An analysis of the relevance of deliberative democracy, agonistic pluralism, and pluralist group theory in explaining Twitter activity during the Scottish independence referendum 2014.

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An Analysis of the Relevance of Deliberative Democracy, Agonistic Pluralism, and Pluralist Group Theory in Explaining Twitter Activity During the Scottish Independence Referendum 2014

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Abstract

This thesis is predominantly focused upon the relevance of deliberative democracy and agonistic pluralism in helping us to understand and analyse the Scottish independence referendum of 2014, as it played out on Twitter. In doing so, it advances theoretical political communication research into social media platforms, which often focuses upon the possibilities of deliberative democracy, whilst agonistic pluralism tends to be used in opposition to deliberative theory. Aspects of liberalism and communitarianism are also used in the empirical study as an aid to this comparison, by applying a model taken from Deen G. Freelon (2010). Uniquely, in addition to activist groups, journalists and MSPs are focused upon as key stakeholders in the democratic communication process. The thesis is qualitative, with a critical theory research philosophy which focuses upon pluralism as a theory which contextualises power relations in the democratic process, underpins the vital role of media plurality in liberal democracies, and is a forerunner of agonistic theory. Methodologically, the empirical study combines an 18 month period of Twitter observation with intensive interviews (conducted with individuals from the three aforementioned stakeholder groups) in line with accepted norms of critical theory research. The empirical study makes an original contribution to knowledge by presenting rich descriptions of exemplars of three different strands of political communication taken from Freelon's model, which could be operationalised by quantitative scholars in future studies. The empirical results suggest that whilst deliberation was negligible during the campaign, there are a number of coding schemes that when tailored to the appropriate platform are capable of capturing online deliberation. However, the process of recognising certain requisite components of deliberative exchanges is particularly challenging from remote settings. Agonistic pluralism was found to be somewhat representative of the online debate, though lacking regarding essential components of Chantal Mouffe's version of the theory in the areas of agonistic respect and conflictual consensus. The study, therefore, concludes that a new strand of agonistic pluralism would complement existing models of political communication, and core components of such a model are discussed. The thesis has a secondary focus which asks how pluralist group theory aids our understanding of Twitter-based activism during the referendum campaign. In this regard, the study concludes that pluralist group theory is indeed still relevant in the modern day, whilst social media platforms such as Twitter are perhaps redefining traditional notions of political interest groups.

Keywords: democracy, pluralism, media, Twitter, deliberation, agonism, social media

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For Ben

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1 Introduction

1.1 Overview of chapter 1

This chapter begins by briefly discussing the relevance of democratic theory, as the empirical testing of democratic theory in a contemporary political campaign is the central focus of this thesis. The current issues facing democracy in the United Kingdom that are relevant to the study are then introduced, followed by a background to the Scottish independence referendum of 2014, which is the arena in which the empirical study is situated. The research problem is then outlined and the aims, objectives, and research questions are presented. Finally, the structure of the thesis is detailed through the presentation of an overview of its constituent chapters.

1.2 Background to the study

Theories of democracy help to explain the evolution of the political decision-making system that is the predominant form of government throughout the developed world. As democracy evolves, new theories emerge and established theories change, it is, therefore, important that theories are rigorously empirically tested in order to establish their relevance in the subject field. This study predominantly focuses upon two such theories, namely, deliberative democracy and agonistic pluralism, as witnessed on Twitter during the Scottish independence referendum of 2014. Democratic academic theory does not only help to explain events, but can also be used to identify and facilitate approaches which can perhaps improve upon the contemporary position. It is, therefore, important to clarify the democratic issues and challenges that are particularly relevant to this study.

There are a number of issues present in UK democracy which lead scholars and practitioners to search for improvements. Participation has been a long-standing issue and survey data shows that there is a prevalent feeling amongst the general public that the UK political system requires improvement (Hansard Society 2016). Additionally, an (arguably healthy) distrust in politicians has always been present to some degree (ibid.). However, this has become increasingly heightened in recent times. Historically, however, UK citizens have displayed a reasonable level of trust in traditional media sources (Committee on Standards in Public Life 2014), such as the written press and broadcast media, to at the very least, expose the wrong-doings of their elected representatives.

This trust has helped maintain a working relationship between the state and its citizens. In recent times, however, events such as the Milly Dowler phone hacking scandal led to public outrage regarding the civic standards displayed by the media. Around the same time, the level of distrust in both the media and politicians was exacerbated by the exposure of an unhealthy relationship between MPs and billionaire media moguls (Wright and Morris 2011). These events have damaged an already precarious relationship between citizens and the state and also between citizens and the traditional media. This study addresses these issues and others, and considers the role that social media already has had, and may have in the future, in addressing them.

Prior to the scandals which dogged the media in the first decade of the 21st century, the traditional media in the UK had been subject to growing criticisms, mainly based upon its composition and ownership. The decision not to refer the takeover of *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* newspapers in 1981 to the monopolies and mergers commission, by the then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, is seen as pivotal in negatively impacting upon the print media landscape in the UK. The takeover meant that Rupert Murdoch acquired 37% of the British printed press (Doyle 2002). The printed press in the UK had for many years faced allegations of being particularly right wing in its editorial leanings, and this compounded those assertions even further. The Murdoch takeover was the embodiment of the burgeoning neo-liberal ideology which was to become the prevalent democratic model for decades to come. The reality was that those who sought journalism which challenged neo-liberal ideals were left significantly restricted in their available choices.

Concerns about citizen engagement with the media, and available places for citizens to access it, and also the influence that ownership, and particularly concentrated ownership, has upon media output are the basis of the concept of media pluralism. Concerns around media pluralism exist across advanced democracies; displayed, for example, in the way that the European Union has a specific monitor in place, headed by the European Commission, to assess the plurality of media across member states. Media pluralism is grounded in the belief that exposure to multiple points of view on any given subject, where a range of conflicting views are presented, allows for individuals to make informed democratic choices. Social media can perhaps be seen as being an extension of media plurality and this thesis explores the empirical reality of, and/or potential for, social media platforms such as Twitter to enable a more pluralistic media through greater plurality of content and also as a platform for political deliberation.

1.3   Background to the Scottish independence referendum 2014

The Act of Union, which was passed in 1707, formalised the political union of the formerly separate states of Scotland and England. Over two hundred years later, the Scottish National Party was formed in 1934 with a central purpose of realising a dissolution of the Act of the Union and achieving political independence for Scotland. The increasing absence of Conservative Party held seats in Scotland, during the government of Margaret Thatcher from 1979 to 1990, helped to establish a mandate for a devolved system of government in Scotland.

The Scotland Act was passed in 1998, and the Scottish Parliament was opened in 1999, whereby certain powers were devolved to the Scottish Parliament, including health; education and training; most aspects of civil and criminal law; housing; and social work; whilst the majority were retained at Westminster (Carrell 2013b). As, constitutionally, it was not in the gift of the Scottish Government to hold an independence referendum without the agreement of the UK Government, the critical event in the eventual establishment of a Scottish independence referendum was the SNP's success in the 2011 Scottish election. The result of which gave them a majority at Holyrood and heaped political pressure upon Westminster, as the election was based upon a manifesto which included a commitment to seek independence by such a referendum (politics.co.uk. n.d.).

A consultation paper on the subject of the referendum was published on the 10th January 2012. Although the Edinburgh Agreement, which set out the terms for a referendum, was not signed by then Prime Minister David Cameron and First Minister Alex Salmond until the 15th October 2012, *Yes Scotland* was launched on the 25th May 2012 closely followed by *Better Together* on the 26th June 2012 (www.parliament.uk 2016). The date of the referendum was negotiated between Holyrood and Westminster and decided upon as the 18th September 2014.

As was perhaps to be expected with such a crucial issue at stake, there was conflict and dispute from the very beginnings of the campaign. This was manifested in the manner in which the question to be asked at the ballot box was the first matter of contention. *Yes Scotland* proposed that the question should be 'do you agree that Scotland should be an independent country?' Unsurprisingly, the electoral commission found this to be a leading question which would favour independence and later settled upon the question 'should Scotland be an independent country?'

Other high-profile events included the decision to allow the minimum age for voting to be reduced to 16, which Unionists alleged was a cynical ploy on the behalf of the independence campaign to capture the votes of a demographic which appeared to favour independence (Oborne 2017). The debate itself hinged upon some key questions of uncertainty in an independent Scotland, in (with some irony in hindsight) the form of Scotland's future place in the European Union and the choice of currency for an independent Scotland. There were high profile leaders' debates between First Minister Alex Salmond and *Better Together* leader Alistair Darling, which tended to focus upon questions of the economic prospects of an independent Scotland. Again, membership of the EU and the currency of an independent Scotland were also prominent in these televised events which were broadcast throughout the UK (Hope 2014).

On September 7th 2014, a YouGov poll, for the first time placed Yes Scotland in the lead (Osley 2014). This was a quite remarkable turnaround of polls in 2013, which saw Scottish independence approval ratings as low as the mid 20 percentile. The YouGov poll was prompted by what some suggested was a panic at Westminster, and on the 16th September, *The Daily Record* carried a front-page story of the now infamous *Vow* (Clegg 2014), signed by the major party leaders at Westminster –David Cameron, Nick Clegg and Ed Miliband - with promises of guaranteed further devolved powers, including health spending and (unspecified) enhanced revenue-raising powers following a vote in favour of the preservation of the Act of Union. On the 18th September 2014, 55% of votes to 45% were cast in favour of the preservation of Scotland's place in the United Kingdom.

1.4   Outline of the research problem

As already noted, the technological advancement of the internet and the rise of social media has raised hopes of a more inclusive democracy, with hopes resting on increased participation with a more level political playing field. In line with these hopes, academic works in the subject area have often focused upon activism as a stark representation of participation, such as the Arab spring (Howard and Hussain 2011; Khondker 2011; Stepanova 2011), and also empirical studies such as Carroll and Hackett (2006) which explores the role of media activism and social movement theory. Other empirical studies have focused upon the broader notions of the democratising effect of the internet such as Groshek (2009) as well as more specifically, the equalizing potential of social media (see Xenos, Vromen and Loader 2014; Loader and Mercea 2011) and the role of Twitter use by politicians such as Jackson and Lilleker (2011). However, such empirical studies are rare. The majority of the aforementioned empirical studies are quantitative, using comparative, multi-national approaches. There is therefore a

gap to be filled by an empirical study such as the current one, which makes a contribution to knowledge in being qualitative, focused specifically upon the United Kingdom and going beyond purely concentrating upon activism and participation.

Theoretically, this research also fills a gap by focusing upon the relevance of agonistic pluralism in contemporary democratic theory, as opposed to limiting itself to the possibilities of deliberative democracy in relation to the internet and social media (see Baek, Wojcieszak and Delli Carpini 2012; Wright 2012; Goldberg 2010; Dahlberg 2007; Wright and Street 2007; Tambini 1999). This study also contributes to knowledge in the field by focusing upon multiple stakeholder groups in the democratic process. It also will focus upon activism in line with the majority of those studies already mentioned. It too, however, seeks a broader understanding of the impact of social media upon the mainstream media and governmental processes. This is achieved by additionally considering the impact of Twitter in relation to the role of journalists and elected politicians.

The aim of the thesis is as follows:

Aim of the study

- To provide an analysis of the relevance of deliberative democracy, agonistic pluralism, and pluralist group theory in explaining Twitter activity during the campaign that preceded the Scottish independence referendum 2014.

Table 1 Study aims

With this in mind, the objectives are:

Objective 1
- To offer an enhanced understanding of the impact of Twitter upon established models of political communication incorporating both deliberative democracy and agonistic pluralism.

Objective 2
- To further the understanding by taking concepts and issues raised and exploring them with multiple stakeholder groups - activists, journalists and MSPs.

Objective 3
- To evaluate the impact of Twitter upon pluralist group theory in the age of new media.

Table 2 Study objectives

With the aim of achieving these objectives the specific research questions are as follows:

Primary Research Question
- How could you tell if the #indyref were characterised by deliberative democracy or agonistic pluralism?

Supplementary Research Question
- How does pluralist group theory aid our understanding of Twitter based activism during the Scottish independence referendum 2014?

Table 3 Research questions

In terms of the focus of existing works upon political communication and the public sphere, as mentioned, the prevalent focus has been upon the possibilities afforded by social media upon the promotion and institutionalisation of deliberative democracy (Halpern and Gibbs 2013; Dahlgren 2009; Habermas 2006). Deliberative democracy is seen by many as having the capacity to improve the democratic process with relation to more effective decision making,

particularly in limiting the levels of under-representation and exclusion which are present in the current system. Agonistic pluralism, however, is a theory which was born out of frustration with the focus of early theories of deliberative democracy which focused upon consensus in the democratic decision making process.

Instead, theories of agonism (Honig 2013; Mouffe 2005; Connolly 2005) accept that politics consists of ineradicable pluralism, and therefore seeks to manage the antagonism which is present in the democratic process. Agonism has largely been overlooked with regard to empirical studies. In light of this, this study answers the calls of, for example, Karppinen, Moe and Svensson (2008) who appeal for a joint approach regarding deliberation and agonism, suggesting that this could have positive implications for research in the subject field, in terms of reflecting upon ideals of democratic public communication.

Pluralism and its relationship to democracy is a central feature of the study. Theories of political pluralism and particularly those from the era of classical pluralism, as seen through the works of, for example, Dahl, Truman, and Lindblom, are considered important as they attempt to shed light on where power lies within the democratic process. This is particularly relevant in terms of the role of interest groups. Pluralism, therefore, aids the study in assessing the role of the competing groups within the campaign which preceded the Scottish independence referendum of 2014. It is important not only in terms of narrow considerations of activist groups, but also in terms of the interplay between such groups and the traditional media, as well as *The State* in its many different organisational forms. Dahl's seminal work in this area *Who Governs? Democracy and power in an American city* (first written in 1961 updated 2005) is particularly relevant in this regard and is explored in detail during the thesis.

