

# **Too many twits? The Effectiveness of two MPs' use of social media**

## **Introduction**

For Members of Parliament, communication is key. In a society that has been moulded by macro-level political developments exacerbated by the proliferation of instant information based on fast-serve convenience attitudes (Jackson, 2006; Williamson, 2009), communication for MPs has never been more important. In addition to traditional modes of correspondence with constituents, an increase in the use of social media has been observed in the activities of MPs (Williamson, 2009) over the last decade. This increase has been driven by the usage of social media in the United Kingdom, with 42 million Facebook users and 13.7 million Twitter users in the UK (LSE, 2020) and a younger audience that may not be reached by traditional modes of correspondence (Sloan, 2017). For MPs, microblogging sites such as Twitter and Facebook are now considered to be a strategic communication tool (Jackson and Lilleker, 2011), with low barriers of investment (Java et al, 2007) enabling them to instantly connect with the electorate. However, with the use of platforms that provide accessible access to the electorate, issues can be found in the motivations of an MP's strategic use of social media and how its use best helps an MP to fulfil their responsibilities. This research essay assesses social media use of two British MPs on Facebook and Twitter as a case study and examines how effectively they fulfil their roles as Members of Parliament on these platforms. It finds that some MPs tend to use Twitter for self-promotion and Facebook to promote the interests of their constituency.

## **MPs and Social Media**

In order to effectively assess MPs use of social media, it is important to highlight that any evaluations of effectiveness need to be tied to the role of the MP. One of the most notable contributions to the discussion on the role of the MP is from Donald Searing (1985; 1994). Searing defines the MP's role as a "local ombudsman, a social service man, who is there to intervene on their behalf, and to battle with government departments and rectify wrongs." (1985, p.350). He then goes on to conceptualise MPs who act effectively as 'good constituency Members' (ibid) in two subtype components. The first subtype is that of a 'Welfare Officer' (Searing, 1985), fulfilled by regular surgeries in order to form a dialogue with constituents, and boost awareness of Parliamentary services available to the constituency (1985). The second

subtype is 'Local Promoter' (Searing, 1985). MPs that accomplish this subtype are Members who promote the collective needs of the constituency (Searing, 1985) by mounting efforts to defend a constituency's reputation and secure further investment, or resources, to improve the lives of their constituents (1985).

Philip Norton has written extensively (1994; 2013, pp219-239) on the responsibilities of an MP, especially on MPs' Constituency Roles. Norton identifies seven constituency-focused roles that MPs can undertake, namely: Safety Valve, Information Provider, Local Dignitary, Advocate, Benefactor, Powerful Friend and Promoter of Constituency Interests (Norton, 1994). Norton found that 'Promoter of Constituency Interests' is a role that an MP does not need to be prompted to do. This implies that MPs who promote their constituencies are more proactive in their approach to representing their constituents (Norton, 1994). Thus, this is a key factor in assessing the effectiveness of an MP.

Norton (1994) also finds that pressures on an MP considerably and demands on to work on behalf of their constituencies have increased. In fact, Norton (1994) asserts that expectations on MPs' responsiveness have risen as a result of the novel challenges posed by local party politics, an increase in careerist MPs and a more volatile electorate reflected in "massive swings in voting intentions and in seats changing hands in byelections" (1994). The latter suggests that MPs view increased responsiveness and effective communication with their constituents a strategic objective in securing re-election.

There is extensive literature that attempts to identify how MPs seek to utilise social media, and to identify predominant motives in using microblogging forms of communication. Jackson and Lilleker (2011) present the most noteworthy findings on this. Based on the subtypes of Searing's 'good constituency Member' (1985), and Jones and Pittman's work on impression management (1982), their study (2001) propose a methodology to operationalise the concept of an effective constituency MP on microblogging websites. Jackson and Lilleker's methodology (2011) consisted on assessing individual tweets from 63 MPs' Twitter accounts and coded them under three typologies. The first typology, based on Jones and Pittman's theory of impression management (1982), measured impression management characteristics. The second typology, based on Searing's subtypes (1985), measured fulfilment of the constituency role of MPs in their tweets: "Refers to individual casework", "Refers to constituency issues",

“Seeks views on local issues”, “Provides local information”, “Promotes local community activity” and “Engaged in dialogue on constituency matters”.

