

DEMOS

Plugged In

Social Action on
Social Media

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All errors and omissions are entirely my own.

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Introduction

This report presents the results of a study examining the ways in which social action is organised, influenced and encouraged on social media. 2018 finds us squarely in the centre of a storm of digitally-driven action. Some is political, some non-partisan. Some is impactful, and makes the front pages of newspapers around the world. Some remains below the radar. We set out to explore how campaigners, campaign groups and social media users themselves felt about the ways in which social action had been impacted by its increasing digitisation: for better and for worse.

Social action on social media is a picture of contrasts. For those for whom the online world feels like home, they see these tools as powerful tools for changing the world. Young people were optimistic about the power of social media to change society in ways they wanted. It was seen as a tool that could play a part in reshaping the political and social spaces they occupied. Although slightly more cynical, older Britons broadly agreed. As a medium for change, these digital platforms were felt to be powerful forces, whether that was changing politics, changing society or simply changing the conversation.

But not everybody feels at home online, and the power of social platforms can be misused, or not used at all. As part of this research, we interviewed a diverse group of campaigners and campaign groups pursuing different - and often opposing - aims. Our focus has been on the means by which they sought to achieve their goals and the mediums through which they campaigned, and have not judged the relative social value of each. Nevertheless, we cannot ignore that these tools are not available to everybody. Where platforms have been used to cause harm and to spread hate, they have excluded or suppressed voices in this country and abroad. Causes online live and die by their ability to navigate these spaces: not everyone is able or willing to do it.

We fear this may contribute to an 'activism gap': a world where only the digitally-included are represented and whose visions for society are articulated, and those who are not represented or whose voices are not heard are left powerless. We hope this report serves as a further reminder that platforms must ensure their tools – for all their potential power - are put to good use.

The research begins with a review of literature examining the strengths and weaknesses of social action as carried out on social media. A survey of 2,000 Britons was commissioned: we looked at attitudes to, experiences of and

behaviours in relation to social action and social media. We follow this up with the results of 30 interviews and discussions carried out with campaigners and campaign groups, through which we examined their work through the ways it joined up with social platforms. Finally, we include a small piece of data analysis aimed at encouraging future attempts to measure the scale and impact of social action using data, and as a call to social media platforms to ensure their data is available to researchers and activists who share their aims for a better society.

Executive Summary

The report presents new evidence for the power of social platforms to mobilise young people into social action.

- Nearly two-thirds of young people (64%) see social media platforms as an essential part of achieving social change, and over half of 35-50 year olds agree (55%).
- Young women are nearly twice as likely to use social media to campaign on issues important to them (19%) than young men (10%).
- Approximately half (55%) of young people in the UK believe social media makes positive offline change more likely to happen.
- Half of young people who report using social media to communicate with community groups, charities and campaign groups do so on a daily basis.

The report reaffirms the centrality of social media platforms in the organisation and experience of our lives.

- 91% felt social media had a net positive impact on them and their community.
- 7% of young people reported using social media to communicate directly with politicians or political groups in the past twelve months. Extrapolated to the UK population, this equates to approximately half a million young people communicating with political groups online. Of these people, half are in direct contact every week.
- Young men were twice as likely to report using social media to communicate with politicians or political groups than young women (10% vs 5%).

The power of social media is a force multiplier: through a review of the academic literature on social action as organised or coordinated online, through 15 interviews with campaign groups and with input from a half-day forum, we conclude that when used for good, social media platforms can be a powerful tool for positive social change, and when used for ill, they can cause considerable damage.

Interviewees:

- Identified the power of social platforms to reach new audiences and provide platforms for new voices, particularly those traditionally excluded from a platform.
- Credited social media with providing new routes into social action for previously excluded or under-informed groups, and of new ways of organising and raising money outside of traditional organisational structures.

However, interviewees also:

- Were highly critical of their vulnerability to abuse through social platforms and the ability of platforms to police their spaces.
- Raised concerns about the extent to which social media allowed sustained and long-lasting social action.

Social action can be encouraged, strengthened and measured through social media and other digital platforms.

- The affordability and accessibility of social platforms have created new civic organisations that are able to successfully operate outside of traditional organisational structures.
- Attitudinal, fundraising and offline meetup data all have potential in providing social campaigners with metrics by which to measure their success.

However, there remain significant concerns about:

- The misuse and abuse of social media by actors attempting to disrupt positive social change through social media platforms, including the spreading of misinformation and hate, and in particular in regions where platform oversight is weaker.
- The impact of algorithmic content curation on the types of messaging and, consequently, the types of groups that find their voices.
- The risk of an 'activism gap': the exclusion of causes and campaigners for whom social media platforms are hostile or unusable,

In light of these findings, Demos recommends:

Measure Digital Community Health

The DCMS should incorporate a measure of digital community health into the yearly Community Life survey, measuring the extent and impact of social action and the quality of community interactions and cohesion as they appear online.

Research and modelling could be supported through co-working with social media platforms (though would not be contingent on this), and would likely take the form of a pilot study in towns and cities in the UK.

Ensure digital literacy is a core component of statutory PSHE

The government should adopt the recommendations made in the 2017 report by the Select Committee on Communications and ensure digital literacy is a core component of the PSHE syllabus in schools; modules tackling citizenship, democracy and human rights ought to include the notion of digital culture and citizenship.

Improve Platform transparency

We recommend social media platforms improve transparency of their platforms in two ways.

Alongside GDPR compliance, platforms might consider extending the levels of data immediately accessible to their users. Currently, we believe data provided by social platforms is difficult to interpret to an average user. An 'at a glance' breakdown of how and why content and advertising is being shown to them on the platform. Where possible, this should be standardised across platforms: GDPR requests provide a likely framework for this.

Transparency at an individual level should be complemented by platform-level transparency. Recent attempts to get an overall view of what is happening on a platform have been patchy: frustrated by platform reluctance and reduction in API access. At a minimum, we recommend a simple heuristic: that which is public on a platform ought to be accessible through an API.

Background

It barely bears repeating that we now live our lives as much online as off.¹ The internet is now a central pillar of British society and a central driver of societal change, and a central force in the organisation, coordination and experience of nearly everything we now do. The web acts as a platform for new groups; it raises new issues, and brings them to a new audience; it provides new routes to funding; new forms of organisation and new forms of offline activism, protest and social action.

A week barely passes without news of another digitally coordinated piece of social action. Viral campaigns, like the “Ice Bucket Challenge” launched by the ALS Association in 2014, are regulars in the #trending sidebar. That campaign was estimated to have raised \$100m over 30 days, to raise awareness about, and fund research into, Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis. Campaign groups, turning to digital platforms, now bring thousands of people out into the streets after organising online: in 2018 alone, the UK hosted a Women’s March, a march against the Tampon Tax, opposing marches in support and against the imprisonment of Tommy Robinson, marches in support of unions, the NHS, Brexit, Palestine, animal rights and so on, all of which appeared on our digital streets as well as our offline ones. Participants in social action might act alone, might act in new groups or organisations enabled by social media, or, more worryingly, incited into action by groups looking to exploit these same tools to cause social division and harm.

Alongside organised campaigns for social change, the immediacy of digital platforms often result in large-scale spontaneous demands or pleas for action that take place outside of any given organization. In the wake of terror attacks or natural disasters, thousands take to social platforms to seek and offer help.

Away from the headlines, digital platforms are now an essential tool by which we as a society or community or group of friends come together.

This paper focuses on the use of digital platforms to organise social groups. Whether a million person march or a handful of friends at the pub, the internet plays the vital role in bringing people together offline. The consequences of this for society and societal change underpin the questions we looked to answer.

Literature Review

Many organisations today ranging from local community groups to non-profit organisations (NPOs), individuals and networks of activists, use social media in some form in their pursuit of social action. The purpose of this section is to review some of the existing academic literature on how effective social media have been in supporting the social action of these groups and how the use of social media has affected their ways of doing and thinking about social action.

There is some confusion among scholars and policy-makers about what social media are. Kaplan and Haelein define social media as “a group of internet-based applications that build on the technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user Generated Content”.² User generated content can in turn be defined as “the various forms of media, whether it be text, images, audio, video or a combination of some or all of these elements that are created, added and made available online by Internet users”.³ A variety of platforms fall within this definition including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram.

It is worth briefly noting that the question of how to conceptualise the relationship between technology and society and has been the subject of contention within academia.⁴ Without falling into the pitfall of technological determinism and oversimplifying the causal relationship between technology and social change it is important to recognise that technology matters to the way we live together socially.⁵ To use the words of historian Melvin Kranzberg, “Technology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral”.⁶ This review takes the soft position that technologies are tools that can be used in a variety of ways, but they shape the range of things we can and cannot accomplish: they have a structuring power in that they alter the landscape in which human interaction takes place, and therefore merit investigation outside of a proven causal relationship.⁷

Social Media for Social Action

Local community groups, non-profit organisations, individuals and networks of activists, use social media to facilitate social action in a variety of ways. This section reviews the academic literature on the use of social media as a tool for these groups to fundraise, raise awareness about a cause and recruit and mobilise people for offline action.

Fundraising

With the advent of crowdfunding and online fundraising platforms such as *Gofundme*, *BT mydonate* or *Facebook Causes*, it has become increasingly common for activists, community groups and NPOs to use social media to fundraise for their cause. The literature on social media and fundraising largely focuses on NPOs and their online fundraising strategies; there is comparatively less research available on how other groups use social media to fundraise for social action. In 2017, online giving represented only a relatively small portion of the total fundraising income of UK NPOs (7.6%). However, online giving is rapidly growing—the revenues of UK NPOs from online fundraising grew 12.1% on average between 2016 and 2017 while revenues from traditional fundraising only grew 4.3%.⁸

Social media seem to be an effective tool for non-profit organisations to reach new donors and audiences. In a study of the online fundraising of 24 American charities, Flannery and colleagues (2009) found that online donors were disproportionately new to the organisations' files (52%). In fact, for 12 of the organisations, new donors acquired online accounted for a median of 16% of all new donors and of 27% of all new revenue on 2008.⁹

Crowdfunding campaigns using internet and social media to mobilise people quickly around causes are a growing market with around £81m raised for good causes in 2015.¹⁰ Crowdfunding is a new form a financing a project facilitated by digital technologies, where a funding comes from many small gifts from a large group of people rather than a few large funders and enable causes unlikely to get funds from traditional donors to receive finance from elsewhere. Social media seem to have been a key enabler of crowdfunding methods as they have made it possible for individuals and small group to reach a large audience of potential funders. Furthermore, the benefits of crowdfunding campaigns may extend beyond financing and help raise awareness about a cause and build communities of support.¹¹

While these numbers seem to highlight the great potential of social media to fundraise for social action, it is difficult to evaluate to which extent social media use makes individuals more likely to donate to charity or good cause (particularly online). Using the PEW Internet and American Life Project data set, Mano found that participation in social media increases the level of online donations to charity but does not impact offline contributions.¹² Similarly, Farrow and Yuan found that the alumni that were active users of social media

alumni groups were more likely to donate to their *alma mater*.¹³ There is also initial evidence regarding the interactivity of discrete social media interactions. Through the use of an online experiment, Lee and Hsieh (2013) found that those who sign an online petition were more likely to then donate money to a related charity: 62% of the participants in their study who signed the online petition donated money to the related charity, compared to 41.7% of those who did not sign.¹⁴

On the other hand, a recent survey found that internet users were more likely to donate online if when they were engaged in voluntary associations offline and that the frequency social media use did not influence the general propensity to donate. Respondents who donated to charity online ranked on average 67% higher on the researcher's index of associational participation than those who didn't. A one point increase in the associational participation measure was associated with a 1 percentage point increase in the likelihood of donating to charity online. In other words, online donations might not be a function of frequency of use of social media but of engagement in social groups offline.¹⁵

There is also some evidence that online and traditional donations are motivated by different factors. In a study of online donations on *Facebook Causes*, Saxton and Wang (2014) found that online donations tended to be smaller than offline gifts— contributions where between \$0-\$50— and that social media seemed to facilitate impulsive donating. They also show that while traditional donors largely make decisions on which charity to give to based on internal characteristics of the fundraising organisation such as efficiency ratio and financial capacity, it does not seem to be the case online. Success in online fundraising is largely a determinant of an organisation's online reach and their ability to access wide audience through their network of fans.¹⁶

To summarise, previous research seems to be largely enthusiastic about the efficiency of fundraising online and through social media for social action. Numbers show that revenues from online donations are rapidly growing and a significant albeit small share of the fundraising revenues of NPOs. Furthermore, Crowdfunding methods enable groups and causes who would have found it difficult to attract funds using traditional methods to raise funds quickly and rather effortlessly. Social media seem to provide people with more opportunities to give but it is not yet possible to reach definitive conclusions about whether their use make people more likely to give.