In order to fully represent the manner in which pluralism has evolved as a theory, works such as those of American author William James - *A Pluralistic Universe* (1908) are explored, as these provide the philosophical origins which underpin later pluralist works. The school of thought which came to be classified as the *English pluralists* are also considered as these have specific relevance to both group and state personality which is a particular area of interest within the study. Other subsequent areas of pluralist thought are also considered, such as value and elite pluralism, which help to explain contemporary considerations of pluralism and its relationship to the democratic process.

Political pluralism also underpins the concept of media pluralism which is again central to the thesis. Media plurality is overwhelmingly accepted as a central feature of a healthy democracy and, as already mentioned, requires a diversity of available viewpoints and media sources as

well as an engaged citizenry, the theory being that citizens can only make informed political choices if these criteria are satisfied. Social media can be considered as an extension of media plurality of source, and also as a tool for engagement. With this in mind, the key debates within the study include media ownership and arguments around the state's role in both traditional and new media as regards plurality. The democratic benefits and challenges of social media in terms of regulation, or rather a lack of regulation, are also discussed in detail. With regard to important media/media pluralism texts, the works of authors such as Murthy (2013); Margaretten and Gaber (2012); Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez (2011); Chadwick and Howard (2010); Sunstein (2009); Hindman (2008) and Fuchs (2007) and the concepts they bring forward are also focused upon.

Deliberative democracy is seen by many (see Mansbridge 2010; Habermas 2006, 2005; Dryzek 2005; Cohen 1997; Benhabib 1996) as having a key role in addressing some of the long-standing issues within our democratic system. Plurality voting or *first past the post* continues to be the preferred electoral system for UK general elections, although Scottish elections now have systems of proportional representation. Whilst the simplicity of first past the post is its strength, the winner takes all system is synonymous with the exclusion of the preferences of the voters on the losing side. The deliberative process, however, is suggested as having the capacity to limit such exclusion (Habermas 2005). There is, however, a significant paucity of empirical work into the possibilities of online deliberation. With this in mind, the thesis concentrates upon the presence and quality of online deliberation during the Scottish independence referendum campaign and asks what the evidence means for the prospects of future deliberation online. Additionally, the study addresses the question of the possibilities of deliberation, with regard to the most emotive contemporary political questions such as those of sovereignty - as was the issue in Scotland in 2014.

Agonistic pluralism (see Mouffe 2014, 2013, 2005; Honig 2013, 2007; Connolly 2005, 2001) as a theory grew from dissatisfaction with consensus-based theories of classical pluralism and deliberative democracy. Both of those theories have moved on from earlier consensus-based versions (see for example Dryzek and Niemeyer 2006). However, proponents of agonistic theory suggest these theories are limited and that agonism offers a more realistic alternative which is accepting of conflict within the political system. This thesis focuses upon the agonism of Mouffe (2005) in what is a controversial theory for some, particularly in the theoretical grounding of some of its normative components. Mouffe's agonism posits that antagonism is the starting point for political decision making and that this should be accepted and understood as having a positive role in the democratic process, as it allows, for example, vehemently held positions to be aired in a manner which prevents those antagonisms being transformed into

physical aggression. The focus for Mouffe is to foster an (hypothetical) environment where antagonisms can be converted into agonisms through arenas of *conflictual consensus,* which sees adversaries agreeing on the ethical principles which are the basis of their association (for example liberty and equality) but disagreeing on the interpretation of those principles.

The study therefore deconstructs Mouffe's normative components of agonism and assesses their presence and relevance to the Scottish independence referendum campaign. Additionally, it specifically focuses on two of the most contested components of Mouffe's theory of agonism: namely, the requirement for the legitimacy of political opponents' value preferences to be accepted and respected, and the possibilities or otherwise of the concept of conflictual consensus in the democratic process.

1.5   Overview of the thesis

The structure of the thesis is as follows:

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 focuses upon democracy and presents theoretical definitions of a functioning democracy and also five standards of an ideal democracy as identified by Dahl (2000). These definitions are the benchmark for judgements made about democracy throughout the thesis. The chapter then goes on to identify the issues facing contemporary democracy in the UK, including public opinion regarding the performance of the mainstream media taken from survey data. These statistics form the basis of assumptions regarding current issues facing the democratic process in the United Kingdom. Following this, theories of both deliberative democracy and agonistic pluralism are presented as these theories are used in combination in the empirical study in analysing the Scottish independence referendum of 2014.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 concentrates upon theoretical pluralism as it is essential to the core theories of both agonistic and media pluralism upon which the study is based. The chapter begins by focusing upon the work of William James, whose philosophical notions of pluralism underpin many of the subsequent branches of pluralist theory. Then, pluralism is contrasted with monism, as a rejection of monism was a key driver of the works of early pluralist authors. One of the main criticisms of pluralism has been its rejection as mere relativism. Therefore, relativism is then discussed alongside pragmatism, as pragmatic judgements within the decision-making process are argued by James and others as elevating pluralist theory from these allegations of relativism. Value pluralism is then introduced and discussed, as value pluralism supports modern considerations of pluralism and is probably the most evident pluralist theory within

contemporary society. Pluralist group theory from earlier works by Parker-Follett through to its most notable proponent Dahl are then focused upon, as group theory is essential to considerations of the democratic process. Finally, more recent pluralist thought is presented in order to clarify the contemporary position.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 is focused upon media pluralism, as social media is considered to be an extension of media plurality within the study. The chapter begins by offering five key functions of the media taken from Kuhn (2007) and these provide a benchmark to judge the performance of social media against throughout the thesis. The *principled notion* and *market theories* of media pluralism are then defined. The events which led to the Levenson Inquiry are then presented as these provide an important background to present day concerns regarding the performance of the mainstream media in the United Kingdom. Public service broadcasting and the BBC are then discussed as these are considered to be essential components of the media in the UK, which ought to ensure a trusted, balanced media provider in contrast with dominant commercial media enterprises. The concept of social media is then introduced and discussed, including a focus upon Twitter and its use during recent votes and elections, particularly in the USA and the UK, as this is the foundation of the empirical study.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 is concerned with the methodology of the project and provides detailed discussion around the reason for the methodologies which were chosen, following consideration of the available options. The choice of critical theory research philosophy approach and a qualitative methodology, as opposed to a quantitative one, are justified, incorporating the unique situation of the Scottish independence referendum of 2014. The research questions are detailed and the social media research paradigm is discussed. The progression from initial desk-based Twitter research through to the identification of relevant activist groups, journalists, and MSPs, to the choice of methods regarding the interview process, structure, and data analysis are explained. Freelon's three models of online democratic communication are then presented and explained in detail, as these models underpin the method of coding, data analysis, and the manner in which the subsequent results chapters are structured and presented. Finally, ethical considerations and methodological limitations are offered.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 is the first results chapter. These results relate to the first research question focusing upon the presence, or otherwise, of tangible deliberative and agonistic theory in the study. A table summary of the partial modification and overall application of the empirical units of

analysis from Freelon's model are first presented. The results are then structured into the three strands of Freelon's model, namely, liberal individualist, communitarian, and deliberative. Each unit of analysis from Freelon's model is presented in turn in order to discuss the evidence from the data collection. Sub themes are categorised within each unit of analysis which maintains a sequential flow and ensures that the theory which is pertinent to the study is rigorously analysed. At the end of each of the three strands the evidence is discussed in relation to deliberative democracy and agonistic pluralism before proceeding to the next. A critique of Freelon's model is presented and conclusions to the primary research question are drawn.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 relates to the supplementary research question which is focused upon pluralist group theory in the modern technological era. In order again to maintain a focus upon the evidence provided in relation to academic theory, Dahl and Lindblom's *five effects of social/interest groups* (1976) are used as a benchmark where appropriate. Theme 7.7 stands separately to Dahl and Lindblom's model, taking the opportunity to assess the impact of social media upon the relationship between the state and its citizens as relating to the work of the English pluralists as detailed in Chapter 3. Conclusions to the supplementary research questions are drawn by relating the evidence provided to Dahl's seminal work regarding group theory titled, *Who Governs?* (2005). The chapter concludes with a discussion of the original contribution to knowledge made by the study along with suggestions for future research based upon its findings.

2 Democracy

2.1   Overview of chapter 2

The central question of this study is focused upon the presence of deliberative democracy and agonistic pluralism on Twitter during the Scottish independence referendum 2014. Those who herald the democratic benefits of social media platforms such as Twitter, together with those who wish to promote deliberative democracy, do so in the hope of addressing systemic issues within our democracy. In the light of this, it is important to first provide the basic standards for democracy as defined by Dahl (2000), and then provide evidence as to why the democratic process in the United Kingdom requires improvement. Liberalism as a key component of liberal democracy, which is the accepted form of contemporary UK politics, is then explained. Following this, deliberative democracy and agonistic pluralism are then introduced, and reasons are given as to why these models are used in combination within the empirical study.

Although the general benefits and criticisms of each theory are first discussed, it is not the intention at this stage to pass judgement as to the specific merits of either theory in opposition to each other as is endemic in academic literature. Instead, it is argued in line with Karppinen, Moe and Svensson (2008) that the two theories can have positive implications when used together within political communication research. The two theories, it is then argued, in their later incarnations are nuanced rather than staunchly oppositional. Both theories are later considered as to their relevance to normative assessments of the Scottish independence referendum.

2.2   Contemporary democracy in the United Kingdom

Many different theoretical concepts of democracy have been developed since its origins in ancient Athens and as Dahl suggests:

> The twenty-five centuries during which democracy has been discussed, debated, supported, attacked, ignored, established, practised, destroyed and then sometimes re-established, have not, it seems, produced agreement on some of the most fundamental questions about democracy (Dahl 2000 p.3).

Whilst this is certainly the case, Dahl himself goes on to identify three essentials for 'functioning democracy':

- National Parliaments
- Elected representatives
- Local government (ibid. p.7)

Dahl then goes on to identify five standards for *ideal democracy* with what is identified hereon in as *the democratic process*:
- Effective participation
- Voting equality
- Enlightened understanding
- Control of agenda
- Inclusion of adults (ibid. p.38)

Effective participation, in Dahl's view, relates to the negative consequences of sections of society failing to participate in a democracy. If individuals and groups do not participate they will not have their preferences registered at the ballot box, a further potential negative consequence being that political parties in a representative democracy will focus on catering to those who do participate particularly at the ballot box, as catering for those who do not, will in all likelihood not largely impact upon the election result. This situation has been alleged to be the case in the UK, with parties, for example, focusing upon the desires of older people in preference to young adults who tend to vote in much smaller numbers.

Equality in voting refers to having a system whereby all votes count equally, as opposed to being weighted, perhaps based upon land ownership (ibid.). The UK does then have voting equality. Enlightened understanding is the aim of having an electorate who are equally qualified to make democratic decisions. In terms of our contemporary democracy, whereby we may largely presume a certain standard of education within admittedly wide parameters, we can apply enlightened understanding to the availability and access to relevant, balanced information, which allows citizens to make reasoned democratic choices. The control of the agenda in Dahl's model relates to the way that citizens ought to decide which matters are on the political agenda, whilst inclusion of adults relates to the manner in which adults should be treated as equals in the political system.

The partial purpose of this project is to make sense of how the democratic communication process played out on Twitter during the Scottish independence referendum of 2014 and how the process was aligned to, or deviated from, contemporary academic theory. The UK does have Dahl's three essentials and to some extent the five ideal standards as stated. The four

pertinent elements of the democratic process within the study are effective participation, enlightened understanding, control of the agenda and inclusion of adults. The empirical reality is assessed against the concepts of deliberative democracy, pluralism, and agonism, insomuch as the extent to which they are competing or inter-related explanatory democratic theories. These have been chosen as they are representative of explanations derived from preliminary findings within the empirical study. It is then argued as to whether or not they are desirable, and if social media enhanced the process in relation to our democratic norms as opposed to a traditional *offline* campaign.

There are many reasons to suggest that these are problematic times for UK democracy, including matters of participation, legitimacy of politicians, parties, and of course constitutional change and the future of the Union. Politics has become a pejorative term ubiquitously loaded with negative connotations. Hay succinctly sums up the contemporary attitude toward politics:

> Politics is synonymous with sleaze, corruption and duplicity, greed, self-interest and self-importance, interference, inefficiency and intransigence. It is, at best, a necessary evil, at worst an entirely malevolent force that needs to be kept in check (Hay 2007 p.155).

The following graphic illustrates the enormous level of distrust the UK public has in its politicians:

Veracity Index 2016 – all professions overview

"Now I will read you a list of different types of people. For each would you tell me if you generally trust them to tell the truth, or not?"

Profession	% trust to tell the truth
Nurses	93%
Doctors	91%
Teachers	88%
Judges	81%
Scientists	80%
The Police	71%
Clergy/priests	69%
Hairdressers	68%
Television news readers	67%
The ordinary man/woman in the street	65%
Civil Servants	56%
Lawyers	52%
Pollsters	49%
Managers in the NHS	48%
Economists	48%
Charity chief executives	46%
Trade union officials	43%
Local councillors	41%
Bankers	37%
Business leaders	33%
Estate agents	30%
Journalists	24%
Government Ministers	20%
Politicians generally	15%

Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute

Base: 1,019 British adults aged 15+, fieldwork 14th October – 1st November 2016

Figure 1 Screenshot from Ipsos Mori (2016)

We can see then, that the public has overwhelming trust at one end of the scale, in doctors and nurses to tell the truth with approximately 90% supporting that statement in 2016. At the other end of the scale only 15% of people surveyed trusted politicians, with only a slight improvement of 20% regarding trust in government ministers. There have also been other scandals subsequent to the expenses scandal (Bell 2010) which continue to bring the integrity of politicians into question. These include the cash for influence scandal of 2010 (BBC 2010) as exposed by the Channel 4 TV programme *Dispatches*; the Falkirk scandal of 2013 (Cook 2013) whereby the influence of the Unite trade union over parliamentary candidate selection led to MP Eric Joyce proposing to step down from his position in 2015; and closer to the time of writing, the resignation of MP Malcolm Rifkind as he and MP Jack Straw (BBC 2015a) became embroiled in a further *Dispatches* scandal regarding *cash for access*. This concerned

the manner in which lobbyists gain access to MPs, and the question of MPs having second jobs in addition to their parliamentary duties.

