviews with members, while Goodwin's (2010: 34-5) major work on the British National Party (BNP) relied heavily on interviews with 'activists'. Similarly, quantitative studies attempting to isolate predictors of extreme right support have often also relied on analyses that require participants to self-identify as supporters of members of extreme-right parties (Bartlett, Birdwell and Littler, 2011; Ford & Goodwin, 2010).

Recent research has, however, highlighted the importance of questions of belonging and identity to the study of the far-right, challenging traditional notions of 'membership' and 'activism' in favour of a more nuanced understanding of participation that transcends traditional categories to accommodate more fluid modes of participation. It thus remains to be seen how the traditional

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\* Corresponding author. Email: [Benjamin.Lee@northampton.ac.uk](mailto:Benjamin.Lee@northampton.ac.uk). This publication has been produced with the financial support of the DAPHNE Programme of the European Union. The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of Benjamin Lee and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Commission.

categories employed in much of the existing literature can be utilised to help understand both the proliferation of new political actors (Bartlett, Birdwell and Littler, 2011) and shifts in modes of engagement by existing political groups. Indeed, research on the English Defence League (a social movement rather than a political party) highlights the complexity of determining who belongs to a movement and who is merely claiming membership for effect (Bartlett and Littler, 2011), a point lent further credibility by research exploring youths chanting EDL slogans - very few, if any, of whom were found to be involved in the group (Busher, 2012).

### **Membership and Online Activism**

Assuming formal membership or engagement as a basis for analysis is therefore hugely problematic: it ignores the growing repertoire of casual political action available to parties and other political groups and their supporters, and the important ways in which the growth of new communication technologies has shifted norms of political engagement. In an increasingly online world, what constitutes activism or membership has become harder to define, often falling short of the formal membership that has been the focus of much of the existing literature on the far-right. Indeed, evidence suggests that membership of political parties and strength of party affiliation is in long term decline across the West (Keen, 2015), and that the role of members is therefore increasingly symbolic (Stoker, 2006). For young people in particular, formalised electoral politics is often critiqued as alienating, and a lack of engagement seen as symptomatic not of a lack of interest in politics, but of a rejection of formal and partisan participatory modes (Sloam, 2007 see also Quintelier, 2007 and Keen, 2015).

There are numerous explanations for this widespread decline in political parties as formalised

membership organisations, with several theoretical models of party organisation that attempt to compensate for this decline in traditional mass party organisations - for example, Kircheimner's 'catch-all party' (1966), Panebianco's Electoral-professional model (1988) and Katz and Mair's cartel model (1995). The role of technology has equally attracted academic attention as a way of reconciling declining citizen involvement with parties and their continued pre-eminence in the UK system. In response to the push factors created by declining involvement, some have suggested new organisational forms entirely supported by symbolic party engagement through technology (Margetts, 2001), while others have adapted existing party forms (Lofgren & Smith, 2003) to encompass the availability of new and less formalised modes of digital participation within existing party strategies.

In all cases, however, political parties and academic scholarship have struggled to understand the costs and benefits of these shifts in participation norms, with any possible benefits balanced against concerns around 'slacktivism' and 'clicktivism', where online participation may be seen to reduce the chances of offline engagement (Butler, 2011). As a result, significant attention has been paid to the impact of different types of online political engagement, and the relative costs and benefits of different online tools.

### **Online Political Engagement in the UK**

Early efforts at online political engagement in the UK were regarded as poor (Chadwick, 2006), and even contemporary online engagement is often seen as cursory and lacking interactivity (Southern, 2014; Lee, 2014). However, analysis is beginning to identify some evidence of purposeful strategy in UK web campaigning, particularly in the wake of the 2012 Obama campaign. Lilleker and Jackson (2013) highlight the important distinction between

external and internal marketing, suggesting that during the 2012 campaign web presence was an important tool for reaching out to and mobilising supporters. Further in support of the idea of the web, and social media in particular, as a potential substitute for crumbling traditional party structures a recent report highlighted the growth of mainstream political parties' virtual followings on popular social media tools in the UK, going so far as to suggest that such people were 'virtually members' (Bartlett et al, 2013).

