

# What the Thornberry affair tells us about politicians online

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*Emily Thornberry was forced to resign as shadow Attorney General after her now infamous tweet of white van parked outside a house draped in England flags. The Thornberry affair is evidence that what many see as the trend towards the increasingly professionalised, stage-managed, spin-doctored presentation of British politicians has not yet fully spread to online social platforms like Twitter, argues [Josh Cows](#).*



Many commentators have speculated what was going through the mind of Emily Thornberry, the shadow Attorney General, when she tweeted a picture of a terraced Rochester house draped in three England flags and a white van parked in the driveway, with the simple caption 'Image from Rochester'. The BBC's political editor Nick Robinson, echoing the reactions of many, described the tweet as 'the most extraordinary self-inflicted wound I have seen an opposition party inflict on themselves in many, many years'.

No doubt, judging by Thornberry's subsequent apology and then resignation, this was a severe lapse in political judgment. Nonetheless, it is worth delving deeper into the reasons why Thornberry, as a rational and capable politician, posted the tweet, and comparing this to other high-profile occasions in which public figures have been tripped up or caught out by social media.

In Thornberry's case, as in many others, it may be less the content of a message and more the context in which it is communicated, which proves politically problematic. Distasteful and downright snobbish though it seemed to many, the content of Thornberry's tweet itself contained fairly subtle messaging – a sentiment which perhaps reminds of then-Senator Barack Obama's supposedly closed-door speech to supporters in 2008, in which he derided small-town Americans as 'clinging' to guns, religion and xenophobia. Obama was caught out, and his remarks made public, thanks to a secret recording (a fate which also befell 2012 opponent Mitt Romney, with more calamitous consequences.)

Obama certainly should have known better, but he wouldn't have known his remarks were being recorded in a politically (and financially) very supportive environment. Of course, it's easier to deride Thornberry, who surely should have realised that – this being Twitter – the audience for her tweet might have numbered in the millions. Yet, in practice, the distinction is rather more blurred. In much the same way as Obama, Thornberry might, at the time of tweeting, have felt that she was communicating to a 'room full of supporters'.

If this was Thornberry's basic assumption, then in a certain sense it was a fair one. While the earlier predictions of writers like Cass Sunstein in *Republic 2.0* and Eli Pariser in *The Filter Bubble* – which held that the Internet would divide society into 'echo chambers' or 'filter bubbles' – were in hindsight too drastic, nonetheless numerous studies have found that social media platforms can not only accommodate but exacerbate existing political and ideological divides (see work by [Conover et al](#), [Feller et al](#) and, as recently as last week, [Emily Pierson on the Ferguson riots](#)). In such a politically polarised environment, tweeting to one's followers might feel like preaching to the choir.

Yet what makes Twitter in particular so alluring is that it [has the features](#) both of a social network and a news medium – not least because even its co-founders [couldn't agree](#) on exactly what it should be. The same system architecture which facilitates the maintenance of close social ties also allows for the rapid spread of breaking news and information, for example during an [earthquake or hurricane](#). Unfortunately for Thornberry, it only took one follower – maybe a journalist, maybe an opponent – to transform a tweet presumably intended for supporters into a politically seismic event.

The whole affair was, of course, unfortunate for Emily Thornberry herself, and perhaps for the future prospects of her party as well. Yet for fans of democratic accountability, it should be at least somewhat reassuring. For it is

evidence that what many see as the trend towards the increasingly professionalised, stage-managed, spin-doctored presentation of British politicians has not yet fully spread to online social platforms like Twitter. Perhaps it will shortly slam shut – but while it lasts, enjoy social media for what it is, a window offering occasional insights into what politicians actually think – gaffes and all.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

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