

2015 was not an ‘internet election’ but both data and social tools did matter

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Andy Williamson writes that while the 2015 General Election was not an internet election, it was an election where both data and social tools mattered. He looks back what can be learned from the digital campaigns in 2015 and predicts how these lessons are likely to shape the use of digital ahead of elections taking place across the UK in 2016.



The digital campaign for the 2015 General Election was one of two halves: the internal party strategies and the public conversations playing out across social media. If 2015 was the year that showed us the feral negativity and limited value of the public sphere, it was also the campaign that shored up the importance of data and the point where micro-campaigning, long a mainstay of US elections, finally found its feet in Europe, albeit in a very European (and less intrusive) way. With 2016 bringing a year of elections, for the Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly and London Mayoralty amongst others, what can we learn from the General Election?

For 2015, Social media was no game-changer but neither was it a passive bystander. The increasingly normative nature of social tools means it's a natural outlet for expression and it's clear that digital can magnify small acts of participation. But there remain real questions about how these small acts can scale to create lasting or effective engagement. And the rash of naïve hyperbole prominent during the 2015 campaign didn't help. It became a self-referencing narrative of what was said, when and by whom, taking on a life of its own but providing little illumination. Social media rumbled on as an echo chamber. It was not a place for [safe] debate, but neither was it any real help in predicting the outcome, [as the University of Warwick discovered](#).

Where previous campaigns saw parties firing digital shotguns, with content sprayed out to the internet, in 2015 some discovered targeted content; the right message to the right people at the right time. This made digital not simply more nuanced but also much harder to get right. And done well, as the Conservatives showed, it created a sharply focussed signal that could cut through the noise. More than ever it's data that drives the campaign.

The Conservative's success involved a highly personalised focus, reportedly costing them upwards of [£100,000 a month in Facebook advertising alone](#). This reflects the growth and increased penetration of Facebook. In 2010 it was still a niche platform used by students, young people and primarily urban but by 2015 the parents of those students and people in rural communities had joined. Facebook has matured into spaces more reflective of the electorate at large. Its increasing sophistication lets a party target not just more people but, critically, more of the right people.

Too much is made of statistics, like reach or retweets. Last year showed us that it's the quality of engagement that matters, not the quantity. As [Craig Elder put it](#), "it's much better to reach five people with the right message than 500 with the wrong one." Where Labour saw the campaign as talking to "[millions of people on the doorstep](#)", the Conservatives recognised early on that it was really about talking to the people who could affect the outcome. This was an election that hinged on no more than 900 critical swing voters, so whether through knocks on the door or via Facebook it was critical to connect with them.

The SNP approach was somewhat different, starting from a surge in support on the back of the referendum, they were able to maintain the impression of a growing force. This was in part because they were highly effective at capturing social media commentary and content, then repackaging it to be more visible to their target voters. Where the Conservative campaign was about focusing on marginal seats and a ruthless shaping of individual messaging, the SNP's was about momentum and perception.

The 2015 General Election wasn't an internet election but it was an election where both data and social tools mattered. It showed us too that digital can only work with what it's got. For example, no amount of good campaign strategy – on or offline – was going to avert the inevitable car crash that was the LibDems. And the final lesson was that quality matters more than quantity, and that getting quality engagement requires strong analytical skills and a deep understanding of that data.

Looking forward to 2016, it's hard to predict the role of digital but let's look for a second at another election coming up this year: Australia. This acts as an important reminder for one of 2015's critical lessons: that you can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear! It's hard to imagine that the governing coalition in Australia's Federal Parliament won't run a negative but slick campaign based on undermining a weak opposition (the scene was set with the release of a [report on trade union corruption](#)). They enjoy a position of power perhaps only mirrored by the SNP in the UK. Because of that there's no real need for an expensive and targeted digital campaign. The Scottish Parliament's proportional system will limit the SNP's success but it's hard to imagine they won't retain power or anything other than a similar digital strategy than the one that worked in 2015, sustaining the momentum. Wales is more likely to be hard fought with Labour in trouble, UKIP making strong in-roads and Plaid not obviously benefiting from the situation. But campaigning in Wales lags behind in terms of skills and money, so expect little of interest here.

The election to watch is the London Mayoralty. Already too close to call, this two-horse race between Sadiq Khan and Zac Goldsmith is going to need all the campaign smarts to win over the marginal wards across the city, and digital is going to play a significant part. We already know from his first Westminster campaign in 2010 that Goldsmith isn't afraid to throw money at a campaign and this is an election Labour has to win. Khan's team are hot on the emails to supporters but it's not the already converted they need to persuade. And given London was a Labour city in 2015, the Tories must know it's theirs to lose. Expect more targeted campaigns (though not of the sophistication of 2015) and a lot of [dead cats](#).

For more on the 2015 digital campaigns, see [Andy Williamson's Political Insight article The Digital Campaign: Are We There Yet?](#).

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