

There was more to George Galloway's triumph in the Bradford West by-election than celebrity politics

The shock victory of George Galloway in last year's Bradford West by-election provoked much media speculation as to its causes. Some pointed to Galloway's alleged celebrated status, others suggested the campaign's success was due to its innovative use of social media. [Lewis Baston](#) explains how there is an element of truth in both explanations but that there is much more we can learn from these events than either explanation would suggest.



Immediately after George Galloway's triumph in the March 2012 Bradford West by-election, some commentators proclaimed that it was an example of celebrity politics, and others that it arose from the Respect campaign making a breakthrough in the political use of social media. While there are elements of truth in both claims, in some ways they miss the most interesting and significant lessons of Bradford West for the media and politics.

The Respect campaign in Bradford West was clearly more advanced in its use of electronic media, particularly social media, than the other campaigns. Labour MP Tony Perkins noted after the result that while Labour candidate Imran Hussain had 300 Twitter followers, George Galloway had 82,751 'likes' for his Facebook page. Galloway's supporters were adept at promoting their candidate and campaigning themes on both Facebook and Twitter. Respect also developed an iPhone app to promote Galloway's campaign, informing supporters and journalists about his speeches and visits. This was the first time this had been done in the UK for a parliamentary candidate.

Although the Respect effort was impressive, it is important to realise why it happened. In some ways it is misleading to talk about 'Respect did this' in the context of the Bradford by-election. Galloway was the catalyst rather than the initiator of the campaigning innovations. The politics of the constituency had been stagnant for many years, and revolved more around local clan power-brokerage than ideology or campaigning. Local politics had failed, until the arrival of Respect, to provide a fit vehicle for the energies that existed in what was a more youthful, impassioned and politicised electorate than most other constituencies could boast. The talents of many young Pakistani-British men and women in Bradford were not allowed political expression until the Respect campaign welcomed their efforts. The social media campaign was created largely by technologically literate locals, including IT professionals for large companies, not by a central plan. The Respect campaign was spontaneous, voluntary and locally-driven, rather resembling protest movements such as Occupy in its free-form organisation. Some aspects of its campaign were almost nostalgic, such as Galloway's bus tours and street corner meetings. Respect liberated dammed-up political creativity. In that, rather than the specifics of its social media, it was a campaigning breakthrough for Bradford.

The Bradford campaign's most interesting moment provides a fascinating example of how social and traditional media interact. The BBC *Sunday Politics* programme broadcast on the weekend before the poll featured a debate between the candidates, which demonstrated Galloway's clearly superior speaking and political skills. It was a perfect demonstration of Galloway's argument that Bradford should send a parliamentarian to parliament rather than a local councillor. Twenty years ago, the impact would have been limited to those watching the programme and a little bit of word of mouth and local media follow-up. But the Bradford debate was available on line through the BBC and YouTube. Respect supporters could ensure, through Twitter, Facebook and messaging their friends, that the footage of the debate was widely disseminated. By August 2012 the YouTube clip had received 76,000 views. Social media amplified the impact of a traditional media event in the closing days of the campaign.

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Galloway was often described as a celebrity candidate, but his fame illustrates some of the limitations of the concept at a time when the media is so fragmented and plural. To political commentators, his biggest media impact was a rather embarrassing appearance on *Celebrity Big Brother* in 2006. But many electors in Bradford knew him through other channels. He was a frequent commentator on Press TV and was well-known to viewers of other Middle Eastern media such as the global Al-Jazeera network. He was also a regular on Talk Sport radio, which was a favourite of Bradford's many Pakistani taxi drivers. His tour de force before an accusing US Senate committee in 2005 is one of the most popular political YouTube clips in the world. He was known to many of the voters as a strong voice articulating positions they agreed with, to the extent that even early in the campaign opinion pollsters found that voters would spontaneously say they were voting for him. It is clearly possible to be a different sort of celebrity in different media markets these days, and he had shown an attractive side to many of Bradford's voters through media that were unknown or disdained by most of the political class.



Celebrity as such does not guarantee political success, as the failure of Esther Rantzen in Luton South in 2010 demonstrates. Rantzen campaigned on an issue where she had a lot of public support, namely disgust over the expenses scandal which had heavily implicated the outgoing MP for the constituency. But, thanks largely to the successful reinvention of the local Labour Party under new candidate Gavin Shuker, mainstream politics was able to fight back in a way it could not in Bradford in 2012.

Galloway was able to break another, fairly recently established, political pattern. He was elected for his political ideas and persona in an election where most of the other candidates were trying to play the game of being more 'local' than each other – Imran Hussain had extremely strong local credentials as a sitting councillor born and bred in Bradford West, but this was not the trump card that traditional by-election campaigning techniques assumed it to be. Indeed, Galloway's handling of local political issues such as the Odeon and the Westfield Hole was much more deft than that of the local politicians, as he was able to weave them into his general story of how Bradford had been neglected and marginalised by capitalism and the traditional political parties.

After the Bradford West by-election there was a tendency for many politicians and political commentators to regard the result as an aberration with little significance for politics elsewhere; beneath that judgment was also sometimes an implicit disrespect for the choices made by Muslim voters. While there is not a great deal that can be exported unchanged from the Bradford campaign, it does illustrate some broader patterns in political engagement, campaigning and the media, and it would be foolish to ignore its lessons.

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