Awareness Raising and Information sharing

Local community groups, non-profit organisations, individuals and networks of activists, also increasingly use social media to raise awareness and share information about their cause – particularly campaign and advocacy groups. A recent survey of US advocacy groups found that 98% used social media (especially Facebook and Twitter) to communicate to the public. Furthermore, it found, that 67% of the groups surveyed used Facebook and Twitter as a communication tool on a daily basis.¹⁷

Social media seems to be an effective tool in this regard because it provides individuals and organisations with a low cost medium to advertise their cause to a wide audience and potentially at great speed.¹⁸ In their survey of US advocacy group's uses of social media, Obar and colleagues found that social media had four main benefits in facilitating awareness raising and civic engagement: 1) Social media help connect individuals to advocacy groups and can strengthen outreach efforts, 2) they enable *engaging feedback loops* or conversations with the public, 3) they strengthen efforts to promote social action through increased speed of communication, 4) they are a costless effective tool and allow NPOs to do more for less.¹⁹ In addition, it is widely believed that social media create a democratic public space accessible to all citizens and enabling them to bypass the gatekeeping of traditional media and government censorship.²⁰ For instance, many scholars have highlighted the key role of social media in rapidly sharing information and raising awareness about the abuses of the Egyptian regime during the 2011 Arab Uprisings--in the context of censorship of the traditional media.^{21 22}

There is little comparative data available evaluating the effectiveness of social media in raising awareness and sharing information for social action. However, there are many anecdotal examples in the literature of individual and organisations successfully using of social media to share information or raise awareness about their cause and ignite social action. For instance, in March 2012, Invisible Children, a San Diego-based advocacy NPO bringing awareness to the activities of Joseph Kony—an indicted Ugandan war criminal—started a video campaign called “Kony 2012” to make Joseph Kony internationally known. Within 3 days their video became viral and drew millions of viewers on YouTube spurring a resolution by the US senate to condemn Kony for crimes against humanity.²³ A Demos study of Twitter activity following floods across

Northern England in 2014 also found that, individuals and organisation widely used Twitter to share information and updates and to organise relief efforts.²⁴

On the other hand, the literature also highlights some of the potential downsides of using social media when seeking to raise awareness about a cause. In *Twitter and Tear Gas*, Tufekci points out that social media platforms (most notably Facebook) increasingly use algorithms to sift through content and decide what to prioritise. This has implications for people and organisations using social media for social change: because of the huge amount of content posted on social media, these platforms cannot show everything to everyone. Algorithms control which posts get visible and which don't and each person sees is tailored to the individual. The first implication of using algorithm-ruled social media platform when trying to raise awareness for a cause is that there is a risk of the message being drowned or not reaching its full potential audience.

For example, Tufekci observed that the campaign group Black Lives Matter's messaging was widespread on her Twitter feed but that the story was not shown to her through her Facebook feed, despite her friends were posting about it-- this phenomenon was reported by other Facebook users. For some reason the Facebook algorithm had decided not to show her content about the Ferguson protests. She explains that platform algorithms often contain feedback loops: once the algorithms buries a story even a little, it becomes increasingly hidden. In other words, while anyone can post content on social media, social media algorithms act as new gatekeepers and determine how wide a reach a message can get.²⁵

As a result, organisations and individuals using social media to raise awareness about their cause often try to create 'algorithm-friendly' content. A study of trends in Facebook follower counts for Plan International - a development and humanitarian organisation that advances children's rights and equality for girls - over 2 years showed that the followers of their international office grew the most (from 60,000 to 1,27,230), while the following of regional office pages grew by only 5,000-10,000 followers over the two years. Posts about global campaigns attracted far more followers than posts about local campaigns.²⁶ This may place constraints on the ways in which individual and organisations for social action formulate their messages, and has implications for the ability of campaigners whose cause is locally-based or whose message is not 'algorithm-friendly'. Another concern is that the opacity and personalised nature of social media content algorithms mean that it is difficult for

individuals and organisations to tell whether their message is not resonating or whether it is failing to be picked up by the content algorithm.^{27 28}

The lack of empirical comparative evidence makes it difficult to reach definitive conclusions on the effectiveness of social media in awareness raising campaigns. Success stories of social media awareness raising campaigns suggest that social media can be a powerful tool to reach wide audiences rapidly, although history rarely remembers the losers, and the science of 'virality' is limited.

Mobilising and recruiting for offline action

Local community groups, non-profit organisations, individuals and networks of activists, also use social media to mobilise people to act offline (eg. volunteer, attend community events, protest). One of the main debates among academics is whether social media encourages low risk, low cost online activism with little real impact —the 'slacktivist' hypothesis —or whether they can be powerful tools driving social action offline.²⁹

There are some examples in the literature of social media being unhelpful when used to mobilise people for offline action. For example, a US housing association keen to revitalise its disengaged membership launched a Facebook Page, but this suffered from a low level of engagement among residents. An event launched on Facebook and other social media platforms was not attended by any new members. Engagement on the platform was dogged by residents' concerns that social media was not an appropriate communications tool due to potential digital exclusion, but there was a recognition that it could be a useful as a secondary communications channel.³⁰

In an attempt to explain the role of Social media in the protest and eventual toppling of the Mubarak regime in Egypt in 2011, Lim concludes that social media provided a space and tool for the formation of new networks and the expansion of outstanding networks, helping to enable greater on-the-ground social action. It brokered connections between previously disconnected groups, sustained longstanding networks of labour opposition, and allowed new connections among middle-class youth opposed to the regime.³¹

There is also emerging empirical evidence against the slacktivism hypothesis. A recent report by the NCVO found that there was no overall decline of civic participation such as volunteering in the UK and that the internet and social

media had made it easier for people to access opportunities for civic participation.

In fact, overall the same proportion of people formally volunteer once a month in 2001 and 2016 (27%) and the rates of volunteering among young people (16-25) have increased steadily from 23 to 32% between 2011 and 2016.³² The study found that young people (16-25) --who are also the segment of the population most likely to use social media frequently--were the group most likely to volunteer regularly.³³ These findings suggests that widespread social media use has not affected rates of offline engagement as suggested by the slacktivist hypothesis.

There is also growing empirical evidence that social media can be an effective mean to recruit people into offline action such as volunteering and protesting. For example, in their study of volunteer behaviour through social media, Kim and Lee found that a wide majority of the American college student they surveyed who had volunteered for a non-profit organisation had joined it through a social media platform (74%). They also found that the perception social pressure on social media was an important factor motivating people's decision to volunteer.³⁴ A cross-cultural study of social networking sites for activism across the US and Latin America, involving extensive surveying of activists also found that whether respondent's activism took place mostly online or offline they all participated equally in offline activism.³⁵

Enjolras and colleagues found that 40% of the participants to the Rose Marches in Norway had first heard about the demonstration on Facebook and that this was also the case of 26% of participants to other public demonstration. Among respondents, 18-24 years old were the most likely to use social media (Facebook and Twitter) to access and disseminate news about the demonstrations: 32% reported using Facebook and 51% using Twitter for this purpose. Interestingly, they also found that social media helped mobilise groups that were less likely to participate in protests--those at the lower end of the household income scale. This suggests that using social media to mobilise for offline action has the potential to increase the diversity of participants involved.³⁶ Using a content interviews and a content analysis of the most active Facebook groups blaming the Guatemalan President Alvaro Colom for murdering lawyer Rodrigo Rosenberg in 2009, Harlow found that the social media platform was used to mobilise an online movement to go offline. She argues that the interactive nature of Facebook and the user's posts

and motivational comments helped organise massive protests demanding justice for the alleged murder.³⁷

The literature also seems to show a positive correlation between social media use and protesting as well as forms of civic participation such as volunteering. In an online survey of college students across Texas, Valenzuela and colleagues found that Facebook users were significantly more likely to engage in form of civic participation such as volunteering or raising money for charity than non-facebook users. One should be cautious in attributing increased likelihood of civic participation to social media use, but at the very least these results suggest that Facebook attracts students who are more civically engaged which also seem to contradict the slacktivism hypothesis.³⁸

Moreover, Chile saw widespread demonstrations against government education and energy policy from 2011 onwards, led by a broad range of groups including university students, unions and environmentalists, and “completely autonomous” from the main political parties in Chile. Valenzeula examining the role of social media in these demonstrations found that , holding other variables constant, frequent users of social media were nearly 11 times more likely to participate in street demonstrations than nonusers. In addition, those using social media heavily were 7 times more likely to express demands to authorities, and frequent social media users were 3 times more likely to attend citizen forums or political debates than those lightly using social media, or not at all.³⁹

Rather than viewing social media as a barrier or enabler of social action, a more productive approach might be to identify the conditions under which participation in social media encourage social action. To date, there is little large scale comparative research on the topic. However, a comparative case study of successful and unsuccessful attempts by activists to mobilise people for offline action in Indonesia found that social media activism was more likely translate into offline activism when it adopted simple narratives compatible with dominant narratives such as nationalism and religiosity.⁴⁰ In addition, in his ethnographic work of large social movements using social media, Gerbaudo found that mobilisation for offline action in the case of the #OccupyWallStreet movement, the Tahrir Square protests and the Indiganos in Spain did not occur solely online but involved an intensive effort to spread the message locally through local pre-existing groups of activists. He also argues that the #OccupyWallStreet movement initially attracted little attention on social media --because their narration failed to involve people

emotionally--and that it was only when the group was repressed by the police and broadcasted by the mass media that it gathered momentum.⁴¹ This suggests that to evaluate the effectiveness of social media for mobilisation one also should look at how social media use relates to the other channels of communication of the campaign and larger organisational schemes.⁴²

Despite concerns that social media use encourages slacktivism, there is growing anecdotal and empirical evidence showing that social media can be a potent tool to encourage and organise action offline. In addition, there seems to be a correlation between social media use and likelihood of being engaged in forms of civic engagement such as volunteering and protest. This seems to disprove the slacktivism hypothesis and to show the need to move beyond a dichotomous view of online vs offline. In fact, it seems that online and offline activism complement each other and that the difference is one of degree rather than kind.⁴³ More comparative research is needed to understand why in some cases social media translate into action and others not. Furthermore, the effectiveness of social media for mobilisation should be studied within the complex social context in which they operate rather than in the abstract.

Social Media and Social Action

Understanding how social media are used by various groups for social action and how effective a tool they are is crucial, but it is equally important to consider the impact of social media on people's attitude towards social action, and the ways in which individuals and groups go about pursuing it. This section therefore gives a brief overview of how the features of social media may shape the way people *do* and *think* about social action.

Sociologist Zynep Tufecki writes, "As technologies change, and they alter the societal architectures of visibility, access, and community, they also affect the contours of the public sphere, which in turn affects social norms and political structures."⁴⁴ The incorporation of digital and social media into the practices of social activism help the diffusion of new social mechanisms and enhance certain existing organisational forms such as network and horizontal forms of organisation. How exactly social media shape our way of organising for social action is a subject of debate and contention among academics. For example, Juris argues that the speed, flexibility and global reach of digital media have enhanced the "logic of horizontal networking" in the practice of activism. In other words, the features of digital media orientate actors towards building

horizontal ties and connections among diverse autonomous groups globally, the free and open circulation of information, decentralised form of collaboration and self-directed networking. This logic of networking facilitated by digital technologies provides a new method to organise social movements but also an alternative form for political and social organisation.⁴⁵

Similarly, Tufekci argues that new digital technologies (especially social media) have enabled the emergence of a leaderless and networked models of protest where protestors operate without formal organisation, leaders and extensive structures. She believes that the spread of this leaderless model of protest organisation and the speed of mobilisation enabled by social media have deep consequences on the ability of protest movements to deliver long-term change beyond the protest phase. Using the example of the failure of the Arab uprisings to deliver lasting change, she argues that the ease and speed with which social movement can mobilise today thank to social media comes with a disadvantage: participants to quasi-spontaneous protests such as the 2011 anti-Mubarak protest Egypt had little or no experience of collective decision-making. Earlier forms of protests, she argues, and the tedious organising and logistical tasks that they required in the absence of social media helped set leadership and decision making structures. The absence of decision making structures, often resulted in a tactical freeze and the movements' failure to create a long-term legacy.⁴⁶

However, the idea that social media encourages spontaneous and leaderless forms of organisation is perhaps an oversimplification. In his ethnographic study of the #OccupyWallStreet, the Indignados in Spain and the Tharir Square protests, Gerbaudo shows that social media and communication were anything but a non-hierarchical communication environment: a small minority of activists produce the great majority of the content others consumes and gather most of the attention. This creates asymmetrical relationships and forms of soft leadership that are concealed by the participatory nature of social media.⁴⁷

Finally, there is a growing sense of concern among observers and policy-makers— particularly so since the 2016 US elections and the EU membership referendum— that social media is being used by foreign actors to spread rumours aimed at generating negative offline social action in other countries. Researchers at the University of Edinburgh, for instance, identified 419 accounts operated from the Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA) attempting to influence UK politics. One of these accounts attempted to stir

anti-Islam sentiments during the Westminster Bridge terror attack claiming that a muslim woman had walked past a victim ignoring the attack. Similarly, a team of researchers from Swansea University led by Oleksandr Talavera estimates that 150,000 amounts with links to Russia tweeted about Brexit in the run up to the referendum — posting almost 40,000 messages a day. In 2016 activists allegedly linked to the Ethiopian diaspora spread a rumour on social media that a police helicopter had fired into the crowd at the “Oromo Irrecha Festival” and called for “five days of rage” against the government. Reporters have linked these rumours to attacks against government buildings, tourist lodges and foreign-owned factories were attacked across the region resulting in a six month state of emergency. .

The literature reviewed above presents a mixed bag of conclusions on the impact social media has had on social action and the people and organisations who are involved therein. New technology has provided these groups with new tools, and where those tools have been dedicated to social action – as in the case of fundraising platforms – the impact has been largely positive. However, more generalist platforms that are co-opted into use by social action organisations present a greater number of challenges.

Lowering the barriers to entry into social action is a key benefit, with new groups finding it easier to get going and new routes into social action emerging for participants. Expensive and resource- and skills-heavy requirements have been reduced. This has not, however, been without its costs.

Organic, flatter, digitally-dependent, leaderless or ‘leader-lite’ organisations seem less able to take high-level coordinative and organisational decisions, and success online does not effectively translate to success offline: a gap in expectations, in skills and in resources can be masked by the metrics of advertising used to organise the content and conversations on major social platforms. These metrics can, in fact, lead to groups failing to maximise social impact in favour of succeeding in an online environment. These opportunities and challenges came through strongly in the interviews that formed the central research component of this paper.

Survey Results

Alongside interviews with those looking to enact social change through social media platforms, researchers sought to examine the ways in which social media users perceived, experienced and took part in social action themselves.

The survey was designed to measure three key areas.

1. Attitudes

The ways in which survey respondent groups felt about social media and its relationship with social action and change.