The exact role of online supporters of parties thus remains unclear. Many parties appear to be attempting to leverage their online followings in a number of ways, with one prominent example being viral advertising. Viral advertising refers to the potential for the exponential spread of content through online networks as users forward messages to one another (Phelps, et al, 2004; Golan & Zaidner, 2008; Swanepoel, et al, 2009; Hinz, et al, 2011). Most typically this takes the form of images designed to be shared by online supporters. A forthcoming study based on the run up to the 2015 general election in the UK found that collectively the seven largest parties in the UK posted 2447 of these online political posters (OPPs) on the social network Facebook between September 2013 and May 2015 (Lee & Campbell, 2015). OPPs closely resembled conventional posters in some ways, juxtaposing images and text to convey a political message. However, they differed in some key respects, being on the whole less sophisticated than conventional political posters, far more numerous and, as they could be produced within a narrow timescale, more topical. The aims of viral advertising for political parties in this way are less clear. In the first instance OPPs seem designed to be distributed widely and contain appeals for users to 'like' and 'share' content, capitalising on the potential of social networks such as Facebook to act as catalysts for accidental

exposure to political material even amongst apolitical users (Chadwick, 2009; Lee & Campbell, 2015). The empirical reality suggested, however, that most of the OPPs produced remained within a political echo chamber, and despite a few strong performers, were rarely shared more than a few thousand times (Lee & Campbell, 2015; see also Sunstein 2007).

### **The BNP and viral advertising**

Returning to far-right politics, despite a disastrous showing in the 2014 European elections and the 2015 general election, and a change in leadership, the British National Party remains the most prominent – and visible - far-right political party in the UK. However, important questions may be asked around the BNP's political (and organisational) collapse and the impact this has had on its position in the broader milieu of far-right politics in the UK. In terms of online presence and viral advertising on social media, alternative groups – for example, the EDL, Infidels, and Britain First (a BNP offshoot) - have all had arguably greater success in establishing their presence on platforms such as Facebook (often by inducing users to 'like' and 'share' posts that address non-right wing issues – for example, opposing animal cruelty - without being aware of the party's political ideology).

Despite this, the BNP continues to take its online offering very seriously maintaining an active website and a managed presences on a series of social media platforms. Most analysis of the BNP's web presence has centred on the content and narrative (Atton, 2006; Wood and Finlay, 2008) although there has been some consideration of the role of the web in developing new recruits (Goodwin, 2010). The BNP shares the same organisational incentives as any other UK political party to incorporate online tools into its communication mix. However, the fringe status of the BNP also provides some unique reasons for it to

use online tools, allowing the BNP to expand its reach despite its small size, circumvent (to some extent) mainstream media lock out, and to allow its supporters to participate with some degree of anonymity (Whine, 1999; Virchow, 2004; Bratten, 2005; Caiani & Wagemann, 2009).

As with mainstream political parties, the BNP also produces online political posters and distributes them through social media, particularly Facebook. This paper is an attempt to explore its usage of this medium, examining its use of online political posters over a 21 month period.

## Method

This paper is based on observations from a dataset of OPPs produced by the BNP between 12<sup>th</sup> September 2013 and 8<sup>th</sup> May 2015. The main Facebook page of the BNP<sup>2</sup> was observed on a daily basis and any OPPs that were posted were downloaded by the researcher. In addition, a note was made of the number of times an image was liked, shared, and when available, commented upon.<sup>3</sup> In order to allow likes and shares to accumulate, data was collected retrospectively, three days after the original posting. Between September 2013 and May 2015 the BNP produced 1122 OPPs. As a point of comparison, the Labour party, the most prolific user of OPPs among mainstream parties produced 888 OPPs within the same time period (Campbell & Lee, 2015). Not of all the OPPs were original and this figure includes OPPs that were posted multiple times by the BNP as well as slight reconfigurations of older images, e.g. changes to text.

## Results

A review of this data highlights a number of key trends in the BNP's use of OPPs. BNP OPPs are seemingly explicitly designed to be shared by users

on social media. In the early portion of the dataset (between 13<sup>th</sup> September 2013 and 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2013) explicit requests for users to share or like an image were absent from the majority of BNP images. From the 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 2013 onwards, however, requests for users to 'share and like if you agree' become far more common and are featured in the majority of images. Of the 1052 images metadata was available for, the mean number of times an image was shared was 1014.8. It should be noted that the distributions of likes and shares were both highly skewed with a small number of high-performing images increasing the overall mean drastically, the median number of likes was 802 and median shares was 417.5. Cumulatively, BNP OPPs were shared 1,066,812 times during the analysis period. BNP OPPs were liked an average of 3624.01 times and accumulated a total of 3,812,461 likes in the analysis period. These should be seen in the context of the unknown Facebook audience but it is likely that the same audience members were repeatedly sharing content.

