

Junk News and Information Sharing During the 2019 UK General Election

[COMPROM](#) ONLINE SUPPLEMENT TO DATA MEMO 2019.4 / 9 December 2019

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I. Types of News and Information Shared over Twitter

For this study, we collected 1.76 million tweets related to the 2019 UK General Election from 284,265 unique users between November 13th and November 19th using 40 election-related hashtags. From this sample, we extracted 308,493 tweets containing a URL link, which pointed to a total of 28,532 unique URLs.

The set of election-related hashtags (see *Table 1*) was compiled by a team of three coders with expert knowledge of the socio-political landscape of the UK. Prior to launching the data collection, the list of hashtags was refined in a trial run, which revealed the most frequently used election-related hashtags, and the list was revised accordingly. We split up the Twitter data based on hashtag use, with different clusters of hashtags acting as proxies for the “ad-hoc” publics forming around discussion of the UK General Election.

Table 1. List of Election-Related Hashtags

Themes	List of hashtags
General Election	#GE19 #GeneralElection2019 #UKElection2019 #GE2019 #GeneralElection19 #UKElection
Labour	#VoteLabour2019 #VoteLabour #Labourdoorstep #RealChange #JC4pm #GTTO
Conservatives	#GetBrexitDone #VoteConservative2019 #VoteConservative #backboris #neverlabour

UKIP	#VoteUKIP #ForTheNation #MakeBrexitHappen
Liberal Democrats	#DemandBetter #BrighterFuture #VoteLibDem
Brexit Party	#brexitparty #ChangePoliticsforGood
SNP	#activeSNP #voteSNP
Green Party	#climateelection #VoteGreen2019 #reasonstovotegreen
EU Referendum	#Brexit #FinalSay #PeoplesVote #StopBrexit #PeoplesVote #Remain #Leave #RevokeA50 #LeaveMeansLeave

Twitter's Streaming API was used to collect publicly available tweets. The platform's precise sampling method is not disclosed, however Twitter reports that data available through the Streaming API is, at most, 1% of the overall global public traffic on Twitter at any given time. Tweets were collected if they: (1) contained at least one of the relevant hashtags; (2) contained the hashtag in the URL shared, or the title of its webpage; (3) were a retweet of a message that contained a relevant hashtag or mention in the original message; or (4) were a quoted tweet referring to a tweet with a relevant hashtag or mention.

Sources that were shared ten times or more across our collection period were manually classified by a team of three coders based on a rigorous grounded typology developed and refined through the project's previous studies of nine elections in several countries around the world. After multiple rounds of testing coding on sub-sample of 100 sources, our team reached a Krippendorff's alpha of 0.77, indicating high inter-coder reliability. Links leading to Twitter itself were excluded, but links to content on other social media platforms, such as Facebook, were included and catalogued.

By combining the cataloguing decisions made on this sample with those made using samples from the last two years, we were able to successfully label 96.4 % of all the URLs being shared. Using this technique, our team identified 29 sources of junk news and information — sources that did not adhere to basic standards of credibility, transparency and professionalism and published misleading, deceptive or incorrect information purporting to be real news about politics, economics or culture — among a total of 1,260 unique domains. The typology explaining our content classification is as follows:

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Professional News Content

- Major News Brands. This is political news and information by major newspapers, broadcasting or radio outlets, as well as news agencies.
- Local News. This content comes from local and regional newspapers, broadcasting and radio outlets, or local affiliates of major news brands.
- New Media and Start-ups. This content comes from new media and digitally native publishers, news brands and start-ups.
- Tabloids. This news reporting focuses on sex, crime, astrology and celebrities, and includes yellow press publications.

Professional Political Content

- Government. These links are to websites of branches of government or public agencies.
- Experts. This content takes the form of white papers, policy papers or scholarship from researchers based at universities, think tanks or other research organizations.
- Political Party or Candidate. These links are to official content produced by a political party or candidate campaign, as well as the parties' political committees.

