Voters' online information behaviour and response to campaign content during the Scottish referendum on independence

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ABSTRACT

Research into the public's motivations for, and barriers to, the use of referendum campaign sites was carried out in the final weeks before the 2014 vote on Scottish independence. As a qualitative study, drawing on 54 interactive, electronically-assisted interviews, where participants were observed and questioned as they searched for and used information on the websites and social media sites of the campaign groups, the results enable more precise causal inferences to be drawn about voters' exposure to campaign sites. Results indicate participants value 'facts', what they perceive as authoritative voices, the capacity to compare campaign messages directly, infographics and concise, direct information. They are sceptical, particularly about celebrity contributions, preferring expert messages, and uncertain about their personal capacity to evaluate information they will use to make decisions. The authors set out a new model of levels of user engagement with political discourse during campaigns. Results have relevance for governments, as well as researchers in the fields of politics, communications and information management.

1. Introduction

Scotland is represented politically in the United Kingdom Parliament in London, and since 1999 has held significant devolved powers of self-governance via the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh. On 18 September 2014, the Scottish independence referendum took place, when the people of Scotland were asked the dichotomous Yes/No question, "Should Scotland be an independent country?" The polling day saw an overall turnout of 84.6% of the electorate (the highest for any election or referendum in the UK since the introduction of universal male suffrage in 1918), with 55.3% voting against independence. The referendum campaign, which began two years earlier in 2012, was dominated by two groups: the pro-independence Yes Scotland group, led by the Scottish National Party (SNP), with support from the Scottish Green and the Scottish Socialist parties; and the pro-union Better Together group, which had broad support from the Labour, Liberal Democrat and Conservative parties.

This paper presents the results of a study of voters' online information behaviour conducted a few weeks before polling day. The referendum offered a rare opportunity to explore politicians' use of the Internet and citizens' online information behaviour in a very different campaign context from that of the typical election in the UK; one where party differences could be swept aside or overcome by the coming together of political opponents to either support or oppose the independence argument (a context since replicated in the 2016 UK European Union membership referendum, or 'Brexit'). The aims of the study were to:

- identify motivations for, and barriers to, the Scottish public's use of referendum campaign sites;
- investigate the types of information, tools and technologies that prospective voters most value when accessing these sites;
- assess the likelihood of these sites being visited again in the future; and
- explore the extent to which the use of these sites might influence voting decisions.

While the high level emerging results of the study were presented very broadly at ISIC: the Information Behaviour Conference in September 2014 (Baxter & Marcella, 2014), this paper sets out a full discussion of the results.

2. Theoretical underpinning

Since the mid-1990s, a significant body of literature has emerged internationally on the use of the Internet as an electoral tool by political actors. This literature has been dominated by "supply side" questions, where researchers have quantified the extent to which political actors

have adopted online campaigning tools, or conducted content analyses of campaign websites (Gibson & Ward, 2009; p.94). Less attention has been paid to the "demand side" of online electioneering—studies that have explored the extent to which the electorate visit campaign sites, or the impact that exposure to these sites has on political participation and voting decisions.

There have been several large-scale, quantitative surveys, mostly in western, liberal democracies, that have explored the public's use of the Internet to obtain and exchange electoral information (e.g., Gibson, Cantijoch & Ward, 2010; Smith, 2013). Other researchers, predominantly in the US, have used multiple regression techniques to explore relationships between Internet use during elections and citizens' levels of political efficacy, knowledge, trust or engagement (e.g., Kenski & Stroud, 2006; Hansen & Pedersen, 2014). A number of more experimental, laboratory-based investigations have also taken place, again largely in the US, where participants have been exposed to candidates' online sites and their attitudes towards the candidates and political issues have then been measured using Likert-type scales (e.g., Hansen & Benoit, 2005; Towner & Dulio, 2011).