Jackson and Lilleker (2011) found that self-promotion scored the highest by far, with personal interests and promotion of own personal achievements as Members of Parliament appearing in 26% of tweets. They also found that constituency service is a less common feature in MPs tweets, making up only 13% of all tweets measured. The study observe that partisan promotion of MPs own party was the least common feature of all tweets, with only 11% of tweets promoting parties (Jackson and Lilleker, 2011). As such, Jackson and Lilleker (2011) suggest that Twitter is viewed as a tool that can promote the individual, not the constituency or the party. They go on to suggest that, working on the premise of the work of Jones and Pitman (1982), MPs want to be seen to be doing a good job and so broadcast their achievements through the site.

Heal and Piskorski (2009) reiterate this, illustrating that 90% of tweets are one-way (they have no two-way interaction between the author and recipient) and so represent a form of one-to-many-broadcast-communication (2009), indicative of self-promotion. Williamson (2009) found in an MP survey that only 4% of MPs would initiate dialogue over messaging services, and that MPs are motivated to employ social media as a strategic campaigning tool rather than a tool for seeking views. Baxter, Marcella and O’Shea (2016) in an analysis of over 10,000 Tweets from MSPs observed that only 12% of total tweets represented dialogue and only 9% of total tweets conveyed any information regarding the MSP’s constituency. Vesvic-Alujevic (2013) reciprocated this, finding that social media is seldom used by politicians to increase turnout, but as a political marketing tool. This reiterates the theme of political representatives using social media as a top-down, one-way-communication tool to promote themselves.

MPs’ use of Facebook is less represented in the literature. Sixto (2011) tracked the activity of Spanish MPs using a framework of Facebook communication quality that found MPs do not make use of the two-way dialogue feature Facebook provides, although it does not help us conceptualise effective use of Facebook in terms of constituency role (Searing, 1985). Jackson and Lilleker (2009) assess e-Representation and constituency promotion on MySpace and suggest that social networks attract more local audiences than microblogging sites (2009). However, it does not make use of their later framework (Jackson and Lilleker, 2011) as

rigorously. Therefore, it is useful to apply this to Facebook, parallel to Twitter, when assessing the effectiveness of MPs use of social media and comparatively assess the results.

## **Research questions and data**

This essay attempts to examine how effectively two MPs use social media in fulfilling their roles and responsibilities. Two research questions were explored in order to make this assessment:

1. How frequently do a sample of two Members of Parliament use social media to promote their constituents and constituency?

Two MPs were randomly selected from the backbenches of both The Conservative Party and The Labour Party. Respectively, these MPs are David Duguid MP, and Hon Stephen Kinnock MP. These MPs were selected from the UK Parliament website, with MPs filtered by those who had both a Facebook and Twitter account, and were backbenchers (UK Parliament, 2020). Backbench MPs were chosen as they spend the majority of their time representing their constituents (Norton, 1994).

2. Do a sample of two Members of Parliament use one form of social media more effectively than another?

This essay compares the use of social media by Duguid and Kinnock on both Facebook (@DavidDuguidMP and @StephenKinnock) and Twitter (@David\_Duguid and @SKinnock). It will apply the same coding typology to both platforms, with the exception of Facebook comments.

In order to answer these research questions, a data source analysis was conducted on a sample of tweets and Facebook wall posts from the respective profiles of each MP. 200 tweets and 50 wall posts were taken from the Twitter and Facebook accounts of each MP. More tweets than wall posts were analysed as tweets are limited to 240 characters and wall posts are unrestricted, so tend to be much longer and are posted less frequently. Tweets were taken directly from [www.twitter.com](http://www.twitter.com) and wall posts directly from [www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com) using personal accounts, rather than using an API service, due to the relatively small sample size.

Furthermore, the data samples were taken from before 29<sup>th</sup> February 2020 as to avoid a predominance of tweets regarding the COVID-19 pandemic in the sample. Furthermore, data samples from 6<sup>th</sup> November 2019 to 12<sup>th</sup> December 2019 were also avoided, as this was the purdah period during the 2019 General Election and consisted mainly of party-promotion tweets, risking skewing the data.

