

Not just swearing and loathing on the internet: analysing BuzzFeed and VICE during #GE2017



Dr James Dennis

Senior Lecturer in Journalism at the University of Portsmouth.

Email: james.dennis@port.ac.uk

Twitter: @jameswilldennis



Dr Susana Sampaio-Dias

Lecturer in Journalism at the University of Portsmouth.

Email: susana.sampaio-dias@port.ac.uk

Twitter: @ssampaodias

In the hours that followed the shock of the exit poll, a narrative quickly emerged amongst political pundits to help explain the unexpected surge in support for the Labour Party: “It Was the Young Wot Won It”. Youth engagement has been a key factor throughout this election. From musicians JME and Stormzy spearheading the #grime4Corbyn campaign, to a massive voter registration drive that resulted in over one million applications from 18-24-year olds, young people have been consistently touted as potential difference-makers in the outcome of #GE2017. While our understanding of precisely who voted will remain somewhat sketchy until the publication of the British Election Study later this year, early indications point to a significant and substantial growth in youth engagement.

This leads us to ask, what information sources did these young people draw on when deciding how to cast their vote? Although the robust media analysis conducted by Loughborough University covers broadcast and print media, the outcome of this election highlights the pressing need to also explore those digital news sources that directly target younger voters. We analyse how this election was reported to younger audiences by two new-media organisations, BuzzFeed and VICE.

Founded in 2006, BuzzFeed is renowned for its cat memes, quizzes, and listicles. While initially focusing on light-hearted content, over the past four years the company has invested significantly in its news operation. Under the stewardship of editor-in-chief Janine Gibson, BuzzFeed News commands an online news audience comparable to *The Mirror* and *The Telegraph*. Despite their growing reach, some cast doubt on whether the tone and style that BuzzFeed adopts is suited to rigorous journalism.

As expected, BuzzFeed maintained a journalistic style that blurred the lines between information and entertainment. From illustrating their readers’ surreal dreams about the election, to a compilation of the best reactions to Theresa May’s confession that the naughtiest thing she had ever done was to “run through fields of wheat”, humour was a constant feature. However, this approach belies the sophistication and depth of their election reporting. BuzzFeed were at the forefront of coverage on the digital campaign, identifying how political parties were using micro-targeted adverts on social media to bypass election spending limits, flagging up misinformation shared online, and producing detailed analysis of the growing influence of left-wing political blogs. Alongside pieces on the daily developments of the campaign, they also focused on LGBTQ rights, race, and those working in the gig-economy. While evidently many of these stories reflect the interests of their target demographic, what is striking about their coverage is its form, language, and style: BuzzFeed taps into a particular digital

vernacular to connect with its audience. The use of quizzes, dank memes, and cute photos of dogs at polling stations represents a new form of digital storytelling, one that can act as an important entry point for younger citizens into a range of complex political stories.

Emerging as an underground counterculture magazine in Montreal in 1994, VICE’s current editorial style chimes with its abrasive and controversial CEO, Shane Smith. Launching its UK arm in 2002, VICE strongly oppose conventional orthodoxy in journalism, seeking to offer hip, edgy, alternative perspectives to the legacy media agenda, such as their behind the scenes look at the Syrian conflict, or their guide to North Korea. With an average age of 27, their staff speaks to—and for—their target audience.

VICE organised much of their coverage under two sections, *Oh Snap* and *Tory Week*, setting the overarching tone of the election coverage: either in dismay to be dragged to the “hell’s waiting room” of yet another election, or in merry enjoyment, provoking Conservative voters and blaming them for the catastrophic state of things. Like an amused biologist hiding in the bushes, VICE described the *Tory* as a unique species and scrutinised “*Toriness*” as a mode of life. If the tabloids were biased against Jeremy Corbyn, VICE attacked the Conservatives with comparable levels of fearless partisanship. With a fierce conviction that the election result would depend on youth turnout, VICE explained to their young readers the importance of strategic voting and peer-mobilisation, and urged them to not vote for the Conservatives under any circumstances. The language was witty and sarcastic, comfortable with swearing, and chose to hover between the othering of Conservative supporters and pushing a serious news agenda. Their Gonzo-inspired political coverage is as familiar as a pub discussion with your hilarious — maybe already tipsy — but still well informed mates.