Common topics referenced in BNP OPPs included immigration (Muslim immigration and social issues in particular) and the ineptitude of the current political establishment. This combination of the hostile other and the incompetent or sinister elite is in keeping with established research on the BNP's political narrative as well as with populist mobilisations in general (Halikiopoulou & Vasilopoulou, 2010, Atton, 2006; Canovan, 1981). Image one [see appendix] combines most of these narratives in a single image. It includes an unflattering picture of current UK Prime Minister David Cameron looking confused and uncertain. Next to this image is an icon representing the messaging application WhatsApp. The text next to the image is in quotation marks saying "If I'm re-

<sup>2</sup> The main Facebook page of the BNP can found at: <https://www.facebook.com/OfficialBritishNationalParty?fref=ts>

<sup>3</sup> A change to the way Facebook works meant that the total number of comments was not displayed in many cases after April 2015.

elected 'I'll ban WhatsApp in Britain because terrorists are using it.' This refers to a speech made by David Cameron on the 12<sup>th</sup> of January 2015 in which he problematized and hinted at a ban on the use of encrypted communications applications (The Independent, 2015; TechDirt, 2015). Although media reporting around the issue specifically mentioned WhatsApp (among other applications) this was not mentioned in the Prime Minister's Speech. Equally, no reference to the text presented by the BNP as a quote can be found. The BNP then pivots the message suggesting that they would prevent 'Islamist jihadis' from 're-entering' the country, a reference to the current concern over the rise of the self-described Islamic State, and that they would deport terrorist 'suspects', although it is not made clear where they would be deported to or on what legal basis. In the final sentence, this argument is linked to protecting the 'ordinary people' of the UK from both an overly intrusive government and terrorism. Aside from combination of messages in a relatively succinct way, this image stands out for its timeliness. The speech was reported on 12<sup>th</sup> of January and the BNP was able to create and publish a response within the day.

More concerning is the ability of the BNP to engage on topics not obviously related to a far-right agenda and without explicitly identifying the origin of communication. Image two shows an attempt by the BNP to mobilise support around the issue of energy prices in the winter of 2013. The focus on energy prices coincides with a Labour pre-election pledge to freeze energy prices (BBC, 2013). The BNP has converted the message to a more hostile form, attacking British Gas rather than pledging a freeze, the message nonetheless seems calculated to capitalise on the wider public debate. The BNP also frequently attempts to co-opt existing figures, both contemporary and historical, into its movement. Presented as endorsements, these OPPs typically featured an image of the individual

and a quotation seen as broadly supportive of the BNP's agenda. The dataset includes OPPs that feature Morrissey (25<sup>th</sup> January 2015), Prince Charles (16<sup>th</sup> February 2015, image three) and Roger Daltrey (5<sup>th</sup> April 2015). The BNP also ran a Great Britons series in which they included historical figures such as Bernard Montgomery (17<sup>th</sup> November 2014), Agatha Christie (15<sup>th</sup> September 2014), Alexander Fleming (6<sup>th</sup> August 2014) and Emmeline Pankhurst (15<sup>th</sup> July 2014). The presentation of these images differed in that BNP branding was less explicit in the image, confined typically to a detail in the 'o' of 'Great Britain'.

The lack of explicit branding was also a feature of other BNP OPPs. For example, an OPP (image four) posted by the BNP on the 12<sup>th</sup> of January 2015 attempted to capitalise on recent news stories centred on the performance of the NHS in the run up to the 2015 election. Both Labour and the Conservatives are represented as being equally inept and unable to fix the crisis. The party name or any identifiable BNP branding does not appear anywhere on the image. In some cases, for example on a mobile device or when sharing images that have already been reposted by friends, it may be harder for users to realise what they are sharing and who created it.

In addition to the images themselves, BNP OPPs also became a focal point for comments by users. Often these comment sections would begin by referencing the image but in some cases users would later begin to respond to one another. One exchange demonstrates the capacity for these debates to descend into extreme rhetoric. The following occurred in response to a BNP OPP published on the 26<sup>th</sup> July 2015. The OPP featured a comparison of two quotes, one from David Cameron saying 'I want an Asian Prime Minister of Great Britain' and a second from BNP Leader Adam

Walker saying 'We need politicians who represent the British people.' One section of the resulting comment thread is reproduced below:

A: 'Cameron is brainwashed by the muslim believe he has become a traitor to Britain, and by the way there isn't a good muslim'

B: 'Oh yeah and how many Muslims do you know?'

