

Civic Engagement, Communication-Based Networks and Conservative Future: Technocultural and Organisational Change, 2008-10.

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ABSTRACT

In the run-up to the 2015 UK General Election, social media (Web 2.0) like blogs, Facebook and Twitter seem to have become widely accepted and established modes of civic engagement. However, in the run-up to 2010, these media were newer, less understood and largely associated with younger generations. Therefore, it seems pertinent to examine the impact of the advent of these communication-based networks in the culture of the young people who were civically engaged at the time. Using, as a case study, Conservative Future, the young activist wing of the British Conservative Party, this paper presents findings drawn from qualitative data that were gathered while in the field with young Conservative participants, between 2008 and 2012. Observations suggest that there was an emergence of a technologically-centred innovation culture that helped dissolve traditional geographical and hierarchical barriers to grassroots activity. It is argued that a culture of Facebook participation evolved organically through a learning and copying behaviour within cohorts at the grassroots of Conservative Future, which in turn acted as a driver of change that impacted upon the more established characteristics of the party's organisational culture. This change is described to be associated with a technologically-driven subculture that is argued to have been extant in the party between 2008 and 2010. The author calls this subculture "Cyber Toryism".

INTRODUCTION

In the run-up to the 2015 UK General Election, social media (Web 2.0) like blogs, Facebook and Twitter seem to have become widely accepted and established modes of civic engagement, of which political engagement is an observable extension. However, in the run-up to 2010, these media were newer, less understood and largely associated with younger generations. Between 2005 and 2010, the public face of the Conservative Party (also referred to as the Conservatives, Tories and Tory Party), while in opposition, underwent significant change. It was marked by the arrival of David Cameron's fresh-faced leadership (Bale 2010). There is some evidence that suggests Cameron's youthfulness attracted younger participation to the party (Pickard 2007). Cameron's name and face became integral to the party and its rebrand. One of the most innovative, salient and symbolic expressions of change in the party was the leadership's use of internet technologies in the form of *WebCameron* and *Ask David* (Ridge-Newman 2014). Matthew Hindman (2009) argues that, while some claim the internet to be a democratizing force in politics, digital democracy is a myth and that new elite participants have filled niches in its place. The Cameron-branded internet applications, which aimed to encourage wider public engagement in the election campaign through a two-way interface between the party and the public, could be argued, in one sense, to fit Hindman's notion.

Furthermore, unofficial, new elites at the Conservative grassroots were also developing a new vehicle for Conservative-leaning participation in the form of the innovative Tory-affiliated blog *ConservativeHome.com*, also referred to as "ConHome", which filled a vacant cyber niche. ConHome's rise in prominence within the Tory-sphere occurred at a time when newer media, like Facebook and Twitter, were beginning to blur the lines between online civic engagement, e.g. engaging with public e-forums and making e-donations to charitable causes; and online political participation, e.g. interacting with political emails and donating via party websites (Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2012). Social media act as electronic venues that facilitate the integration of the interests and activities of individuals and groups in a publically displayable manner. They have been used as tools to display civic pride during national events like the London Olympics and Diamond Jubilee celebrations in 2012. Similarly, participants in the political sphere in the run-up to 2010 used Facebook pages like a branded carrier bag to display, publically online, and often with pride, a political affiliation and/or support for one or more candidates (Ridge-Newman, 2014). Rachel Gibson (2013) argues that these communication-based networks are impacting on traditional professionalised political parties. Gibson suggests that power is being devolved from the elite centres of party organisation to the grassroots. Subsequently, modes of party membership are argued to be evolving in an age that is increasingly characterised by the use of the internet. Loader et al. (2014) suggest that, although younger generations are less trusting of traditional political actors and vehicles, there is significant potential for democracies to evolve from impacts driven by young people interfacing with digital media. Therefore, it seems pertinent to examine the impact of the advent of these communication-based networks in the culture of the young people who are civically and politically engaged.