Both publications are examples of digital disruption in election reporting. More than distributing content, BuzzFeed and VICE embrace the culture of social media. They draw on the ideas, language, and behaviours of the social web to connect with their audience. In doing so, they challenged the traditional values and norms of news making during this general election.

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"This is what political journalists do in their spare time."

The RISE of the alt-left BRITISH media

"I would really hate it if you shared this article on Facebook"

SHARE THIS ARTICLE NOW

Boris Johnson accuses Jeremy Corbyn of being a "mugwump"

Even if he is one, that's still miles better than being an outright fucking liar though isn't it?

These facts (with extra evidence) will show why the BBC is LYING about Jeremy Corbyn's biscuits."

TORY BULLSHIT ALERT

Are the TV debates over yet?



The Rise Of The Alt-Left British Media

They've been mocked, ignored, and dismissed as conspiracy mongers – but a small group of hyperpartisan British media outlets have quietly built enormous audiences on Facebook in the space of just two years with relentlessly pro-Corbyn coverage. But how will the British alt-left media cope with the election?

Posted on May 6, 2017, at 9:08 a.m.



Jim Waterson
BuzzFeed UK Political Editor



Even if you're a political obsessive you've probably never heard of Thomas G Clark. It's understandable: He's not a politician, so he doesn't get much press coverage or many requests for comment. Nor is he a political pundit, so he doesn't spend his time taking part in profile-raising TV programmes, or arguing the toss with opponents in carefully balanced, Ofcom-friendly debates that never stray too far from the political agenda set by that morning's newspapers and BBC news bulletins.

Clark doesn't have much of an inside track on what's going on in Westminster and he's not even particularly aligned with any single political party – with the exception of holding strong anti-Tory views. In fact, he's a thirtysomething part-time English tutor originally from the Yorkshire Dales who has never previously spoken to the media and was quite happy to keep a relatively low profile until BuzzFeed News got in touch.

He's also, measured by Facebook shares per article in the first week of the election campaign, the most viral political journalist in the entire country.

Clark's site, *Another Angry Voice*, is attracting a readership that most mainstream news sites would kill for. Despite still being hosted on an old-fashioned Blogspot account and relying on donations for funding, it's reaching millions of people with a combination of endearingly homemade memes, Facebook-friendly headlines, and a regular output of relentlessly anti-Conservative takes on the news. Recent mega-viral hits include "How many of Jeremy Corbyn's policies do you actually disagree with?", "30 things you should know about the Tory record",

BuzzFeed screenshot: <https://www.buzzfeed.com/jimwaterson/the-rise-of-the-alt-left>.

VICE VICE CHANNELS

OH SNAP

How the Tories Fucked the Country

BB BEN BEACH Jun 7 2017, 2:59pm

Theresa May inspects some fish (Stefan Rousseau/PA Wire/PA Images)

And what to do about it.

This election cycle has been full of Tory deception and distraction. For instance, after seven years of a Conservative government pursuing an economic strategy described as "repeatedly hitting yourself in the face", any alternatives offered up to soaring inequality and collapsing living standards have been ridiculed as relying on a "magic money tree", when in fact costs have been plainly laid out for the electorate to see.

So actually, Theresa May's insistence that "this is the most important election in a generation" is a rare moment of honesty. For the first time in decades, there is an opportunity to break with an anti-social past going nowhere, in favour of a shared hope of a better future.

At a recent leadership debate, Amber Rudd called for the Conservatives to be "judged on our record" – triggering howls of laughter from the audience. Understandable, when you consider the record of the Conservative Party in government includes: the trebling of tuition fees to £9,000 a year; the scrapping of EMA and Legal Aid; the closure of hundreds of libraries, youth centres and women refuges; savage cuts to schools, arts, mental health, social care and local authority budgets; humiliation of the disabled; victimisation of the unemployed; the bedroom tax; the illegal deportation of 50,000 people; racial profiling of school students; spiralling violence in prisons; the worst housing crisis in decades; and higher taxes for low earners.

Impressively, all this has been achieved before the Conservatives even reach the halfway point on the austerity measures they plan on continuing until 2025.

VICE screenshot: https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/how-the-tories-fucked-the-country.