

# Facebook and Twitter: the real winners in elections?

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(PhysOrg.com) -- A new Oxford study shows methods of electioneering and political reporting have changed for good because of Facebook and Twitter.

It concludes lessons were learned by journalists and politicians in how to harness the power of [social networking](#) sites, which contributed to ‘unprecedented levels of participation’ and voter turnout at the 2010 election - particularly among voters aged between 18-24 years old.

The study, published by Oxford University’s Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (RISJ), reveals how [social media](#) websites were used by more than 200 18-24 year olds during the week of the UK election.

An online survey, conducted for RISJ, shows that nearly all of the 18-24 year olds used Facebook during the election period and engaged in ‘extremely high’ levels of activity, using social media to discover and share content, discuss the election, or join Facebook groups and polls. The poll, conducted 3-8 May 2010, sought to indicate trends and does not claim to be statistically representative. However, the study reflects the findings of a nationwide YouGov survey, in which a quarter of 18-24 year olds said they had used social networks to comment on the general election, and 81 per cent of them expressed an interest in the election campaign.

The survey also suggests that this age group generally consumes most of their political information online. Online news sources may be at the expense of newspapers and broadcasters, but the study says traditional forms of media have ‘normalised’ their use of social media, both as source material and to extend their own service. Newspaper and broadcast news websites are providing live blogs, digital correspondents, republication and retransmission, which has ‘helped to amplify the impact of social media even further’, says the study.

The success of a targeted campaign by the Electoral Commission to increase registration is also highlighted. The study says after a social media tie in with [Facebook](#) and ads on TV and radio, half a million people used the registration form on the Electoral Commission website, almost half of them aged between 18-24 years old. Over a million people used vote comparison tools like Vote Match to help them choose their political party at the last election.

Study author Nic Newman, a journalist and Visiting Fellow at RISJ, has played a key role in shaping the BBC’s internet services for more than a decade. For the study, he interviewed more than 30 people, including journalists, political bloggers and founders of political websites.

Nic Newman said: ‘Before the 2010 UK election, it was being billed as the internet election. Ironically, the biggest media story of the election ended up being a television event: a set piece leadership debate which turned the campaign on its head - with the internet seen as a sideshow. However, this research shows how the internet enabled the election to come alive and engage, particularly the younger electorate. This study shows that far from becoming disengaged from the political process, as some had feared would happen, young voters tweeted, blogged and used online chat-rooms to discuss the last election. There is also evidence to show that online information, context and real-time feedback enriched and invigorated the mainstream [election](#) coverage in newspapers, TV and radio.’

According to Newman, Twitter has ‘cemented its place as a core communication tool’ amongst political and media circles. In the study he describes it as an ‘essential source of real-time information for journalists and politicians’. This key finding is due in part to the sheer number of MPs now using Twitter: 600 political candidates engaged with Twitter during the campaign, alongside hundreds of journalists and party workers. There are nearly 200 members of the new parliament, including five members of Cabinet who are currently active on Twitter. The study finds that ‘even old style heavyweights like John Prescott (Labour MP) and Eric Pickles (Conservative MP) embraced social media’.

Provided by Oxford University

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