

Candidate 2 evidence

The influence of social media on politics is exaggerated

Advanced Higher Modern Studies Dissertation



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Abstract

Over the last decade, the growth of social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube has changed the way governments reach out and converse with voters and without social media communication between the parties and the voters would not be as strong as it is today. This has led to arguments that the increase of online platform usage has started to influence the way people vote. Some even say that social media now is more influent than classic media like TV, radio and newspapers. However, it seems as if political parties are not sure how to effectively put social media to use in aiding their campaigns. Social media can mainly be used by political parties to reach younger voters, during the EU referendum, the turnout of ages 18-24 came out at 64% (Heim, 2016). However, studies say that even though social media users agree that a wider range of views can be seen, it's also developed the influence of more extreme views which makes it more difficult to determine what is true and what isn't (Pew Research Centre, 2011).

Many people around the world still don't have access to social media platforms, this may be because of no electronic device available to them, no access to electricity. Some countries around the world also censor and block certain parts of the internet, like China and Iran. However, social media is used in many different countries by groups like ISIS and Al-Qaeda. They use social media to put out violent videos and photos to warn their rivals and also put out propaganda to try and recruit those. These videos and propaganda could be seen by the billions of people who actively use social media every day. (HagueHarropMcCormick, 2016) Social media platforms aren't the quickest in censoring extreme political content and in the time it takes for posts to be reviewed, many could have already shared the post or be thinking about the contents of the post. Along with extremist views, social media is a host of abuse that is aimed at people just for voicing their opinions. When it comes to how people vote, social media is a huge factor as now social media may be part of their day to day life and with fake news now making into users feed, believing what is said can change how someone feels towards a topic, politician or party. There are many reasons why social media may be positive

as it draws in younger voters but it can poison minds of those who may be newer to voting and fake news, extreme views and exaggeration may guide someone to vote for a more extreme party. Social Medias rise has changed the way people get involved in politics and makes it much easier for those who may live in rural areas to campaign. This dissertation will argue that the influence of social media is not exaggerated.

Chapter 1- Use of Social media by voters and parties

It's crucial that political parties have a social media strategy in place as social media allows parties and MPs to communicate with the people of their constituency. The people of the constituency can interact with posts and get their voices heard by their MP and the MP can keep them updated about changes that could possibly benefit the community. During the Covid-19 pandemic, social media became more important to parties than ever. Due to in person events and social gatherings being cancelled, political parties turned to social media to ensure their constituents (Malnar, 2020). During this time strategies like live streams, information and update videos, interactive quizzes and polls helped gather information on what constituents felt was important, this gave parties an idea of what their people wanted and with the US, Scottish Parliament and Welsh Parliament elections all happening during Covid. The use of social media in this way was vital in attracting people to vote as it gave voters a clear idea of the intentions of the person they were voting for and made the people feel like their opinion mattered.

Social media was still a huge factor before the pandemic, in the General Election in 2015 hashtags like #VoteSNP and #SNP were tweeted about 30,000 times in the first 2 weeks of campaigning which were the most used hashtags each day along with the main election hashtags (Henderson, 2015). In the 2015 General election, when the SNP used the hashtag #GE2015, the tweet was retweeted by users 118 on average compared to the Liberal Democrats who's were retweeted 8 times on average (Henderson, 2015). This spread the SNP and their message around social media, bringing in new voters. A popular strategy used by politicians now is to do a livestream, this is so the hosting politician can talk to the citizens directly and answer any questions they may have. A popular example of a politician who uses livestreaming to their advantage is Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez. She has set up an account on the streaming platform called Twitch where she regularly streams. On her Twitter she retweeted a tweet from a fellow Democrat member Bernie Sanders saying "BUFFALO, NEW YORK: Today you have the opportunity to cast your ballot for @Indiawaltonbflo and her bold

vision which invests in the needs of the people, not the moneyed interests. Polls are open now until 9:00 PM. VOTE! VOTE! VOTE!". After AOC retweeted this tweet from Bernie Sanders, the tweet had more than 14,500 likes which could have been shared to many more people and this could have encouraged them to vote for India Walton.

