Ipsos

SOCIAL MEDIA
& THE 2011 SCOTTISH
PARLIAMENT ELECTION
CAMPAIGN

7/10 SCOTS NOW ACCESS THE INTERNET FOR PERSONAL USE.

Twitter, blogs and other social media have created a public forum for exchanging views and information. But, not simply a way of expressing and guiding discussions and debate, they are accessible and sit ready to be used as a valuable and public source of intelligence on what is being said, and how moods are shifting. While by no means complete, social media data cannot be ignored by those with reputations to promote or protect.

Seven-in-ten Scots now access the internet for personal use, rising to nine-in-ten aged 18-24[1]. Younger people are also more connected with social media sites, such as Facebook and Twitter. Almost two-thirds of 15-34 year olds in the UK use social media[2].

A political party's success is determined by the way in which it is perceived by voters. As a result, they must win the loyalty and trust of voters in the same way that brands have to attract consumers to buy their products or services.

Like brands, political parties try to shape perceptions through advertising and marketing campaigns that involve canvassing, leafleting, party political broadcasts and media appearances. However, just like consumers, voters' perceptions are often shaped by a myriad of other influences, such as the media, local issues, past allegiances and the opinions of family and friends.

Younger groups, as the most avid social media users, are particularly important to parties as they look to the future because they are less likely to have ingrained political allegiances or to interact with politics in traditional ways.

The increasing popularity of social media platforms means people can now share their opinions with hundreds, even thousands, of others in a single click. The average Twitter user has 126 followers[3], while the average Facebook user has 130 friends[4]. However, messages will often spread far beyond a user's immediate circle of friends. The advent of hashtags, 'Like' and other share buttons enables users to pass on messages, creating a ripple effect through social networks.

It may seem easy to dismiss social media by suggesting that no one listens to what people say online. However, research by Ipsos MORI has found that consumers are more likely to trust online recommendations made by like-minded people than a newspaper review or TV advert when making purchasing decisions. Social media users also say that content which is shared or 'liked' by members of their social network has an impact on how they feel about a brand[5].

Ahead of the 2011 Scottish Parliament elections, it was clear that the main parties invested significant campaign resources[6] in online media. However, simply having an online presence is no panacea to engaging potential voters. Instead, it needs to be integrated into a wider strategy alongside traditional campaigning methods. The importance of social media integration is recognised by some of the world's largest organisations. Most members of Ipsos MORI's Reputation Council said they now formally review social media discussions on a daily basis, while the majority have incorporated it into their reputation management processes[7].

The first stage in developing a social media strategy is to understand what people are saying online and the impact this is likely to have. Ipsos MORI used social listening techniques to explore online discussions surrounding the four main parties in the 2011 Scottish Parliament

1. www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2010/08/25092046/21
2. www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/Publications/IpsosMediaCT_TechTracker_Q1_2011.pdf
3. www.guardian.co.uk/technology/blog/2009/jun/29/twitter-users-average-api-traffic
4. www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics
5. Source: Sarah Everitt, YouTube and Ipsos MediaCT, joint paper at Social Media Research Conference
6. www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-12849236
7. www.ipsos-mori.com/DownloadPublication/1411_RepCouncilReportInsightandIdeas.pdf

VOLUME OF **MENTIONS**

	Total mentions	Average mentions per day	Highest mentions in a day
SCOTTISH NATIONAL PARTY	18,378	613	1,262
SCOTTISH LABOUR	15.536	518	914
SCOTTISH CONSERVATIVES	8,704	290	631
SCOTTISH LIBERAL DEMOCRATS	6,461	215	457

election campaign. Social listening works by trawling the internet every day, through blogs, social networking sites, forums and news sites, to monitor 'mentions' of the parties[8]. Once the data is collected, it allows us to explore what people are saying online[9]. This provides an insight into the ways in which the respective campaigns were perceived online and explores the implications for reputation management.

Our analysis reveals that the SNP had the largest online presence in the final month of campaigning, receiving the highest number of total mentions compared to the other parties. Table 1 shows that they also received more mentions on average per day and received the highest number of mentions in a single day. As the party of government, some mentions can be attributed to other parties mentioning the SNP while criticising or challenging their record and policies. However, it also suggests that there was more online 'buzz' around the party.