Divisive and Conspiratorial Content

- Junk News and Information. These sources deliberately publish misleading, deceptive or incorrect information purporting to be real news about politics, economics or culture. This content includes various forms of propaganda and ideologically extreme, hyper-partisan or conspiratorial news and information. To be classified as Junk News and Information, the source **must fulfil at least three of these five criteria:**
 - *Professionalism:* These outlets do not employ standards and best practices of professional journalism. They refrain from providing clear information about real authors, editors, publishers and owners. They lack transparency and accountability, and do not publish corrections on debunked information.
 - *Style:* These outlets use emotionally driven language with emotive expressions, hyperbole, ad hominem attacks, misleading headlines, excessive capitalization, unsafe generalizations and logical fallacies, moving images, and lots of pictures and mobilizing memes.
 - *Credibility:* These outlets rely on false information and conspiracy theories, which they often employ strategically. They report without consulting multiple sources and do not fact-check. Sources are often untrustworthy and standards of production lack reliability.
 - *Bias:* Reporting in these outlets is highly biased, ideologically skewed or hyper-partisan, and news reporting frequently includes strongly opinionated commentary.
 - *Counterfeit:* These sources mimic established news reporting. They counterfeit fonts, branding and stylistic content strategies. Commentary and junk content are stylistically disguised as news, with references to news agencies and credible sources, and headlines written in a news tone with date, time and location stamps.

Other Political News and Information

- Citizen, Civil Society and Civic Content. These are links to content produced by independent citizen, civic groups, civil society organizations, watchdog organizations, fact-checkers, interest groups and lobby groups representing specific political interests or agendas. This includes blogs and websites dedicated to citizen journalism, personal activism, and other forms of civic expression that display originality and creation that goes beyond curation or aggregation. This category includes Medium, Blogger and WordPress, unless a specific source hosted on either of these pages can be identified.
- Political Humor & Entertainment. This category includes political jokes, sketch, comedy or entertainment-focused coverage, as well as political talk shows and late-night formats. Despite their humorous and entertaining nature, these formats often serve as central sources of news and information.
- Video/Image Sharing & Content Subscriptions. Includes music streaming portals like Spotify, video streaming services and live streaming, political documentary movies, e-books and audio book subscriptions, as well as image sharing services.

- Fundraising and Petitions. Encompasses civil society fundraising and petition pages, as well as surveying services for various political causes and interests that do not represent an official campaign or candidate.
- Lifestyle & Special Interest. Includes lifestyle and special interest publications like women's and men's magazines, and content focused on art and fashion, fitness, food and wellness, nature and tourism, or hunting, fishing and automobiles.
- Religion. Refers to content with distinctly religious themes and faith-based editorializing presented as political news or information.
- Online Portals, Search Engines and Aggregators. Includes online portals like AOL, Yahoo! and MSN that do not themselves have editorial policies and have no or limited original news content. This category also includes links to Wikipedia.
- Cloud. Encompasses services such as Amazon Web Services, Google Drive and Docs, OneDrive, or archiving services in the cloud.
- Other Political. Refers to content that is political in nature but does not fit any of the other categories, for example services where voters are able to check their polling stations or purchase political merchandise.

Other

- Social Media Platforms. These are links that refer to other social media platforms as well as official developer tools. If the content at the ultimate destination can be attributed to another source, it is.
- Not Available. This includes links that are no longer available or have not been successfully archived after repeated attempts, as well as sources that are redirected to other sources and whose original content is unknown.
- Shopping, Services and Applications. Encompasses links to auction websites or sales platforms, such as eBay and Amazon, including software-as-a-service applications, analytics tools and content optimization and monetization tools. This also includes applications and browser extensions.
- Link Shorteners. Includes links like Bitly or Vitweet, when it is not possible to unwrap the original URL. If the source is successfully unwrapped from the link shortener, it is coded in the appropriate category.
- Other Non-Political. Refers to sites that have no political content such as spam, gambling and brand advertising.
- Language. Content from sources in languages that are not English, French, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Hungarian or Mandarin are not labeled, unless verifiable information about a source is accessible.