This was a subject which again came to prominence in 2017 regarding former Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne's decision to take on the role of Editor of the Evening Standard newspaper, whilst still serving as the Conservative member for Tatton, for which he received an annual salary in excess of £75,000 from the public purse. The decision to combine the role of MP, to which constituents would quite rightly expect full commitment, with the onerous task of editing a daily newspaper was in itself controversial. This was exacerbated by the fact that Mr Osborne was also a speaker at the Washington Speakers' Bureau, chairman of the Northern Powerhouse Partnership, advisor to the American fund management firm Blackrock (for which he was believed to be paid a salary of £650,000 per annum) and also Fellow at the American think tank the McCain Institute (Goodall 2017).

Hay elaborates and questions whether the electorate are correct to perceive politics in this way and why this has become the case. He goes on to discuss why in the modern day, politics seems incapable of providing solutions to collective problems and questions if this is down to the issues at hand, or the capabilities and calibre of the political actors involved. Regardless of the reasons for such distrust and disaffection the consequences in terms of participation are perhaps inevitable.

The issue of declining participation is commonplace in political literature and relates to the considerable decline in voter turnout in UK elections, as represented in the following graphic:

General election turnout since 1945
Tap or mouseover chart for details
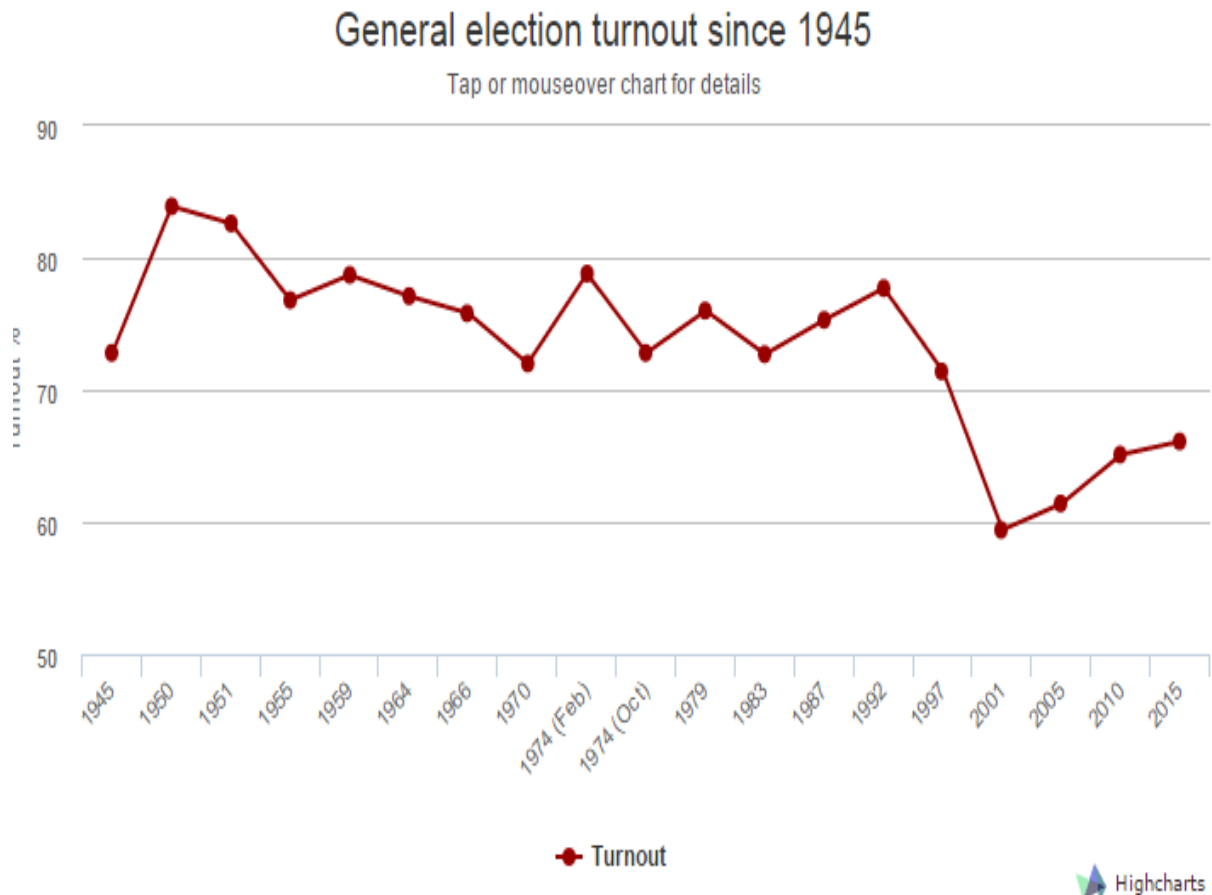
Figure 2 Screenshot from ukpolitical.info (2015)

The figure above shows participation in terms of voter turnout since World War II in UK general elections. In more recent times the turnout in 2001 was 59.4%, in 2005 it was 61.4% and in 2010 it was 65.1%, rising slightly to 66.1% in 2015. It can be argued that falling turnout is in part due to a general satisfaction with living standards and that people will vote when they are genuinely discontented with government. There is more evidence however, that there has been a general malaise in attitudes to politics in the UK due to distrust of politicians coupled with the perception of a lack of genuine alternatives between the major political parties, as they have fought for the centre ground, which generally decides election results (Bromley, Curtice and Seyd 2004). Such voter apathy in terms of politicians and the proliferation of centre ground parties and policy, has been associated with the increase in support for right wing parties such as UKIP. Similarly, there has been a move to the left in the Labour Party whose party members elected Jeremy Corbyn, a less than prominent back bench MP given bookmaker odds of 100/1 at the beginning of the leadership contest. It can be claimed that the presence of a centre-left, or perhaps simply left-wing Labour Party, if Corbyn achieves his personal political positions, redresses the balance of popular representation within UK politics.

However, the historical stagnant levels of citizen participation in the most basic democratic process of voting in general elections, is still of concern in terms of general democratic legitimacy.

The following graphic starkly demonstrates the level of disinterest in politics displayed by citizens of the United Kingdom:

Interest in Politics

UK Citizen Interest in Politics
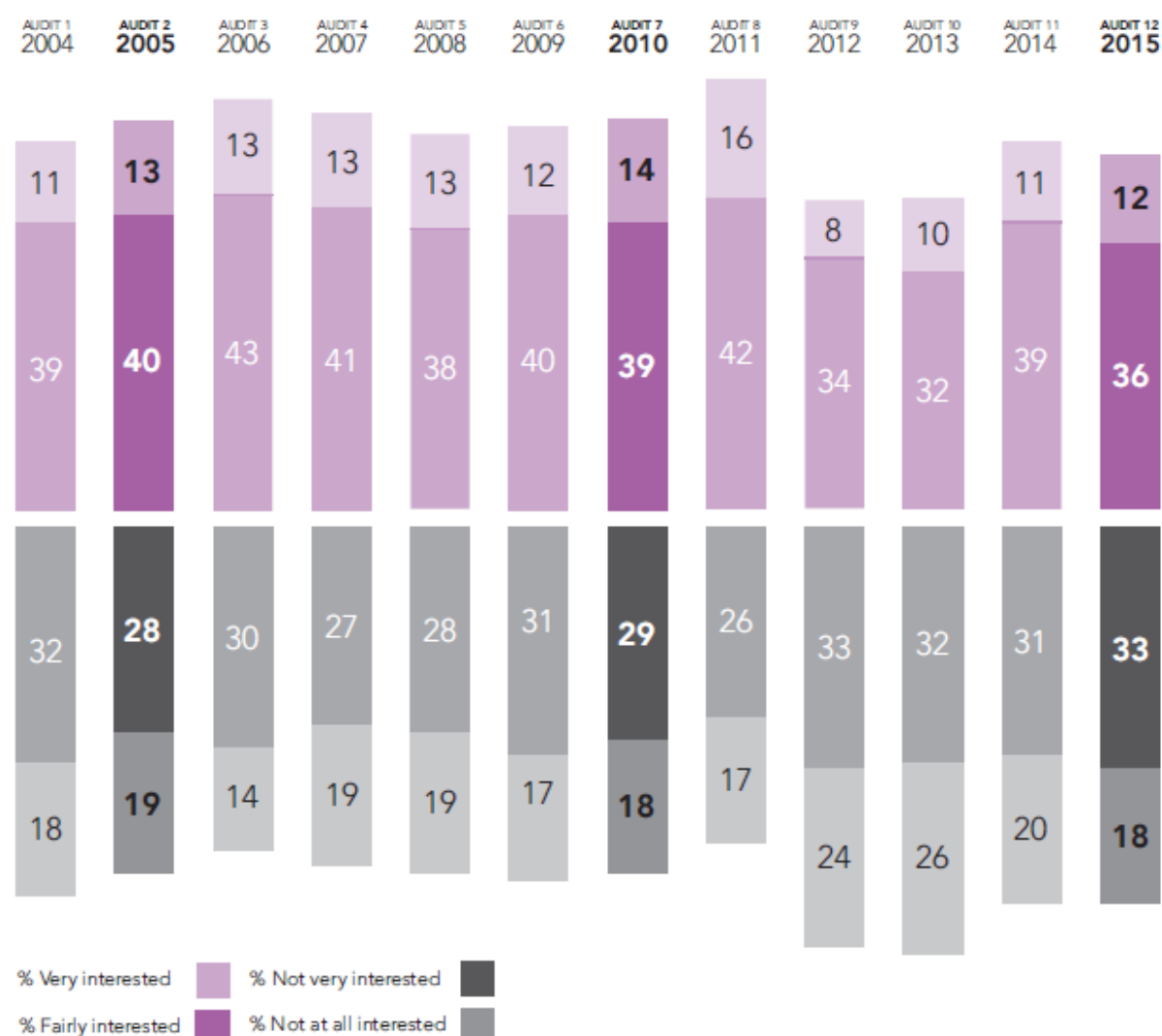
Figure 3 Screenshot from Hansard Society (2016)

The highest level of those that class themselves as 'very interested in politics', as taken from the audit, stands at 16% in 2011 whilst in 2013, 26% of those questioned classed themselves as 'not interested at all'.

The next graphic demonstrates the feelings towards how well people think our system of government works:

Satisfaction with Present System of Governing Britain

Figure 4 Screenshot from Hansard Society (2016)

Whilst it is perhaps unsurprising that no more than 3% of participants have ever believed that the system could not be improved, more revealingly, since 2004 the lowest combined total of those classifying the system as 'could be improved quite a lot' and 'needs a great deal of improvement' has never been fewer than 60% of total respondents.

Simplistically put, we have evidence of a democracy that suffers from low levels of participation in general elections; with an electorate consisting of roughly 50% of people with little or no political interest; where politicians are overwhelmingly seen as untrustworthy and the system is seen by at least 60% of people as in need of significant improvement.

With this in mind, it is rather of an understatement to suggest that we require a determined effort to find ways to enhance our democracy to fit with Dahl's ideals as stated earlier.

Support for Changes to Encourage People to Participate in Future Elections
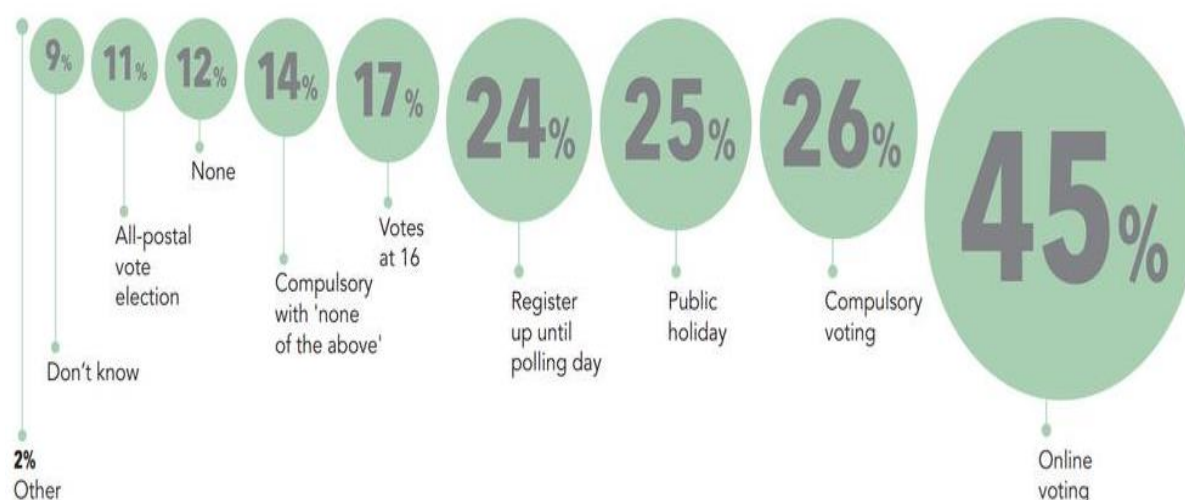
Figure 5 Screenshot from the Audit of Political Engagement (2015)

The above graphic from the *Audit of Political Engagement* 2015, details the popularity of suggestions aimed at increasing the propensity for UK voters to participate in future elections. The overwhelming favourite suggestion is that of online voting, at approaching twice that of any other category. Whilst this study is not specifically concerned with online voting, the graphic displays the potential for the internet to mobilise UK citizens to participate in politics more generally.

There is, however, a glaring caveat that flies in the face of political disaffection and participation as regards the Scottish independence referendum: the fact that it was almost entirely contradictory to the aforementioned evidence. The turnout was a record for any UK public vote at 84.59% (Electoral Commission 2015) and this was preceded by a campaign that was universally credited as vibrant, supported by a level of engagement beyond even the most optimistic expectation. Later chapters will of course, address the reasons for this and how it manifested itself both on and offline. The specific question will be as to whether, and how, Twitter impacted on those successes of engagement and participation.