"Money-bombs" are a widely used strategy by politicians in order to quickly raise funds for their campaigns. Money-bombs are usually posted on platforms like Twitter and Facebook where voters are encouraged to donate money towards a cause that needs support near voting day. An example of a politician who successfully used a money-bomb is Ron Paul. (Murse, 2019) He raised 2.3 million dollars within 3 days of opening the fundraiser. All of the donations didn't come from big companies or banks but rather individuals. (Rubin, 2011) This shows that social media's influence is not exaggerated as they take time to use it properly as they know just how vital it is in gaining voters and donations.

On the days coming up to the 2017 UK General election, The Labour party gained 1,300,000 followers across Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. In contrast the Conservatives gained around 850,000 within this same time period. Since the election was called, Labour gained a 61% rise in followers on Facebook compared to the Conservatives who had only gained a 6% rise. (Loon, 2017). Thus, social media is crucial for Labour, as it is the main way that they reach out and communicate with supporters. In the week leading up to the election, they had posted around 30 times across different social media platforms. It was said that the Conservatives video asking people to go out and vote had less than half the views that Labour did, according to Sam Jeffers who is the founder of 'Who Targets Me'. (Hern, 2017) This ultimately will have influenced voters to vote for Labour as they had much more engagement and views, meaning they may have been on voters' social feed much more frequently than any other party. Due to this, voters will have had more access to manifestos and persuasive posts compared to another party who didn't perform as well on social media like the Conservatives. This ultimately resulted in Labour receiving the most votes since Tony Blair in 1997,

this was a result of the success created by the social media campaign. During the campaign the Labour party posted 545 posts which is around 3 times more than the Conservatives. Jeremy Corbyn also posted the most out of all the leaders during the campaign, he posted 289 times which is much more frequent than Theresa May who posted 78 times. (Walsh, 2017) 58.7% of people said that they believe the SNP are the most active party on social media with the Conservative party coming in second with 24.5%. (Appendix 5) This shows just how crucial social media is as the SNP have had great election results the last few times and this has been a result of their brilliant social media campaigns, like 2 votes SNP.

Social media however can be utilised in diverse ways for voters. Twitter has a page that contains trending topics all over the world, political issues are mainly shown here for example on the 23rd of February 2022, #PMQs was trending on Twitter (Appendix 1). This will help some stay well informed in the political world in the UK as the Prime Minister had been asked questions about the on-going conflict in Russia as well as COVID issues like paying for Lateral Flow Tests. Despite Twitter being an effective way to keep well informed on trending topics, it has its share of fake news and exaggeration. Anyone can tweet to the hashtag PMQs, it is verified accounts or political experts whose tweets pop up, but occasionally ordinary people's tweets can be seen on the hashtags.

Fake news has been widely discussed world-wide as it is shared so easily and is rarely ever removed for users' feeds. The Russia and Ukraine conflict has resurfaced a deep faked video of Ukrainian president Zelensky speaking about surrendering to Russia. This was being used by Russians to convince Ukrainians to surrender and it was quickly shared around social media spreading all over the world. (Wakefield, 2022) The fact that harmful and fake posts can be shared around social media shows just how harmful it can be to the political process. These deep fakes could potentially make a politician or party lose part of their electorate or public support, which damages the integrity of the political process.

Siobhan Brown, MSP for said that she believes that social media played a big part in her election campaign as it allowed her to spread her message around to younger voters. As well as this she also said that social media is a good way for young people to stay educated and updated on the world of politics, as well as holding the government to account. (Appendix 3) The SNPs social media campaigns have shown success as the percentage of young people who would want Scottish Independence has risen. 79% of 16–24-year-olds want Scottish independence. Thus showing the importance of social media to the political process as it can help keep younger voters updated, but also help them find out extra information which can decide what party they would vote for and encourage voting. A higher turnout creates a better democracy, and this can be widely encouraged by social media.

Chapter 2- Grassroots Campaigns

Grassroots campaigns show just how important social media is in the political process. They highlight key issues and use their following on social media to help make change.