This essay modifies Jackson and Lilleker’s framework (2011) which operationalises the subtypes of ‘good constituency Members’ (Searing, 1985) and modes of reputation management (Jones and Pittman, 1982).

*Table 1: Coding Framework*

<i>Code</i>	<i>Feature</i>	<i>Example</i>
Self-promotion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal achievements</li> <li>• Details of personal life</li> <li>• Claiming moral values</li> <li>• Anecdotes</li> </ul>	<p>“Was delighted to attend <a href="#">#ThinkingDay</a> this morning at St Andrews Church in <a href="#">#Turriff</a>. Particularly proud that my son Cameron took part in the presentation of the colours as a member of 1st Turriff Cubs. My daughter Peggy also took part as one of the Rainbows.” - @DavidDuguidMP, Facebook, 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2020</p>
Promotion of party	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Party in general</li> <li>• Local association/CLP</li> <li>• Leadership of party</li> </ul>	<p>“Congratulations @Jackson_Carlaw on being elected @ScotTories leader. Looking forward to working with you – particularly in run-up to #Holyrood 2021.” - @david_duguid, Twitter, 14th February 2020</p>
Refers to constituency issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing local information</li> <li>• Mentioning constituency in House of Commons</li> <li>• Work on a constituency issue</li> </ul>	<p>“Today #Aberavon welcomes The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, who are learning about the vital strategic importance of Port Talbot steelworks to our national economy, &amp; dropping into see the incredible work @BulldogsBCA do in our community.”- @SKinnock, Twitter, 4<sup>th</sup> Feb 2020</p>
Seeks views on local issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Surveys</li> <li>• Reference to doorstep canvassing/street stalls (non-political)</li> </ul>	<p>“The Old Town House at the top of Broad Street is one of the most historic buildings in Peterhead Members of the public are invited to share their suggestions for possible uses of the building by emailing peterheadtownteam@aberdeenshire.gov.uk</p>

		with your suggestions.” – @DavidDuguid MP, Facebook, 25 <sup>th</sup> Feb 2020
Engages in constituency dialogue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Responding to constituents/other users</li> <li>• Defends constituency/action taken to another user</li> </ul>	“Just getting into PT Parkway now, having spoken in the St David’s Day debate in HoC today. Great to be back, as always!” <i>in reply to another user regarding Port Talbot</i> - @SKinnock, Twitter, 27 <sup>th</sup> Feb 2020
Refers to National Issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Refers to issues that affect the whole country on the whole</li> </ul>	“Hundreds - potentially thousands - of UK steelworkers have been ripped off by cowboy financial advisers offering bad pension advice. Today in Parliament workers told regulators of the devastating impact on them & their families. This wild west industry needs proper regulation.” - @SKinnock, Twitter, 27 <sup>th</sup> Feb 2020
Attacks Opposition or Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Critiquing the Government or Opposition</li> <li>• Antagonistic comments towards rival</li> </ul>	“For as long as @theSNP policy is to separate from [UK emoji], rejoin EU AND the #CFP, the Fisheries sector should be wary of anything the SNP say on subject.” - @david_duguid, Twitter, 17 <sup>th</sup> Feb 2020

The coding sheet in Table 1 was used to assess the effectiveness of MPs fulfilling their constituency role, with the codes ‘Refers to constituency issues’, ‘Seeks views on local issues’ and ‘Engages in dialogue on constituency matters’ representing the responsibilities of a good constituency MP (Searing, 1985), ‘Self-promotion’ and ‘Promotion of party’ representing reputation management (Jones and Pittman, 1982), and ‘Attacks Opposition or Government’ and ‘Refers to National Issues’ being used to highlight the other roles an MP might perform on social media (Norton, 1994; Jackson and Lilleker, 2011). Some data sources may contain more than one coding measurement. For example, a tweet may reference a national policy campaign, but may briefly mention a government failure. As long as it is clear that the majority of such a tweet was focused on ‘National issues’, it would be coded as such. If it were unclear, it would be left un-coded in the interest of data uniformity.

Comments by the MP on Facebook wall posts were analysed separately. As comments by the MP were all replies to constituents or users, their context was coded using the coding sheet in Table 1 with the exception of the use of the ‘Dialogue’ measurement as all comments by the MPs are a form of two-way dialogue.