Since the advent of internet use in political culture, boundaries that once governed intra-party dynamics appear to have become faded and, in some cases, have been redrawn. In this context,

scholarly work that qualitatively documents the changing nature of civic engagement and political participation is slow to catch up. Some recent examples of qualitative research that addresses the role of social media include the Arab Spring in Egypt (Eltantawy and Wiest 2011); young people, Facebook and political engagement (Thorson 2014); and young people and political conflict on Facebook (Vraga et al. 2015). When compared, studies like these reveal that the nature of social media engagement is highly complex. The results from this type of research often demonstrate that communication-based networks can both mobilise and demobilise political participation. Therefore, qualitative and context specific studies are important to furthering a deeper understanding of the impacts of social media in diverse settings. In a small way, this paper aims to contribute to narrowing the gap in current knowledge and understanding with a focus on cohorts of young participants in the Conservative Party. Between 2008 and 2012, I conducted an ethnographically inspired participant observation of Conservative Party culture. This paper presents findings drawn from a range of qualitative data sources. They are largely first-hand observations and in-depth interviews gathered while I was actively engaged in the field with Conservative Future (CF), the young activist wing of the party, in the run-up to the 2010 General Election. The paper argues that the Conservative Party developed a grassroots social media culture that evolved and dispersed throughout cohorts within the party in an organic manner. It focuses on the role of Facebook and argues that, in the specific case of the Conservative Party, the uses of new media were most effective in campaign and grassroots party organisation. As a case study, CF provided rich data that effectively illustrates the technocultural change observed in Tory organisation through engagement in communication-based networks. This culture is referred to as “Cyber Toryism” (Ridge-Newman 2014).

CONSERVATIVE FUTURE, FACEBOOK AND COMMUNICATION-BASED NETWORKING

By 2008, in the run-up to the London Mayoral Election campaign, Facebook had begun being used as an organisational tool for political mobilisation in the Conservatives’ “Back Boris” campaign. At that time, the UK was considered to be in the top three Facebook using countries, only behind the US and Canada (Hodgkinson 2008). By 2010, over a third of people in the UK are reported to have joined Facebook (Williamson 2010). Individuals and collectives had begun employing Facebook’s social networking capabilities for personal communication and social interaction. These wider trends in Facebook use had begun to be embraced within cohorts at the grassroots of the Conservative Party.

In early 2008, I was an under 30s member of Spelthorne Conservative Association. Subsequently, via email, I was put in touch with, and invited by, another young/er member of Spelthorne Conservatives to attend a CF event in London, 5 March. The event by its very nature was social and hosted in a public London bar. It quickly became apparent to me that the central interest for most of the individuals at the event was to network socially within a Tory cohort. Therefore, I participated in the customs that I was observing. I met a large number of so called “CFers”, many of whom were young professionals who freely disseminated their business cards to individuals with whom they had developed a rapport. By the end of the evening, I had collected 12 business cards.

Likewise, I reciprocated by giving out a personal card that I had had professionally printed with my name and email address.

A number of individuals suggested that we should “find each other on Facebook”. Seemingly, this phrase was used as a social cue in order to indicate a mutual interest in connecting with other young Conservatives. Therefore, the advent of Facebook, used by the CFers as a networking tool, had begun to facilitate social interactions in both off- and on- line Tory social gatherings. Alexander Smith (2011), a fellow Conservative Party ethnographer, conducted field work in Dumfries and Galloway in 2003. He describes his first networking interactions with local Tories, before the advent of Facebook, as a challenge, because the most enthusiastic individuals he encountered were those who created barriers to him connecting with other local Conservatives. In contrast, I found connecting with CF networks through the use of Facebook comparatively fruitful and immediate, which demonstrates the impact of Facebook in acting to facilitate some divergence in the manner in which Tories were making internal network connections.

I had been a member of the social networking website Facebook since 2005. Therefore, on my return home to Spelthorne from the London event, I checked my Facebook account online, via a personal laptop computer. In the two hours it took for me to travel home, I had received nine Facebook “Friend Requests” from individuals I had met at the event. I subsequently reciprocated by “accepting” their friend requests via my personal computer, and sending friend requests to a number of other individuals whom I had met at the event. Unlike Smith’s experience in Scotland, these Tories seemed, perhaps unsurprisingly, abundant in South East England.

Following my first networking event, I was invited to a number of Facebook groups that were used by young Conservatives. In the following two months, the number of CF Facebook events and CF friend requests that I gained grew significantly. Through that process, I made an influential contact in Surrey CF. In mid-2008, I was invited to join the Surrey CF Area committee as the branch development officer. I accepted the position and became involved in a number of Surrey CF events. However, my role in Surrey CF did not mature until I moved residence and switched my membership to the Runnymede & Weybridge Conservative Association (RWCA) in August 2008. This indicates how, although Facebook was a useful tool for the organisational aspects of CF, my growth as a Conservative participant was reliant on having roots imbedded within a fertile Conservative association.