TogetherForYes is an example of a grassroots campaign who use social media as a tool for social change. They aimed to get the 8th amendment in Ireland, which had made abortion illegal and came along with a criminal sentence. (Kelly, 2018) In 1992, a 14-year-old girl who had fallen pregnant in a horrible circumstance was feeling depressed due as she was not permitted to travel to Britain to get an abortion, she was soon allowed as her suicidal feelings deemed that due to there being a "real and substantial risk" to her life and the unborn. After this, the 12th amendment attempted to relieve suicide as grounds for an abortion but failed. The 13th and 14th amendments meant that legally women could go abroad to get an abortion and that information about doing so was available to them. (Kelly, 2018) TogetherForYes mainly used Twitter to show the public the harms of women not being able to get an abortion and try get the 8th amendment repealed. In 2018, abortion was made legal within the first 12 weeks of pregnancy and beyond 12 weeks termination is permitted if there is a risk to a woman's life, serious effects on the mental or physical health of a woman until the 24th week. However, if there is a fatal foetal abnormality, abortion is permitted. (BBC News, 2018) The success of the TogetherForYes campaign really brought the issues and challenges of abortion faced by women to light. This not only brought people together in a grassroots level but also globally, making abortion and its strict laws a worldwide issue.

In America in 2012, 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, who was black, was shot dead by George Zimmerman, who armed and part of a neighbourhood watch, despite Trayvon having no criminal record. At first, Zimmerman was released which caused national outrage and debates over racial profiling and whether neighbourhood watch law enforcement members should be armed. The Trayvon Martin foundation was started in order to bring change. George Zimmerman was later charged but was then acquitted of all charges. (Biography.com Editors, 2020)

Along with the Trayvon Martin Foundation, Black Lives Matter was then founded. BLMs aim is to eradicate white supremacy and stop violence carried out by the state and vigilantes on Black people. It's now a global campaign with presence in the US, UK, and Canada. On the 25th of May in Minneapolis, a Black man named George Floyd was murdered by a white police officer named Derek Chauvin after being accused of using a counterfeit 20-dollar bill. Chauvin knelt on Floyd's neck for 20 minutes, causing his death. After this event, BLM protests sparked across America. Even more protests were started due to the death of 26-year-old Breonna Taylor, a Black woman living in Louisville. She was shot in her own apartment by 3 white police officers. After these murders, the hashtag BlackLivesMatter was used tens of millions of times. This highlights the importance of social media as it can make more people aware of issues that can be sorted by the government if a tweet or post gets many retweets and likes.

Word about BLM and the organised protests spread very quickly, and events were often organised through social media. For a group like BLM, social media is especially important and effective, as they can publish whatever content they want if it is not explicit or offensive. Posts can also be put on Instagram stories, retweeted, reposted on Facebook or uploaded to YouTube. Each of these platforms' algorithms make it extremely easy for groups like BLM to spread their message to millions of people. As well as spreading their message, social media helps spread the message of demonstrations or petitions, due to social media being so easy to access, this will bring more attention to BLM.

LGBTQ+ Issues have started to gain more recognition and support on social media.

There are many famous people on social media who are either part of the LGBTQ+ community or those who support the community. One of those people in actor Laverne Cox. She is very vocal on social media and is a huge advocate for Tran's rights. On the 28th of March 2022, Laverne posted 4 pictures on Instagram about Arizona and how they are introducing bills which will harm Tran's people. She posted telling those to donate to different charities who will help protect Trans rights. Due to her having 5,500,000 followers, this will bring in huge donations as well as people to come to

demonstrations. This shows just how much power social media can have. Laverne Cox standing up and speaking out may also inspire others to come forward and tell their stories, which creates a safer online platform for LGBTQ+ people to show their governments that they want change.

As well as giving LGBTQ+ a platform to stand up for what they think is right, it also encourages LGBTQ+ people to vote, social media will give these people confidence to vote but also teach them about what parties are helpful. In the US, the democrats have shown their support and brought in many different bills for Trans people, including letting them back in into the army. The support that has led to reforms has mostly come from social media and those who use their influence to give a voice to the voiceless. Social media gives those a place to feel welcome and unjudged, giving them a safe place to vote.