Declining participation and distrust of politicians are concerning for UK democracy while being neither new nor the central feature of this study. What is less well known and is of significant relevance to this study is the decline of public confidence in the traditional media. An example of this trend, regarding the capacity of the traditional media to uncover the type of wrongdoings as documented previously, is represented in the graphic below:

Public Confidence in the Traditional Media
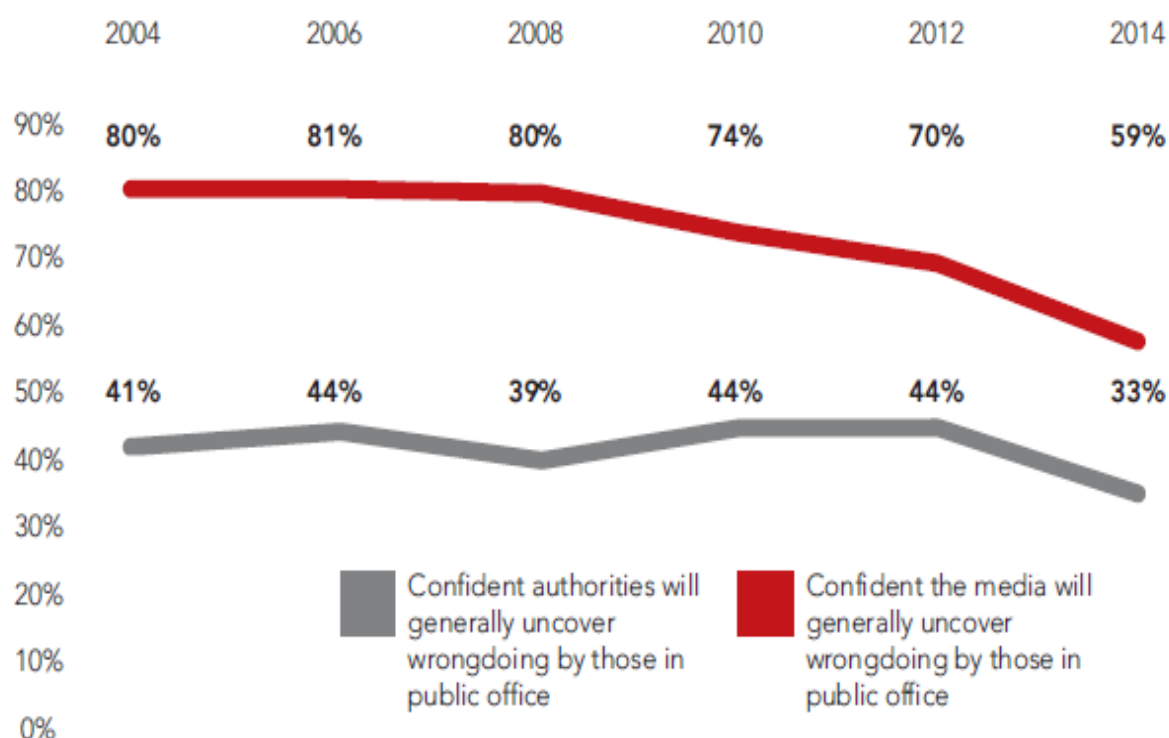
Figure 6 Screenshot from the Standards in Public Life Survey (2014)

This graphic illustrates the manner in which confidence in authorities to uncover wrongdoing in public office generally remained consistent in the 10 years of the survey, with a more rapid decline between 2012 and 2014. There has however, been an exponential increase in a *lack* of confidence in the traditional media to uncover such wrongdoings in their commonly accepted role as 'public watchdog' (Fuchs 2011) on behalf of *the people*. A more detailed summary of the broader issues of public confidence in the traditional media, particularly in tandem with the distrust of politicians as already detailed, and why this is a major issue for UK democracy is presented in chapter four of the thesis.

Within the independence referendum, this distrust was exacerbated among the supporters of the Yes Scotland campaign by a perceived bias and unhealthy closeness of the media and particularly the BBC, to the status quo and the opposing Better Together campaign. Whether

there was any foundation for this argument and what this meant for the role of social media is a main topic within the study. The importance of the media for a fully functioning democracy (as detailed in chapter 4) and the implications of the kind of trend in the table above, provide reason for this study (and others like it) to examine the role of Twitter and other social media platforms in supplementing or supplanting the traditional media in areas of political communications.

2.3   Liberal democracy

Firstly, however, it is important to present the relevant strands of liberal democratic theory which are appropriate to the project and explain why these have been chosen. Classic liberal theory as espoused by English writers John Locke, John Stuart Mill, and Jeremy Bentham, amongst many others, is underpinned by certain common values such as the rights of the individual. Building on the works of, Kekes (1997); Gray (1995); Galston (1995); Rawls (1993); Larmore (1990); Walzer (1990); Shklar (1989) and Waldron (1987); Thorsen and Lie state that:

> It usually describes a disposition towards individual liberty and democracy which might be present in a person's political point of view, or ingrained in the political culture of a country, rather than a well-defined and clearly demarcated set of political beliefs (Thorsen and Lie 2006 p.7).

Classical liberal theory aids our understanding of liberal democracy, the ubiquitous form of contemporary western government.

The term *liberalism* is complicated by the difference in meanings of the term on either side of the Atlantic. *Liberalism* in America is often used by the right wing as a derogatory term, with connotations of socialism and the support of the welfare state. In the UK, the term is more associated with historical theory, or as a term referring to progressive politics, and further complications arise when the term liberalism is used in a financial or economic context. Free markets - meaning an economic trading system composed of markets which wherever possible are free from state intervention - are key components of the liberal democratic system. Additionally, free market economic liberalism is synonymous with principles based upon the individual rather than the state or collectives, in the belief that such individualism is more desirable as individuals are autonomous and self-reliant (Allik and Realo 2004 p.31), with this likely to result in broader economic prosperity which in turn finances public services. Support for liberalism in recent times has been largely without challenge:

Liberalism has dominated normative political thought as well as practical politics in the West for the past sixty years, up to the point in which it has become a shared inheritance among political theorists, professional politicians, and nearly all significant political movements in its native countries (Thorson and Lie 2006 p.3).

Such was the dominant belief in liberalism at the end of the last century that Fukuyama (2006) notoriously proclaimed the 'end of history' (a position he subsequently revoked) insofar as humans had completed their socio-cultural evolution and need look no further for alternative democratic theories. It is important to note, however, that the blame attributed to neo-liberalism for the financial crisis of 2008 (see Foster and Magdoff 2009), and the resulting world-wide recession, resulted in more serious questioning of economic liberalism and the free market. The popularity of liberal democracy, however, largely remains intact.

Liberal democracy is also fundamentally associated with certain democratic rights, which are generally not present in nondemocratic systems of government. At the beginning of this chapter, five components of an ideal democracy as expressed by Dahl (2000) were detailed. When discussing this vision of an ideal democracy Dahl makes the point that for the system to work, citizens within the system require a formal guarantee of their role within that process. Therefore, for example, *effective participation* requires the right to vote and the right to free speech whilst ideals such as *voting equality* require the right for individual citizens' votes to count equally in comparison to others. Other generally accepted democratic rights within a liberal democracy include the right to life and personal security, equality before the law, and freedom of association.

The term *liberal democracy* is ubiquitously used as a descriptor for the prevalent modern day political systems in the majority of developed nation states. The pairing of the two words within that descriptor is, however, somewhat at odds with itself. Liberalism, as discussed, relates to the individual and the private: however, democracy relates to the public and the collective. To clarify, we can take the term to mean, 'the extent to which a political system allows political liberties *and* democratic rule' (Bollen 1993 p.2008) implying that the individual can maintain liberty under an umbrella of collective, democratic government. Others such as Schumpeter place more emphasis upon the democratic rule component, stating democracy is, 'that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which the individuals *acquire* the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote' (Schumpeter 1950 p.269 in Bollen 1993 p.1209). Schumpeter's definition stresses that individual *liberty* is maintained by the right to choose representatives through the ballot box, empowering said

representatives to campaign for political outcomes and make political decisions on their behalf. The prevalence and longevity of liberal democracy suggests that regardless of academic issues with the term itself, it is still the dominant form of government across the majority of developed nation states.

2.4 Deliberative democracy

To state that the UK is an established liberal democracy in no way suggests that it is perfect and should not or could not be improved. As detailed, the UK has a democracy suffering from low levels of participation in elections; where over half the electorate have little or no political interest; where the respect for politicians is at an all-time low and the majority of the electorate have significant reservations as to the efficacy of the current system of government. One other important flaw in the current system is that even with higher levels of turnout in elections, the result is often under-representation due to the arrangement used in those elections.

The *first past the post* electoral system has been discarded in favour of proportional representation systems in many elections within the UK. It is, though, still the electoral system for UK general elections and also for some English local elections. First past the post, whilst intuitively fair inevitably results in under-representation and potential exclusion of up to 49% of voters on any one ballot box decision.

One potential solution to under-representation would be the further institution of proportional representation systems, which are already used in the devolved UK assemblies in Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, as well as local government elections in Scotland and Northern Ireland. One of the usual effects of proportional representation elections is that they tend to produce results where no one party has an outright majority. These elections usually result in coalition governments or minority governments which both require a level of cooperation and consensus which are anathema to first past the post. It should be noted, however, that this has not always been the outcome, demonstrated by the SNP having an outright majority in the parliament of 2011-2016 and only just falling short of another majority in the election of 2016.

The UK held a referendum in 2011 whereby the vote went against adopting the *alternative vote* or 'AV' system, meaning the first past the post system remains in place today. However, the recent movement away from the historic two-party order of Conservative and Labour dominated parliaments (in terms of votes cast), with a dramatic increase for minority parties such as the SNP and UKIP during the 2015 general election, has led to further calls to revisit

the notion of proportional representation. The inequalities of the current system were laid bare in 2015 when a total UKIP vote of 3,881,099 (BBC 2015b) quite preposterously, returned the party only one seat in parliament. The fact that a referendum on the subject was held as recently as 2011 would, however, suggest that any re-visitation of the subject is highly unlikely (regardless of how appropriate) in the foreseeable future.

The absence of a foreseeable move to PR, particularly in the light of the requirement for the two main UK parties of Conservative and Labour to push for a system which would almost inevitably result in a significant loss of political power, is just one example of the manner in which our current political system fails to take into account the views of those who lose a ballot box decision. Deliberative democracy, which is intended to reach democratic decisions through strength of argument via a reciprocal process of rational exchanges, is for many a way to address this issue. Proponents of the deliberative model of democracy, such as John Rawls, Joshua Cohen, John Dryzek, Jurgen Habermas and Seyla Benhabib, are generally driven by the notion that deliberation is a better, reciprocal method of decision making than the ruthlessness of the ballot box alone. In this regard it stands contrary to liberal theory which sees politics as an aggregation of self-interest without any genuine presence of the *common good* (Dewey 1963), a position which is highlighted by the theory of the majority generally attributed to John Adams (1794).

The discourse theory of deliberation as proposed by Habermas and others, it is claimed, produces an increased legitimacy in political decision making through citizen participation and public reasoning. Joseph Bessette (1980) is credited with first using the term *deliberative democracy,* whilst Dryzek (2005) states that it is *the* dominant approach in democratic theory. The main idea behind the initial deliberative model of democracy is that it has 'a truth tracking potential' (Habermas 2006 p.411). What Habermas, one of the most recognised proponents of the model, is suggesting, is that the process of deliberation can bring about consensus which in some manner implies that the correct decision or the *truth* will be the end product. In coming to a decision (based upon a binary question of yes or no) following a period of public consideration prior to a democratic vote, the resulting decision will therefore be legitimate. Habermas states that there is empirical evidence from small scale studies where the process of deliberation has resulted in decisions being taken contrary to *rational choice theory* (Neblo 2005; Habermas 2005; Conover and Searing 2005; Steiner 2004). Rational choice theory works from the premise that individuals take decisions based upon their own personal preference, as opposed to a wider *common good.* In such instances then, the individual has changed their mind contrary to personal choice through consideration, following discourse with those of an opposing viewpoint.

Computer mediated communications of the kind that are central to this project pose problems for deliberative theory in terms of:

> The lack of face-to-face interaction between the participants in a shared practice of collective decision making and the lack of reciprocity between the roles of speakers and addressees in an egalitarian exchange of opinions (Habermas 2005 p.415).

Reciprocity is a vital component of deliberative theory (Elstub and McLaverty 2014) whereby arguing in terms that others can accept through giving of reasons, encompasses the process of exchange for mutual benefit of the parties involved. Fehr, Fischbacher and Gachter (2002) argue that voluntary cooperation is for many as natural as the propensity for self-interest in terms of human bargaining. Here, Habermas seems to be suggesting that the physical exclusion of online communication between participants prevents the social relationships which help to drive the will to reach equitable agreement on any given issue. Habermas also states that the role of the media in selecting and shaping messages is detrimental to the process of deliberation. The possibility of online deliberation has received much academic attention in recent times (Baek, Wojcieszak and Delli Carpini 2012; Wright 2012; Goldberg 2010; Dahlberg 2007; Wright and Street 2007; Tambini 1999). The possibility of deliberation and the broader subject of online communication and its role in decision making in the independence referendum is a central question of the project.

Second generation deliberative theory such as that of Bohman (1997) and Gutmann and Thompson (1998) developed the position of Rawls and Habermas whereby:

> First generation deliberative democrats…debated the normative justifications of deliberative democracy, interpretations and necessary components of the theory, but failed to take account of the sheer complexity of contemporary societies (Elstub 2010 p.291).

Such complexity, as Elstub puts it, includes the impact of cultural pluralism in reinforcing particular values and the manner in which social inequality will in all likelihood preclude certain sections of society from the deliberative process. The challenges of such exclusion were to be taken into account and guarded against if deliberation was to be seen as effective and inclusive. The acceptance of such developments in deliberative theory from its first incarnations, bring it much closer to the *agonistic pluralism* of Chantal Mouffe (which is

discussed later in this chapter) in the notion that consensus is idealistic and unrealistic in a consistent normative sense.