Table 2. Type of News and Information Shared Over Twitter

Type of Source	N	Percentage
Professional News Content		
Major News Brands	98,198	33.02
Local News	20,176	6.78
New Media and Start-Ups	16,971	5.71
Tabloid	34,599	11.63
Professional Political Content		
Government	22,029	7.41
Experts	4,008	1.35
Political Party or Candidate	21,975	7.39
Polarizing and Conspiracy Content		
Junk News and Information	5,189	1.74
WikiLeaks	-	0.00
Russia	223	0.07
Other Political News and Information		
Citizen, Civil Society and Civic Content	35,159	11.82

Political Humor and Entertainment Video/Image Sharing and Content Subscriptions	167	0.06
Fundraising and Petitions	10,472	3.52
Lifestyle	2,619	0.88
Religion	1,902	0.64
Online Portals, Search Engines and Aggregators	325	0.11
Cloud	8,454	2.84
Other Political	333	0.11
Other	2,338	0.79
Social Media Platform	4,447	1.50
Not available	1,213	0.41
Shopping, Services and Applications	3,721	1.25
Other Non-Political	1,426	0.48
Link Shorteners	160	0.05
Language	1,287	0.43
Total	297,391	100
Note: Author's calculations based on data collected from November 6 — November 27, 2019		

II. Trends in User Interactions over Facebook

Having analysed the most prominent categories of political news and information circulating over Twitter, we then isolated the most popular junk news sources in our sample with a corresponding public Facebook page (18 in total). By focusing on this sub-sample, we aim to provide a snapshot of public engagement with junk posts in the lead up to the UK General Election. Using the CrowdTangle¹, a social media analytics tool owned by Facebook, we examined user engagement with content posted by these sites over a three-weeks period (November 6th to November 27th). For comparison, we also computed the same metrics for the 18 most shared professional outlets.

CrowdTangle tracks public posts on Facebook, Instagram and Reddit, made by public accounts or groups. The tool does not track every public account and does not track private profiles or groups, so this data is not representative of performance across the entire platform. We compiled public Facebook interactions (likes, shares and comments) and user reactions (Love, Wow, Haha, Sad and Angry) to posts published by these sources during the first three weeks of the campaign (see *Table 3, 4, 5 & 6*). *Total posts* refer to links, text posts, image and video posts shared by these outlets' public Facebook page. *Total interactions* refer to the number of likes, shares and comments a post gathered between when the moment it was posted and the time the API call is made. The numbers shown below reflect public interactions and do not include either interactions with shares, interactions with comments underneath a post, reach or referral traffic.

Out of the 18 sources of junk news we identified, half were foreign media outlets that were shared using UK election-related hashtags. CrowdTangle's Leaderboard function does not allow to filter by keywords at the outlet level for posts shared on public Facebook pages, meaning that the interaction metrics produced below apply to all the posts shared by these outlets over Facebook during those three weeks regardless of whether their content was related to UK politics or not.

¹ CrowdTangle Team (2019). CrowdTangle. Facebook, Menlo Park, California, United States. URL: <https://apps.crowdtangle.com/naomidemo/lists/23190>

Table 3. Facebook User Interactions with Most Shared Junk News Sources

Page	Total Interactions	Shares	Posts Per Day	Total Posts	Avg. Interactions / Story	Page Likes
Breitbart	11,356,539	1,389,713	55.1	1,157	9,816	4,076,489
EvolvePolitics	156,289	79,765	3.1	65	2,404	138,457
Voice of Europe	130,138	30,138	9.48	199	654	356,939
The Skwawkbox	102,243	61,910	7.1	149	686	14,679
Conservative Daily News	41,041	27,742	35.24	740	55	20,375
Men's Day Out	10,169	2,240	4.9	103	99	5,643
Zero Hedge	7,705	2,552	33.62	706	11	51,078
FrontPage Magazine	6,031	3,131	2.43	51	118	37,995
The Conservative Woman	3,082	411	7.52	158	20	4,527
The Unz Review	2,918	822	4.9	103	28	6,346
Global Research (Centre for Research on Globalization)	2,714	1,424	3.86	81	34	279,356
Facts4EU.org	2,093	858	1.29	27	78	993
Wings Over Scotland	1,026	229	0.38	8	128	38,033
Neon Nettle	683	165	2.1	44	16	534
Kipper Central	532	150	0.43	9	59	4,039
The Red Roar	110	59	0.43	9	12	412
The EU Referendum Blog	0	0	0	0	0	1,431
The Irish News	0	0	0	0	0	1

