



Measuring Online Behaviour:
Web Metrics and Political Behaviour
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Lisa McInerney & Maura Conway – Measuring Online Behaviour: A Toolkit for Measuring Online Radicalisation¹

Panel one focused on academic approaches to the use of web metrics to measure political behaviour. Lisa McInerney presented her paper on the measurement of online radicalization using the global social network platform YouTube. McInerney claimed that research on online radicalization has to date been somewhat flawed as it has focused on content emanating from forums and websites. She claimed that there is a high barrier to entry in creating content for these channels as most forums are password protected and the creation of blog post articles is very labour intensive. To an extent therefore, once you have created content for these mediums, you have already committed to the cause of the group in question, or a “made-up-mind.”

In order to get a clearer picture of the way in which ordinary people with no prior sympathies to a particular ideology ultimately get radicalized, McInerney proposed that it is better to examine global online networks such as YouTube.

In his analysis on global Jihad networks, Marc Sageman came under criticism for not including actual social network analysis techniques². McInerney sought to address this criticism by using dynamic network analysis and sentiment analysis software, such as that produced by Clarity.³ Dynamic network analysis, termed predictive social network analysis, has the advantage of predicting trends in online social networks and thus gives a more holistic picture of online radicalization. The resulting approach, labeled ‘denomic network analysis’, does not just map existing networks but is predictive.

¹ Paper available at: http://doras.dcu.ie/2253/2/youtube_2008.pdf

² Hoffman, B. (2008) ‘The Myth of Grass-Roots Terrorism’, *Foreign Affairs*, 87, May/June. Available at: <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/63408/bruce-hoffman/the-myth-of-grass-roots-terrorism>

³ <http://www.clarity-centre.org/>

Dr. Darren Lilleker – Quality and Quantity: Assessing the Participation Behind the Metrics

Darren Lilleker examined both the importance and the scope of measuring e-Democracy and e-Participation in the UK and French political systems. He claimed that improved interactivity on political sites could reinvigorate representative democracy. Interactivity on political sites, and by implication political behaviour and trust, cannot be measured by counting features such as those seen in various web analytics tools. If interactivity in the e-democratic process is conversational, it should be participational and at least two-way. Control should be shared between the politician and the citizen and the barriers to entry should be low.

Lilleker suggested that new models for political interactivity such as the Ferber Model⁴ should be used to measure e-democracy and participation. He claimed that the Ferber Model would be possible to implement following his analysis of the French presidential election of 2006.⁵

Finally, Lilleker outlined that in measuring political behaviour, researchers should examine the features present on a political website, the direction of the communication and the extent to which participation is taking place.

Sheryl Prentice – Analysing the Semantic Content and Persuasive Composition of Extremist Media: A Case Study of Texts Produced During the Gaza Conflict

Sheryl Prentice presented research conducted by the University of Lancaster, University of Warwick and Royal Holloway, University of London, examining the composition of online media generated from the Gaza Conflict of 2008. In particular, the research examined the prominent narratives and arguments within extremist literature, the underlying perceptions and cognitions of the authors, the resistance and identification with extremist media and finally the development of a conceptual model of understanding the risk of such literature having a 'radicalising' effect on individuals.

The group conducted a content and composition analysis of the semantic content and design of extremist online media. It was found that there was extensive use of audience-related persuasion in extremist literature from the period of the Gaza conflict, with moral arguments particularly frequent. Although the caveat was made that the corpus of media from this period should not be viewed as homogenous, Prentice asserted that counter-messages could focus on identifying with the audience from a moral perspective.

In addition, key concept analysis using the WMatrix software was used as a means of summarising the most salient ideas emerging from online media. This analysis showed that there was a movement from general contempt to audience-orientated expressions of violence on an expanded target.

⁴ Ferber, P. Foltz, F. Pugliese, R., (2007) Cyberdemocracy and Online Politics: a new model of interactivity Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society 27 (5) pp391-400

⁵ Lilleker, D., and Malagon, C. (2010) Making Elections Interactive: online discourse during the 2006 French presidential election

In conclusion, Prentice claimed that it would be worth considering expanding the keyword and concept analysis corpus to perform cross-group analysis, to perform stylistic analysis to determine whether different authors use differing styles and the re-use of text (why are some texts or words used more than others?).