The third generation deliberative theorists (Parkinson 2006; O'Flynn 2006; Baber and Bartlett 2005 amongst others) were more concerned with the practical institutionalisation of deliberative democracy than its normative premise. The suggested mechanisms for deliberative democracy include citizen juries, consensus conferences, planning cells, deliberative polls and citizen's assemblies. Held surmises that:

> Whilst the concept of deliberative democracy now spans a wide range of positions, its main advocates use it to distinguish a political approach focused on improving the quality of democracy. At issue is enhancing the nature and form of political participation, not just increasing it for its own sake (Held 2006 p.232).

More recent developments in the theory, such as that of Jane Mansbridge (2010), explicitly accept the benefits of deliberation without the previously central, arguably unrealistic, requirement for consensus. Mansbridge accepts the role of *liberal self-interest* alongside the *common good,* and holds that deliberation is valid and worthy in enhancing the democratic process when the participants are, 'constrained by the deliberative democratic ideals of mutual respect, equality, reciprocity, mutual justification, the search of fairness, and the absence of coercive power' (ibid. p.94). Mansbridge makes the important distinction, which separates deliberation from other discourse theories such as agonism, in requiring the setting for deliberation to specifically be well natured rather than coercive and antagonistic.

The arguments around the internet and more specifically social media participation in the modern day, are not as to whether the internet and social media have at least the *potential* to enhance the democratic process, notwithstanding narrower arguments on deliberation, but rather to what extent this potential is being fulfilled and at what costs (Sunstein 2009; Hindman 2008). The reality however, of establishing the necessary climate for deliberation, particularly online, is questionable. Dryzek (2005) suggests the difficulty lies in the different settings for deliberation and whether they are *hot* or *cold*, suggesting that *cold* settings such as deliberative opinion polls involving non-partisan participants, regularly achieve persuasion and do indeed see participants change position through deliberation.

As far as the Scottish independence referendum is concerned, we can apply Dryzek's criteria for *hot* deliberation where he states, 'deliberation tied to sovereign authority in divided societies is about as *hot* a setting as one can imagine' (Dryzek 2005 p.229). We ought,

however, to make the distinction that whilst the independence referendum was highly emotive and of great significance to the participants, it would be entirely inappropriate to categorise it with the armed conflicts in Bosnia and Rwanda on which Dryzek bases his arguments. Dryzek specifically points to identity-based arguments as being the most unlikely to easily change opinions (identity was suggested to be a key driver in position taking in the referendum and is discussed at length in later chapters). He goes on to clarify the need for a period of reflection, physically removed from the *hot* setting, if they are to save face by 'not admitting it for the present' (ibid. p.239). As far as online deliberation is concerned, it could be argued that the removal of face to face deliberation, whilst likely encouraging incivility and preventing Habermasian egalitarian social relationships, also allows for participants to reflect from a distance and take the opposing position, whilst saving face away from a physical deliberative forum.

The challenge it would seem, then, is to create an online environment whereby the type of passionate discourse that is ultimately strived for remains within the boundaries which allow for it to be deemed as a satisfactory element of, or even an improvement in, the democratic communication process.

2.5   Agonistic pluralism

Deliberative democracy is a much-debated concept championed by many but contested by others, some in support of *agonism*, often referred to as agonistic pluralism. Agonistic pluralism is seen by a number of contemporary democratic theorists (for example see Honig 2013; Mouffe 2005; Connolly 2005) to be a more genuine normative representation of the democratic process than deliberative theory. Whilst there are variations in the detail of agonistic theory dependent upon the author of the work, Mouffe, writing with Laclau in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Toward a Radical Democratic Politics* (2001), and individually with *Agonistics Thinking the World Politically* (2013) and also *On the Political* (2005). The latter is probably the most recognisable proponent of the theory, and it is Mouffe's model of agonism that will be used as a basis for the arguments presented in this study.

It would, however, be helpful to detail the normative facets of agonistic theory and explain how Mouffe's agonism differs to other contemporary agonists, namely Bonnie Honig and her inspiration Hannah Arendt, and also William Connolly. The term agonism is derived from the Greek word *agon,* meaning contest, and is generally perceived as relating to competition, struggle and particularly in the political sense, conflict, and more specifically conflict between individuals and groups, in democratic society. Agonism developed as a theory largely in

response to deliberative democratic models and represents the notion of ineradicable pluralism whereby opposing, legitimate value preferences negate the possibility of consensus without exclusion. Other established norms of agonism include conflict as not just being inevitable in contemporary politics, but also productive and desirable.

Hegemonic and counter hegemonic practices are vital to Mouffe's agonism. Cultural hegemony, in Mouffe's eyes, relates to the power struggle that goes beyond the Marxist class struggle and is evident in, 'every type of social order' (Carpentier and Cammaerts 2006). The unending hegemonic pursuit as one prevailing view in a binary argument is replaced by another, for Mouffe, dictates that consensus without exclusion is unachievable. In other words it embodies 'the impossibility of a fully inclusive *rational* consensus' (Andreas 2000 in Schaap 2007 p11). The afore-mentioned agonists would agree that passion is endemic in politics and that identity is a key driver of participation in the democratic process. Finally, the notion of the antagonistic we/they or friend/enemy relationship (Mouffe 2005) (as attributable to Nazi sympathiser Carl Schmitt) is accepted to differing degrees as being another important component of the political, though adapted in a manner which is compatible with democratic pluralism, something far removed from Schmitt's original version of the theory.

The specific differences attributed to *politics* and *the political* are the central premise in the relationship between the other key components of conflict, hegemony, passion and antagonism, in Mouffe's version of agonistic pluralism. *Politics* for Mouffe is procedural and mechanistic, embodying political practices and institutions, whilst *the political* embodies the social, and that social is driven by *antagonism*. It is, however, an antagonism, it is important to note, in the form of an adversarial encounter without force as opposed to an *enemy* conflict in the commonly accepted sense of the phrase. Mouffe explains that:

> I have suggested distinguishing between *the political*, which is linked to the dimension of antagonism present in human societies – an antagonism that can emerge within a large variety of social relations – and *politics,* whose aims are establishing an order and organising human coexistence [through political practices and institutions] under conditions that are marked by *The political* and thus always conflictual (Mouffe 2014 p150).

Mouffe attempts to clarify what is an abstract theory which is open to contestation, by separating political *science*, which Mouffe sees as empirical enquiry and political *theory* which is 'the domain of philosophers, who enquire not about facts of *politics* but the essence of *the political*' (Mouffe 2005 p.8). The differing interpretation of *the political* is one of the ways that

Mouffe's agonism differs from Arendt (although Arendt never specifically used the term *the political)* whom Mouffe sees as identifying it with liberty and common action rather than conflict and antagonism (ibid.). In this respect, Mouffe sees Arendt's agonism as communitarian and incorporating the ability to see things from multiple perspectives in a Kantian expression of 'enlarged thought' (Mouffe 2014 p.152) whereby the individual has the ability to see issues in a way that others holding different viewpoints to themselves do, ultimately resulting with consensus in the public sphere. This nuanced difference of Arendt's definition of *the political* brings it closer to the first generation of deliberative democratic theory.

Mouffe, in her own words in *By Way of a Postscript* (2014), distances herself from the Arendtian work of Bonnie Honig, whose concept of agonism in her eyes is built upon, 'preventing the closure of the questioning process' (ibid. p.152) but fails to articulate the counter hegemonic struggle (as detailed on the previous page) which Mouffe sees as ever present. William Connolly is also seen by Mouffe as having, in her eyes, fundamental differences when it comes to their respective theories of agonism. Mouffe states that Connolly is influenced by Frederick Nietzsche rather than Arendt, and she agrees with Connolly's belief in the requirement of *agonistic respect*, which is an important aspect of both of their visions of agonism. This requires each individual to acknowledge the other in any confrontation, as having a legitimate role in the democratic process (an assertion that is somewhat controversial for reasons we come to shortly).

For Mouffe though, not all antagonisms can be transformed into agonism (in the manner which Arendt believes so) through agonistic respect which is partly delivered by the afore-mentioned 'enlarged thought'. This limits the *agonistic respect* that Connolly (Mouffe suggests) deems to be perpetual:

> Must all positions be considered legitimate and must they be granted a place inside the agonistic public sphere? Or must certain claims be excluded because they undermine the conflictual consensus that constitutes the symbolic framework in which opponents recognise themselves as legitimate adversaries (ibid. p.153).

The crucial moment when the notion of agonistic respect becomes limited for Mouffe, is at the point where a democratic decision is required to be made, and this is when, for her, the persistent hegemonic struggle is situated. For example, decision time within the independence referendum was at the ballot box on the 18th September 2014, the result of which would see one side prevail and the result would see the exclusion of the losing side. The implication is

that the space for conflictual consensus is then closed (at least temporarily) contrary to Connolly's theory, and the antagonism of the losing position remains.

Conflict and the impossibility of (rational) consensus along with the fundamental unending existence of the *other* are absolutely central to Mouffe's agonism. The point of the impossibility of consensus without exclusion is predicated by the assertion that all things *political* cannot be decided from a strictly rational point of view, and this leads to the irreducibility of pluralism. This is a point that Mouffe reiterates again and again as her works develop and is explicit in her most recent book, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically (*2013). Mouffe believes that the task for democracy is to create spaces which allow for 'conflictual consensus' (ibid.) which sees adversaries agreeing on the ethical principles which are the basis of their association, for example liberty and equality, (ibid.) but disagreeing on the interpretation of the said principles to exist and be played out. Mouffe refers to *conflictual consensus* in the setting of the European Union whereby the starting position is a belief in *the Union* but contestation as to elements of, for example, its constitution. The question at hand in terms of this project, is whether the independence referendum fits with these assertions and whether the internet and more specifically social media platforms such as Twitter, are a place for them to be played out and whether these do, or can, contribute to enhancing the democratic communication process in the UK.

There are a number of writers who choose to dispute the arguments put forward by Mouffe, and in doing so generally defend deliberative democracy (see Erman 2009; Karppinen, Moe and Svensson 2008; Dryzek 2005; Brady 2004). Knops (2007) and Dryzek (2005) deliver pointed arguments whereby they suggest that the main flaw in Mouffe's agonism is the unanswered question of where the *agonistic respect* between adversaries, which is the starting point of the journey to agonism, comes from, if not from some kind of intrinsic notion of the common good. Erman stands very much in opposition to Mouffe in the area of conflict and the universalism of the *them* and *us* argument, instead declaring that such conflict is the basis of deliberative theory rather than a reason to dismiss it. Brady (2004) and Karppinen, Moe and Svensson (2008) put forward positive cases for the possibilities of a combined theoretical argument whereby the deliberative and the agonistic, ought not to be seen as inherently incompatible but recognised as 'ways in which political contestation can support the achievement of consensus' (Brady 2004 p.351).

Karppinen, Moe and Svensson (2008) interpret the deliberative/agonistic argument from the same field as this study, in the area of democratic public communication. This author again suggest that the differences between the two are nuanced rather than inherently oppositional,

suggesting 'that the public sphere is best understood as an arena of articulating expressions of both solidarity and difference, and in a general sense, this understanding is shared by both Mouffe and Habermas' (ibid. p.8). Similarly, Honig (1993), correctly points out the perpetual presence of *settlement* and *unsettlement* in politics. Karppinen goes on to state 'that an openness to potential combinations of the two approaches might have positive implications for media and communication research' (ibid. p.11). These two approaches have been used in combination, as suggested by Karppinen, in evaluating the role of Twitter in the independence referendum because, in line with the fact of *settlement* and *unsettlement* as just stated, eliminating either from the discussion seems inappropriate and counterproductive in explaining the realities of online political debate.

2.6   Conclusions to chapter 2

In this chapter the core components of democratic theory have been illustrated and explanations have been given as to how these relate to the broader project. *Politics* has become a dirty word in the UK driven by distrust of politicians and disaffection with the political process partly in the wake of numerous high-profile scandals. This, coupled with a perceived lack of alternative choice as the main parties until very recently have all converged on the centre ground, has resulted in falling levels of participation in Westminster elections. A major issue with democracy in this study is the manner in which trust in the traditional media in general, driven by a lack of public faith in their overall will to expose political wrongdoings, and a perceived unhealthy closeness to the state, has perhaps been a factor in the important development in political communication in the form of social media. In combination, two core models of democratic theory, namely deliberation and agonism, provide us with a theoretical framework to analyse the impact that social media platforms such as Twitter have had upon that democratic process during the campaign preceding the Scottish independence referendum of 2014.

3 Pluralism

3.1 Overview of chapter 3

Literature on political pluralism is extremely diverse and the most learned scholars of the subject disagree as to how we define pluralism, why pluralism matters, and what pluralism can add to contemporary political debate. Within this chapter, political pluralism is discussed, as pluralism helps explain where power lies within the democratic process and is the basis of later theories of media pluralism. This will provide a foundation for evaluating how the theories reflect, if at all, the debate which surrounded the Scottish independence referendum of 2014. The term 'pluralism' has been attributed to the works of a multitude of political theorists and has evolved into a theory which is accused of being vague and complex. With this in mind, the main debates which surround the definition of the term in its various forms are discussed.

Historically pluralism has been sub-divided into categories such as philosophical pluralism, classical pluralism, elite pluralism and neo-classical pluralism. These categorisations are far from distinct and much of the literature overlaps into different schools of pluralist thought. For the purposes of this study, pluralism is thematically explored in the areas of: pluralism as a theory of truth and opposition to monism; pluralism and the defence of allegations of pluralism as mere relativism incorporating pragmatism and fallibilism; value pluralism and also pluralist group theory and the personality of the state. In doing so, the works of prominent pluralists such as William James, Mary Parker Follet, Charles Pierce and John Dewey, in the early twentieth century and classical pluralists such as Robert Dahl, Charles Lindblom, and David Truman in the 1960's are discussed; as well as more recent pluralist thinkers such as David Marsh and William Connolly, and also a critic of pluralism - Gregor McLennan - in the modern day.

3.2 Pluralism and monism

Pluralism is multi-faceted and from the perspective of early philosophical pluralists can be contextualised as a theory of power, influence, and truth. The term pluralism is used as a prefix for a plethora of theory regarding a wide range of subjects such as religion, culture, values, politics and media amongst many others and generally presupposes, an acceptance of and a commitment to, diversity and toleration of difference. Many of the key components of philosophical pluralism as a theory of truth which stands in opposition to monism can be found in the work of William James, and particularly his series of lectures presented to audiences in both Oxford and Harvard in James' native America, titled *A Pluralistic Universe* (1908).