C: '[User A]...The Only 'good' moslum is a Dead One..!!'

Exchange in BNP comment thread on Facebook 26<sup>th</sup> July 2015

The exchange is interesting in several ways. First, the original OPP made no reference to Muslims or Islam, and in fact only referenced Asian ethnicity. User A is not alone in this comment section in assuming a universal equivalency between Asian and Muslim. Collectively the comments have departed considerably from the original message. Second, despite the presence of a counter narrative, this was not addressed within this specific thread, although other comments from User B were challenged by others where he was seen as a 'troll'. Finally, users were able to descend from paranoia and xenophobia to extremist and potentially violent rhetoric relatively quickly and without being challenged.

### **Consequences and policy implications**

In terms of electoral support or social cohesion, the impact of viral advertising by the BNP is not clear. In keeping with wider studies of propaganda and advertising, measuring the direct effect of messages is difficult given the issues of validity associated with both survey and experimental approaches (Kaid, 2012: 41-42). These issues are further compounded when considering the small numbers involved in far-right politics and the ethical dimension in creating any artificial experiment around these issues. More generally, the effectiveness of online activism of this type for

bringing about real political change has been openly questioned on the grounds that it compares poorly to more costly forms of political engagement (Gladwell, 2010). In the case of OPPs, the lack of concrete electoral effects should be balanced against the more indirect effects of building an online brand. In addition to directly mobilising support, spreading messages online enhances the prestige and credibility of an organisation and provides established online supporters that lack any physical connection to each other or the party with a common frame of reference (Lee & Campbell, 2015).

More pressing than any immediate political impact, however, is the potential for OPPs produced by the BNP and other far-right groups to provide a pathway to low-level political participation in far-right politics. Engaging with this material by sharing, liking or commenting on it may open up participants to unforeseen risks socially, professionally and in some cases legally. Engagement can be intentional and a reflection of an individual's own political views. In some cases engagement with BNP content is likely to be unintentional with users unaware of where the content they are sharing originates as a result of either a lack of care or a lack of understanding. The use of unbranded and politically ambiguous content by the BNP seems designed to exploit the potential for unintended engagement. Although unintended engagement is unlikely to begin a chain reaction that ultimately leads a user to join the BNP, the BNP still benefits from the greater organisational credibility online and wider message dissemination.

The social and political risks of participation are clear and immediate. In addition to the general risks that online behaviours pose in terms of the promotion of intolerance and degradation of social cohesion – including, potentially, to 'cumulative

extremism' (Feldman and Littler, 2015) – the distribution online of far-right content may do much to bring extreme concerns to the attention of the wide public. This has the potential – for example, with concerns around immigration and radical Islam – to feed in to (and harden) more 'mainstream' concerns around these issues, potentially helping to build moral panic (Cohen, 1972). More than this, the use of OPPs (and online activism more broadly) may help far-right groups to appear a more significant force than, in reality, they are, with potentially serious consequences in terms of the state response.

At an individual level, as acts carried out on social media are public (even though they can be difficult to identify), sharing or endorsing content from the BNP or another far-right group, even inadvertently, may provoke a reaction from friends and family. Similar risks apply professionally, with some employers now using social media to check up on the character of potential employees (Smith & Kidder, 2010). Social networks are also becoming an important component in professional working, potentially blurring the line between the personal and professional, combining worlds that even a few years previously could have been comfortably separated (Sánchez Abril et al, 2012). Membership of groups such as the BNP is outright forbidden in some professions: for example, there is a ban on BNP membership in both the Police and Prison Service (Guardian, 2008). In addition, membership of the BNP has been seen as problematic in other professions such as Teaching (Telegraph, 2010). It is not clear how these policies and prejudices will translate to this kind of low-resource engagement.

In addition to the social and professional risks presented by these behaviours, there is also a potential legal risk. Despite the existence of legislation, there is little evidence that casual engagement with the BNP online has resulted in prosecutions on these grounds, although there have been cases brought against prominent individuals within the BNP.<sup>4</sup> Both the legal and social risks to the individual are heightened by the existence of 'obstructive' campaign groups designed to collate hate crime instances, websites and individuals, or highlight content classified as racist (Titley et al, 2014: 45-46 and 74). These risks are also further emphasised by the fact that there is little current understanding of the audience for the BNP on Facebook. Although analysis of BNP support through survey instruments has suggested that BNP support is concentrated in over 35s (Ford & Goodwin, 2010), analysis of those that follow the group on Facebook has suggested that on social media those following the group were likely younger (Bartlett, et al, 2011). Immature audiences are potentially less aware of the risks involved with engaging with BNP content, and are potentially more likely to incautious in engaging with content second hand.