Video updates on Twitter and Facebook were not coded; however, descriptions and captions of photos were coded, as often photographs were only supplementary to tweets and posts. Retweets were also not coded as it difficult to determine whether a retweet represents the MPs' opinion.

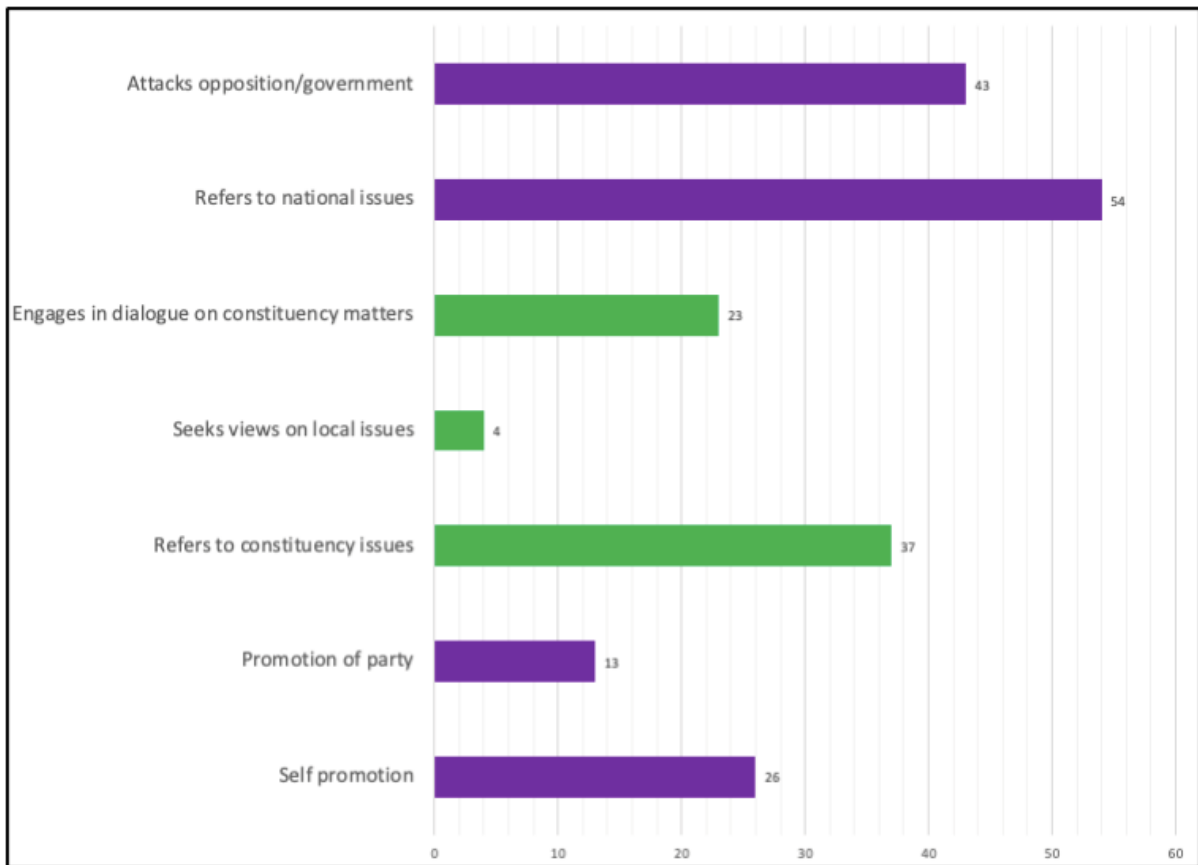
There were some limitations. The study is affected by dataset size, limited by the number of data sources I could code given my resources. In addition to this, it is worth reflecting on coder-reliability. Due to resource constraints, I was unable to cross-reference coding with other researcher, meaning the coding of each tweet is subjective. As such, the significance of results may be negatively affected. As all data is taken from publicly available social media pages, there are no ethical considerations.