Trends in the choices and uses of internet technologies in the RWCA appear to have been dependent on the two distinct age groups in the association. In terms of activism, there was a small but keen group of younger Conservatives who leant towards the use of Facebook to organise their involvement within the local party. However, they also used regularly email and mobile telephones. Often, their mobile phones were used as devices with which internet connections were made in order to access email and Facebook. That said, these were the days before the widespread use of smartphones, therefore much of the mobile cellular technology was of more primitive forms of interface. Some young Conservatives used their phones to update their Twitter status with short microblogs, within 140 characters, detailing their activities on the campaign and other political messages.

The CFers created a Facebook group for paid-up members of the local CF branch, which was also extended to unofficial supporters from outside the local area who could request to join the closed Facebook group. The group was typical of those administered by other CF branches, which utilised Facebook groups in order to grow a network of supportive and active Conservative participants; and share organisational, campaign and other political information on the group's Facebook Wall. Often, this would encourage debate through online activity involving group members interacting with one another and the medium by posting comments in public conversational threads. Facebook was used to organise also campaign events, social events and other organisational and political activities. Gibson (2013) suggests that this type of activity presents a new model of grassroots campaigning that has led to the devolution of power from the professional centres of party organisation, because of the low financial cost of engagement in social media.

The freedom from financial burden in using Facebook as a marketing tool certainly enhanced a local RWCA by-election campaign in Virginia Water campaign, 2009. The administrators of the Facebook group were able to send Facebook messages to the entire group, which acted as an instantaneous and targeted promotion device during the campaign period. The chairman of the local CF regularly sent messages to the members of the Facebook group in order to encourage them to attend specific campaign days. Individuals were invited to attend political, social or campaign events through the creation of Facebook event pages. The event page would give information about the time, date and location of the event in addition to further information and a list of those who intended to attend the event. The members of the local CF Facebook group were subsequently digitally invited to the campaign event using simple Facebook functions. Members of the group were encouraged to "RSVP", thus showing whether they were "attending | not attending | maybe attending". On 9 May 2009, 12 members of CF, including local members and members from outside the local area, came to a Virginia Water "action day". Most of these individuals had interacted with the group and the event information on Facebook.

In addition to the CFers, there were other, more senior, activists who attended the action day in Virginia Water, however they were fewer in number and their participation in the campaign day was organised via other media, namely email and telephone. None of the senior activists were members of the Facebook group. Therefore, they did not receive notification of the campaign day via any Facebook interaction. It is not possible to know which, and to what extent, senior members had interacted already with Facebook in their personal lives, but as an administrator and observer of the Facebook group, I was aware of who the group members were. The chairmen of Spelthorne Conservatives and the RWCA joined the local CF Facebook Group in the run-up to 2010, and sometime after the Virginia Water campaign.

During the Virginia Water Action Day, the RWCA Chairman and another senior local Conservative expressed how impressed they were with the turnout of younger people and acknowledged the role that Facebook had played in the successful organisation of the event. However, one senior local Conservative, who assisted in the organisation of the canvassing part of the action day, made disparaging remarks about the young people who "turned-out" to help in his "patch". His concerns were centred on the lack of control he had over the organisation of the

campaign day, which was a new and uncomfortable change to the manner in which the branch had executed its campaigns in the past. In a campaign day debrief on 11 May 2009, the same Conservative, who at that time was a septuagenarian, said that the best way to contact him was by telephone and that he was not of the generation who felt the need to communicate regularly by email. This account suggests that a digital divide in the culture of the RWCA could cause, at times, a clash between the generations. The digital divide in RWCA might have been narrowed perhaps if there had been a wider understanding of the benefits of internet use in political organisation at that time.

CHANGING FACE OF CONSERVATIVE ORGANISATION

According to respondents, the turning point for the assimilation of Facebook within the party was when Boris Johnson released a Facebook “App” for his 2008 London mayoral campaign. One respondent explains how Facebook was used to organise teams of young Conservative activists to mobilise the Conservative vote in the 2008, 2009 and 2010 elections:

In terms of Conservative Future the first thing you do is start on Facebook... I organised council by-election campaigns in the local area, in Hampstead and Kilburn, leading up to 2008 and 2009, and we managed to get a lot of local campaigners from UCL [University College London], King’s College London [KCL], LSE [London School of Economics] and so on...we did use Facebook very heavily. I think I set up probably 10 campaign day events for every by-election going, and it is tried and tested - it seemed to work.