The PASSOP movement in South Africa who aim to help LGBT+, refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants. They aim to give them a voice and to help them be less vulnerable when living in South Africa. A report published by PASSOP says that many LGBT+ people from many other different countries come to South Africa where they can live freely without being persecuted. During a focus group they carried out they found that most of the 30 participants fled their country to escape abuse and stigma about their sexuality. (Appendix 2) They use their Instagram to share dates of demonstrations and encourage people to turn up, very similar to BLM.

Grassroots campaigns benefit the most from social media as it can be very easy to use the algorithm to their advantage, since the start of BLM it has been shown just how crucial the use of social media is. Not only can it inspire others to get involved and vote, but it can also spark a spike in votes for a specific party, which is just one of the reasons why social media is so crucial. The TogetherForYes campaign would not have been as successful if it was not for social media and its ability to spread a message around the world. Starting demonstrations is much easier now than before thanks to social media, which is the final step in showing just how grassroots campaigns rely on social media, as well as the voters.

Chapter 3- Extremism, censorship and the problems with social media

Despite social media being greatly beneficial to many people within politics, it still can be seen as a thing that hinders political integrity.

Siobhan Brown said that social media allows people to hide behind their keyboards and that this is one of the negatives of social media. Siobhan also said that social media is an amazing tool, but it must be used very carefully as we have seen the consequences of extremism in USA recently.

Social Media is known for being very lenient on what people can post or message others. This has allowed extremist groups to post and spread fake propaganda of harmful views. In 2014, a 10-year-old boy whose identity was never realised, he was named Haarun by the BBC searched up terrorist organisation ISIS online, after reading a few articles he went in a deep delve onto sites, which was said to have radicalised him, he eventually ended up agreeing with ISIS and their cause. (Price, 2017)

As well as propaganda, videos of ISIS executing innocent people were shared around different platforms, without it being taken down. This really shows how social media can be a negative within politics as not only does it allow violent and politically motivated violence to be shown, but it also allows propaganda sites to keep producing and posting fake, anti-West news. Social media sites are criticised for not being quick enough to strike down on terrorist propaganda and the consequences of them being inefficient can be harmful to the younger generation. More than half of the respondents from my survey said that they believe that extremist groups and views have in fact become more prevalent during the rise of social media, perhaps highlighting how easy it is for these people to spread obscene propaganda videos.

In some countries, like China, Social Media platforms like Facebook are blocked for citizens within the country. Not only is it closely monitored but it also does not allow news from other countries to be accessed easily without it coming directly from their own government, as it comes from the government, they can spin stories and exaggerate it as much as they want, allowing them to control

what their citizens know, and feel towards other countries that they may not have a good relationship with. The government monitor what is said on the Chinese versions of different social media platforms, in 2019 a Chinese student who was living in Minnesota was given a 6-month sentence when he eventually returned to China after he had tweeted out different tweets making fun of the Chinese paramount leader Xi Jinping. (Bloomberg, 2020) This allows the Government to block criticisms of the government and what they do, this takes away the voices of citizens and does not give them the options to hold the government to account for mistakes they have made. This takes away the basic human right to free speech and can affect people's knowledge of international affairs, making them less politically involved. Social Media is crucial for those who feel it's important to check in with what other countries are doing which may affect their own. Social Media is crucial for getting people involved in politics.

The Russian Government have blocked Facebook and Instagram during their invasion of Ukraine as the Russian courts deemed Meta "extremists" and that these platforms were carrying out extremist activities. Russia's security company said that Meta created an "alternate universe" that "hatred for the Russians was kindled". (Sauer, 2022) This allows Vladimir Putin to stop news from outside Russia being exposed to the Russian people. The Russian people are under the impression that Ukraine are the aggressors. Putin restricting and banning all social media allows him to feed his people lies about the war in Ukraine but recently in March 2022, Arnold Schwarzenegger released a video that told the Russian people the truth of what is happening. The video was watched over 28 million times on Twitter and the video has been shared by Russian people who oppose the Government on an encrypted Social Media platform. This shows that social media is perhaps especially important as it allows people in a war-torn country to see current updates and without social media, they would not know how much danger they could be in. Encrypted Social Media platforms have made the Russian people aware of what is happening in their country and allows them to see the truth. This shows the importance of social media and how it keeps people informed and if it is banned it allows

Governments to lie to their people not just in a political war aspect but fabricating fake stories in order to gain support from their people. Russian people, despite the banning of different Social Media platforms have been using VPN to avoid being caught, showing that the people of Russia know how vital social media is in a time like this. (Sauer, 2022) Social Media therefore has huge benefits for everyone and is a particularly important part of the political process for this reason as shown in Russia, as it is helping people realise what is truly going on with their government as well as foreign affairs that may also affect their country, social media's main goal is to keep people updated, which it does very well.