Simon Bergman – Challenges of Accessing and Measuring New Media in Conflict Environments – How do we Reach Hard to Access Audiences?

As a strategic communications professional, Bergman claimed that there is a major problem in measuring communications within complex environments. One major problem associated with this is seen in the lack of tools to adequately measure 'influence operations' in complex environments.

Online takeup is particularly strong in the Middle East, especially in latter years. However, efforts by supranational organisations in these regions to engage with people online are piecemeal. An example of this is NATO TV which provides video footage of operations in countries such as Afghanistan which has to go through a complex approval system before video is posted resulting in a relatively slow news service. However, the Taliban is able to post video and other rich media much quicker – Bergman made the point that in this case video needs to be streamed in order to remain relevant. At the strategic level, he claimed that organisations such as NATO should be reformed in order to meet the media challenges they face in states such as Afghanistan. Bergman gave the example of the widespread filming of IED explosions for the purpose of shifting world opinion and influencing global events.

In conclusion, Bergman argued that it is imperative that we understand the audience in complex regions and subsequently decipher the tools needed to communicate with them. Military communications is all too often conducted from the top-down when in actuality it needs to be conducted from the ground up, and one solution may be to enrol local intermediaries such as journalists on the ground who could transmit or convey the military's communications.

Rob Pearson - The London Summit 2009: Evaluation of Key Performance Indicators⁶

Rob Pearson conducted the evaluation of the online efforts for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's London Summit 2009 campaign. Previously devised Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) were evaluated using web analytics from the campaign site, using free web analytics tools to assess trends around the campaign, such as Google Trends and finally an online survey of 286 subscribers to the London Summit site.

KPI One: The London Summit Site is the Focal Point for Engaging and Shaping Global Opinions.

Pearson claimed this KPI was fully met after the site was ranked first on the influential search engines Google, Yahoo! and Bing. He continued that a Google Trends analysis revealed that the term "London Summit" was by no means the most popular phrase and

⁶ The London Summit 2009: Evaluation of Key Performance Indicators

<http://www.londonsummit.gov.uk/en/about1/evaluation-kpi/>

that variants of G20 term were more popular. However, another KPI, “Influential Sites in every Country Link Back and Quote from the London Summit Site” was only partially met after an analysis using the web analytics tool SiteStat. An analysis, using various measures such as Google PageRank and Alexa ratings, showed that 11 of 24 countries (46 per cent) regarded as influential did not provide backlinks to the London Summit site.

In addition, a survey was conducted to measure the effectiveness of the KPI “All Visitors Find it Easy to find the Information they are Looking for”. 86 per cent of respondents claimed that finding information was easy.

KPI Two: Authoritative Provision of In-depth Briefings on Summit

The first section of KPI Two, “All Unclassified Policy Papers Accessible from London Summit Site in Web-friendly form”, was ranked by Pearson as not met. This was due to the lack of web-friendly papers being available online. He outlined that the majority of online communiqués were “dry and technical and therefore unlikely to be read by much of the target audience.” The second section of KPI Two, “Only the Highest Quality Content goes on the Site Based on the Content Guidelines. If it doesn’t help to Achieve an Objective then it doesn’t go on” was ranked as partially met. Assessment of this section came from the online survey in which subscribers were asked to rank how trustworthy, balanced and informative they believed the site to be. 22 per cent believed that information on the site was informative while 30 per cent strongly agreed that the site was a source of trusted information.

The final section of KPI Two: “At Least Four Expert Bloggers Providing Authoritative, Real-time content for the London Summit” was ranked as not met because there were no expert bloggers providing content of this sort.

KPI Three: Effective Operational Functions for 2,000 Journalists

The first section of KPI Three: “Media Centre Regarded by Journalists as the Most Respected Government Media Site Ever” was ranked as not met by Pearson after 47 journalists responding to a survey gave mixed opinions. 33 per cent of journalists rated the London Summit site as either worse than or the same as other government sites however, 93 per cent of journalists ranked the site as useful.