2. Experience

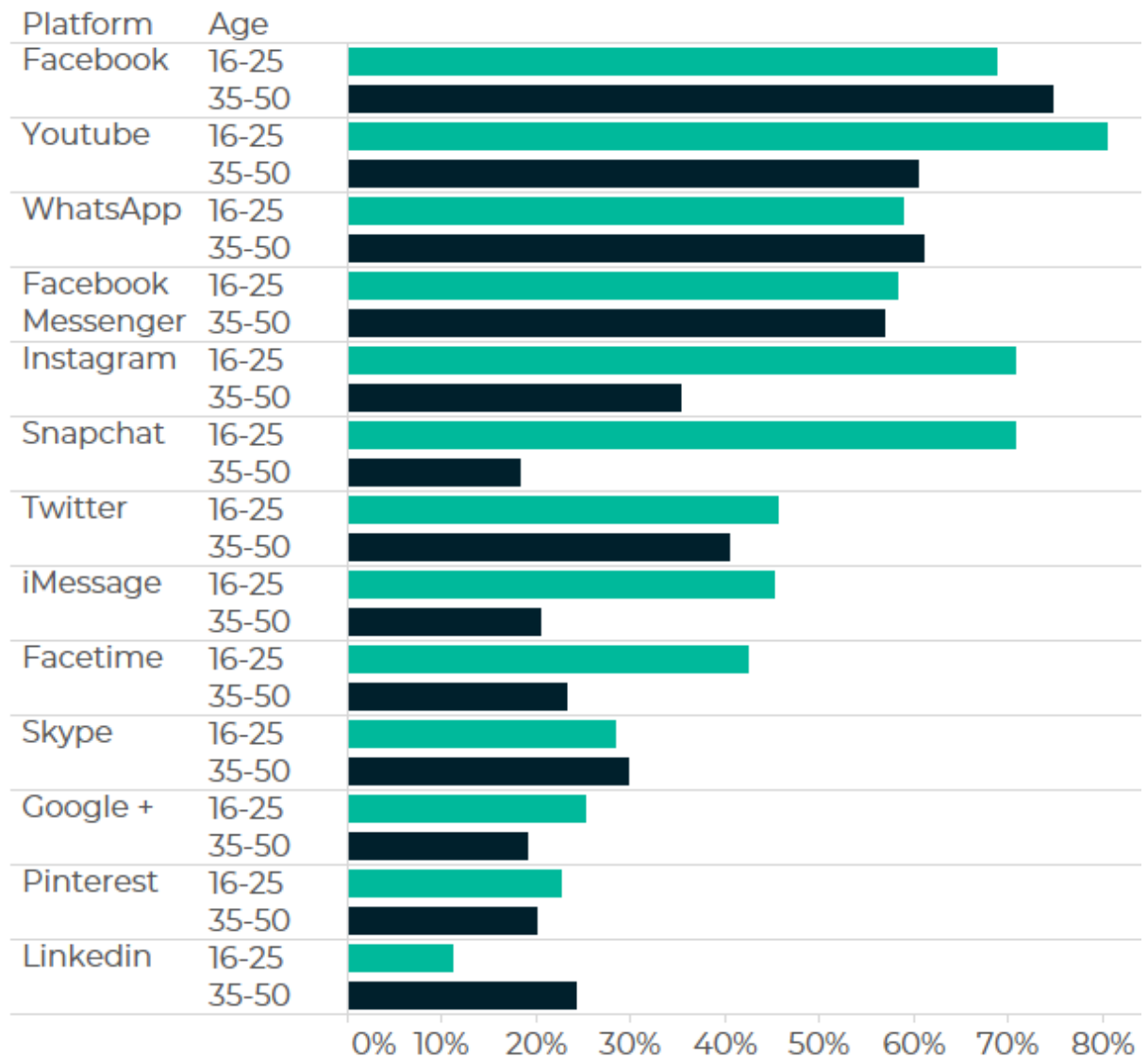
The ways in which social media had impacted the ways in which survey respondents had experienced social events and social action.

3. Behaviour

The ways social media users themselves had taken part in social action.

We commissioned Opinium Research to carry out a representative survey of 1,000 Britons aged 16-25, and another representative survey of Britons aged 35-50. Of the 2,000 people we surveyed, 96.5 percent were social media users. Broken down by the most popular platforms, their usage of social media platforms is shown below.

Chart 1: Top Social Media Platform Usage (by Age and Platform)



Young adults (16-25) and older generations reported using different social media platforms. Among the younger cohort, YouTube was the most popular, followed by Instagram, Snapchat and Facebook. Among the older cohort, Facebook, WhatsApp, Youtube and Messenger were more widely used.

Attitudes

We asked a series of questions aimed at establishing how far Britons felt social media was being used to promote social change and social action, including social change that they supported. Respondents broadly felt that social media use was now a key driver of social change, and that changing social attitudes for the better required effort online. Two question profiles are shown below.

Chart 2: Extent of agreement with the statement by age group (N = 2000)

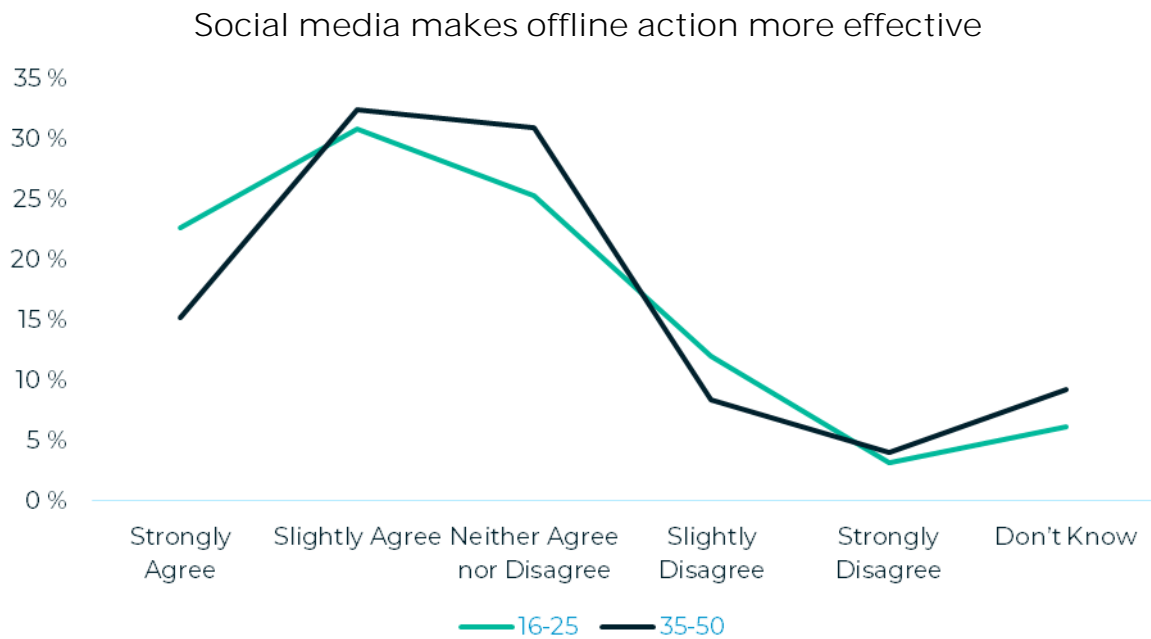
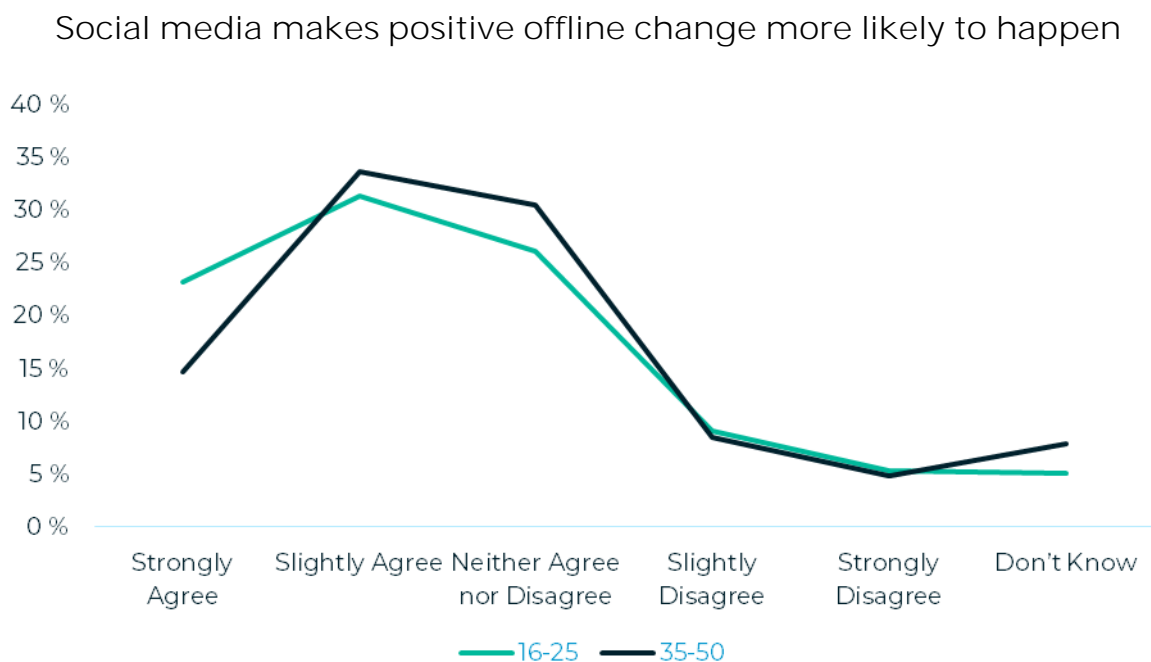


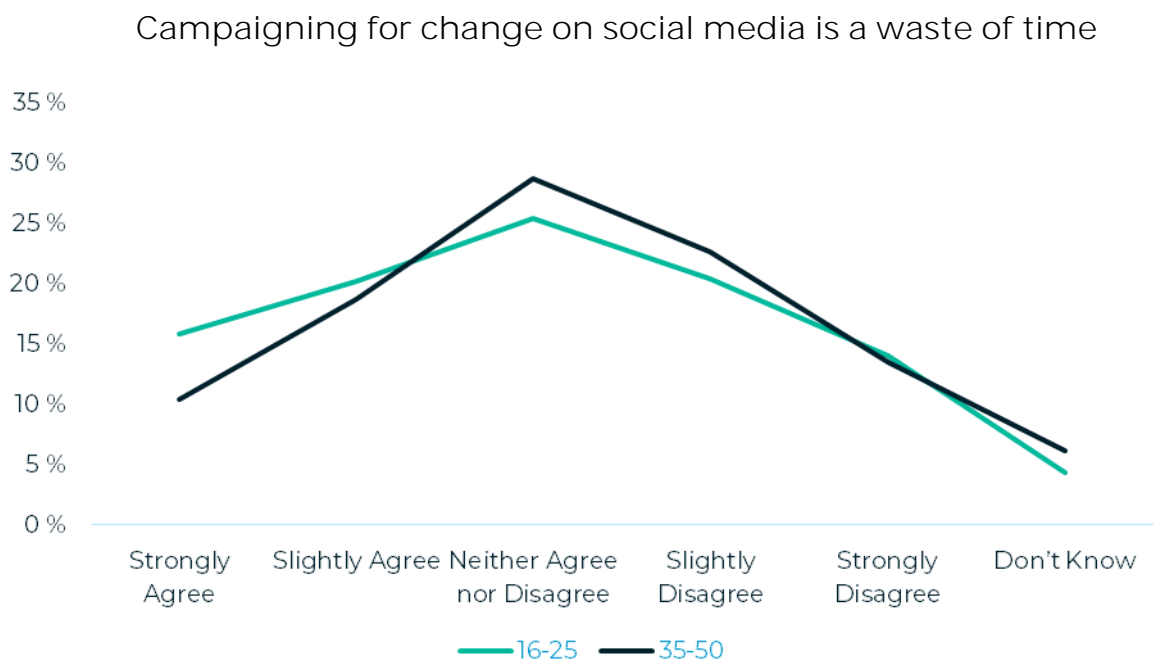
Chart 3: Extent of agreement with the statement by age group (N = 2000)



Survey respondents' attitudes to social action they had taken part in was also roundly optimistic: the profile of data for similar questions looked the same.

The majority of survey respondents from both age groups felt that social media was a powerful force, and one that could be used to make changes to the world in ways they wanted. When asked whether social media was a good place to get involved with a campaign or cause they believed in, 90 percent of young people felt this was at least somewhat true, and a third felt it was very true (though this number fell to 17 percent for the older group). Some dissonance was found with one question, asking the extent to which survey respondents believed campaigning for change on social media was a waste of time. Here, survey respondents were more divided.