Social media is there to give people freedom to portray their political views, this can be hindered by governments who have regulations. Most places like China and Russia completely crack down and control what the people say, but in Germany the Act to amend the Network Enforcement act was brought in. The aim of this new act was to tackle hate speech and fake news. This made it a safer place for those to give share their opinions on social media but being protected from targeted attacks. The act states that social media platforms that have surpassed 2 million followers must take down content that is ruled as clearly illegal in 24 hours and all illegal content within a week of being posted, if they fail to do so they will face a fine up to 50,000,000 euros. As well as this, platforms must publish transparency reports with the dealing of illegal content every six months. (Lahoti, 2019) However, NetzDG has been criticised for being negative for people's free speech. Although this may be true, it does mostly prevent hate speech but also protects politicians. Siobhan Brown said that companies like Facebook need to go further with regulation, especially during the pandemic. Fake news and information were posted on Facebook regarding vaccines and different health measures, due to this misinformation there should be more drastic action taken against misinformation. Siobhan herself has been a target of fake news and misleading information as some people had posted that she was under investigation and that she had stolen money from a charity, she had found out that there was not much she could do. (Appendix 3) Fake news and misleading information has the potential to ruin a candidates' electoral campaign or could damage public

opinion and lead to a decrease of support. This is one of the many downfalls to the lack of proper regulation in the UK. The UK currently have no legislation on social media regulation which can allow for fake and harmful content to be posted, Siobhan Browns campaign was affected for this very reason and the lack of regulation in the UK has been criticized as in Germany, NetzDG would be quicker at ensuring that targeted attacks were prevented which could be the difference between losing and winning a campaign.

Despite extremism and fake news, social media is still beneficial for the political process, but only with the correct regulations. The correct regulations could make sure all information is truthful and helpful, politicians can't be targeted in attempt to derail their campaign and that extreme views can't poison the minds of those who don't know any better.

Conclusion

The use of social media is in fact not exaggerated and is actually not appreciated enough in its contribution to the political process. However, different people may argue that social media does more bad than it does well. As shown in chapter 3, social media has made it increasingly easier for extremist groups to spread propaganda and radicalise people, especially some of the younger generation. This does show that social media does have its flaws but extremism can be tackled easily like in Germany with NetzDG. Social media is now improving on taking down harmful and fake posts due to the consequences that the platform may face, so this is only a miniscule problem with social media as extremism can be easily tackled and restricted as for example Instagram and twitter have warnings on posts that have graphic content, on twitter this means that someone will need to turn off the restrictions in settings and on Instagram someone only has to click a button on the post to allow them to see it, which will stop accidental viewings of these posts. Despite all this, it cannot be denied that social media is beneficial for the political process, after all it gets younger voters involved in voting which is so crucial to not only a country but the entire world. Social media allows users to access trending topics which often includes foreign affairs and home affairs, especially in the lead up to an election. Educating the younger voters has always been spoken about and social media has got more 18-24 year olds involved than before. Rather than voting for someone random, they can now make an educated vote rather than wasting it on a random person or party. Politicians themselves can also benefit from social media, they can use campaigns to target certain groups which can be made much easier than before due to the algorithms of social media. Responding to constituents or voters is made much easier through things like livestreaming, exactly as AOC did. This can bring a huge advantage when going to the polls and can introduce a huge influx in votes as a successful campaign can be seen by thousands. Grassroots campaigns are the ones who benefit the most from social media however. The arranging of demonstrations and the sharing of petitions is made much easier and more accessible by social media. BLM is a perfect example of how social

media can start support of a cause not only nationwide, but worldwide. Through voters, politicians and grassroots campaigns, it's shown just how crucial social media is to the political process and how helpful it can be but only if the correct restrictions and regulations in place. Making sure that extreme and harmful content is not shown is very important but also making sure that the right to free speech is not taken away from anyone who wants to be heard. Without social media, the political process would have a lower voter turnout, so therefore social media is not exaggerated in the political process.