There remains the question of formulating an appropriate policy response to the question of far-right viral advertising online in the UK. Avenues to deal with this are split mainly between suppression of the BNP and those posting its content, and awareness-building. Legally there may be a case to restrict the BNP's use of Facebook to disseminate messages where messages transgress UK law. However, there has been little sign of interest in attempting to limit the BNP's activities on social media. This may in part be down to legislation that

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<sup>4</sup> In 1998 Nick Griffin and Paul Ballard, both members of the BNP were convicted of distributing material likely to incite racial hatred as a result of an article written in *The Rune*. In 2004 then BNP Leader Griffin, as well as prominent member and founder John Tyndall and several others were arrested on suspicion of inciting racial hatred as the result of the ITV documentary *The Secret Agent*. Griffin and activist Mark Collett were cleared of all charges following a retrial in 2006.

requires that material was *intended* to or was *likely* in the circumstances to stir up racial hatred, or, in the case of religious hatred only if a person intends to stir up religious hatred (Crown Prosecution Service, undated). This may also be a result of the complexities of enforcing laws online, in particular where jurisdictional issues may confuse matters. The protection granted by the US First Amendment is noted as presenting a particular difficulty for tackling hate speech online (Banks, 2010). An alternative approach might be to act on service providers themselves (ibid). Facebook, for example, is under no obligation to provide the BNP with a platform and can withdraw services if it chooses to do so.

However, any attempt to suppress the BNP's online activities should be viewed with caution and may ultimately be counter-productive. The BNP's belief in its own persecution by both media and political establishment would only be exacerbated and perhaps to some extent justified as a result of legal action, or action taken by a service provider. In addition, the BNP is a legitimately constituted political party and one registered with the UK Electoral Commission, and the current Crown Prosecution Service guidance emphasises the importance of protecting a 'robust exchange of views' (Crown Prosecution Service, undated). As a result of the difficulty and undesirability of suppression, a second policy approach relies on developing awareness of the issues posed by the use of social media by groups such as the BNP. There is much work underway in this area already, and a recent Council of Europe Report (Tittley et al, 2014: 41-44; see also UNESCO's 2015 report) highlights a number of organisations engaging in work in particular with young people to educate them about basic concepts such as stereotyping. Within the UK, groups such as Show Racism the Red Card and Stonewall also work with young people. However, these projects are piecemeal and

there is seemingly little space to incorporate this type of work into statutory curricula. In the UK the National Curriculum, and in particular Citizenship Education is a historical and contemporary site of struggle (Carr, 1991; Guardian, 2015). The most recent iteration does include a reference to 'the need for mutual respect and understanding' at Key Stage Four (14-16) but does not emphasise the sort of technical and critical skills need for a broader 'Digital Citizenship' (Gagliardone et al 2015).

## Conclusions

This has been a far-ranging paper, but hopefully one that has illustrated how some far-right organisations are changing and taking advantage of new forms of political participation. Whereas in the past membership or formal electoral support may have been the benchmark for involvement in far-right politics, the arrival of the web and social media in particular has opened up the potential for online audiences to participate either casually or accidentally. Based on an extensive sample of images collected from the social network Facebook it has become clear that the BNP has exploited this potential, condensing much of its message down to easily sharable poster-style images. The BNP has also attempted to mobilise around mainstream issues such as energy prices, co-opt historical figures and celebrities, and in some instances remove its own branding on political advertisements.

The immediate electoral consequences of this form of mobilisation are likely minimal. However, the social, political, and legal consequences of these behaviours are of greater concern, in particular where audience members are likely to be younger and potentially politically naïve or lacking in the media literacy skills required to fully understand the production of political messages over social networks. Although there are various avenues to address and suppress these types of behaviour, both



legal and extra-legal, these may be counter-productive. Instead, these behaviours further add weight to calls to develop and teach the skills required for young people in particular to act as well-informed and digitally-literate citizens.

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APPENDIX



Image one: BNP OPP 13<sup>th</sup> January 2015



Image two: BNP 12<sup>th</sup> December 2013



Image three: BNP 16<sup>th</sup> February 2015



Image four: BNP 12<sup>th</sup> January 2015