Chart 4: *Extent of agreement with the statement by age group (N = 2000)*

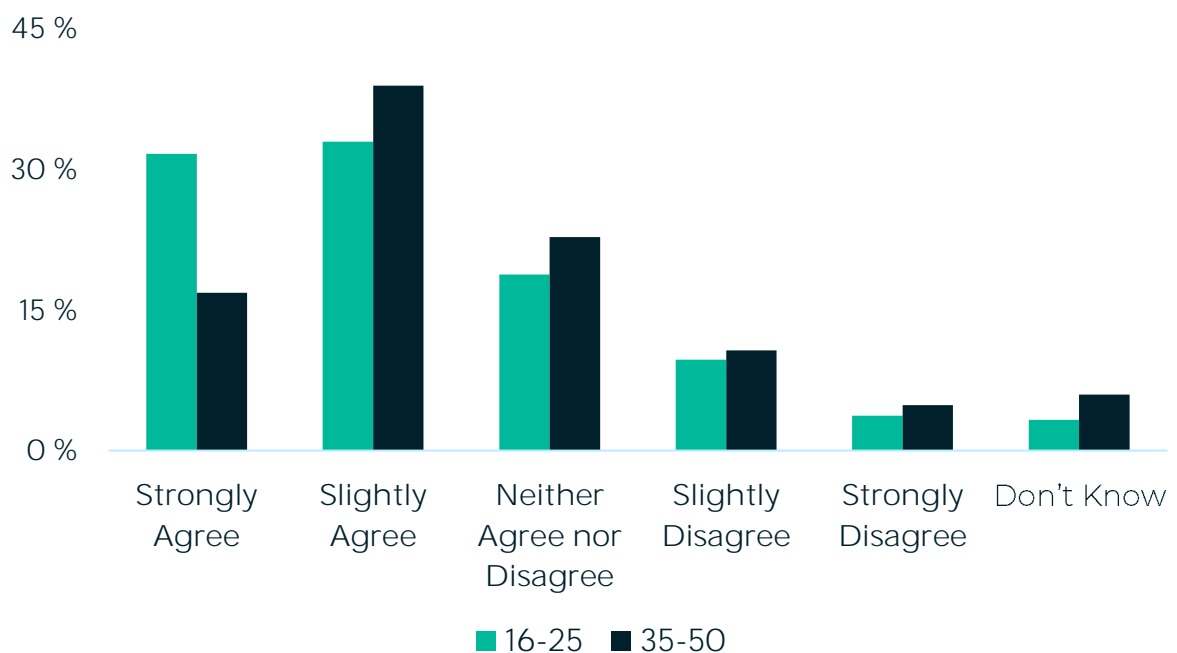


This question saw a roughly even split between those who agreed with the statement and those who didn't, though the difference was more marked for the older group (36 percent agreed, 34 percent disagreed for 16-25; 29 percent agreed, 36 percent disagreed for 35-50). There was, however, a disparity when broken down by male and female respondent. Women tended to be more optimistic about campaigning for social change online: 41 percent of all men surveyed felt it was a waste of time, compared with 25 percent of women (19 percent among the older cohort). It is possible that at the time of the survey, July 2018, the recent campaigning around a number of women's issues online (tampon tax, vaginal mesh, #metoo) could account for this difference.

In light of this optimistic view of social media as a tool for social change, we tested how far young people felt their use of social media was being unfairly criticised by older generations, particularly in light of campaigning on social causes. Interestingly, there was a broad consensus across both age groups: 65 percent of young people agreed with the statement, compared to 56 percent of the 35-50 cohort.

Chart 5: Extent of agreement with the statement by age group (N = 2000)

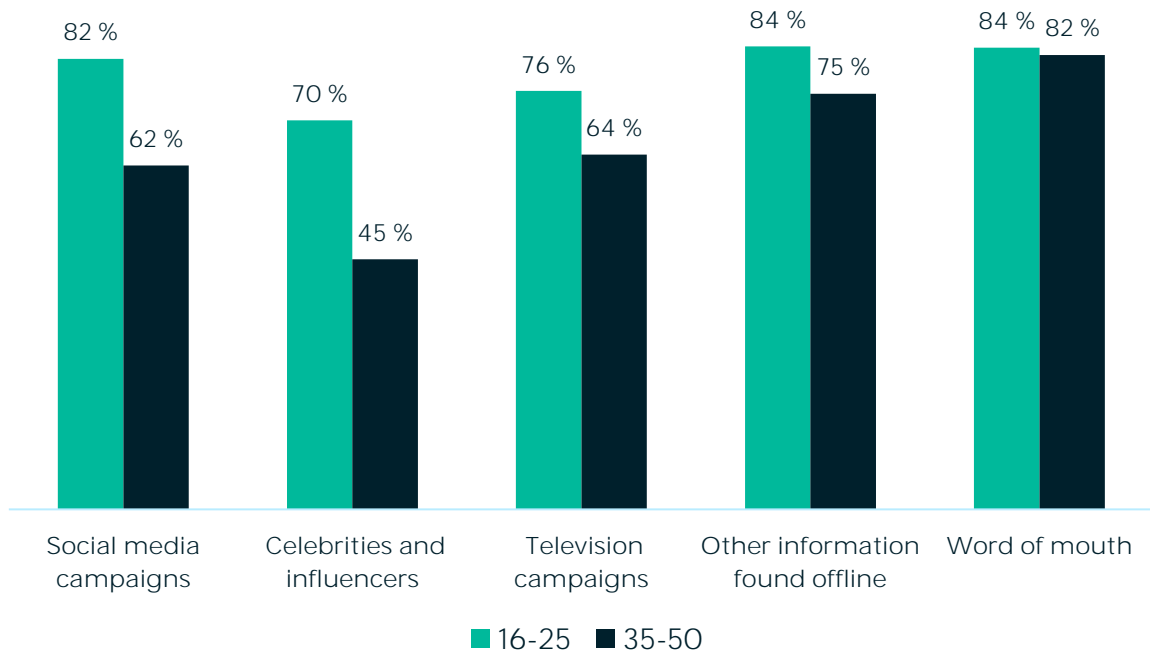
I believe older generations don't understand the positive ways younger people use social media



Given a strong indication that our survey respondents felt social media was a strong driver of social change, researchers looked to identify the drivers of influential social action. We asked both cohorts which sources of information were important to them in deciding which causes to support. Although word of mouth was consistently the most important factor in helping someone decide which causes to support (84 percent of the younger group felt it was important, 82 percent of the older group), there was significant differentiation between the younger and older cohorts.

Chart 6: Extent to which sources of information about social causes are important by age group, % respondents answering 'very important', 'important' or 'slightly important' (N = 2000)

When deciding whether to support a cause or charity, how important are the following in helping you to make your decision?



Social media, celebrities and influencers were deemed important by significantly more young people than older people in helping them decide which causes they ought to support. It is also important to note the weight young people assigned to influencers and celebrities when compared with the older group. Across the board the older cohort felt none of the options were as important. On average, 29 percent of responses from the older cohort found the options to be not important at all compared with 15 percent among the younger group. Taken as a whole, however, non-digital sources are still held to be highly influential across survey respondents.

These results varied by where people lived. Across both older and younger survey respondents, the level of urbanisation correlated with an increased assignment of influence to all five of the proposed sources. This suggests that campaigners for social change targeting less urbanised areas may require a different strategy to those operating in cities. The average for each is shown in the table below.

Table 1: Extent to which sources of information about social causes are important by place of living, % respondents answering 'very important', 'important' or 'slightly important' (N = 2000)

Source	Place of Living		
	A city	A town	A village or rural area
Social media campaigns	77%	69%	67%
Celebrities and influencers	67%	53%	47%
Television campaigns	75%	68%	62%
Other information found offline	83%	78%	75%
Word of mouth	85%	82%	77%

Finally, we asked respondents who had taken part in some kind of social action to estimate how much of a difference to people's lives their activities had actually had. The overwhelming majority of survey respondents felt that, broadly, their actions had made at least some difference to peoples' lives: for both age categories, 94 percent of the sample felt some difference had been made and four percent that the actions had had no impact at all. The table below shows how this broke down by activity for our younger age band.

Table 2: Estimate of impact by activity for respondents aged 16-25

Activity	# Young People	How much of a difference did it make?				
		A major difference	A moderate difference	A minor difference	No difference at all	I don't know
Raised money for a charity/a charitable cause	232	29 %	42 %	28 %	0 %	2 %
Given money to charity/a charitable cause	344	25 %	33 %	36 %	3 %	4 %
Campaigned on an issue	140	22 %	34 %	34 %	4 %	6 %
Got involved in a political event	99	25 %	42 %	28 %	5 %	0 %
Volunteered with a local organisation	190	30 %	45 %	20 %	1 %	4 %
Volunteered with a national organisation	109	37 %	32 %	21 %	9 %	1 %

Raising money was viewed most optimistically by young people: among the 232 survey respondents who had done so in the past twelve months, 70 percent felt it had made a major or moderate difference. Volunteering with national organisations saw the widest disagreement (37 percent felt it had made a major difference while 9 percent felt it had made no difference at all). That one in ten felt it had made no difference is surprising, particularly when compared with volunteering at a local level (1 percent felt their effort had made no difference at all).

In general, survey respondents felt social media was a powerful tool that was central to changing society, and that it played an important role in arsenal available to advocates of social action. Again, it is worth noting that although respondents were positive about the power of social media for positive social change, we are unable to determine what that change would look like: no questions were asked about the specific aims of social action.

Experience

Following on from questions of attitudes to social media as a tool for social action, we put a series of questions to the survey panel around their experience of events and the role social media played in them. Through the interviews carried out with campaigners, a successful offline event could be characterised as memorable and with meaningful social interaction. The table below shows how the two cohorts of survey respondents who had attended because of, or organised an event on, social media judged the role of social media in the organisation, experience and aftermath of offline social interactions.

Table 3: Impact of social media on event experiences by age (N=1562)

Activity	Age	Net: Easier	Net: More Difficult
Organizing an event	16-25	65 %	13 %
	35-50	64 %	7 %
Having a face-to-face conversation	16-25	52 %	20 %
	35-50	55 %	11 %
Having a good time at an event	16-25	57 %	11 %
	35-50	50 %	7 %
Keeping in touch with people you met at the event	16-25	71 %	10 %
	35-50	71 %	5 %
Remembering what happened after an event	16-25	68 %	10 %
	35-50	66 %	6 %

The majority of survey respondents felt social media had made these aspects of offline events easier, with 62 percent finding them easier and ten percent finding them more difficult overall, most notably in organisation and networking. There are some small disparities: social media was seven percent more likely to be a cause for enjoying an event for the younger cohort. Most interestingly, young people were consistently twice as likely to describe social

media as making each activity more difficult than older people, with one in five noting that face-to-face conversations were made more difficult compared to one in ten in the older cohort. One possible explanation for the increased polarisation of views among 16-25 year olds is the centrality of social media to young peoples' experiences: older generations may not find social media to be as strong a factor in their experience of an event. On average, 22 percent of younger respondents felt social media had no positive or negative impact on their experiences, compared with 28 percent for 35-50 year olds.

These numbers broadly matched with an increased willingness to air personal or political views as a result of social media: 85 percent of young male respondents and 82 percent of young women felt they were more at least slightly more likely to share their views.

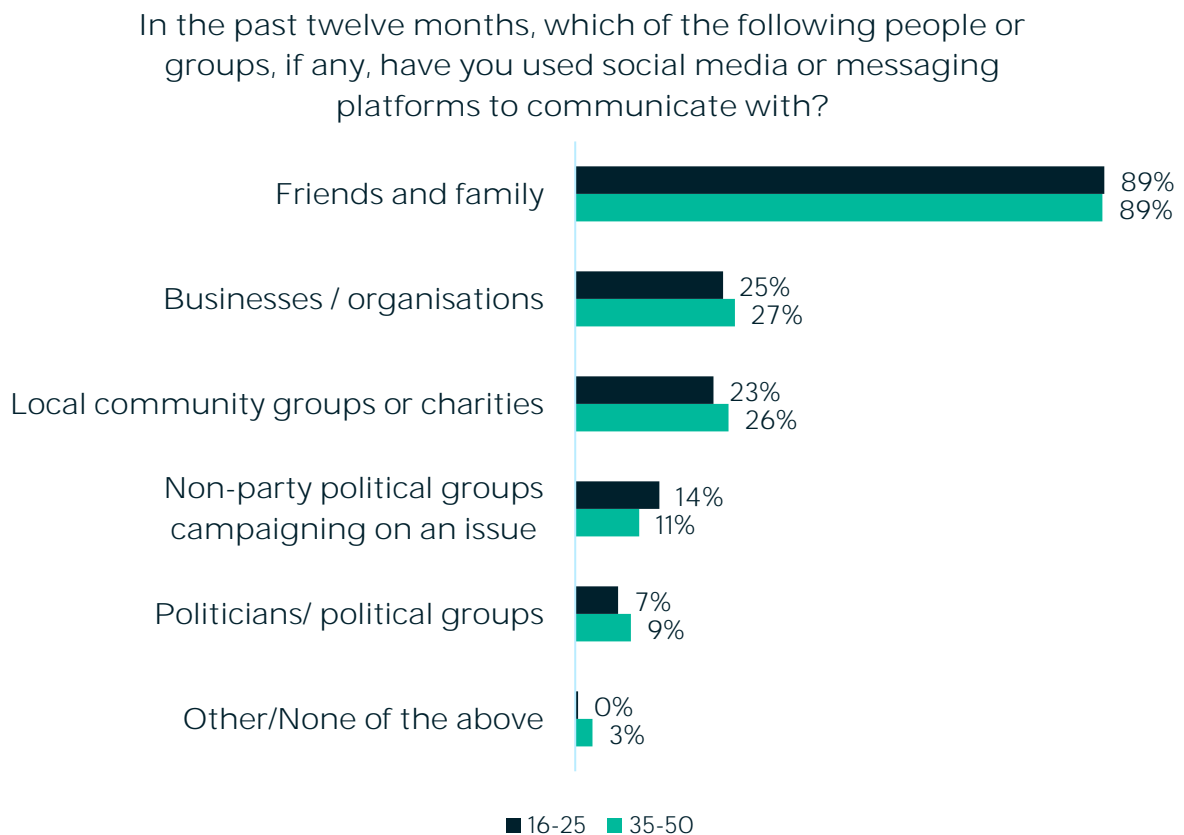
These breakdowns did not vary significantly by gender or location hierarchy.

Behaviour

Finally, we asked a number of questions aimed at establishing how survey respondents went about using social platforms to network, communicate with organisations and their community, socialise and carry out social action.

We began by asking social media users about how they used platforms to communicate with wider societal groups.