This testimony offers a perspective of a young CF activist at the sharp end of Conservative Party campaigns in London in the run-up to General Election 2010. It reveals that Facebook was used at the local level as an in-house marketing tool in order for key Conservative participants, who were in activist mobilisation roles, to sell campaign activities to younger members of the party through a prominent interactive digital medium of their generation. The respondent claims that selling mechanisms used were made more effective when Facebook’s direct targeting was combined with more traditional incentives of complimentary refreshment, thus resulting in a quid pro quo campaigning culture at the heart of the Facebook-facilitated activism

A study by Nils Gustafsson (2012), which used focus groups to assess the role of social networks in political participation in Sweden, had similar findings and concluded that those who were politically inactive were unlikely to be spurred into political activity through social media alone. In the US context, one study of the 2008 presidential elections showed a strong correlation between participation in Facebook groups and offline activism (Conroy et al. 2012). Another study of the same election showed a correlation between political Facebook participation and other forms of civic engagement (Vitak et al. 2011). These findings would suggest therefore that those individuals in the Tory party engaging in political social media activity were likely to be more naturally predisposed to civic engagement and acting in a similar manner on- and off- line. It would appear that CFers were not necessarily inspired to activism through the advent of new technologies, but rather the technologies became an extension and integration of already established practices. Moreover, this ties in with the

notion that the internet can be a weaker form of interaction in terms of mobilising new supporters (Margetts 2006).

In the Conservative Party case, Facebook was used as a tool to persuade and mobilise already active Tories to participate in campaigns to which they would not have contributed traditionally, because of geographical barriers. Some aspects of campaign organisation migrated to Facebook - the hub of communication that was being used already on a daily basis for general connectivity by younger Tories and subsequently facilitated outcomes of seemingly new social norms (van Dijck 2012).

According to a respondent:

People log onto their Facebook every single day and, if you do pester them, then, in effect, they will cave in, which is why, if you do organise 10 campaign day events and only 10 of your activists in your group of 300 friends on Facebook turn-up, that is still 10 activists more than you would have otherwise – and 10 times your 10 campaign days is probably more activists than you will be able to put on the street than the association will itself.

The use of Facebook in this way helped to make participation in Conservative activism a more fluid and decentralised process (Gibson 2013). At a fringe event during Conservative Party Conference 2012, one activist commented that they believed that social media had brought the party closer together, suggesting that, from a party organisation and campaign point of view, it encourages activists to give mutual-aid (campaign support) in other geographical locations. It would suggest that, at the Tory grassroots, there is now, post General Election 2010, some internal realisation of how internet technologies have impacted on the party's organisational culture, coupled with some understanding of its benefits in aspects of political campaigning. Therefore, social media has now matured to a point at which it has become assimilated into the party's inter- and intra- cultural discursive behaviour.

By 2008, the Conservative Party had begun using online venues as a place to meet the next generation of British Conservatism. Once connected through Facebook, from the comfort of a personal laptop or desktop computer, prominent individuals with basic skills in using online social networking tools were able to effectively impact on the numbers of activists attending campaign days in the offline world. The following respondent provides a personal narrative that gives some cultural insight into the discovery and development of Facebook within young Conservative circles around that time.

I joined Facebook in 2006, when I first went to university. I had never heard of it before the day I signed up for it and there were very few people at university that were on it at that time. One person that used it very effectively was the president of my conservative society at UCL - Richard Jackson. He was very effective, and still is very effective in organising events and organising complete campaigns for CF, and others, on Facebook. He did not teach me - he did not sit me down and lecture me on exactly how to do it, but it is good best practice to copy, and it is pretty simple best practice to copy.

This evidence supports one of the key arguments of this paper that Facebook, as an organisational tool for the Conservative Party, developed organically at the grassroots of the party - as opposed to being something that was led from the top-down. In the wider context, this finding can be explained by social movement theory which suggests that the use of social media is an ideal technocultural development for mediating political activism (Lievrouw 2011).