## **Descriptive Results**

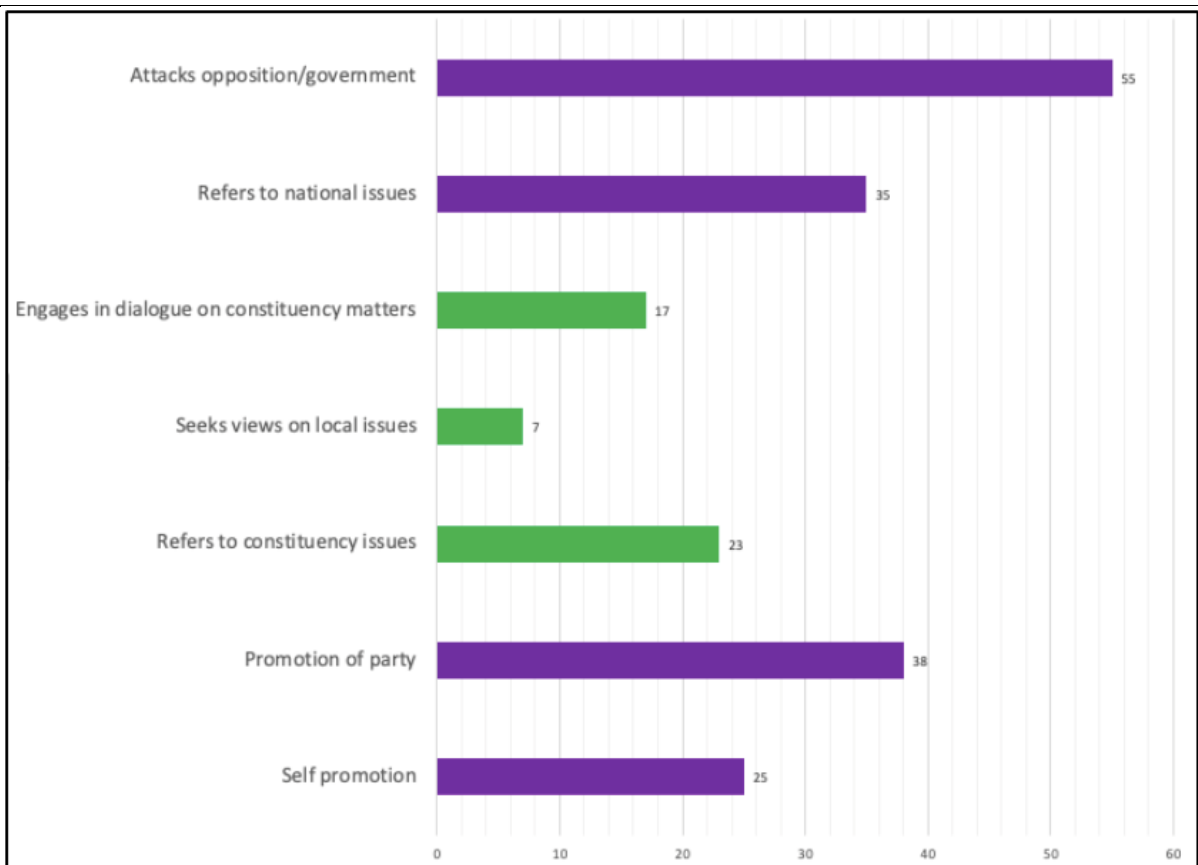
Figure 1 and Figure 2 represent 200 tweets from both MPs. It is clear that roles MPs play, other than representing their constituency, are the most dominant features in both MPs tweets. The three coded features relevant to constituency responsibilities, in green in Figure 1 and 2, represent only 32% of Duguid's tweets and 24% of Kinnock's tweets. The most frequent feature in David Duguid's Tweets is 'Referring to national issues', with 54 of his tweets (27%) doing so, as observed in Figure 1. Stephen Kinnock's most frequent feature in his tweet are 'Attacks on the Government' with 55 of his tweets (28%) doing so. The least frequent feature in Duguid's tweets is 'Seeking views of constituents', observed in only 4 tweets (2%). This is reciprocated by Kinnock, with 'Seeking views of constituents' appearing least in only 7 tweets (4%). Duguid refers to 'Constituency issues' more than Kinnock, with 19% of tweets referring to such issues compared to 12% in Kinnock's tweets. Promotion of party was the largest minority of tweets for Kinnock, appearing in 19% of his tweets. Self-promotion also appeared in a significant minority of tweets from each MP in 26 of Duguid's tweets (13%) and 25 of Kinnock's tweets (13%).