The work is largely a response to the works of German philosophers of the time such as Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, who take the position of holism, incorporating theories of rationalism and absolutism, whereby 'the full truth about anything involves more than that thing. In the end nothing less than the whole of everything can be the truth of anything at all' (James 1908 p.22). Hegel's holism is founded upon the premise that theory should ultimately reveal complete worldviews and that reductionism - the breakdown of the entity into its constitutive parts, alters the entity so that it ceases to have meaning from its original form. This is not sufficient for James' pluralist philosophy where relations and sense experience are vital to explaining his version of truth:

> Nothing real is absolutely simple, that every smallest bit of experience is a multim in parvo [much in little] plurally related, that each relation is one aspect, character, or function, way of its being taken, or way of its taking something else; and that bit of reality when actively engaged in one of the relations is not by that very fact engaged in all other relations simultaneously (ibid. p.69).

Pluralism then stands squarely in opposition to monism, whereby all relations are engaged simultaneously. They are all part of the whole and nothing factually can be absent from anything else. It is this notion of the *each* and its possibilities and relations outside of the *all,* which is central to James' pluralism. For James, there is not one all-encompassing singular truth of anything: instead there are a multiplicity of valid positions and relations that are all perhaps interpreted differently from the experience in which the individual encounters them. The enduring part of James' theory is a commitment to multiplicity and rejection of the exclusion of other possibilities which is an inevitable consequence of monism. The celebration of toleration of differing points of view politically, and the resulting democracy which encourages difference and defends minority opinion, is what modern day pluralism has become synonymous with. The pervasiveness of the pursuit and celebration of *pluralistic democracy* which is endemic in the present day, can then be traced to the early pluralist thinkers such as James.

William Connolly, a modern day philosophical pluralist, is heavily influenced by James and provides a useful synopsis of what James' pluralism stands for, by summarising what he stands opposed to:

> James knows roughly what he opposes: (a) the variant of mechanistic materialism which posits a unified world knowable through fixed laws unconnected to any power above nature; (b) monistic rationalism or absolutism, which postulates a rational whole

in which we are set, providing us with transcendent obligations to pursue; (c) traditional Christian dualism, which projects an omnipotent, commanding God presiding over both nature and humanity (Connolly 2005 p.69).

It is important to note, however, that James' rejection of monism, absolutism, and religious dualism only applies when these theories are presented in rejection of all other theories, without such a caveat James' pluralism would be as guilty of the monistic restrictions to philosophy, as to the ones which he stands opposed to. For James, the existence of such theories are perfectly valid when we accept that others are *entitled* to reject such a position in preference to other, perhaps conflicting theories.

3.3   Pluralism, relativism and pragmatism

It is with such a commitment to the validity of multiple perspectives and rejection of singular truths that brings critics to suggest that pluralism is merely relativism. To qualify such an assertion, we must first explain the basics of relativist theory. Relativism can be traced back to ancient Athens and Protagoras 490-421 B.C. and forward to post-modern cultural relativists such as Foucault, Kuhn and Peter Winch. Relativism can be sub categorised into the areas of moral, descriptive, normative and meta-ethical relativism. These sub-categories are all versions of a theory built upon the foundation that no single viewpoint or value can be held as an absolute truth, therefore all opinions are relative.

These sub-categories range from normative relativism at one end of the spectrum, whereby we should tolerate the thoughts and actions of others, even if they are contrary to our own cultural or moral standards, to descriptive relativism, whereby it is acknowledged that different courses of action will be held as appropriate for different individuals and cultures regardless, when presented with the same foundational facts (Rorty 1982). The key difference between relativism and pluralism lies in the propensity for toleration of different value positioning. To take relativism to extremes, whereby it becomes nihilistic, is to in essence suggest there is no right and wrong in terms of moral positions. Normative relativists, then, may be inclined to accept the extreme positions of others as just and acceptable, whereby pluralism will not, for reasons discussed shortly with the aid of pragmatism theory.

However, as Connolly states, 'pluralists are not relativists…our image of culture encourages us to embrace certain things in this particular place, to be indifferent to some, to be wary of others, and to fight militantly against the continuation of yet others' (Connolly 2005 p.42). Berlin qualifies the pluralist position further when he states, 'value pluralists are not relativists. On the contrary, they insist that there is a world of objective values. They also insist, however,

that there is no *perfect whole* or *ultimate solution* in all the different values that might be reconciled' (Berlin 2013 p.13 in Cinalli and O'Flynn 2014 p.83).

Pluralism then, when taken at face value, even with the kind of qualifications of both Connolly and Berlin, with its toleration and celebration of multiplicity of value positions, is still understandably mistaken for relativism. The answer for some to the pluralist/relativist dilemma lies with the theory of pragmatism. Pragmatism is a philosophical movement of the late 19th Century from the United States of America in which James was a main theorist as were Charles Pierce and John Dewey. Pierce is often credited as the founder of pragmatism, 'pragmatism is sometimes said to have originated in 1878, when Pierce published the article, *How to Make Our Ideas Clear*' (Titus 1994 p.290).

James' *radical empiricism* in his own admission (James 1908) is essentially the same theory as pragmatism. Dewey preferred to use the term *instrumentalism* rather than pragmatism, and in the same vein as James, focused upon the importance of experience in documenting fact rather than imagined hypothesis whereby, 'experience is not a veil that shuts man off from nature, it is the only means of penetrating further into the secrets of nature' (Titus 1994 p.295). Dewey's passion for the necessity of inquiry as a normative democratic duty, gives further reason for the ongoing re-visitation and challenge of existing theory, 'inasmuch as democracy is concerned with the interests of the governed, it is also concerned with inquiry, which helps us to form and revise interests' (Festenstein 2001 p.742.)

The following explanation of the Pragmatic Method is taken from lectures delivered by James himself to the Lowell Institute in Boston in 1906 and 1907:

> The pragmatic method is primarily a method of settling metaphysical disputes that otherwise might be interminable. Is the world one or many?-fated or free?-material or spiritual?-here are notions either of which may or may not hold good in the world; and disputes over such notions are unending. The pragmatic method in such cases is to try to interpret each notion by tracing its practical consequences. What difference would it practically make to anyone if this notion rather than that notion were true? If no practical difference whatever can be traced, then the alternatives mean practically the same thing, and all dispute is idle. Whenever a dispute is serious, we ought to be able to show some practical difference that must follow from one side or the other's being right (James 1908).

If we take James' metaphysical disputes and substitute them with the practical consequence of actions or in political terms of for example, policy formulation, we can further see they are no longer merely relative when they produce different, manifest outcomes. If we take the empirical study of this project, the Scottish independence referendum of 2014 as an example, we can more clearly see how pragmatism qualifies the pluralist position. In what was a binary argument fuelled by different, entirely legitimate political motivations of unionism and nationalism/separatism, the final result would have practical consequences in areas of certainly sovereign identity, and perhaps, financial well-being. The pluralist, then, accepts the rights and motivations of both value positions and then encourages debate (perhaps through social media) into the practical consequences of the outcomes of either choice.

Bertrand Russell was one of the critics of the pragmatist ideology. Russell points to the ironically *practical* difficulty in the way that we just do not know what the usefulness of belief will be ahead of time, using the example of Columbus' exploration of the Americas in 1492. 'We can't just look this up in a book; we have to determine its effect on us (or as James puts it, its *cash value*). But how can we know this ahead of time?' (Groothuis 2013 p.1). Russell also points to the problem of knowing what effect beliefs have produced *after* the fact; the meaning of truth simply being its ability to produce desirable states of affairs, whilst stating that pragmatism fails to deal with the fact that a belief may *work* and not be *true* and that there are a myriad of 'useless truths' (ibid. p.2).

Susan Haack also cites Russell's criticism of pragmatists, finding 'their stress on the experiential cash value of truths to be distasteful [saying that] pragmatism was an *engineer's philosophy*' (Haack 1976 p.247). Kadlec further articulated the feeling of vulgarity in pragmatism's rejection of anything foundational, in preference for only the empirical, stating that, 'pragmatism as a philosophy reflects with an almost disarming candour the spirit of the prevailing business culture [and can be taken as] a thin philosophy of bourgeois liberalism' (Kadlec 2006 p.529). Such arguments centred particularly on pragmatism and the discovery of *truth* per se, have credibility, however, pragmatism as a method for attributing *cash value* as James would put it, and attributing reason to potential outcomes, helps overcome allegations of pluralism as mere relativism.

The concept of fallibilism and its relation to academic enquiry is an important part of pragmatist theory. Fallibilism is a concept that can be applied to multiple disciplines:

> Fallibilism is the thesis that humans can have *reliable* knowledge, but never *absolutely* certain knowledge. All knowledge is a product of human reasoning and human

observation, and, since neither of these methods is infallible, all knowledge produced by these methods may be proven wrong in the future (Cooke 2003 p158).

Such a perspective on the fallibility of people and theory, may seem unquestionable to the modern-day scholar as it has been the basis of enquiry for many years. Such a perspective, however, is at odds with classical, foundational philosophy and its search for the absolute and the unquestionable. The theory of fallibilism then, encourages us to revisit and question our own work and theory as well as that of others. It gives important impetus for pluralism in such matters whilst respecting the rights of those to continue to seek absolute theory, which by its very definition encourages us to stop thinking and stop questioning existing theory.

3.4   Value pluralism

The celebration of difference and acceptance of multiple truths which we can trace back to James' theory, developed into what we can class as value pluralism, and it is value pluralism that is perhaps the core tenet of pluralism that is evident, valued, and pursued in the modern day:

> It has become commonplace to claim that a 'value-pluralist' movement has emerged in modern political theory. This 'movement' owes a clear debt to Berlin's work. The prominent members of this so-called movement usually include, among others, Bernard Williams, Stuart Hampshire, Joseph Raz, Steven Lukes, Thomas Nagel, Charles Taylor, Charles Larmore and John Gray. Despite the differences between them, it is clear that one thing they do have in common is a belief in the recognition of the plurality of values, both as a fact and as a theory about the modern world, and this presents political thinking with a distinct set of new problems (Lassman 2011 p.7).

Value pluralism accepts that people will hold different values and that monistic rationality cannot solve dilemmas of moral uncertainty. Whilst this project is more concerned, certainly empirically, with procedural pluralism and the democratic communication process, value pluralism is an important aspect of the broader pluralist philosophy and the two should be considered as complimentary aspects of the overall theory.

Isiah Berlin, as noted by Lassman (ibid.) is probably the most recognised value pluralist as postulated in his prominent essay *Two Concepts of Liberty* (1958). Berlin's work centres upon the concepts of *positive* and *negative* liberty:

Negative liberty is the absence of obstacles, barriers or constraints. One has negative liberty to the extent that actions are available to one in this negative sense. Positive liberty is the possibility of acting — or the fact of acting — in such a way as to take control of one's life and realize one's fundamental purposes (Carter 2003).

Berlin rejects that rationality is capable of successfully answering moral questions and sees conflict (in line with Mouffe's agonism in the previous chapter) as an ever-present part of the human condition. Critics such as Moore (2009) argue that value pluralism defeats itself and makes liberalism contentious, because of the ranking of moral decisions:

My main contention is that all three of these otherwise quite different efforts to find some normative consequences in value pluralism rest on the same illegitimate move: all of them implicitly violate the premise of value pluralism by assuming that some value or combination of values can be treated as supremely important and therefore capable of rank-ordering value systems (Moore 2009 p245).

Rawls' take on this problem in *Political Liberalism* (2005a), which was a follow up to his seminal work titled *Theory of Justice* (2005b) which advanced theories of *social contract* in keeping with the works of Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau, as he develops the concept of *reasonable pluralism*. Reasonable pluralism allows Rawls to extract certain values out of the deliberative such as moral, religious, and philosophical doctrines and suggests that fundamental disagreement on those values is natural and appropriate, again however, the criticisms of such an approach are driven by the question of where and how the ranking of different moral positions stem from.

Considering the different strands of pluralist theory as discussed, when *pluralism* is spoken of by contemporary politicians and political commentators, it would be reasonable to suggest that they most often do so, not in the way of James' philosophical pursuit of truth; or indeed Dahl's procedural pluralism which originally sought to explain where power was truly situated in the democratic process in the USA; nor Mouffe's agonistic pluralism but predominantly in the name of value pluralism and its commitment to diversity and inclusion (Connolly 2005; Galston 1999; McLennan 1995).

3.5   Pluralist group theory

Grouping or forming associations to achieve political goals is as old as democracy itself. Groups have formed in pursuit of various political aims, including; for democracy as the state

system of government itself; for the rights of different sections of society to vote; in support of and opposition to issues and policies; to rally support against political systems; and for the institution or removal of political representatives. The normative assumption of physical strength in numbers was perhaps a precursor for accepting the majority opinion as being politically legitimate, and this became a basic utilitarian principle of democracy. Dahl and Lindblom identify five political effects of interest groups as detailed below:

- More effective than individuals

- Facilitate healthy political competition

- Group bargaining process creates a barrier to extremism

- Overlapping memberships of social groups discourages unilateral thought and action

- Extensive networks help to ensure the spread of information and communication channels (Dahl and Lindblom 1976 p.304-305)

These effects are hypothesised by Dahl and Lindblom in relation to group leadership and in the results chapters of the thesis these effects are considered in detail and are then applied to the effects of Twitter as evidenced within the empirical study. This is done to ascertain the relevance or otherwise of pluralist group theory in the modern day digital age of social media. Theories around the influence and characteristics of groups upon the political process are a central theme within pluralist literature and have been written about by the vast majority of recognised pluralist thinkers, including Dahl (2005); Dahl and Lindblom (1976); Truman (1951); Parker-Follett (1918) and also the English pluralists - Cole, Barker, Maitland, Figgis and Laski as told by Runciman (1997). The work of these authors, in respect of groups within politics, is commonly classified as p*rocedural pluralism* and is distinct from, although still related to, the philosophical pluralism of James and Connolly.