Leah Lievrouw's theory is helpful in that it strengthens the following proposition that (1) Facebook functionality was ideal for the mobilisation of party participation at Conservative events and campaigns; and (2) its use grew-out of individual user innovation. In the Tory case, this theoretical explanation is particularly helpful when it is integrated with (1) the empirical observations that organisational leaders - like David Cameron, who first used WebCameron as party leader; Tim Montgomerie, who combined his journalistic status with the internet and his grassroots roles in the party to form a leadership role as the founder of ConservativeHome; and Richard Jackson, who leveraged his skill in Facebook use to enhance his prominent leadership and organisational role within the party's youth movement - acted as Cyber Tory catalysts that promoted the wider use of internet-based media at the party's grassroots; and (2) further theory like that of Edgar Schein on the role of leadership in organisational culture. Schein (2010) states that leaders are hierarchical innovators whose actions direct and drive culture change within the organisation to which they belong. Historically, the Conservative Party has maintained a significant organisational hierarchy and deferential culture (Seldon and Ball 1994). Therefore, leadership has been shown, at specific points in its history, to be a significant driving factor contributing to change within the party (Bale 2012). It is therefore plausible to suggest that the actions of specific figures within the party helped to speed-up the internet-based culture change witnessed in the party in run-up to the 2010 General Election.

In the UCL case, it appears that the leadership actions of a university Conservative society president are significant. The actions were observed and copied by other Conservative participants in other parts of the party organisation. In turn, it seems it was this that led to an organic proliferation of the Conservatives' grassroots social media culture from 2008. The ethnographic observations suggest that this learning and copying culture was passed-on from one group or individual to the next. Both the on- and off- line activist behaviour proliferated to provide significant impact for the party's grassroots operations as this form of Cyber Toryism spread. The use of digital technologies by Cameron and Johnson, the face of the Conservative-elite, seem to have signalled to the party's grassroots that innovative uses of new media for the party's gain was an appropriate activity in which to engage. Young activists at the Conservative grassroots appear to have responded accordingly within on- and off- line environments, which provided relative freedom for a culture of digital experimentation and innovation that was tempered only by aspects of the party's traditional organisational culture (like e.g. the remnants of party deference and unity in the party's collective approach to its corporate messages), with the aim of winning General Election 2010 in mind. It appears that the balance between the individualisation of new forms of activism (Gauja 2015) and the collective goal of delivering the corporate message, generally, kept the culture of Cyber Toryism in organisational stasis during campaign periods.

Like many social phenomena which evolve rather than become founded in some act or constitution, it is challenging, if not impossible, to outline with any certainty the moment of genesis when Facebook became a significant part of Conservative Party organisational culture. However, one respondent's personal observations offer a perspective on how it may have come about:

Within Facebook we have had groups and pages and then new groups have come along, and these different architectures are used by different people. I guess there is a bit of an evolutionary aspect to it, in that the people that cannot use Facebook particularly well are kind of nudged aside by other people in the organisation in Conservative Future and told to follow the UCL Conservative Society group's structure. They get 400 people a year going to their event, so they obviously know what they're doing. And, I guess, best practice spreads that way, because there's certainly no training days or courses that I've been to on how to use Facebook to get people to campaign.

Richard Jackson, the UCL Conservative Society president 2006-07, and more recently a Conservative Campaign HQ press officer, was a close personal friend of, and worked closely with, the 2008-10 CF national chairman, Michael Rock. During that period, the role of the UCL Conservative Society was one of national prominence in the CF movement. UCL Conservatives' close proximity to Conservative Campaign HQ London; the London Mayoral Campaign 2008; and their influential position and relationship with other prominent University of London colleges that had CF societies meant that the society wielded a significant influence in the manner in which CF and its use of internet technologies developed in the run-up to the 2010 General Election. Furthermore, the observations and interviews which inform this research show that, prior to General Election 2010, Facebook was largely used by the younger demographic of the Conservative Party. Therefore, it is plausible to suggest that the evolution of widespread use of Facebook within the Conservative Party had its roots in the CF movement, and, perhaps, more specifically in UCL Conservatives.

The UCL approach tends to be in contrast to the "Oxbridge" universities' Conservative bodies, Oxford University Conservative Association (OUCA) and Cambridge University Conservative Association (CUCA), which operate less as practical campaign resources to the party and more as highbrow social and debate driven policy forums. Both Oxbridge groups have a Facebook presence. CUCA have tended to use their open Facebook group to portray the more traditional elite face of British Conservatism. While OUCA have a closed Facebook group and heavily invests in email to reach its organisational objectives.