Note: Calculations based on data collected via CrowdTangle from November 6 – November 27, 2019

Table 4. Facebook User Interactions with Most Shared Professional News Sources

Page	Total Interactions	Shares	Posts Per Day	Total Posts	Avg. Interactions / Story	Page Likes
BBC News	4,067,994	599,456	28.57	600	6,780	49,629,459
The Independent	3,723,444	987,254	76.29	1,602	2,324	8,947,159
The Guardian	2,130,269	407,359	79.95	1,679	1,269	8,252,035
Sky News	870,279	123,841	33.9	712	1,222	8,341,131
ITV News	723,931	103,985	26.86	564	1,284	2,114,069
The Telegraph	348,887	78,189	39.71	834	418	4,443,438
STV News	274,665	56,517	28.9	607	452	503,383
Financial Times	110,866	23,544	34.67	728	152	3,897,993
The i Paper	105,181	33,021	25.43	534	197	283,066

The Times and The Sunday Times	83,104	13,810	35.52	746	111	821,456
Business Insider UK	81,929	20,495	131.81	2,768	30	2,846,053
HuffPost UK	73,346	12,395	53.81	1,130	65	1,287,855
Reuters UK	30,107	4,330	36.1	758	40	890,096
HeraldScotland	26,417	5,313	32.9	691	38	39,772
Bywire News	19,609	2,380	3.29	69	284	37,943
New Statesman	14,985	4,458	13.71	288	52	153,508
City AM	1,796	289	2.81	59	30	9,437
Byline	1,132	500	2.86	60	19	5,122

Note: Calculations based on data collected via CrowdTangle from November 6 – November 27, 2019

Table 5. Facebook User Reactions to Posts by Professional News Outlets

Reaction	Love	Wows	Hahas	Sads	Angry
Frequency	38,167	27,985	47,821	49,049	40,727
Percentage	8%	6%	10%	10%	8%

Note: Calculations based on data collected via CrowdTangle from November 6 – November 27, 2019

Table 6. Facebook User Reactions to Posts by Junk News Outlets

Reaction	Love	Wows	Hahas	Sads	Angry
Frequency	29,188	12,204	89,851	8,893	82,108
Percentage	7%	3%	21%	2%	19%

Note: Calculations based on data collected via CrowdTangle from November 6 – November 27, 2019

III. Thematic Analysis of Most Popular Junk New Stories

Finally, for the last part of our analysis, we extracted the top most popular junk posts across UK Facebook pages during our data collection period based on total user interactions analysed the main themes and issues covered in these articles. The complete list of stories is listed below in *Table 7*.

Themes	Description
<i>Policy</i>	Stories explicitly mentioning the parties' manifestos and policy agendas, including immigration, the economy, the NHS, taxation and security.
<i>Polling</i>	Stories explicitly mentioning public opinion polls and polling agencies.
<i>Anti-mainstream media (Anti-MSM)</i>	Stories explicitly condemning established and dominant media outlets.
<i>Labour</i>	Stories explicitly mentioning Jeremy Corbyn, the Labour party or any of its members.
<i>Conservatives</i>	Stories explicitly mentioning Boris Johnson, the Conservative party or any of its members.
<i>Liberal-Democrats (Lib-Dem)</i>	Stories explicitly mentioning Jo Swinson, the Liberal Democrat party or any of its members.
<i>Wrongdoing</i>	Stories containing accusations of wrongdoing, professional misconduct and malpractice.