*Figure 1: Duguid on Twitter*

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*Figure 2: Kinnock on Twitter*





The overall trend in Figure 3 and 4, compared to Figure 1 and 2, highlight how differently both MPs use Facebook to Twitter. Constituency-focused roles, in green in Figure 3 and 4, represent the large majority of all Facebook wall posts from both MPs, with these roles appearing in 64% of all posts for both MPs. Indeed, for both Duguid and Kinnock, ‘Reference to constituency issues’ was the most frequent measure in wall posts, observed in 29 of Duguid’s wall posts (58%) and in 28 of Kinnock’s post (56%). ‘Attacking the opposition/government’ appeared least, with Duguid not posting any wall posts attacking the opposition, and Kinnock only posting 3 (6% of all posts). Kinnock also posted 3 ‘self-promotion’ wall posts (6%). ‘National issues’ were the second most frequent features for both MPs, with Duguid posting 13 times (26%) and Kinnock posting 7 times (14%).

*Figure 3: Kinnock on Facebook*

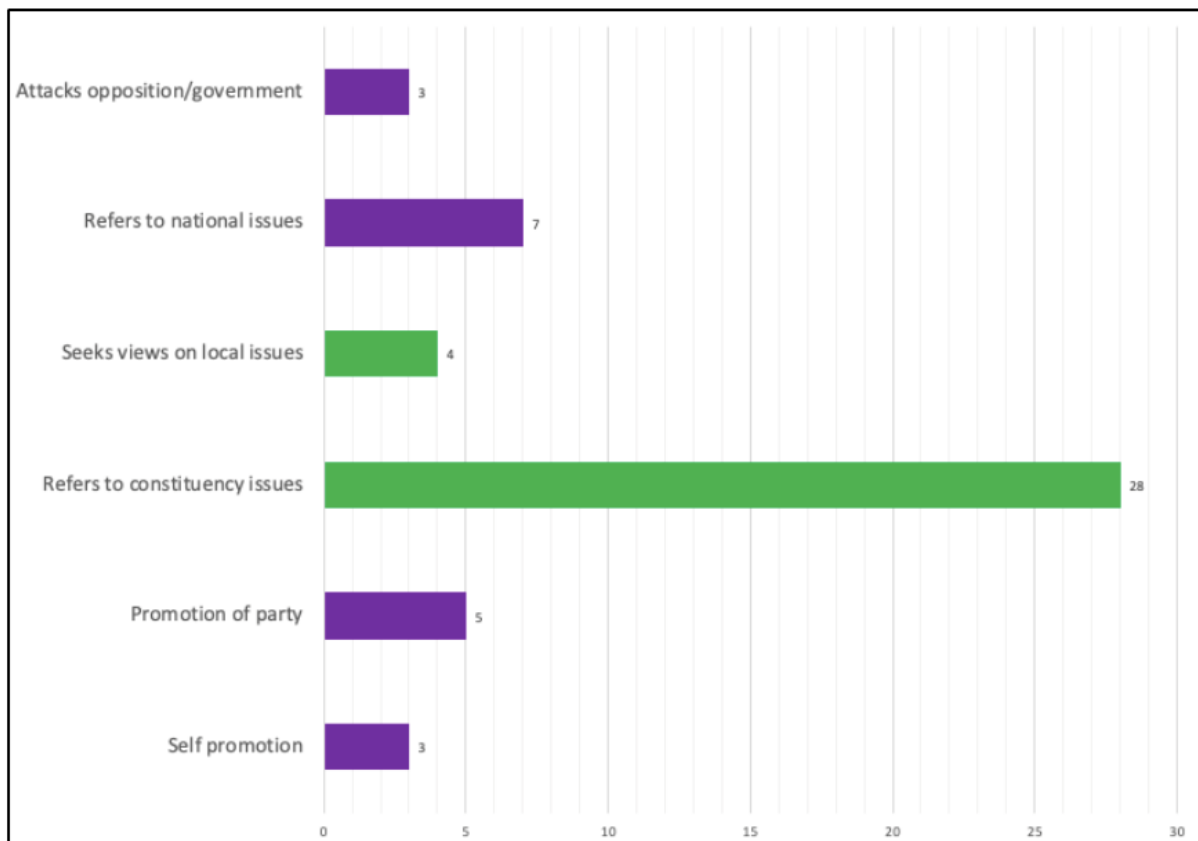
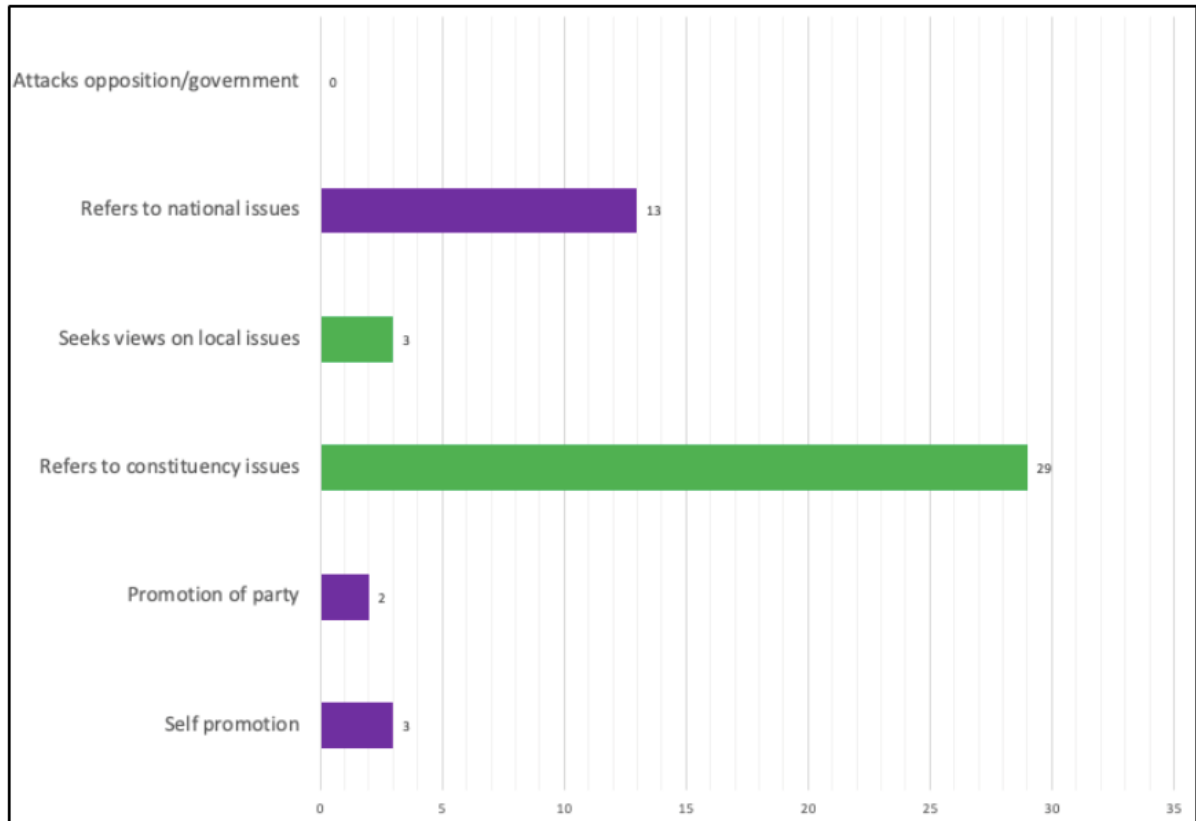


Figure 4: Duguid on Facebook



Across all 50 Facebook wall posts coded from each MP, 6 comments were made by each MP on their own wall posts. For each MP, all 6 of these were coded as ‘Providing constituency information’, meaning 100% of all 12 comments from both MP in the dataset were ‘Providing constituency information’.

## Discussion

It is clear from Figure 1 and 2 that both case studies, on the whole, do not use Twitter to supplement their normal parliamentary activities as a ‘welfare-officer’ or ‘local promoter’ (Searing, 1985). It appears that Duguid and Kinnock utilise Twitter’s one-way, one-to-many features (Heal and Piskorski, 2009) to attack their electoral rivals or enhance their own reputation.