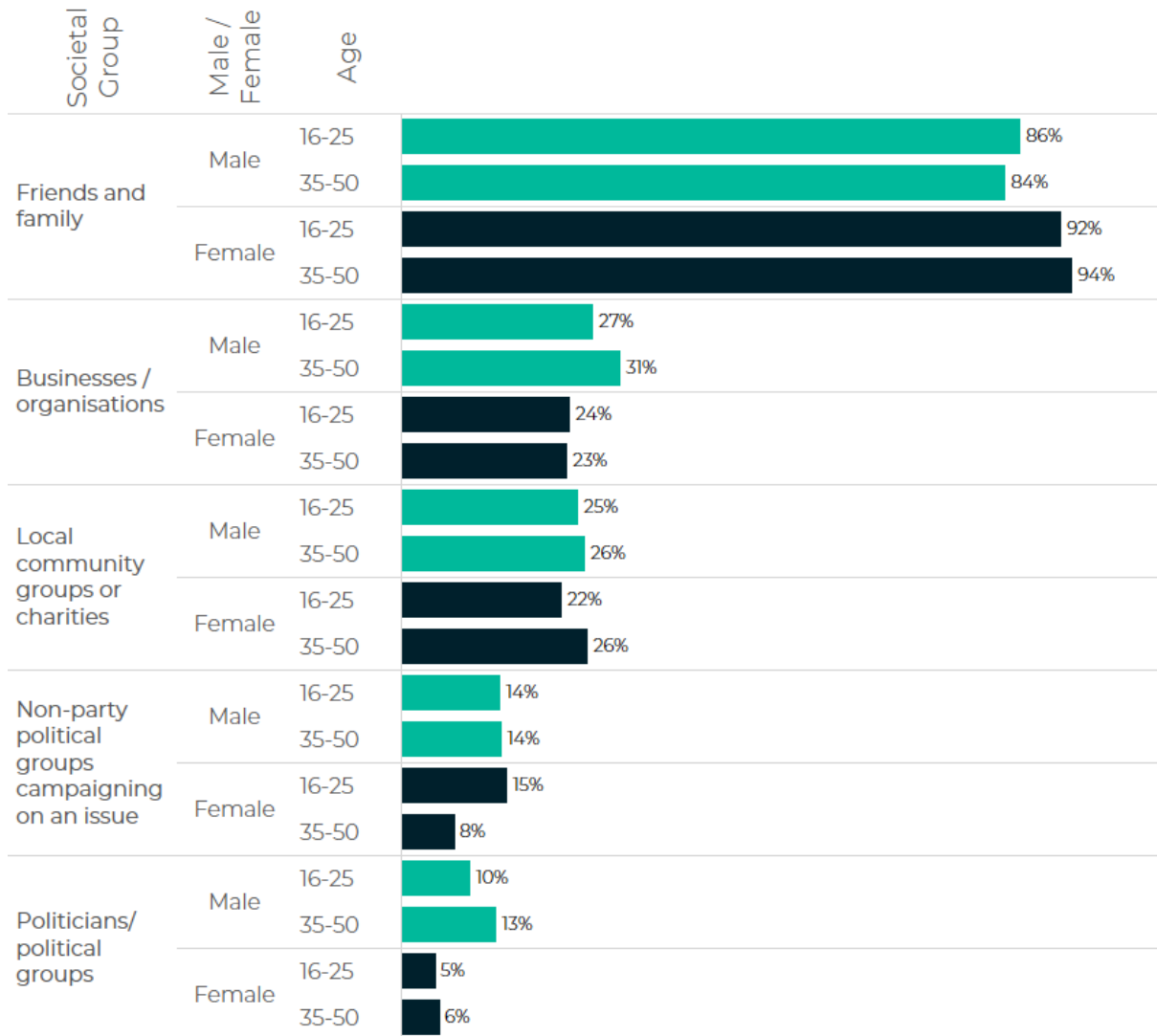
Chart 7: % Respondents by age group using social media to communicate with people or groups (N=1930)



The vast majority (89 percent) of people from both age groups surveyed used social media as a tool to communicate with friends and family. On average, one in every eight social media users used the platforms to engage with campaigning groups and one in four a local community group or charity. It is notable that of the groups, only non-party political groups were more likely to be communicated with by the younger cohort. There was some variation in these numbers by gender, as shown in the table below. 21 of the 2,000 respondents to the survey identified as 'other' or did not disclose a gender: owing to the size of the sample, they cannot be represented in the charts below.

Chart 8: % Respondents by age group and male/female split using social media to communicate with people or groups

In the past twelve months, which of the following people or groups, if any, have you used social media or messaging platforms to communicate with?

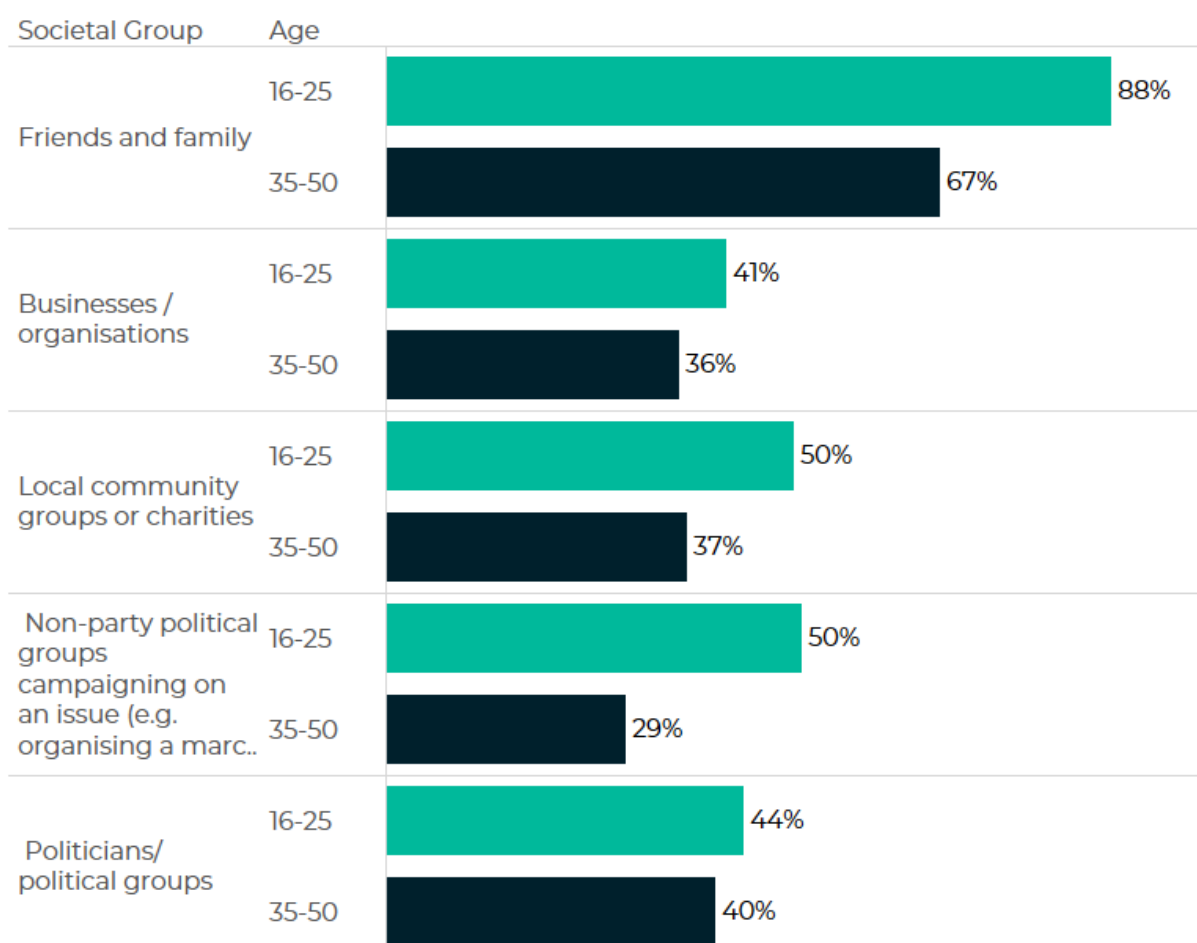


Two differences are worth highlighting. First, young women were twice as likely to use social media to engage with non-political groups campaigning on an issue than older women (15 percent vs 8 percent). Second, men were twice as likely to engage with political groups and politicians regardless of age groups, reflecting previous Demos research which has found the political space on social media to be male-dominated.

We also looked to measure the level of engagement with each group by asking survey respondents to estimate the frequency with which they communicated with each group. The chart below shows how what proportion of those survey respondents who had used social media to contact a group did so at least once a day.

Chart 9: % Respondents by age using social media to communicate with people or groups at least once a day

How often, on average, do you communicate with the following through social media or messaging platforms? (Net: Once a day or more)



Across the board, young people were more likely to be in contact with any given societal group on a daily basis than the 35-50 cohort. Strikingly, half of young people reported being in contact with a campaigning group, a local community group or charity on social media on at least a daily basis, suggesting that social media is being used to bring young people into frequent contact with groups looking to have a social impact. The two graphs below break these numbers down further.

Chart 10: Frequency of contact with group by age (N = 242)

How often, on average, do you communicate with non-party political groups campaigning on an issue on social media or messaging platforms?

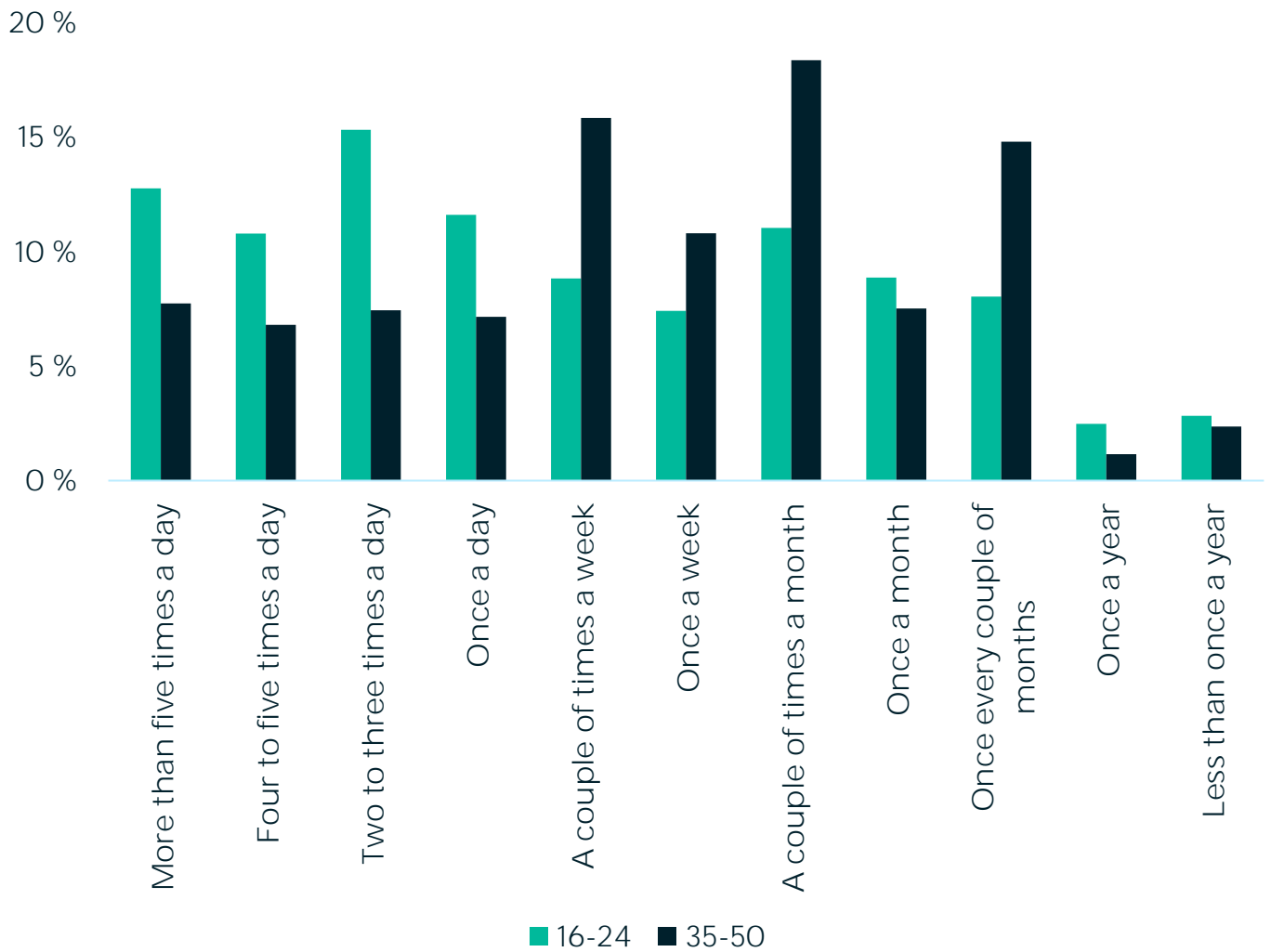
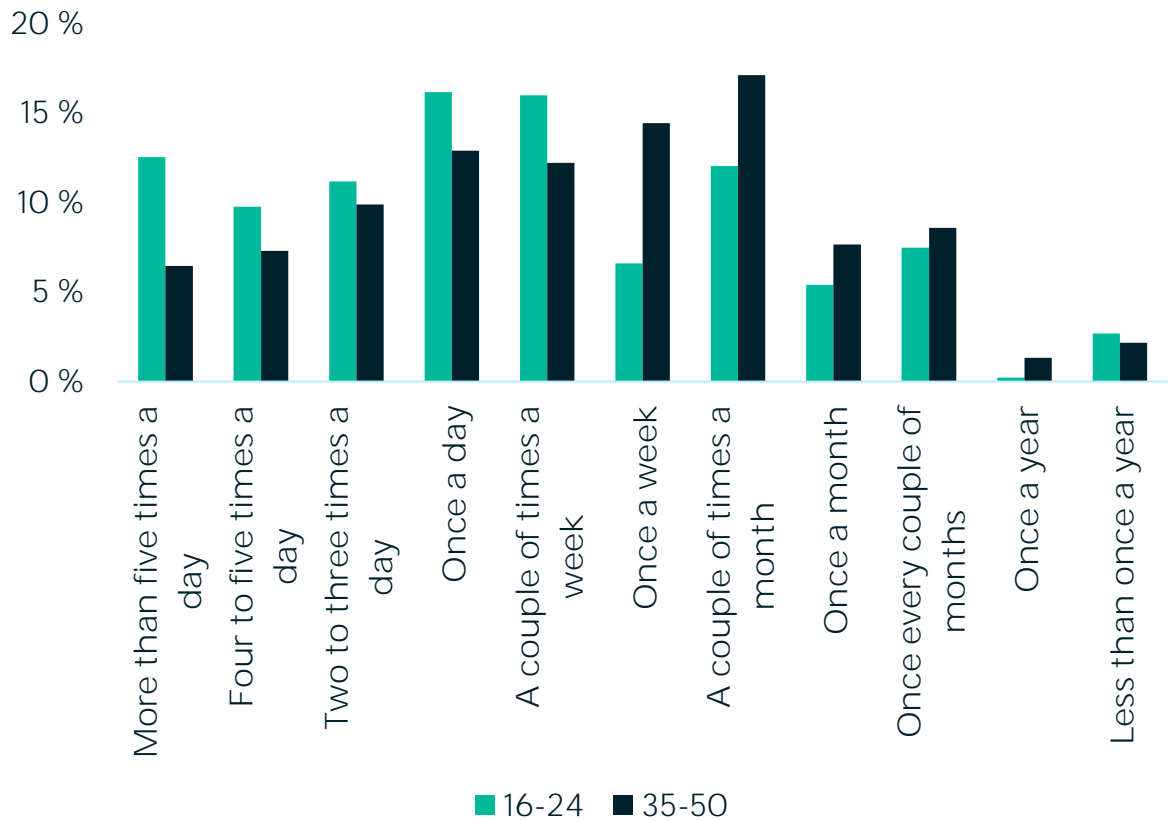