Research Methods

Primary Research

During my research for my dissertation, I used a few methods of research to gather information. I used google forms to make a survey that was completely anonymous. I got over 140 responses. Making my survey anonymous meant that those who took part would feel more comfortable answering honestly, this made my research more valid and therefore more reliable. As well as being anonymous, I made sure that everyone taking part was okay with doing so and let them know that responses were anonymous, this made my research ethical. When I sent the survey around I made sure I clarified what the answers they gave were going to be used for my dissertation and that it would not be posted anywhere without their consent. Consent is extremely important as it makes the respondent know that their answers won't be misused which is very important ethically. Next time I carry out a survey I will make sure that I get a higher response rate as it will give a larger range of views. I used a lot of known news sources like the Guardian. However, using papers like the Guardian has its drawbacks, it is a left wing news paper. This means that the paper could contain bias information that could be intended to make the other side of the political spectrum look bad. Bearing this in mind, the next time I research I will make sure not only to use papers from both sides but also neutral ones that can give me an unbiased view of what I am researching.

Secondary Research

I emailed an MSP for my constituency and the MP for my constituency to ask for their opinions on social media as it gives me a deeper insight into what politicians themselves think of social media, perhaps next time I will include more questions to ensure I get both qualitative and quantitative information, I also made sure that I stated what the answers they gave me were going to be used for. Both the members of parliament I emailed were from the SNP, next time I will include members of parliament from different parties to see how different ideologies think and feel about social media as some are less active and present on social media than others. I also will email some

educated professionals in order to gain an unbiased understanding of social media in the political world as this will also bring me more valid and accurate information.

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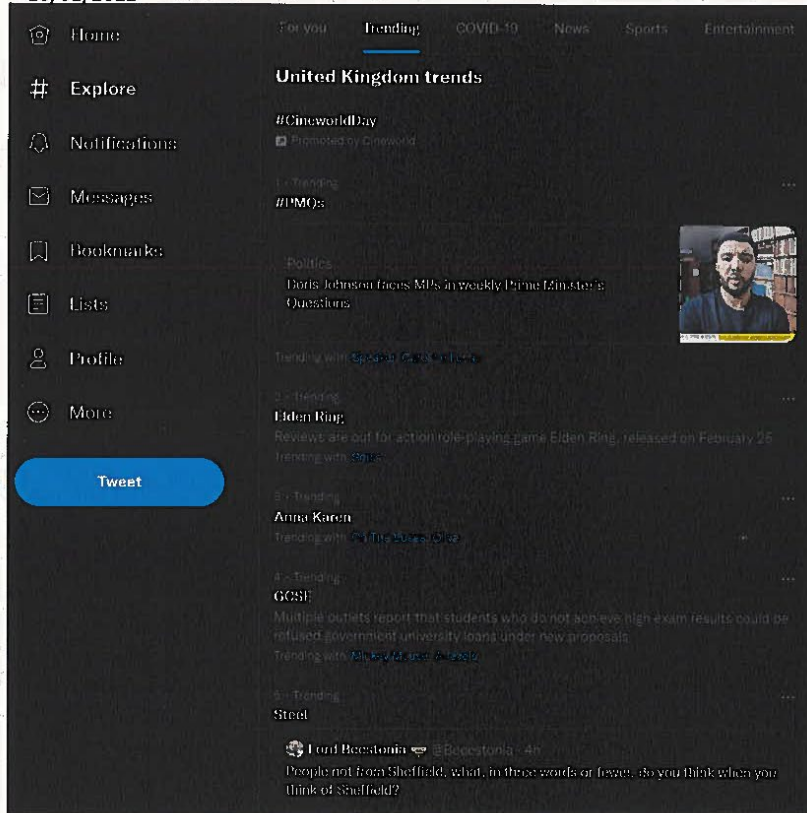
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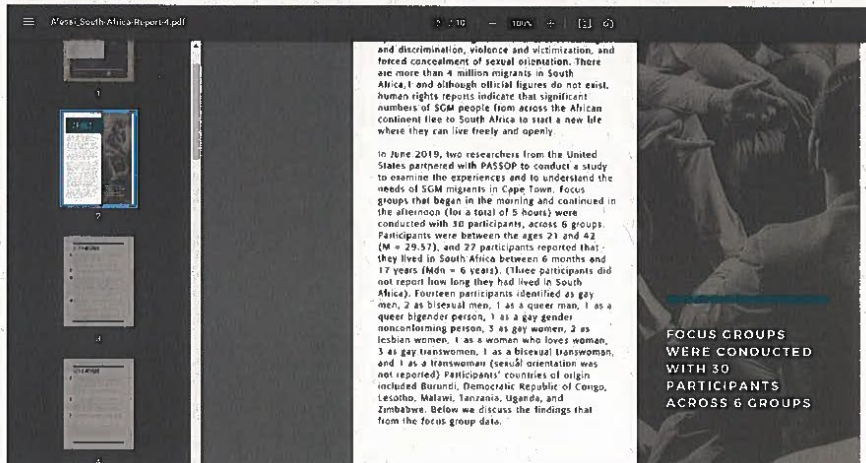
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Appendices