Table 7. Most Popular Posts by Junk News Outlets, by Total Interactions

Created	Page Name	Total Interactions	Type	Shares	Link Text	Policy	Polling	Anti-MSM	Labour	Conservatives	Lib-Dem	Wrong doing
2019-11-06 16:41:01 UTC	EvolvePolitics	949	Link	520	YouGov confirm the Lib Dems are now publishing entirely made-up polls on election leaflets		X				X	X
2019-11-07 12:36:22 UTC	EvolvePolitics	3,072	Link	2,172	The Times claims Corbyn voted against Falklands War despite Corbyn not being an MP at the time			X	X			X
2019-11-08 15:30:13 UTC	Get Britain Out	1,922	Link	194	TCW's tribute to a fine politician					X		
2019-11-09 21:55:32 UTC	British Voice	1,596	Link	351	FIRST FOR FAKING NEWS: Kay Burley To Face Ofcom Investigation over Anti-Tory Stunt			X		X		X
2019-11-10 17:30:43 UTC	The Skwawkbox	790	Link	589	Video: MSM silence as Johnson messes up Remembrance Sunday – twice – while Corbyn pays double tribute			X	X	X		X
2019-11-11 09:54:47 UTC	EvolvePolitics	3,041	Link	2,106	BBC accused of 'covering up' Boris Johnson Remembrance Day gaffe by using 2016 footage			X	X	X		X
2019-11-12 09:10:09 UTC	People's Campaign for Corbyn	431	Link	83	Labour: 6 years free adult education to retrain for new career	X			X			
2019-11-13 14:24:47 UTC	Get Britain Out	877	Link	98	Time for Tories to show some of the Brexit Party's grace					X		
2019-11-14 17:44:04 UTC	The Skwawkbox	2,217	Native Video	1,144	Tory attacks what he thinks are Corbyn's words on terrorism - but they're Boris Johnson's	X			X	X		
2019-11-15 14:06:59 UTC	Peter Stefanovic	1,608	Link	376	BBC slammed after framing Labour's Free Broadband plans as "Communism"	X		X	X			X
2019-11-16 10:03:53 UTC	The Skwawkbox	3,191	Link	2,884	Video: horrific new cladding fire consumes Bolton block – and broadcasters ignore					X		X
2019-11-17 07:35:06 UTC	British Voice	3,686	Link	753	BORIS BORDER FORCE: Immigrants Will Need Job Offer To Enter Britain, says PM	X				X		

2019-11-18 11:56:18 UTC	The Skwawkbox	1,090	Native Video	449	Defining 'few v many' moment as CBI boss feeds Johnson response to tricky question	X				X	
2019-11-19 16:51:48 UTC	EvolvePolitics	3,614	Link	2,231	BBC Chiefs say it's 'wrong to expose Boris Johnson's lies because it undermines trust in democracy'			X		X	X
2019-11-20 00:59:16 UTC	The Skwawkbox	1,355	Link	1,095	Video: YouGov 'snap poll' saying Johnson 'won' debate shows time more than 1hr before debate took place		X			X	
2019-11-21 10:07:17 UTC	The Skwawkbox	3,237	Native Video	2,628	Patel says you're to blame for poverty, not govt	X				X	
2019-11-22 08:39:33 UTC	Peter Stefanovic	2,358	Link	544	Labour pledges to ban MPs from taking paid second jobs in 2019 Manifesto	X			X		
2019-11-23 17:56:13 UTC	EvolvePolitics	1,776	Link	1,055	WATCH: BBC edits out Question Time audience laughing at Boris Johnson for their news clip			X		X	X
2019-11-24 14:07:15 UTC	The Skwawkbox	796	Native Video	394	Boris Johnson's 'welcome' in 'Tory' Telford was not what he hoped...	X				X	
2019-11-25 01:19:25 UTC	The Skwawkbox	1,312	Native Video	960	Johnson lies straight to people of Telford about downgrade of their A&E	X				X	X
2019-11-26 18:23:37 UTC	The Skwawkbox	2,430	Native Video	1,063	Why is the Establishment so afraid of Corbyn? Find out in 97 seconds				X		
2019-11-27 18:28:12 UTC	The Skwawkbox	1,530	Link	1,253	Breaking: BBC LIED to Labour about Johnson chickening out to secure Corbyn's Neil interview			X		X	X