Chart 11: Frequency of contact with group by age (N=475)

How often, on average, do you communicate with local community groups or charities on social media or messaging platforms?



The profiles for communication with other groups are similar. Although there is a close similarity in the numbers of younger and older social media users interacting with their social circles and societal groups, younger social media users tend to engage with their social circles and other societal groups more often.

Whether this engagement translated into action is the subject of some debate, sometimes referred to as the 'clicktivism' argument: that engagement online was shallow and did not encourage significant offline action, seen as a key driver of social change.

We looked to identify how far social media communication translated to offline action by asking survey respondents a series of questions related to activities they had taken part in having seen, been invited to, heard about or organised through social media. The overall figures and breakdowns by male and female for young people are shown below.

Table 4: % respondents aged 16-25 reporting taking part in an activity offline having seen, been invited to, heard about or organised it through social media or messaging platforms. (N=833)

Activity	Overall	Male	Female	Δ
Pursued an offline hobby/interest	41 %	40 %	42 %	2 %
Given money to charity/a charitable cause	35 %	32 %	39 %	7 %
Participated in sport/exercise	35 %	41 %	30 %	11 %
Raised money for a charity/a charitable cause	24 %	24 %	24 %	0 %
Volunteered with a local organisation	20 %	22 %	17 %	5 %
Discovered a new charity or good cause to support	19 %	18 %	21 %	3 %
Joined a community group	16 %	16 %	16 %	0 %
Campaigned on an issue	14 %	10 %	19 %	9 %
Volunteered with a national organisation	11 %	11 %	11 %	0 %
Organised an event and invited people you didn't already know	10 %	11 %	10 %	1 %
Got involved in a political event	10 %	12 %	8 %	4 %
None of the above	14 %	11 %	16 %	5 %

Many people in the UK report participating in civic social activities because they found out about it on social media. These findings support the NCVO (2018) report on civic participation in the UK which suggests that social media provides more opportunities for people to engage in forms of civic participation. According to the survey results, approximately 1 in 3 of 16-25 and

40 percent of 35-50 year old social media users who gave to charity in past 12 months credited social media for helping them to do it. With regards to social action, it is notable that women were nearly twice as likely to report campaigning on issues than men.

As noted above, fundraising for causes that respondents believed in was one social action that was felt to be highly impactful. According to the survey, people who gave to charity or a cause after hearing about it on social media usually gave small sums, and there was no significant difference between the 2 age categories. Most frequent amount given over a year (mode) by those who gave to charity on social media was £50 in both age category. The survey also revealed young people credit social media with their fundraising efforts more frequently than 35-50 year olds (24 percent vs 15 percent).

This broadly reflects other estimates. A Saxton and Wang (2104) study of donations on Facebook causes found that online donations tended to be smaller than offline gifts— contributions where between \$0-\$50— and that social media seemed to facilitate impulsive donating. The average size in online giving in 2014 was £63.69 according to a Blackbaud report on UK giving trends.⁴⁸

Conclusion

The survey results show young British social media users as highly aware of the power social platforms have as tools for social change, hopeful about the ways in which they are being used to effect social change, and positive about their offline experiences when combined with social media use.

Social platforms are being used on a daily basis to communicate with friends and family, and by a significant minority to communicate with social and political causes. By comparison with reported communication by 35-50 year olds, young people channelled their communications with non-party political causes more often than into political groups or charities. This may well reflect a difference in the way young people perceive routes to social change.

Communication is also more frequent and more sustained: for those engaging with community groups, charities and non-party political groups, half do so on a daily basis.

Campaigner and Campaign Group Interviews

To explore the ways in which people had actively used social media as a tool for social action, we turned to individuals and groups who used it on a daily basis to campaign for causes they believe in.

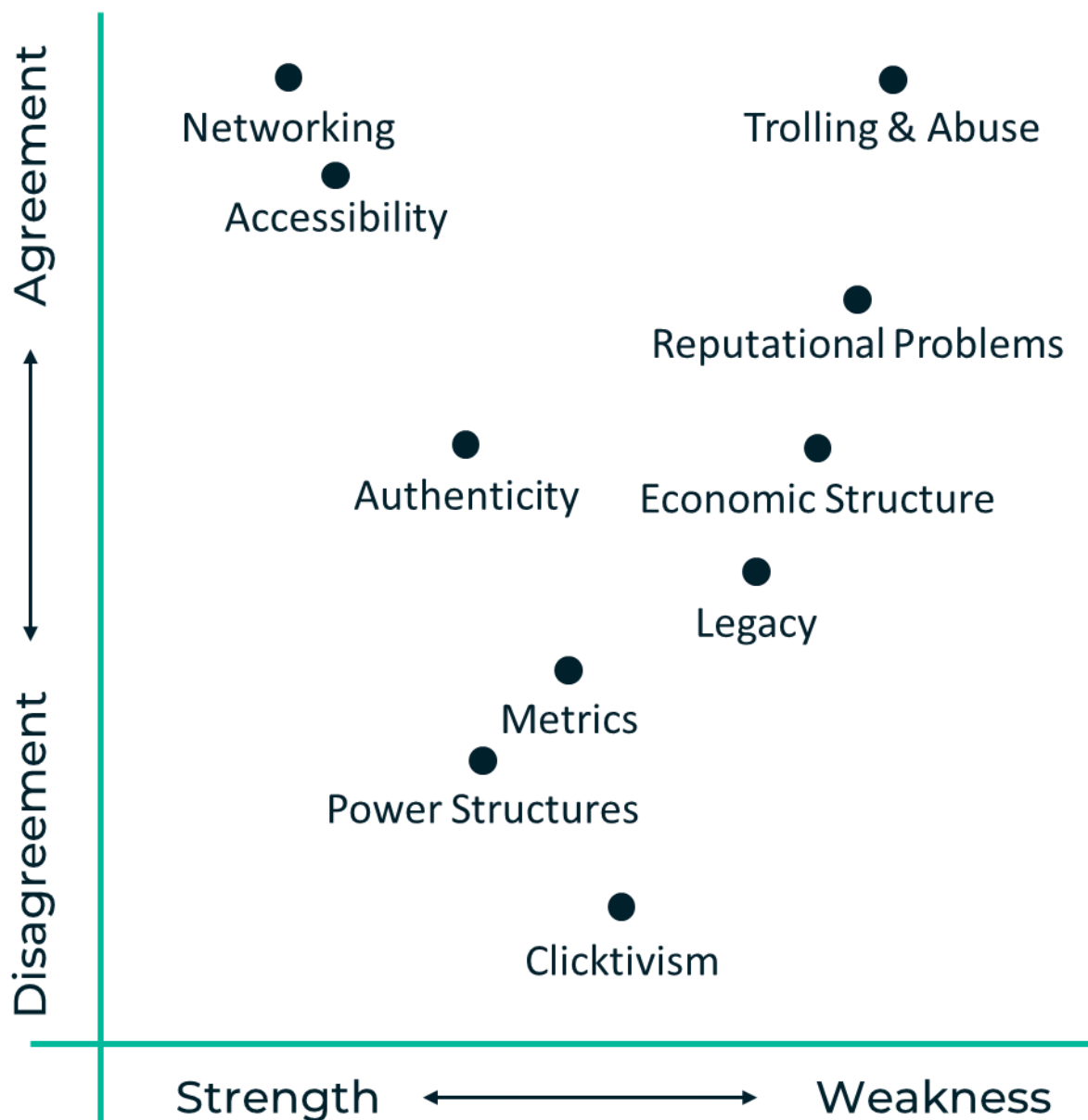
Researchers conducted thirty interviews with a range of campaigners, campaign groups and influencers who had used social media to promote, organise or coordinate social action across a wide range of concerns and issues, as well as a large forum event held in London. Interviewees included figures from across the so-called political spectrum, though we selected groups primarily concerned with a non-party political agenda. Their work included action on social justice, national identity, community cohesion, minority representation, mental health, women's rights and issues, and had been responsible for marches attended by hundreds of thousands of people around the world, Britain's largest mental health festival and a series of youth employment and uplift programmes around the UK. A list of the groups and individuals we interviewed and heard from can be found in Annex 1.

Campaigners and campaign groups used a range of social media platforms as part of their work, with Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and WhatsApp the most frequently cited. All interviewees agreed that the networks served different purposes. Across the board, Facebook was largely regarded as a platform for sharing content - whether this be videos, pictures, or links to events and fundraising pages - and as a hub for event organisation: a number of campaigners noted that bringing thousands of people to an offline march, protest, or organising a smaller, cause-related gathering was best done on Facebook. Twitter on the other hand was employed to join national and international conversations and networks, and like YouTube was used to host and broadcast content. Instagram was considered to be the most personal and accepting of emotion of the primary platforms and was the space used most often to tell and share stories. Users of WhatsApp agreed it was a means of instigating and maintaining contact with those who did not have other online profiles as well as a good way to communicate locally and in smaller groups.

We asked each campaigner a series of questions aimed at uncovering the ways in which they had used social media to pursue their campaign goals.⁴⁹

Below are summarised the interviews as they touched on a number of recurrent themes: some were seen as overall strengths of social media as a platform for social good, others as weaknesses. There was a good deal of consensus but also areas of disagreement. The chart below gives an indication of the primary themes that emerged, the degree of consensus and how far they were seen as a net strength or weakness.

Figure 1: Discussions Areas by estimated positive/negative impact on social action and estimated level of interviewee agreement/disagreement.



Strengths

Areas of Agreement

Networking

Interviewees agreed that one of the most useful facets of social media was the speed and ease with which they were able to network with potential partners, funders and those able to provide their campaigning with resources and skills. In this process, social media platforms acted as communication tools, as reputation management tools and as pitching tools.

In looking to get his social enterprise off the ground, one campaigner used social media as a way to network with established social good organisations and high-net worth individuals, crediting the platforms as providing access to funding and logistical support that otherwise would have been impossible to reach. Others spoke to their online profiles leading to established social action organisations reaching out to them, leading to coordinated campaigning. This process was made easier by the platforms' function as a reputation system: a number of our interviewees noted that influential or well-resourced organisations and individuals would take them seriously once they had achieved a certain number of followers.

Finally, interviewees and forum participants raised the issue of global connectivity, and the strength and encouragement they felt they could find through international collaboration online.

Accessibility

Campaigners agreed that social media has allowed for a greater number of people to become involved in social action, both as participants and as organisers. We heard from campaigners tackling mental health, democratic deficits, female identity, all of whom were working without a budget and for whom alternative pathways to their audience were not available.

There was near unanimity on the power of social media to draw in participants who had not previously been involved in social action. There was a strong sense that social media acted as a channel or signpost for people looking for ways to help but who had previously been unaware of the opportunities to get

involved. Most assumed that there was an untapped willingness to contribute to social causes in the UK. Moreover, the ability to participate in social action and social causes online was of particular value to those who want to take part but find traditional channels difficult – disabled activists was one good example raised in the forum.

An organiser of a march credited social media with bringing new types of protesters to the event, many of whom were marching in protest for the first time. Another campaigner circulated events across multiple social media platforms and found that as a result, new people would attend who had not previously been invited. One organiser of academies for marginalised students credited the platforms with bringing new people into the organisation by breaking down traditional barriers to social action groups and communicating directly with young people themselves. Another campaigner stressed the importance of social media as providing new spaces for people who hadn't previously been involved in social action to do so in a supportive environment.