Mary Parker-Follett, writing at around the same time as James in 1918, advanced James' work by focussing upon the role of the group within society - 'The group process contains the secret of collective life, it is the key to democracy, it is the master lesson for each individual to learn, it is our chief hope for the political, the social, the international life of the future' (Parker–Follett p.97 1918). Parker Follet details how all members of groups must be participants and not lazy or quiet and how the group process is not about dominant characters taking centre stage, but rather that the personality of the group will organically emerge and take precedent. Parker-Follett's group personality (and later, state personality theorised by the English pluralists)

explores the manner in which political groups take on a personality which itself is perhaps distinct from the individual members of the group.

In *Pluralism and the Personality of the State* (1997) Runciman provides a detailed analysis of what is perceived to be the 'golden age' of English pluralism in the 1920s with the works of Maitland, Laski, Cole, Barker and Figgis. Runciman again focuses upon association and the group theory of power:

> The question of how men form themselves into associations lies at the heart of western political thought. An association is a group of human beings possessed of a distinct, formal identity based on the relation subsisting between its members, and it may fairly be said that it is around such groups that our political understanding has been constructed (Runciman 1997 p.1).

The English pluralists' works were largely a result of theories proposed by the German scholar Otto Von Gierke in *Das Deutche Gennossenschaftsrecht* (1873, cited in Runciman 1997). According to Runciman (1997), Von Gierke seeks to explain the personality of the state through the concept of *societas*: 'an association of individuals, each of whom conditions his actions to accord with the terms of the joint agreement' and *universitas* - 'an association of individuals considered collectively to form a single entity itself capable of action' (ibid. p.13, p.14). It is the suggestion of the group personality as a single entity which is the key proposition here. Runciman goes on to say that 'the modern English term which best approximates to Von Gierke's vision of the state is *pluralism*, which is suggestive of a diversity founded on coalitions of individuals rather than individuals themselves' (ibid. p.63).

Maitland suggested that sovereign permission was required to acknowledge the group in question. Figgis spoke of *communitas communitariam* seeing society as self-formed, self-governing associations with the state retaining coercive power though very much in the background. Barker identified *the discredited State* whereby he sought, 'some sustainable alternatives to the theories of group personality that had been set out by Von Gierke, Maitland and Figgis. Barker was consistently resistant to the idea that some *thing* is created when a group of individuals come together, and sought instead to construct a formula that would convey an *oneness without any transcendent one*' (ibid. p.152). With this in mind, the role of the State was intentionally restricted and seen as largely pertaining to law and order.

Cole is synonymous with the term *Guild Socialism* whereby, like Figgis, he did not believe that the state should be perceived as subordinating other groups and believed in natural multiple

associations. 'In *conflicting social obligations*, Cole defines his terms as follows: *The State* means government and non-government; and *community* means all social life, whether organised or not' (ibid. p.172). Laski (1916) talked similarly about *The Personality of Associations* which was important because, 'it contains the earliest use by an English political theorist of the term 'pluralistic' to describe what has previously been called *polyarchic* or *federalistic* political structures' (ibid. p.187).

Although the afore mentioned English pluralist authors differed amongst other things in areas of group personality, sovereignty, and state personality, the importance of the group as a reference for how we view our democracy was a common theme that persisted with later generations of pluralist thinkers. Group theory and its origins is important to this project as it addresses the second research question which asks: *how does pluralist group theory aid our understanding of Twitter based activism during the Scottish independence referendum 2014?* In doing so, the theories described here are applied to group and state personality and the author asks if they are still relevant. Also, it may be asked if they advanced or detracted from the role of groups and the collective conception of *the State,* in relation to the contemporary manifestation of groups in the age of computer mediated communications.

3.6   Classical pluralism

David Truman, Robert Dahl and Charles Lindblom are considered as the leading classical American pluralists of the 1950s and 1960s. Although their works are situated in American democracy with its federalist political system, the general principles of the work based around what can be also be described as *procedural pluralism* (Lassman 2011) are transferable to the United Kingdom and other liberal democracies. The works of Truman, Dahl, and Lindblom are described by McLennan as advancing pluralism to being 'essentially the study of the formation and intermediation of political interest groups as a precondition of competitive liberal democracy' (McLennan 1995 p.34). In *The Governmental Process* (Truman 1951) the author is highly critical of the aforementioned English pluralists, stating that a lack of understanding of the cleavages that lead to political conflict and how broader representation will likely not eradicate conflict between or within competing groups. Truman, typically of the time, writes of his belief in the influence of interest groups upon the American political process and more specifically the relations between interest groups and the institutions of government.

Robert Dahl is perhaps the best-known pluralist writer and is identified as leading the movement known as *classical pluralism*. According to McLennan, he was regarded by many as, 'the doyen of conventional political pluralist theory' (McLennan 1995 p.4). Classical

pluralism, when situated in the climate of The Cold War, 'can be seen as a reaction to and a rejection of the monistic, imposing, communist USSR' (ibid. p.43). It is no coincidence that, in line with McLennan's quote, pluralism has flourished in western liberal democracies outside of times of major armed conflict as was the case with the English pluralists, pre-WW1 and the American classical pluralists, post-WW2. The appetite for pluralism, understandably, historically diminishes considerably during times of conflict which require centralised governments focused on meeting the demands of military operations. The classical pluralists had the ideal moment in history to appeal to those happy to stand in opposition to the *absolute* communist doctrine and to sell to the world the (often overegged) vision of a minimalist state focused upon the rights, liberties and freedoms of the individual, which is central to pluralist philosophy.

Dahl's most influential work in the subject area is titled, *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City* (2005). Dahl advances philosophical pluralist theory seeing pluralism as the overarching construct to explain who holds power in post-World War II America. Again, 'group theory' (particularly interest groups), and the manner in which groups with differing views, opinions, and values, compete to influence the state, are central to Dahlian philosophy. Dahl argues that his empirical observations of local government in the town of New Haven Connecticut, show how the state has the role of arbiter between vying interest groups to whom it is responsive, none of whom has any inbuilt advantage over the others. McLennan, in line with pluralist authors already mentioned, summarises the importance of *group theory* to pluralist philosophy by stating 'the central sociological agency for pluralists is the interest group and balanced interaction between these units of political motivation constitutes the foundation of advanced democracy' (McLennan 1989 p.20). If we accept McLennan's importance of interest groups in modern day advanced democracy, we have good reason to examine the impact of social media on the pre-existing group theory which was largely based in times before its existence. Therefore, this is the premise of the supplementary research question of the empirical study which is presented later in the thesis.

3.7   Contemporary pluralism

Classical pluralism with Dahl at its centre came in for much academic criticism on numerous different basic assumptions.

> Back then, pluralism was being attacked for its narrow notion of interest, the limited
> understanding of political action, the exclusion of various interest groups, the dismissal

of the political power and the economic resources of elites, and its flawed concept of tolerance, among other things (Schlosberg 1998 p.584).

Against a barrage of criticisms of conventional pluralism, the concept was developed by later authors who agreed with the shortcomings of earlier work (even Dahl himself acknowledged these shortcomings eventually) and developed theories still very much based upon the politics of difference but with an acknowledgement of the disproportionate power of business and the self-interest of government. As Wenman states, 'commentators now refer variously to *reformed* pluralism, to *neo* pluralism, and to *elite* pluralism' (Wenman 2003 p.58).

Post-modern pluralists such as David Marsh (1995) advanced pluralist theory by acknowledging the disparity of power between groups on the basis of wealth, a theory which became known as, 'elite pluralism'. Neo-pluralists argued that government and the state are far from impartial and have their own political agenda, rather than acting as a mediating umpire to a balanced environment of interest groups. Schlosberg sees William Connolly (previously mentioned as motivated by the theories of William James) as, 'one of the earliest critics of the limits and *bias* of pluralism, having returned to reclaim the meaning of pluralism- a more *critical* pluralism, he argues and its focus on difference and multiplicity' (Schlosberg 1998 p.584).

Neo pluralists, such as Connolly, are more concerned with value pluralism than the classical pluralists focus upon procedural pluralism. Connolly does, however, see that the role of government would ideally be as an impartial arbiter but that the reality is that politics and economics are intrinsically linked, with business groups having greater access to political power. Connolly provides us with his own definition of neo pluralism, an abstract pluralism, whereby:

> The philosophy of pluralism does encounter paradox; it has not been demonstrated to be true; and it does feel implausible to many. But it is not unique in these respects. Therefore, it can be advanced as a possibility to consider; it can be articulated in ways that tap into currents of experience heretofore ignored or discredited; and its presentation can profit from creative stretching and amendments in the established terms of discourse (Connolly 2005 p.75).

The neo-pluralists concept of *elite pluralism* sees contemporary governments as being inextricably linked to the pervasive business interests which Dahl suggested they should arbitrate between. The suggestion that big business has a disproportionate level of influence between competing groups in the present day is something that few would argue with. Such

a disproportionate level of political influence, based upon financial power, is in itself entirely undemocratic. Returning again to Dahl's five standards for *ideal* democracy, the emphasis is upon equality within the democratic process whereby all persons are seen as equal. If this is not the case, we do not have an ideal democracy. In the following chapter this concept is further explored by focusing upon the paradox of a democracy whereby the media is at certain levels *owned* by corporations who are in turn empowered to pursue their own political interests.

This does not, however, mean that pluralist group theory in a broader context is not relevant in the modern day. The types of groups are largely similar to those on which the English pluralists wrote, and they form for the same political reasons of gaining voice and influence in the political arena and continue to require the information which feeds and allows them to grow. Where they (sometimes, but certainly not yet always) gain that information from is changing, driven by technological developments of the internet and the growth of social media. A social media which some believe has the potential to redress the balance of power which is currently still firmly placed in the hands of a small group of social elites.

3.8   Conclusions to Chapter 3

We have then, a distinct body of work regarding pluralist theory which was grounded with the early philosophical American pluralists. The mantle was then taken up by the English pluralists with a focus upon the personality of the state and latterly focus on a more detailed approach to explaining the procedural element of group politics by Dahl and the classical pluralists. In terms of the democratic process, Dahl's classical pluralism in particular asked us to perceive democracy as a form of rationalistic government which largely reflected Dahl's ideal democracy. Political participation, for instance, was seen as being a simple process whereby interest groups found their place in the political spectrum with some ease and were able to effectively find voice and be heard. Whilst subsequent pluralist models accepted the inequalities in the democratic process, they still embodied an arena whereby the plurality of positions seamlessly existed through an inherent presence of the common good. Earlier notions of deliberative democracy went further still. Habermasian conceptions of a unitary public sphere were a premise of the possibilities of consensus in the decision-making process, though later proponents accepted the idealised nature of consensus, whilst affirming the inherent benefits of deliberation in terms of mitigating political exclusion.

It was a rejection of such an idealistic notion of pluralist democracy which was at the heart of agonistic pluralism as described in chapter 2. Agonism instead asks us to accept and to a

certain degree welcome, a more fractious political environment consisting of passionate, antagonistic political actors driven largely by identity in a persistent hegemonic struggle. Mouffe's agonism in particular seeks to convert such antagonisms into agonism whereby the irreducibility of pluralism and the subsequent persistence of exclusion in the decision making process is inevitable. In Mouffe's theory, the transformation of antagonism into more acceptable and productive agonism, is dependent upon an arena of conflictual consensus where the legitimacy of the position of opponents is accepted. The empirical study assesses the presence and practical democratic implications of agonistic pluralism and deliberative democracy, and also pluralist group theory, through a lens of the Scottish independence referendum of 2014.

4　Media Pluralism

4.1　Overview of Chapter 4

In the previous chapter the principles and key arguments of political pluralist theory, as found in a comprehensive body of academic literature, were presented as a theory which contextualises power relations within democracies, and also as a theory which underpins the vital role of media plurality in democratic societies. In this chapter, whilst still referring to academic literature, the importance of media pluralism is clarified, and contemporary features and challenges regarding media pluralism are focused upon with a specific emphasis upon the internet and social media. Media pluralism suffers in a similar manner to political pluralism in a lack of clarity in the term itself. However, media pluralism is generally not contested as to its constitutive norms in the way that political or agonistic pluralism is. Media pluralism generally relates to two overlapping definitions and these will be discussed alongside the general role of the media in a democracy, before setting out their importance to this study. The events that led to the Levenson Inquiry are detailed as these coincide historically with the rise in distrust of UK mainstream media as discussed in chapter two, and also the increase in social media use which is the basis of the empirical study. Public service broadcasting and the BBC are essential elements of media plurality in the United Kingdom. These are therefore presented with a particular emphasis upon the main theoretical democratic purposes of the BBC, as a prelude to criticisms which it faced during the Scottish independence referendum, as is documented in the empirical study. Social media is then focused upon, including a brief history and explanation of Twitter, as this is the chosen platform on which the empirical study is situated.

4.2　Media in a democracy

The following definition of the five key roles of the media in a democracy is used as a benchmark throughout this study:

- The role of information provider.

- A part of the agenda setting process.

- The role of public watchdog.

- A driver of political mobilization.

- A means of regime legitimation (Kuhn 2007 p21).

The role of information provider is self-explanatory and is the core task of any media outlet. The electorate can only make informed democratic decisions based upon consumption of relevant information. The agenda setting process relates to the practice of individuals and groups in society competing to get their respective issues and points of view into the public domain, a process in which the media have a key role to play. The role of public watchdog (see also Fuchs 2011) refers to the task bestowed upon the media to be the guardian of public interest and to expose issues and events which the elite classes may wish to keep to themselves. As a driver of political mobilisation, the media, through highlighting issues and campaigns, has the power to influence the public to participate in political action, for example to join a political party or interest group. A means of regime legitimation sees the media as having the power to socialise citizens with respect to accepted norms and values of society in general. If these do not tally with the government of the day's actions and aims, this can lead to political cynicism and may result in disengagement and voter apathy (ibid. p21-29).