Appendix 1- Date accessed- 23/02/2022



Appendix 2



Appendix 3

(No subject)

Wed 30/03/2022 12:19
 To: Siobhan.Brown.msp@parliament.scot

Hello,

My name is [redacted] and I am currently studying Advanced Higher Modern Studies at [redacted]

I was wondering if you would be to give your opinion on Social Medias role in the Polltcal Process and how important you believe it is?

Many thanks,

Reply Forward

Appendix 4

SM Siobhan Brown MSP <Siobhan.Brown.msp@parliament.scot>
 Thu 31/03/2022 15:59

To:

Dear

Thank you for getting in touch. I hope I can provide an answer to your questions.

1. Do you feel that Social Media helps younger people engage in the political process?
 I do. Social media played a big role in my campaign for election to the Scottish Parliament and allowed me to get my message across to young voters. I also think that social media gives young people the opportunity to stay up-to-date with the works of politicians and the government and hold us to account.

2. Does Social Media give those with more extreme views a bigger platform?
 This is unfortunately one of the negative realities of social media which allows people to hide behind their keyboard. I think social media can be a great tool, but it also needs to be used carefully. We have seen the extreme consequences of social media play out in recent years in the USA.

3. Do Social Media platforms do enough to tackle fake news and offensive comments?
 This is something that I have recently been looking into regarding content control on Facebook. Companies like Facebook allow users to have greater control over what they see. However, I do feel they need to go further. With the pandemic we have seen fake news over health measures and vaccines spread online. I believe that there does need to be more regulation on social media on misinformation. I was a victim of a targeted social media campaign during my council election in 2017. A couple posted that I was "under investigation" and also implied I stole money from a charity - of course none of this was true and afterwards, I sought legal advice but there was very little I could do. As a politician I receive my fair share of offensive comments.

4. Overall, do you feel that Social Media is a beneficial for the political process?
 Overall I do feel it is. Never before have we been so connected and have the public had such access to political developments. We all have a role to play in making social media platforms a safe and enjoyable place for everyone.

I hope these answers will prove useful for your assignment and I wish you all the best in your studies.

Kind regards,

Siobhan

Siobhan Brown MSP
 Ayr Constituency

PRIVACY NOTICE

The office of Siobhan Brown will collect and process your personal data only as required in order to enable the performance of Mrs Brown's duties of an MSP. Any personal information you share with Siobhan Brown MSP or her office will be treated as confidential and will only be shared with a third party as necessary to pursue your enquiry.

Your data will be kept securely on file and will be retained for the duration of a standard Parliamentary term of office. At your request, your data can be removed from our system at any point unless there are compelling or legal reasons why this cannot be done.

Appendix 5

Quest 1/3 Settings

What political party do you believe is most active on social media? Copy

143 responses