Very few studies of the users of online campaign sites have adopted qualitative approaches. Stromer-Galley and Foot (2002) and Wells and Dudash (2007) conducted focus groups with citizens and students, respectively, to explore perceptions of the participative opportunities presented by campaign websites; while Penney (2016) conducted in-depth interviews with adults who viewed an unofficial YouTube video featuring the 2012 Republican presidential candidate, Mitt Romney. In Scotland, the current authors (Baxter et al., 2013) carried out a qualitative study of voters' online information behaviour during the 2011 Scottish Parliament election campaign. Away from the campaign trail, Ferguson and Howell (2004) discussed the deliberations of a 'blog jury' who monitored political blogs in the UK; while Lynch and Hogan (2013) used focus groups of young citizens to investigate the use of social media by Irish political parties. Commentators suggest that obtaining "a better in-depth understanding of individuals' online election experiences" would assist in allowing more precise causal inferences to be drawn about voters' exposure to campaign sites (Gibson and Römmele, 2005Gibson & Römmele, 2005). The largely qualitative research discussed here is therefore an important contribution to the field.

In terms of theories of users' engagement in the information search process, there has been little prior research. Oliphant (2013) found that, during searches, users were most engaged by and with mental health videos that contained personal narratives and real life experiences. Edwards (2016) argues for the utility of physiological signals in demonstrating emotions encountered during a search, including engagement and frustration. Heinström (2006) found that young people's level of engagement in a search was highly influential in terms of whether they conducted a superficial or deep search. Meanwhile, a number of researchers have considered the impact of user motivation as a factor in search behaviour, often in highly contextualised situations. San José-Cabezudo, Gutiérrez-Cillán and Gutiérrez-Arranz (2008), for example, used Hierarchy of Effects communications theory to study the impact of motivation on search satisfaction in advertising and found that the motivations of information seekers influenced their response, characterising participants as 'information seekers' and 'excitement seekers'. Others, such as Elsweiler and Harvey (2015, p.280), have examined the impact of motivation on search behaviours on social media, to "provide a more detailed and fine-grained understanding of search motivations than previously reported".

As a study of a campaign in which there was an unprecedentedly high level of engagement by the electorate, the current research enables exploration by a wider than usual range of participants in information seeking as a means of underpinning political decision making.

3. Material and methods

In exploring citizens' information behaviour, the current authors

have a long-standing philosophy of conducting their research as close as possible to the everyday lives of their research subjects. With this in mind, the study discussed here took place in three 'public' locations in the city of Aberdeen, in north-east Scotland, between 8 and 20 August 2014:

- The library of the authors' host institution, in the main entrance area.
- A Christian church ministering primarily to Commonwealth citizens, who were eligible to vote. The research took place after a service, when participants were drawn by an announcement by the Pastor.
- A community centre, about to host a referendum debate involving prominent local politicians and public figures, contributing towards a heightened political awareness and interest among the centre's users.

The research adopted the authors' interactive, electronically-assisted interview method (Marcella, Baxter & Moore, 2003), where participants were observed and questioned as they searched for and used information on the websites and social media sites of the campaign groups, political parties and high-profile politicians involved in the Scottish independence debate. Online access was achieved with the use of a laptop computer with mobile broadband dongle, an iPad, and a smartphone. Key policy papers (e.g., the Scottish Government's White Paper on independence) were pre-loaded on the laptop.

Overall, 54 interviews were conducted across the three locations (35 in the university library, nine in the church, 10 in the community centre), with these varying in length from 13 min to over one hour, depending on the availability and interest of the participants. Where consent was granted, interviews were audio-recorded digitally and subsequently transcribed and analysed thematically. The interview comprised four distinct parts:

- demographic questions exploring gender, age, education and occupation;
- structured questions on voting patterns, past needs for election campaign information, forms and levels of political participation, and computer use;
- a free-form period of undirected information seeking on the campaign site(s) of the participant's choice; and
- structured, post-search questions on the ease of use of the sites visited, the relevance, comprehensibility and reliability of the information found, the likelihood of such sites being revisited, and the extent to which the information viewed may have affected their voting decision.

3.1. Sample demographics

Table 1 illustrates the 54 participants' demographic profile. Older or retired people were under-represented in the sample. The participants were largely well-educated, with 21 currently at university and a further 27 having participated in higher education. All but six were

Table 1
Demographic profile of sample (n = 54).

Number of males	22
Number of females	32
Number from a minority ethnic group	12
Number ≤ 30 years old	20
Number 31–50 years old	29
Number > 50 years old	5
Number in employment	29
Number seeking work	4
Number of full-time university students	21
Number who had participated in higher education	48
Number eligible to vote in independence referendum	48