Accessibility was not limited to participation. Interviewees stressed the ways in which social media platforms had provided the tools for new organisers to quickly and efficiently reach an audience, and do so in ways that in the past had been the preserve of organisations with higher levels of financial and logistical resourcing. Many noted the power of on-demand live video in their work: one Guinness record-breaking mental health festival was livestreamed to an audience of 5,000.

There were, however, concerns about who could be accessed. There was a strong sense that tapping into an existing or fertile group of potential supporters online was significantly easier than reaching – let alone converting – those outside of this caucus. For some campaign groups, their supporters were from older demographics and digitally-disengaged. Broadly speaking, however, the capacity of social media platforms to provide routes into social action for a wider and newer body of participants was underlined by nearly all our interviewees.

Areas of Disagreement

Power Structures and the Democratic Nature of Social Media Platforms

There was considerable debate among our interviewees as to the extent to which traditional power structures were broken down by social media. The point of contention was the extent to which social media platforms had retrenched existing power structures, and the extent to which they had opened up the public commons to new voices. Overall, the impact of social media on the share of conversation by new groups was seen as positive.

Many spoke to the emergence of new and previously unheard voices, particularly among previously marginalised groups, and a sense that they were acting as role models for people who had in the past been denied them.

Nevertheless, a number questioned whether they would have found themselves in a position of strength without the support from previously powerful figures. Others were concerned that despite an apparent 'changing of the guard' with regards to the voices capable of changing the conversation, these new voices replicated old power structures and that poverty, class, race and gender remained barriers to influence online. Although our interviewees celebrated the emergence of new voices, they did not equate this with a complete levelling and democratisation of the conversation.

It ought to also be noted that there remains a significant proportion of Brits not active on social media, many of whom are participating in social action and may not be recognised as a result of an increasing focus on digital evidence for social good.

Interviewees noted that platforms differed in how democratic they were. For instance, YouTube was seen as a difficult platform to use without significant financial investment in equipment and without a dedicated skillset, and was contrasted with the platform Vine which required significantly less investment and saw a greater number of black and minority participation. Where we heard scepticism, it tended to be targeted at the economic model of social platforms as a whole: the accusation levelled at these sites was that monetising content was in its own right a fundamentally undemocratic behaviour.

A number of interviewees also noted the 'hidden hand' of algorithmic influence on the voices that are amplified. Overall, this fell into two broad themes. First, a sense that they didn't understand how and why certain types of content were likely to receive a broader audience. Second, that algorithmic influence could be gamed and frequently resulted in negative or unhelpful voices being amplified more often than good news stories. Confirming or denying this claim would require a significant research effort and is unfortunately beyond the scope of this study.

This considered, there was a broad agreement that when compared with 'mainstream' media - the radio, television and news outlets - social media was significantly easier a space for new groups to find a voice and feel represented in. As noted in the section above, accessibility to social media was rated far higher than for traditional media outlets. When mainstream media paid attention to campaigners it was often as a direct result of their efforts on social media.

Authenticity

Continuing with the relationship between social media and more traditional media, there was debate over the extent to which social media provided an authentic side to social campaigning. On the most part, interviewees felt that social media provided a greater level of authenticity than traditional mainstream media, though this was not felt by everybody.

Interviewees tended to see mainstream media as a stamp of approval, giving the cause a degree of legitimacy that social media was unable to. Mainstream media appearances were vital in building a sense of legitimacy among older audiences. This did not, however, equate to authenticity: the 'day-to-day' struggle could only be captured online. Moreover, many stressed that authenticity depended not only on how they were perceived, but how they carried out their activities: social media provided a direct channel to their target audience through which they could listen and hold conversations instead of just broadcasting.

This ability to 'connect' with an audience was itself the subject of some debate. Even with the increased opportunity for one-to-one and direct communication, a minority of interviewees pointed to the importance of converting any social media activity into face-to-face campaigning. One advocate of local democratic change insisted that without the weekly

meetings they held in which participants in the campaign came together, nothing substantial would have been achieved. Another interviewee agreed: that to really make change happen, nothing compared to a face-to-face, offline meeting.

Finally, a growing awareness of misinformation and disinformation on social media platforms was highlighted by a number of interviewees who said they had taken additional steps to ensure their accounts and campaigns evidenced their activities appropriately. Despite these steps, there was a fear of losing access to audiences who had been targeted by misinformation and who had lost faith in a cause as a result, particularly with regards to humanitarian and peacebuilding causes.

Weaknesses

Areas of Agreement

Reputational Problems, Trolling and Abuse

A key criticism shared by the vast majority of our interviewees was the inconsistent application of platforms' codes of conduct and the risk and experience of being 'trolled' while campaigning. Campaign groups faced a range of problematic online interactions, from disparaging comments through to rape and death threats and the publication of sensitive personal data. One campaigner found himself questioning his sanity in remaining in these online spaces.

Critically, there was agreement that the threat of trolling was impacting on their and their supporters' ability to take part in social action. Most often this meant an unwillingness to put up with abuse when voicing support, leading to groups choosing to 'go underground', to close themselves off, or simply to give up.

Some platforms were deemed better or worse: Twitter in particular came in for heavy criticism, while Instagram was seen as 'kinder'. Trolling was universally seen as coming from people who were not part of the community, and online spaces focused on single issues insulated social action groups more effectively.

There was a resignation among much that this 'went with the territory'. Some interviewees went further, calling for participants in social media to prepare

better for the cut and thrust of entering the public sphere and to learn how to manage it, warning that 'niceness' could not come at the cost of freedom.

Participants noted that the impact of 'trolling' on offline events was limited, but equally noted that this environment had a negative impact on those willing to take part in or organise positive social action online. Participants in interviews and in the forum recognised the difficulties in policing online spaces but were highly critical of platforms' efforts to enforce even their own terms of service.

Alongside abuse and 'trolling', the decreasing reputation of social media platforms has impacted the ability of campaign groups. Campaigners noted that reputationally-damaging stories, worries about the impact of using social media, increased fears about data and anti-social media campaigns had reduced the number of people they were able to reach through the platforms.

Economic & Design Structures of Social Media

Interviewees stressed the way social media prioritizes content through its culture and its technology made sustained engagement with a social cause more difficult. The competition for attention was often cited as coming at the expense of good causes, and many questioned the suitability of targeted advertising machinery as channel for non-commercial causes. A small number of campaigners noted a decreased sense of community when compared with five years previous.

This was further hampered by the demonetization of social action content usually mentioned with regards to YouTube. One respondent described the "Adpocalypse"—the fact that some content is classified as being non-advertising friendly and automatically demonetised. He noted this was disproportionately likely to impact news content and social justice causes due to their willingness to engage with "difficult" themes. This was made more difficult by the lack of guidance and consistency as to why and when content is deemed 'inappropriate' and either demonetised or removed, and the appeals process was felt to be too slow for the speed of social media. There are likely parallels across the social web.

Financially sustaining social action online was seen as perhaps the most serious challenge facing campaigners, influencers and campaign groups, and many felt that they should not be in competition for attention with traditional advertisers.

It was further noted that the centralisation of digital communications into monolithic platforms which were difficult to police opened up social action to threats of interference. The impact of foreign state and other hostile attempts to 'fake the audience', to stir up hate and to mobilise people into politically-motivated were also noted: two interviewees and participants in the forum mentioned examples from the 2016 presidential elections in the US, the Brexit campaign in the UK, and the ongoing persecution of the Rohingya population in Myanmar. Four of the groups we spoke to noted that they had been targeted through content moderation tools – reporting, for instance – by those looking to suppress their voices. The logistical challenges of policing the largest online platforms has brought with it challenges for causes pushing for social change not traditionally in the mainstream.

Areas of Disagreement

Metrics

There was disagreement on the applicability of social media metrics to social action. Many interviewees noted their use of traditional advertising and social media metrics - 'reach', 'impressions', 'followers' - as part of informal impact assessments. Whether this was an appropriate measure for social good was the subject of debate.

Some campaigners were positive: follower numbers, and in particular levels of engagement (measured through numbers of messages, replies and 'likes') were seen as useful proof that the word was getting out there and evidence that a conversation was taking place. For many, these metrics were what governed the public debate, and it would be lax to ignore them. One campaigner described social media as a 'catalogue of success' not unlike a CV, and proof of the impact his work was having.

Others were less sure about the utility of these numbers. For the most part, this boiled down to measuring actual change. Various campaigners prioritised more 'tangible' achievements: participants in a demonstration, regular attendees or students, number of face-to-face networking meetings or legislative change. One interviewee dismissed common social media metrics as utterly irrelevant in measuring change, though noted that social media platforms likely did have non-public data that would support a more accurate evaluation of social action.

The use of social media and advertising metrics in defining best practice may also adversely impact groups not using social media as part of their day-to-day work. One campaigner noted that there were more traditional organisations carrying out valuable social and community work who had been excluded from opportunities and sources of funding by failing to deliver digitally. This was echoed by another campaigner, who added that traditional, established organisations who were not able to evolve or build the skillset required to campaign online may be unfairly discriminated against on new measures of impact. Another described how his team began thinking about their work in terms of advertising metrics - 'reach', 'influence' - to the detriment of actual metrics of social good, and another stressed the importance of alternative metrics - money raised, legislative changes, funding pledges - as a truer reflection of effective campaigning.

Legacy

Seen as fundamental to achieving social change, the legacy of social action as promoted through social media also provoked disagreement. Linked to concerns about the financing of social action online, the majority of participants had found the transition from the early stages of campaigning to a sustained online presence and conversation more difficult. We heard from more than one group about the difficulty of sustaining the initial burst of interest that is common to digital campaigning. Following rapid growth, sustaining interest tended to require new skills and, above all, money, and in many cases neither were immediately available to the detriment of the cause. This was described by one campaigner as the 'boom-bust' of digital social action: the speed at which causes come and go is often out of sync with the speed of concrete legislative, social or political change. Others agreed; they struggled with the speed at which social media moved, suggesting it made any kind of legacy or lasting organisation impossible.

Moreover, there was a sense that the concept of 'viral campaigning' was misleading: social change requires a long-term effort for which campaigners with good intentions may not be prepared for, and is also dependent on factors frequently beyond the control of a campaign. One interviewee noted that for every campaign that had made the 'trending topics', many others had fallen by the wayside, often simply as a result of bad luck or bad timing. Expectations about the pace of change online matched poorly to the reality of change offline.

Other campaigns had had significantly more positive experiences. Most often, this translated to an organic, network-driven momentum where centralised control or resourcing were less important. One organiser of a highly successful march we spoke to found similar marches being set up elsewhere in the world, and in their aftermaths small groups of motivated campaigners got together to continue the work at a local level. Another campaigner echoed this: his work had provoked local, grassroots activism that continued beyond the life of the social media campaign.

Overall, the long-term legacy of social action on social media seemed to be unplanned. The aim was to encourage others to follow suit and to be inspired into action themselves, and where social action was sustained it was organic and not controlled or resourced by a central organization.

Finally, three separate campaigners noted that social media appeared to be closely linked to a rise in 'issue-based' politics. Although party political action is outside the remit of this report, it was noteworthy that campaign groups felt social media was more powerful when focusing on a single issue over a broader political agenda, manifesto or stance.

Clicktivism;

'Clicktivism' or 'Slacktivism' was a controversial topic.

The majority of interviewees felt that social media did occasionally lead to lazy, shallow engagement with social action. One described social platforms as reassuringly misleading by giving people a sense they have contributed to society when they haven't. Another interviewee echoed this, blaming platforms for encouraging casual and easy engagement with difficult issues which leads to absenteeism and passing the buck.

Others were more optimistic. One campaigner described so-called 'clicktivism' as a useful entry point into social action, no different to signing a petition in the street. Another influencer agreed: even passive, low-level engagement with an important issue was deemed better than no engagement at all. At the very least, it contributed to an environment that was fertile for social action down the line.

Two campaigners argued strongly against the concept of 'clicktivism': in their view, social media plays a key role in lowering the barriers of entry into social action. By building credibility and engaging with people in a so-called 'safe space' was a vital first step - a means to an end.

Conclusions

The interviews and policy forum were fiery: this is a subject of considerable interest, and we were rewarded with a wide ranging and deep discussion into the ways in which social media had impacted on social action. Although a single, overall impression can be misleading, we felt that those at the coalface of social campaigning had gained more than they had lost, and where there was criticism it was directed at long-standing and fundamental faults in social platforms as a whole.

While a majority of interviewees recognised that social media occasionally led to shallow engagement with social action, overall interviewees agreed that social media were a powerful tool for social action. Many of the campaigners we interviewed said that their work would be impossible without the existence of social media and credited social media for creating new opportunities for social action.

Social media enabled campaigners to reach out directly to wide audiences and recruit participants for social action that might otherwise not have gotten involved. They are also a powerful tool for campaigners to build networks, grow a reputation and attract support and funding for their work with greater speed and ease than would be possible in their absence. In the right hands and with the right application, these powerful tools represented new powers and upgrades on existing ones.

Nevertheless, the great majority respondents mentioned having experienced abuse and “trolling” on social media and many stressed that the decreasing reputation of social media had hampered their ability to campaign online.

Our interviews with campaigners also captured some of the complex ways in which social media affect social action. The accessibility of social media as a tool for campaigners to broadcast their cause compared to traditional media outlet means that competition for attention on social media is fierce. While anybody could theoretically post content on social media, the algorithm curation and prioritisation of content on social media platforms acts as a surrogate for traditional gatekeepers. In that sense, whether we agree or not that social media perpetuate or retrench existing power structures, it is fair to say that not all voices on social media are equally heard.

The competition over attention on social media also has implications for campaigners’ ability to create lasting impact. Interviewees highlighted that

the fight over people's attention on social media could make sustained engagement with social causes difficult. In addition, campaigners often found it difficult to maintain the levels of engagement and participation initially achieved on social media due to lack of resources, centralised organisational structure or long-term strategy planning. Therefore, if social media are a powerful tool for rapidly broadcasting one's message and recruiting new participants into forms of social action, creating lasting engagement with ones' cause still requires planning and a level of formal organisation.