Kinnock is notable in the latter. The majority of his tweets attack the Conservative Government (28% in Figure 2), suggesting that he is making use of the lowered barriers of investment on

Twitter (Java et al, 2007) to disseminate partisan messages. This is reaffirmed by the fact that his second most frequent type of tweet was 'Promotion of party' (19% in Figure 2). Only in 9% of Kinnock's tweets, a dialogue was formed between himself and a constituent. Political marketing in a management of his personal reputation (Vesnic-Alujevic, 2013) was the preferred use of the platform. This suggests that Kinnock is not effectively using Twitter to represent his constituents as reputation management (Jones and Pittman, 1982) features appear more often than constituency-based features (Jackson and Lilleker, 2011) on his Twitter feed.

Duguid also attacked the opposition more than he provided information to constituents as observed in Figure 1. This suggests that Duguid prefers to target his opposition, arguably motivated by the use of social media as a tool for re-election (Williamson, 2009), than engage effectively as 'welfare officer' or 'local promoter' (Searing, 1985) on Twitter. Furthermore, little constituent-dialogue was observed, making it difficult for him to fulfil the role of 'welfare officer' (Searing, 1985). However, 27% of Duguid's tweets were on 'National issues. This is not necessarily detrimental to Duguid's effectiveness as an MP, as all MPs are expected to act as trustees on national decisions on behalf of their constituents (Norton, 1994; 2013, pp219-239). Nonetheless, in the context of Searing's aforementioned subtypes (1985), Duguid is not effectively fulfilling his constituency-based responsibilities.

For both MPs, Facebook provides a different perspective in terms of effectiveness. For Duguid, constituency-based features were the most commonplace as seen in Figure 3, referring to 'Constituency Issues' a large majority of the time, with a negligible amount of 'self-promotion'. This suggests that on Facebook, one-way broadcast features of wall-posts to share and promote constituency information as a 'local-promoter' (Searing, 1985) were preferred. Both MPs engaged in dialogue with users/constituents, and sought views from constituents on 4 occasions, indicating some attempt to fulfil the role of 'welfare officer' (Searing, 1985), making him more effective as a good constituency member (1985) on social media. It is noteworthy that both MPs did not attack the opposition at all on Facebook, highlighting an aversion to using Facebook as an electioneering and campaigning tool (Williamson, 2009), favouring constituency-based wall posts over personal reputation enhancing and partisan posts.

It is clear in these case studies that Facebook is utilised as a tool to promote constituency interests, fulfilling the subtype prerequisites of a 'local promoter' (Searing, 1985; Norton, 1994) in response to the heightened demands on MPs (1994); whereas, Twitter is used more

by both MPs as a strategic electioneering tool (Jackson and Lilleker, 2011), disseminating partisan messaging (Java et al, 2007) and enhancing personal reputation (Pittman and Jones, 1982). In terms of Searing (1985) and Norton's (1994) assessment of effective constituency MPs, both MPs fulfil their roles much more effectively on Facebook over Twitter.

## **Conclusion**

Different MPs have different challenges in their constituencies, and these case studies illustrates broader issues regarding MPs use of social media. In this specific case study, it is clear that both MPs use Twitter less frequently to promote their constituencies or share constituency-based information, in favour of utilising Twitter's lowered barriers of investment (Java et al, 2007; Williamson, 2009) as a campaign tool (Gibson, 2014; Jackson and Lilleker, 2011). Both case studies use Facebook to much more effectively represent their constituents in sharing information about the constituency. Neither MP engaged in a great deal of dialogue with their constituents or other users on Facebook or Twitter, important for constituency 'welfare officers' (Searing, 1985). However, as Jackson (2006) points out, online followings may not resemble MPs constituencies whatsoever. As such, overlooking this, Duguid and Kinnock were moderately effective as Members of Parliament on social media, but primarily in their use of Facebook. Further research with a larger sample size of MPs, and bigger datasets of sources across both Facebook and Twitter may benefit us in understanding how MPs from different parties may use social media differently, and how effectively MPs, generally, make use of social media followings in terms of constituency representation.

**Word count:** 3487

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