The “Live Streaming of all Press Conferences / Keynote Speeches” aspect of KPI Three was ranked as partially met as the entire summit was streamed live, but no other events were. Similarly, the “Site is Reliable (minimal down time) and Meets AA Accessibility at all Times” was rated as partially met as although the site was available most of the time, some content caused the site to fail “even Level-A accessibility compliance”.

KPI Four: Respected Platform for Discussion and Debate

The first section of KPI Four, “Seamless Integration with all Partner Engagement Sites” was classified as not met as links to partner sites were not abundantly clear. Finally, the third aspect of the KPI Four, “Visitors Return to the Site, go to Other Areas of our London Summit Web Site or Subscribe to Feeds / Emails” was ranked as fully met after it was revealed that 95 per cent of survey respondents came back to the site more than once. In addition, more than 2,300 people had subscribed to email alerts.

Assessing the significance of the FCO's campaign site was difficult because of the proliferation of mobile media and other sites delivering content about the summit.

Simon Collister – The Role of Online Monitoring in Influencing Political Behaviour: An Exploratory Survey of UK Political Parties⁷

The keynote speech was delivered by Simon Collister whose research on the use of online monitoring by political parties revealed these key findings:

- 1) All of the main political parties reported that they monitor online stakeholders qualitatively. One respondent claimed that monitoring for the parties was more of "...a gut feeling about what's going on" and that the UK political blogosphere is small and very well organised.
- 2) Online monitoring is conducted informally, without the use of third party agencies or specific tools, although this might change as General Election campaigning becomes more intense.
- 3) Political parties, particularly the Conservative Party, actively engage with influential bloggers such as Guido Fawkes, Iain Dale and Political Betting as an alternative method of national media agenda-setting. Collister claimed that political parties were only "scratching the surface" in terms of online influencer engagement and that it is better to build trusted relationships within these various influencer networks.
- 4) Political parties do actively engage with individuals online, especially at the local level. The Labour Party in particular seems to be at the forefront of engagement with real-time non-political networks. The party uses web analytic programmes to identify trending issues and content for the main party site, which feeds back into the creation of new content.
- 5) The Liberal Democrats use online monitoring as a means of internal communications or customer relations insight. The Party examines the comments of campaigners and activists at the local level as a means of resolving potential issues at the grassroots level.

To build an explanation for the manner in which political parties monitor the web in order to exert influence on the networks of political bloggers, Collister drew on work by the sociologist Manuel Castells, in particular his new book *Communicative Power*⁸. Castells argues that one of the most important measures of influence or power in a network is the ability to establish and control particular networks and argued that actors in a given network be designated thusly:

Programmers: actors who have the ability to establish and control networks in addition to being able to reprogram them at will

Switchers: actors who have the ability to connect to other networks and ensure cooperation of different networks by sharing common goals.

Collister subsequently argued that the Conservative Party took on the role of Programmers, as it sought to influence key bloggers such as Iain Dale, in order to set the online discussion agenda. In contrast, the Labour Party take up the Switcher role as they seek to work with

⁷ <http://wearesocial.net/blog/2009/09/online-monitoring-political-behaviour/>

⁸ Castells, M. (2009) *Communicative Power*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

strategic partner networks by combining resources with media networks with an interest specific issues. The Liberal Democrats operate a combination of Programmer and Switcher roles.

Further points of discussion:

1. Is it possible to trace the initial point at which an issue emerges, e.g. an original blog posting?
2. Can authorship analysis offer verification of who is communicating online – including who is the initial poster of content that begins an issue (point 1)? Are anonymising software and re-routing tactics still effective?
3. How can we evaluate the relative importance of the various factors affecting messaging/PR/public diplomacy?
4. In online social networks, how do we measure how trust is built, how attitudes or emotions are amplified across networks, or how these are contained within echo-chamber spaces?
5. Can we analyse political communications in terms of branding? What metrics does branding offer?
6. How can we construct a multi-method/metric methodology offering a comprehensive evaluation of the various aspects of online communication, e.g. (i) measurement of exposure (ii) measurement of who is talking at all (iii) social network analysis to identify who are the nodal players, and (iv) qualitative or sentiment analysis of shifting attitudes.