Richard Jackson's role as a leading figure in the use of Facebook and his position of leadership and interconnectedness between influential networks at Conservative Campaign HQ, the Carlton Club, the Back Boris campaign, the University of London colleges, Cities of London and Westminster Conservative Association and the CF movement meant that he was a key figure on Facebook who utilised his connections to a significant quantity of quality Conservative "Facebook Friends" interested in activism. Therefore, Jackson's early role in the passive dissemination of the use of Facebook in CF, and subsequently the wider-Conservative Party, may have been an additional significant factor in the development of Facebook being used as a tool for Conservative organisation in campaigns in London and, later, nationally.

CONCLUSIONS

Facebook was used effectively by CF to encourage offline participation within the party organisation by new and more established party supporters. Facebook groups were used as a tool to organise events and campaigns. Facebook pages became for some participants a political shop front (Ridge-Newman 2014). They acted as a display window in which participants could furnish the page Wall with visual multimedia including text, photographs, videos and hyperlinks. These could be used to sell the Conservative Party to a new market of political consumers. The individual or collective group sold their causes to captured audiences in new ways using the organisational ease of a low cost communication-based networks. This was quite a significant and symbolic advance on the political communication culture of previous general elections (Lee 2014).

In using Facebook, the Conservative Party had access to, for the first time, a medium which held the potential for relatively unknown participants to develop an audience and demonstrate their popularity in a publically viewable manner (Jensen and Anstead 2014). Ordinary members and activists had the potential to challenge the traditional party hierarchy in having the opportunity to engage with a medium in which both the grassroots participants and party leader had access to the same types of platforms. Therefore, Facebook's role and the young people engaging with it in the Conservative Party contributed to a cultural change in the daily practice and use of political technologies in an array of areas in the party's organisation and for a significant number of individuals.

By 2010, Facebook was acting as a venue that brought together likeminded individuals and generational-specific cohorts in locales within cyberspace which did not discriminate in terms of spatial limitations and geographical boundaries. Facebook brought closer together than ever before young activists from across the country insofar that, with the immediacy and localisation of Facebook through the internet, geographical boundaries were viewed as being much less limiting. In doing so, it removed the reliance of activists on the traditional party structure which had been long dominated by Conservative Campaign HQ and the national party's organisational structures. It would seem that this use of Facebook had begun to dissolve the traditional and historic barriers and boundaries for activists at the grassroots in terms of political communication, which, since the 1960s, had been largely dominated by television and the gradual centralisation and professionalisation at Conservative Central Office (Gibson 2013). Therefore, Facebook seemed to further empower the young Conservatives with a dynamic grassroots communication culture, which is in line with the theories about technological impacts on internal democracy that is cited to indicate to a more networked campaign culture in the UK political context (Gibson and Ward 2012). It also supports Loader et al.'s (2014) theory that young people can play a role in evolving democratic practices. As the oral testimonies indicate, Facebook appears to have allowed and facilitated easier organisation of offline sociality; otherwise unknown participants to develop a profile through which their voice was more readily heard; and the opportunity to promote messages outside of those dominated by the traditional centralised control (Gauja 2015).

Most significantly, Facebook, as an internet application, contributed to a technology centred innovation culture at the grassroots, which evolved and spread through a learning, adapting and

copying behaviour by Conservatives who used the medium early on in the 2005-10 election cycle. However, it is important to be cautious about generalising Facebook behaviour in this context, because of the demographic and leadership trends that played significant roles in the events that contributed to its evolution as a political and organisational tool within Tory culture. A range of respondents have supported one of the key observations that, in the run-up to the 2010 General Election, the majority of Conservative-minded individuals interacting with Conservative-leaning pages on Facebook were representative of the younger wing of the party. The testimonies have provided narratives which are useful in understanding how unwitting leadership within prominent CF groups led to the passing down of Facebook best practice in an organic manner through observation and learning.

It was through this behaviour that a new and distinctive internet based cyber culture within CF began to proliferate. The culture of Cyber Toryism in turn led to a loosening of the control that the central party had over party organisation and its communication and campaign operations similar to that described by Gibson (2013). Therefore, it seems plausible to suggest that both Hindman's (2009) elite niche perspective and Gibson's (2013) decentralisation perspective are helpful in explaining specific phenomena observed in the organisational culture of the Conservative Party in the run-up to General Election 2010. However, it is pertinent to note that both perspectives are not mutually exclusive in the Cyber Tory case. It would appear that Cyber Toryism was a complex soup of e-interactions which led to a general redistribution of power and reorganisation of networks at both grassroots and elite levels and across Conservative individuals, groups, institutions and systems.

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