Tracking the number of mentions over time provides an indication of how discussions developed as the campaign progressed. As Figure 1 shows, there were significant peaks and troughs in online activity for all parties throughout the campaign.
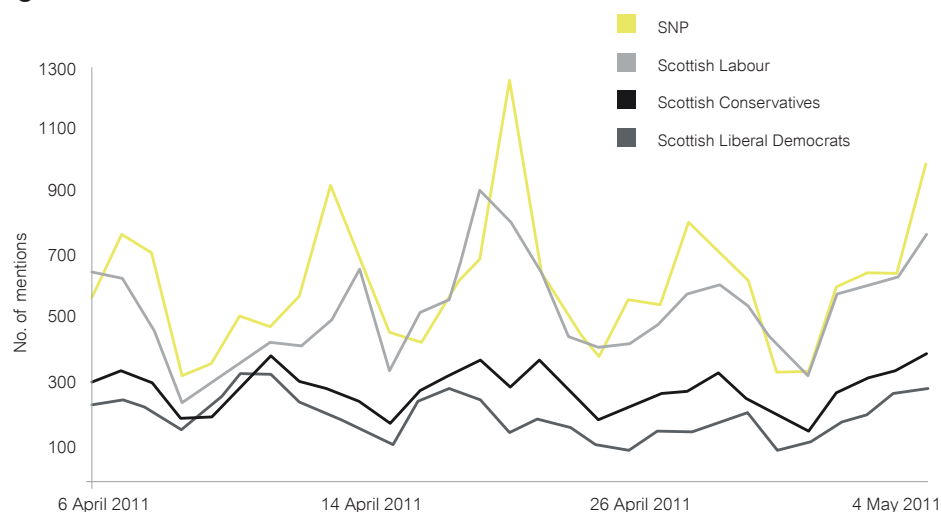
Peaks generally coincided with key events, such as manifesto launches and TV debates. The largest spike in activity occurred on 20th April, the day that News International's main titles decided to back the SNP. Online activity dropped off significantly at weekends, particularly over Easter and during the break for the royal wedding.

This suggests that online activity is still influenced to some extent by the traditional media, which is unsurprising given the high profile of the campaign. However, it is the analysis of activity on non-news sites (such as Facebook, Twitter and blogs) which is key to understanding online users' perceptions.

Figure 2 shows the SNP received the most mentions on non-news sites at the beginning of April, but that the gap between them and Labour narrowed over final two weeks of the campaign. Further analysis suggests this was largely down to users comparing the two parties or commenting on why they would vote for one over the other.

Analysing these spikes in more detail provides an insight into the extent to which key party messages were being shared by users. The largest spike in the number of mentions surrounded the launch of the SNP manifesto on 14th April. A significant proportion of mentions
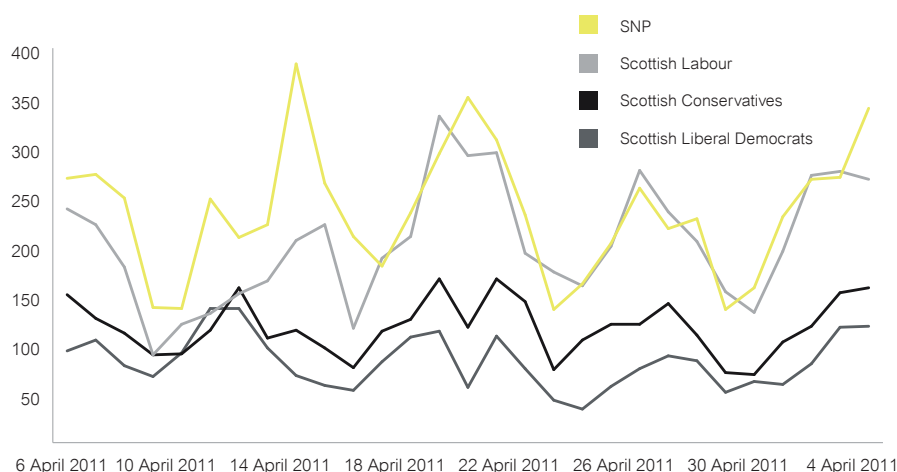
Figure 1: Volume of mentions trend

Legend: SNP, Scottish Labour, Scottish Conservatives, Scottish Liberal Democrats

Y-axis: No. of mentions (100, 300, 500, 700, 900, 1100, 1300)
X-axis: 6 April 2011, 14 April 2011, 26 April 2011, 4 May 2011

1. A mention is counted as a page that matches the search string (for example, "Scottish Conservatives"). If the match appears more than once on this page, it would still count as a single mention. This prevents the results being skewed by pages which contain multiple mentions of a single search string, thus ensuring that the data is accurate and more reflective of what is being discussed online.