Finally, social media metrics have become a way for outsiders including the mainstream media to assess an organisation or a campaign's reputation and impact. Many interviewees were offered support and opportunities as a result of their wide reach on social media. However, most of the campaigners we interviewed also recognised that social media metrics were not necessarily a good measure of social impact and "tangible" or "real" social action. There is therefore a risk that organisations and activist may be unfairly discriminated against based on these new measure of impact.

Data Case Study: Exploring Social Action through Data

In addition to survey data, researchers set out to see how far open data might offer a window into the way groups of internet users coordinate social action. In the past, Demos has explored a number of platforms in this way: in 2015, we explored the use of Twitter as a network for organic, ‘under the radar’ social action in the response to widespread flooding in the UK.⁵⁰ *Voices of Discontent* (2014) used Facebook to understand the ways in which new political actors were mobilizing.⁵¹ As part of this project, researchers looked to identify digital spaces with open data that hosted offline meetings or events.

Founded in 2002, Meetup.com provides a platform for organising offline events, including groups focused on social action and social good. Using an open source dataset covering three US cities, researchers used Meetup data to explore how far this kind of data might inform our understanding of offline event organisation and social action as it is conducted online. We looked to answer four questions:

- What kind of groups are using the platform to coordinate offline?
- What overlaps existed between the groups?
- How widespread was social action on the platform?
- What overlaps existed between social action and other groups, and how did that change by geography?

Overview

The dataset was made up of Meetup users in San Francisco, New York and Chicago between 2010 and 2017. Once anonymised and deduplicated, the dataset contained 1.1 million users spread across 11.8 thousand groups. Groups ranged in size - from a handful of members to over thirty thousand. 10.7 thousand groups contained at least 100 members, and 2.9 thousand contained at least a thousand.

Categorising the groups active on the platform required two steps. Meetup assigned one or more labels to each group - ‘Art Galleries’, ‘French Language’, ‘Social Enterprise’ and so on - 961 unique labels in total. Analysts then manually grouped labels into nineteen higher categories, shown in the table below.

Table 5 Members, Groups and Average Group Sizes

Category	# Members	# Groups	Average Group Size
socialising	546943	3105	176.1
technology	406680	2726	149.2
lgbt	371905	2144	173.5
sport	298645	1370	218.0
arts, crafts and photography	272911	1120	243.7
music and dancing	259323	1011	256.5
business	247500	1343	184.3
culture	203917	941	216.7
food and drink	202531	771	262.7
health and spirituality	187138	1662	112.6
reading and writing	140299	517	271.4
language	138698	605	229.3
film and television	122470	287	426.7
gaming	118785	514	231.1
fashion	102870	313	328.7
education	78473	429	182.9

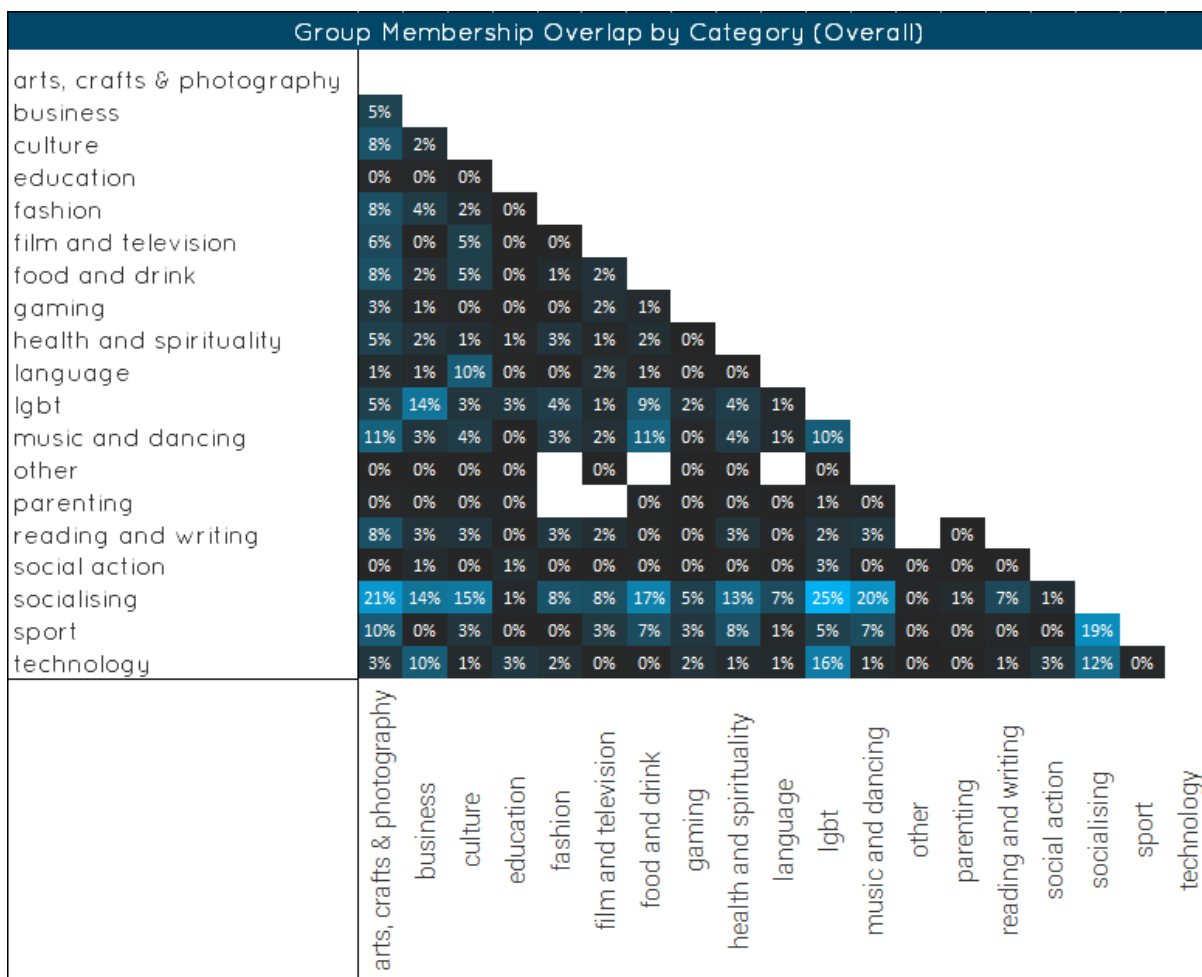
social action	66848	306	218.5
parenting	44003	300	146.7
other	12924	70	184.6

Meetup hosted a broad range of groups. The category of group most frequently used by Meetup members was socialising: over half of all Meetup members were part of at least one socialising group. Social action was one of the most poorly represented categories, joined by 66 thousand members spread across 306 groups.

Data focused on the coordination of offline activities provides a window into the extent to which members with different interests were likely to meet at an offline event. Meetup users were members of groups in multiple categories. Based on a ten percent sample, an average user was a member of groups belonging to 4.5 different categories, suggesting that people who used Meetup during the period covered by the data to attend offline events would be moving in multiple offline groups.

Central to answering the question of how social action manifested itself on the platform was a calculation of overlap between social action groups and other groups. Researchers calculated this overlap in terms of likelihood: as a member of one group, how likely were you to be a member of another? The overall findings for each category are presented below.

Chart 12: Group Membership Overlap by Category



The overall picture shows a digital space catering to a number of different types of offline behaviour. Members looking to socialise were also more likely to be members of LGBT groups (25%), arts, crafts and photography groups (21%) and music and dance-related groups (20%). Meetup members who were part of business-related groups (22.5% of the total population) also crossed over with LGBT and social groups (14%) and technology-related groups (10%).

Overall, three other categories overlapped with social action: technology (3%), LGBT (3%) and education (1%).

Social Action

Just over six percent of Meetup members were part of a social action group: 67 thousand in total. These included groups centered on social justice, social entrepreneurship, cultural diversity and social media for social change.

Meetup data allowed researchers to compare the average likelihood a member would be part of other categories as members of a social action group. For instance, members of social action groups were 8 percent more likely to also be part of LGBT groups, and 11 percent more likely to be part of education groups. The overall numbers are shown below, alongside a comparison of social action group members across the three cities.

Chart 13: Likelihood of Overlap with Social Action Groups by City

Categories	Likelihood of Being a Group Member by Category			
		Chicago	San Francisco	New York
arts, crafts and photography	-25%	-25%	-15%	-28%
business	-2%	-5%	12%	-7%
culture	-18%	-16%	-11%	-21%
education	11%	26%	-2%	13%
fashion	-8%	-10%	0%	-12%
film and television	-12%	-16%	-9%	-12%
food and drink	-19%	-23%	-14%	-18%
gaming	-11%	-13%	-12%	-9%
health and spirituality	-16%	-19%	-10%	-17%
language	-14%	-12%	-12%	-16%
lgbt	8%	2%	19%	6%
music and dancing	-24%	-30%	-18%	-23%
other	2%	3%	-1%	3%
parenting	-5%	-9%	-1%	-4%
reading and writing	-13%	-17%	-8%	-13%
socialising	-25%	-38%	12%	-36%
sport	-31%	-60%	-23%	-31%
technology	-4%	-31%	5%	3%

There are striking differences across the three cities. Social change groups in Chicago overlapped heavily with education groups in Chicago (26 percent) and New York (13 percent), but in San Francisco the opposite was true (-2 percent likelihood). Although the likelihood of being part of LGBT groups was higher across all three cities, it is heavily influenced by San Francisco where it was as high as 19 percent. San Francisco is also distinct in its relationship between business groups and social action groups: a 12 percent increase when compared to decreases in Chicago and New York. Finally, there was an increased likelihood of overlap between technology groups and social action groups in San Francisco and New York (five and three percent respectively), but a massively decreased likelihood of overlap in Chicago (-31 percent).

The data presented above offers a window into how social action groups differ by location, and shows how digital platforms might help us to better understand how social action offline is being organised online. We might, for instance, further investigate why education is so strongly linked to social action in Chicago, while technology isn't, or whether the decreased likelihood

of LGBT membership in Chicago is a reflection of the population or a lack of available groups.

We believe that one advantage of the use of digital platforms and social media as a tool for coordinating social action is the production of data that might be used to measure its spread and impact. This Meetup case study presents just one example of data being used this way. We would urge social media and technology companies to find new ways to allow their data to be used to measure the impact and effectiveness of groups using their platforms to organise for social good.

Concluding Remarks

Young people do not regard social platforms simply as ways to keep in touch with one another, but as online spaces worth owning, worth shaping and sculpting with an understanding that online social change ought to bring with it offline social change.

This has far-reaching consequences. Overall, our interviewees reported a sense that they had found spaces in which they felt newly powerful, in which their voices are heard and through which they are able to rally communities of like-minded people. We see evidence of this every day: not only in headline-grabbing marches in our streets, but in fundraising, in awareness raising, in a viral hashtag that provokes new debates on difficult or controversial topics. Under the radar, young peoples' experience of social action is fundamentally shaped by social media, and the evidence presented here suggests it suggests that experience has been changed for the better.

This power, however, is not without its challenges. Fragmentation in society plays out online, and vice versa: we are confronted daily by individuals and groups and their values and ideas that call for social change we fundamentally disagree with. At times this is a worthwhile provocation; at other times, it is an abuse of these platforms that is frequently too easy to do, too difficult to respond to, and too poorly policed. At its best, social media is an irrepressible force for positive social change. At its worst, it is a weapon used to spread hate and intolerance.

Responsibility for this rests with everyone involved. Campaigners must learn to use these tools to the best of their ability. Social platforms must reassess their values, enforce their terms of service, and work cooperatively with government and civil society to stamp out the hateful and illegal. Government, too, should play a role by ensuring their citizens are prepared for a life lived online and by holding social platforms to account when things go wrong.

Recommendations

Measure Digital Community Health

The DCMS should incorporate a measure of digital community health into the yearly Community Life survey, measuring the extent and impact of social action and the quality of community interactions and cohesion as they appear online.

Research and modelling could be supported through co-working with social media platforms (though would not be contingent on this), and would likely take the form of a pilot study in towns and cities in the UK.

Ensure digital literacy is a core component of statutory PSHE

The government should adopt the recommendations made in the 2017 report by the Select Committee on Communications and ensure digital literacy is a core component of the PSHE syllabus in schools; modules tackling citizenship, democracy and human rights ought to include the notion of digital culture and citizenship.

Improve Platform transparency

We recommend social media platforms improve transparency of their platforms in two ways.

Alongside GDPR compliance, platforms might consider extending the levels of data immediately accessible to their users. Currently, we believe data provided by social platforms is difficult to interpret to an average user. An 'at a glance' breakdown of how and why content and advertising is being shown to them on the platform. Where possible, this should be standardised across platforms: GDPR requests provide a likely framework for this.

Transparency at an individual level should be complemented by platform-level transparency. Recent attempts to get an overall view of what is happening on a platform have been patchy: frustrated by platform reluctance and reduction in API access. At a minimum, we recommend a simple heuristic: that which is public on a platform ought to be accessible through an API.

Appendix 1

List of interviewees

Amika George, #FreePeriods

Hussain Manawer, Poet & Mental Health Campaigner

Holly-Marie Cato, Photographer and Black Identity

John Loughton, Dare2Lead & SCRAN Academy

Jazza John, Creators for Change

Clayre Gribben - Women's March London

Jaz O'Hara -Worldwide Tribe

Richard Mason, Democracy Brum

George Hodgson - Maison de Choup

Father Owen - Paddington Community Choir

Jim, DFLA & Justice for the 21

Ella Whelan, Spiked; Battle of Ideas

Eden Pang, Save the Children

Stuart Cowie, Life Charity

Josie Naughton, Help Refugees

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