

Is the Conservative Party deliberately distributing fake news in attack ads on Facebook?

The Conservative Party made clear that they would run an anti-Corbyn campaign, attempting to contrast the alleged weaknesses of the leader of the Labour Party with Theresa May's supposedly superior leadership. An analysis of Tories' Facebook advertising by LSE researchers [Damian Tambini](#), [Nick Anstead](#) and [João Carlos Magalhães](#) suggests that this negative campaign included specific instances of demonstrably false or misleading information.



This post is the third in a series that is examining data collected as part of a joint project recently launched by the LSE Media Policy Project and the “[Who Targets Me](#)” initiative. In the [first post](#), we considered the 2017 Liberal Democrat Facebook campaign; in the second, [Labour's](#). The data give an insight into pieces of political advertising which were designed to be viewed by individual users. These messages are not systematically disclosed by political parties on their websites or on their Facebook pages.

As we made clear in our first two posts, our analysis here is exploratory. It is, for example, unclear to what extent our dataset is representative of Conservatives' online advertising throughout this campaign, and the WhoTargetsMe sample of potential voters, from whose Facebook feeds our data is scraped, may be skewed.

Bearing in mind these problems, we can say that, of the 820 exposures to ads paid for by Conservatives that we analysed, 28% (or 232 items) attacked Corbyn using facts that appear to be false or are clearly manipulated to confound the reader – and sometimes both.

Among them is one of the more prevalent ads in the sample (67 items, or 8% of exposures), a collage of Corbyn's public appearances in which he talks about his position on matters of security and terrorism. As [The Guardian](#) has [explained](#), one video was manipulated to give the impression that Corbyn could not “condemn unequivocally the IRA” The ad implores voters: “On June 9th, this man could be Prime Minister. We can't let that happen. SHARE this video with everyone you know to make sure it never does.” In fact, Corbyn does say he condemns “all the bombing by the loyalists and the IRA”.

Another even more prevalent ad paid for by the Tories, which appears 82 times (10%) in our sample, compares Corbyn with May and claims that the former wants to “abolish” UK's armed forces. That would be an extreme and unprecedented measure, and, as one can imagine, there's no evidence that Corbyn intends to apply it. As [The Guardian](#) also showed, the Labour manifesto details “armed forces” importance in the party's budget.

One last ad exemplifies how the Conservative tried to confound voters. Corbyn is an open critic of nuclear *weapons*, and this was a constant source of criticism during the whole campaign. But his manifesto is supportive of nuclear *power plants*, arguing that the UK “has the world's oldest nuclear industry, and nuclear will continue to be part of the UK energy supply. We will support further nuclear projects and protect nuclear workers' jobs and pensions”. Despite this explicit position, the Tories paid to circulate an ad saying the opposite of that. “Jeremy Corbyn wants to shut down nuclear power plants – putting 60,000 jobs at risk. Only a vote for Theresa May's team will protect jobs and economic security where you live,” the message reads.

Generally, Conservatives used 73% (598) of its 820 ads exposed in our sample to attack Corbyn. They are not, of course, the only ones targeting opponents. As we have shown, both Labour and Lib Dems have done the same. However, while ads by these other parties conveyed [simplifying](#)

messages, portraying adversaries as weak, immoral or pro-elite, we couldn't find, at least in our samples, pieces by them using baseless or misleading facts.

This kind of strategy illustrates a key preoccupation of regulators and scholars regarding political propaganda on Facebook. For them, since political ads on the social media platform are shown to users in a personalized way, and not displayed in an open digital repository, for instance, they become resistant to accountability. Such lack of visibility arguably incentivizes smearing opponents in deceiving ways.

At the same time, at least in this case, it is not certain that more transparency would necessarily amount to a less aggressive and more accurate portrait of Corbyn. After all, this kind of depiction of the Labour leader is not so different from his **representation** in the British press.

In conclusion, whilst our research collaboration with the Who Targets Me project is only beginning, we can already see that there appear to be quite dramatically different approaches between the main parties. The Lib Dems started their Facebook campaign early; using the platform to harvest data through quizzes; Labour have run a euphemistic campaign with a notable lack of the divisive Brexit theme in their ads. And the Conservatives have used the social media platform to run a personalised attack campaign reminiscent of the infamous 'Demon eyes' attacks on Tony Blair. What marks this campaign, and links it to the recent Brexit campaigns, is a tendency to exploit the weaker 'truth filters' of the Facebook platform, and play fast and loose with facts.

The regulatory implications of this will be interesting. According to the **Electoral Commission** 'It is an illegal practice to make or publish a false statement of fact about the personal character or conduct of a candidate in order to affect the return of a candidate at an election.' WhoTargetsMe have a repository of these ads and hopes to foster debate that will ultimately lead to changes in how they are regulated.

This post gives the views of the authors and does not represent the position of the LSE Media Policy Project blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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