2. Further information on our Social Listening techniques can be found here:
www.ipsos-mori.com/offices/scotland/ourapproach/researchtechniques/Online-and-mobile/Social-listening.aspx

Figure 2: Non-news volume trend

Legend: SNP, Scottish Labour, Scottish Conservatives, Scottish Liberal Democrats

X-axis: 6 April 2011, 10 April 2011, 14 April 2011, 18 April 2011, 22 April 2011, 26 April 2011, 30 April 2011, 4 April 2011

The contrast between the Liberal Democrats poor showing at the election and their relatively high proportion of positive mentions is interesting. Further analysis suggests that this was down to the party being largely ignored in election discussions on Twitter and Facebook. The SNP and Labour both received five times as many mentions as the Lib Dems. As a result, much of the discussion about the Lib Dems was generated by the party itself or its supporters, who are likely to express more positive opinions.
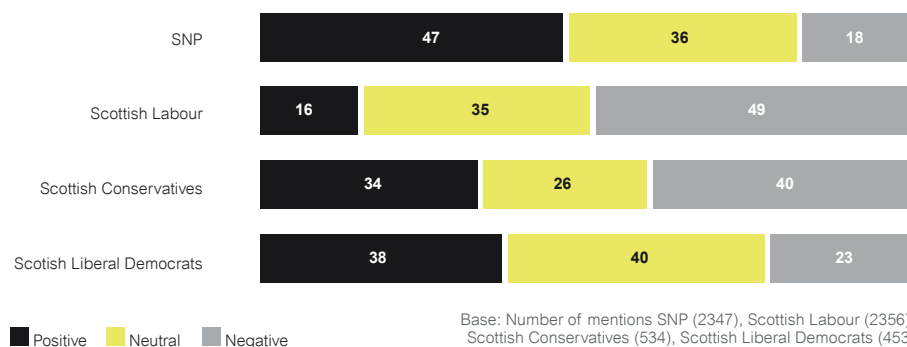
contained reference to the launch and its key pledges, particularly the extension of the Council Tax freeze.

The other parties also received higher than average spikes to coincide with their manifesto launches. Key messages, such as Labour's commitment to 'end jobless youth', the Conservatives' 'common sense' pledges and the Liberal Democrats'

networking sites, and categorised them as positive, negative or neutral. Figure 3 shows that almost half of SNP mentions were positive, compared to just 16% of Labour mentions. Almost half of Labour mentions were negative. Mentions of the Conservatives were more likely to be negative than positive, while mentions of the Liberal Democrats tended to be more positive than negative.

This underlines the need to understand the context surrounding online discussions. Who is generating and driving discussions? Where are they taking place? How do they relate to wider discussions on an issue or within an industry? These are key questions that need to be considered when monitoring social media. Involving a researcher with in-depth knowledge of both social media and the subject area, simultaneously monitoring competitors or by combining social listening with other research methodologies will all help to address these questions.

Figure 3: Sentiment of mentions on Twitter and Facebook

Party	Positive	Neutral	Negative
SNP	47	36	18
Scottish Labour	16	35	49
Scottish Conservatives	34	26	40
Scotish Liberal Democrats	38	40	23

Base: Number of mentions SNP (2347), Scottish Labour (2356), Scottish Conservatives (534), Scottish Liberal Democrats (453)

Monitoring social media has become a news story for very different reasons recently following the violent looting in English cities. It will, however, remain important to brand managers and communication professionals long after the riots disappear from the headlines ■

'manifesto for jobs' were all shared by users in significant numbers. The prevalence of content sharing highlights the need to create content that can easily be shared by users to encourage them to spread key messages.

While the number of mentions a party receives is important in terms of its online presence, what really matters is the sentiment behind those mentions. We analysed mentions found on Twitter and Facebook, the most popular social

Mentions of the SNP and Labour largely focussed on the key issues that defined the battle between the parties and were highlighted by Ipsos MORI polling before and during the campaign. Positive mentions of the SNP tended to express satisfaction with their manifesto pledges, record in government and the leadership of Alex Salmond. On the other hand, negative mentions of Labour tended to criticise their perceived lack of original policies and the leadership of Iain Gray.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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For more information about our social listening research please visit www.ipsos-mori.com /scotland-social-listening