The two generally accepted overarching components of media pluralism are the *principled* notion of media pluralism, and the *market* theory of plurality of media source and ownership, the media regulator Ofcom provide a useful definition encompassing the two components as stated. Media pluralism is then concerned with:

- Ensuring there is a diversity of viewpoints available and consumed across and within media enterprises.
- [As well as] preventing any one media owner or voice having too much influence over public opinion and the political agenda (Ofcom 2015 p.4).

Ensuring that diverse points of view are *consumed* in our democracy first of all requires there to be multiple accessible view points on offer, and this largely depends on limitations of ownership as expressed in the second part of the definition. Secondly, citizens must be motivated to engage with the multiple points of view which ought to be available to them. The second part of the definition relates to the free market theory of media pluralism and the ownership of media sources. Who *owns* our media is vital democratically and this is protected by legislation in a unique way in comparison to other marketplace commodities and services. The dangers of concentrated ownership of media sources relate to undue influence and the impact this may have on political decision making (Doyle 2002; Tunstall and Palmer 1991). Simply put, concentrated ownership, the likes of which has been regularly levelled at, for example the Rupert Murdoch empire, gives them the power to amongst other things, (at least potentially) set the political agenda although empirical evidence to support those claims is

mixed (see for example, Larcinese, Puglisi and Sneyder 2011; Picard and Van Weezel 2008). Whatever the empirical reality is regarding the level of power gleaned from such media owners, concentrated ownership and the powers which it potentially affords has infamously led to accusations of unhealthy (in terms of democratic standards) relations between media moguls and policymakers, including Cabinet Ministers and other MPs.

4.3   UK Media pluralism as headline news

2011 saw the subject of media plurality within the UK become headline news for a prolonged period in the wake of the Milly Dowler phone hacking scandal, a consequence of which was the closure of the United Kingdom's best-selling Sunday newspaper, *The News of the World*. There was what could be accurately described as public outrage following the later proven allegations of phone hacking by *News of the World* employees. The most notable of these was the mobile phone of murdered schoolgirl Milly Dowler. As the scandal progressed, the question of the relationship between UK politicians and media owners mostly involving News Corporation owner Rupert Murdoch, fell into the media spotlight.

The volume of meetings between former Prime Minister David Cameron and Mr Murdoch's executives were revealed by *The Independent* newspaper in 2014:

> The scale of private links between David Cameron and News International was exposed for the first time last night, with the Prime Minister shown to have met Rupert Murdoch's executives on no fewer than 26 occasions in just over a year since he entered Downing Street (Wright and Morris 2011).

The former Prime Minister and Labour Party leader Tony Blair was also notable in his close friendship to Mr Murdoch and is Godfather to one of Mr Murdoch's children. Tony Blair infamously addressed NewsCorp's annual conference in 1995 and *The Sun* newspaper (part of NewsCorp) subsequently backed The Labour Party in the 1997 general election where it won a landslide victory. Mr Murdoch's close relationships with UK politicians was not only a recent occurrence, as he was also found to be having numerous personal meetings with former Prime Minister Lady Thatcher, as far back as 1981. Whilst such meetings are not in themselves scandalous, the meetings with Thatcher were important because they preceded what can be seen as a pivotal moment in the history of UK media ownership with his acquisition of *The Times* and *Sunday Times* newspapers:

This direct personal lobbying was critical, as the government had the power to block his acquisition by referring the bid to the Monopolies and Mergers Commission because Murdoch already owned *The Sun* and *The News of the World*. The government's subsequent refusal to do so paved the way for the creation of what is easily the largest newspaper group in Britain. Its market share was about 28% at the time, but its financial strength has helped it grow to the point where it accounts for about 37% of all newspaper copies sold (Travis, 2012).

The restriction of ownership of media outlets is the starting point for ensuring media plurality and the manner in which Mr Murdoch was allowed to take over *The Times* and *The Sunday Times,* crucially in light of the fact that there was no referral to the Monopolies and Mergers Commission, brought the deal into question. Being a newspaper owner allows, if chosen, overall editorial control which in turn raises the issue of having the power to impact upon the setting of the political agenda. Therefore, the position which Mr Murdoch acquired by owning 37% of newspaper news consumption, can only be seen as pluralistically troublesome when benchmarked against a commitment to multiplicity and diversity of media source and outlets.

The performance of the UK media in the face of largely unrestricted ownership with a majority of printed media having centre-right wing political leanings is discussed by left wing writer Owen Jones in *The Establishment and how they get away with it* (2014). Whilst it is undeniable that Jones seeks to support his own political position in a non-academic text, the claims made with supporting evidence from named journalists and MPs are hugely concerning for anyone who seeks to have generally unfettered media organisations. Ownership and almost total confinement to an imposed journalistic narrative is explored in detail. Jones quotes journalists who state that they understood that their career progression was contingent on sacrificing their journalistic principles and, quoting Angela Eagle MP, follow a media course which is, 'ideologically driven by its owners who have particular views that you or I probably wouldn't agree with a lot of the time' (Jones 2014 p.90). More specifically, Jones quotes Benedict Brogan, former deputy editor of *The Telegraph* on the subject of owner influence and the commercial nature of newspapers:

> They are private combines, they are commercial operations, which are there in the hope of perhaps making money and selling their wares. I think it would be utter madness if you were to stand up and say the guy who owns the train set has no say over the train set. It would be defying the truth about newspapers throughout the ages. What is the point of owning a newspaper if you can't take an interest in what the newspaper is up to? (ibid. p.98).

Whilst agreeing with the premise of the arguments above regarding the influences upon the printed media, we ought to acknowledge that the overall media landscape in the UK is partially corrected by a broadcast media which is arguably more balanced in nature. The BBC (which is discussed in a following section) has a key role in this regard as the main public service broadcaster and faced stern criticism for its performance during the Scottish independence referendum. Additionally, all television broadcasters are regulated by Ofcom which in relation to media output requires that 'all news in any part of the service should be presented with due accuracy and impartiality' (Ofcom 2005). Nevertheless, the evidence regarding print media ownership and the points presented by Jones (2004) suggest that we cannot classify UK newspapers as serving a plurality of political views.

If we remind ourselves of Dahl's ideal conditions for democracy and the specific indicator of citizens having the control of the political agenda, we can see why this is troubling in democratic terms. Social media, largely unhindered by issues of ownership and with content output which is practically impossible to control, is heralded by some as the answer to media plurality concerns in the UK and abroad. This thesis, in later chapters, highlights and explores examples of Twitter activism and agenda setting during the Scottish independence referendum campaign of 2014.

Returning, though, to Rupert Murdoch, Mr Murdoch's personal evidence given to a House of Lords Communications Committee in 2007 brought the nature of ownership and editorial influence firmly into question, regarding a man who owns 37% of UK newspapers. At this hearing, journalist Chris Heard stated, 'When it comes to *The Sun* and the old *News of the World*, he saw himself as a *traditional proprietor* who exercised editorial control over both [newspapers]' (ibid. p.98). Heard then goes on to suggest less specific influence over *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* whilst stating that he would however, often telephone the editors to ask *what they were doing* on certain issues. In light of this it would seem fanciful to suggest that the editors would reply in any way other than one which supported Mr Murdoch's own personal position.

4.4   The Leveson Enquiry

The culmination of *the phone hacking scandal* was a judicial review led by The Right Honourable Lord Justice Leveson into the culture, practice and ethics of the press which was published in November 2012. The four modules of the enquiry were:

- Module 1: The relationship between the press and the public and looks at phone-hacking and other potentially illegal behaviour.
- Module 2: The relationships between the press and police and the extent to which that has operated in the public interest.
- Module 3: The relationship between press and politicians.
- Module 4: Recommendations for a more effective policy and regulation that supports the integrity and freedom of the press while encouraging the highest ethical standards. (Leveson Enquiry 2012)

The relationship between the press and the public, police, and politicians was in the public spotlight from 2011 onwards. It is then probably no coincidence that this was the same time as the exponential decrease in trust of the media as demonstrated in the chart below which was discussed in chapter 2. The decline in public confidence in the traditional media to uncover wrongdoings of those in public office is exacerbated when coupled with the wholesale distrust of those that are holding the positions in public office (as previously discussed). A media which is seen in the manner it was previously as a tenacious public watchdog helps to negate the impact of the still wholly undesirable, though perhaps now inevitable, distrust of political elites. More worryingly, such distrust then leads to the media being seen as another component of the established political elite it was previously entrusted to hold accountable to public opinion:

Public Confidence in Traditional Media

	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014
Confident the media will generally uncover wrongdoing by those in public office	80%	81%	80%	74%	70%	59%
Confident authorities will generally uncover wrongdoing by those in public office	41%	44%	39%	44%	44%	33%

Figure 7 Screenshot from the Survey of Political Attitudes towards Conduct in Public Life (2014)

Lord Leveson's enquiry was wide ranging as illustrated by the four modules detailed previously. A central issue in relation to the empirical research of this project relates to the utilisation of social media in response to the apparent distrust of the mainstream press, as they are perceived as another component of *the establishment.* The text below, which is taken directly from the final report of the Leveson enquiry adds further weight to that theory:

> Taken as a whole, the evidence clearly demonstrates that, over the last 30-35 years and probably much longer, the political parties of UK national Government and of UK official Opposition, have had or developed too close a relationship with the press in a way which has not been in the public interest. In part, this has simply been a matter of spending a disproportionate amount of time, attention and resource on this relationship in comparison to, and at the expense of, other legitimate claims in relation to the conduct of public affairs. In part, it has been a matter of going too far in trying to control the supply of news and information to the public in return for the hope of favourable treatment by sections of the press, to a degree and by means beyond what might be considered to be the fair and reasonable (albeit partisan) conduct of public debate (Leveson 2012 sec.117 p.26).

The key phrase here refers to *control the supply of news,* which, whilst perhaps an understandable endeavour for politicians and political parties and probably an inevitable

consequence of the pervasive 24 hour media age we live in, is a prospect which must be resolutely guarded against for democracy to be seen as legitimate in the eyes of the general public.

4.5   Public service broadcasting

One of the ways of attempting to ensure the principled notion of media pluralism is to have a public service broadcaster which is mandated to adhere to standardised, pluralistic goals. The BBC is that institution in the UK and its role in the Scottish independence referendum was controversial for some, and is therefore prominent within the empirical study.

The BBC's place in the UK as the public-sector broadcaster is constituted by royal charter which is reviewed around every ten years or so. The six *public* purposes of the BBC are set out below:

- **Sustaining citizenship and civil society** - *The BBC provides high-quality news, current affairs and factual programming to engage its viewers, listeners and users in important current and political issues.*
- **Promoting education and learning** - *The support of formal education in schools and colleges and informal knowledge and skills building.*
- **Stimulating creativity and cultural excellence -** *Encouraging interest, engagement and participation in cultural, creative and sporting activities across the UK.*
- **Representing the UK, its nations, regions and communities** - *BBC viewers, listeners and users can rely on the BBC to reflect the many communities that exist in the UK.*
- **Bringing the UK to the world and the world to the UK** - *The BBC will build a global understanding of international issues and broaden UK audiences' experience of different cultures.*
- **Delivering to the public the benefit of emerging communications technologies and services** - *Assisting UK residents to get the best out of emerging media technologies now and in the future.* (Secretary of State for Culture Media and Sport, 2006)

All six purposes are aligned with pluralism as is generally considered in the empirical study, however, that of the BBC *representing the UK, its nations, regions and communities* was the most debated during and following the independence campaign. The BBC undertook a public consultation from 16th July to 8th October 2015 ahead of its next charter review which was

being undertaken at the time of writing in 2016. Following the consultation, the BBC published details of the public perception of its performance relating to nations regions and communities:

- The priority to represent the different nations, regions and communities to the rest of the UK (priority 1) is one where audiences see a clear need for improvement, particularly in Northern Ireland, Scotland and the North of England.

- The provision of a range of output to meet the different needs of the nations, regions and communities (priority 2) is also identified by licence fee payers as an area where the BBC could improve its performance.

- Although licence fee payers do not rate the priority to reflect different religious and other beliefs on the UK (priority 5) as highly important, they do see a fairly wide performance gap.

- The Trust research on the priority to provide output in indigenous minority languages (priority 6) indicates that there are concerns with the levels of indigenous language provision in Northern Ireland in particular, where support for an increase is very strong among those with any knowledge of, interest in or identification with either Irish or Ulster Scots (BBC 2016).

The value of the BBC in terms of helping maintain a pluralistic democracy relies heavily upon the trust that the public attribute to it, and this trust has been questioned in similar ways as to other sections of the mainstream media in recent years. It would seem, however, that distrust in the BBC as a public service broadcaster is far more damaging than distrust in the rest of the media. The majority of the general population fully understands (certainly post-Leveson if not pre-Leveson) that in the commercial world we live in, following the already detailed rise in media empires which places political power in the hands of the few, that caution must be taken when considering the editorial impact on journalistic output. If, however, the same distrust is attributed to the BBC, when trust and balance are its fundamental reason for existence, then the purpose of the BBC in its entirety is brought into question. In line with other establishments which embody the United Kingdom, as the BBC certainly does, the BBC became a particular target (with some justified reason) for independence supporting nationalists. Empirical data from the study addressing this issue is presented in the results chapters of the thesis.

4.6   Media pluralism – the internet and social media

This section sets out in detail the key components of internet communications and their impact on the democratic process. The main theoretical proposition which is a starting point for the empirical study, states that:

> The internet is redistributing political influence, it is broadcasting the public sphere, increasing political participation, involving citizens in political activities that were closed to them, and challenging the monopoly of elites (Hindman 2008 p.6).

Hindman's hypothesis is used to guide the evaluation of social media upon the democratic process. Here, and throughout the study, the thesis focuses predominantly upon Twitter as it was the chosen platform used in the empirical study, for reasons which are detailed in the methodology chapter.
.
The development and proliferation of social media has fundamentally altered the way that people communicate (Fuchs 2007). Social media in a narrow definition encompasses computer-mediated technology which allows users to connect and share information. *Connectivity* is the prevalent buzz word which encapsulates the manner in which users are brought together via computers and mobile technology. The following graphic summarises digital statistics relating to the UK in 2016:

UK Digital Statistics Indicators
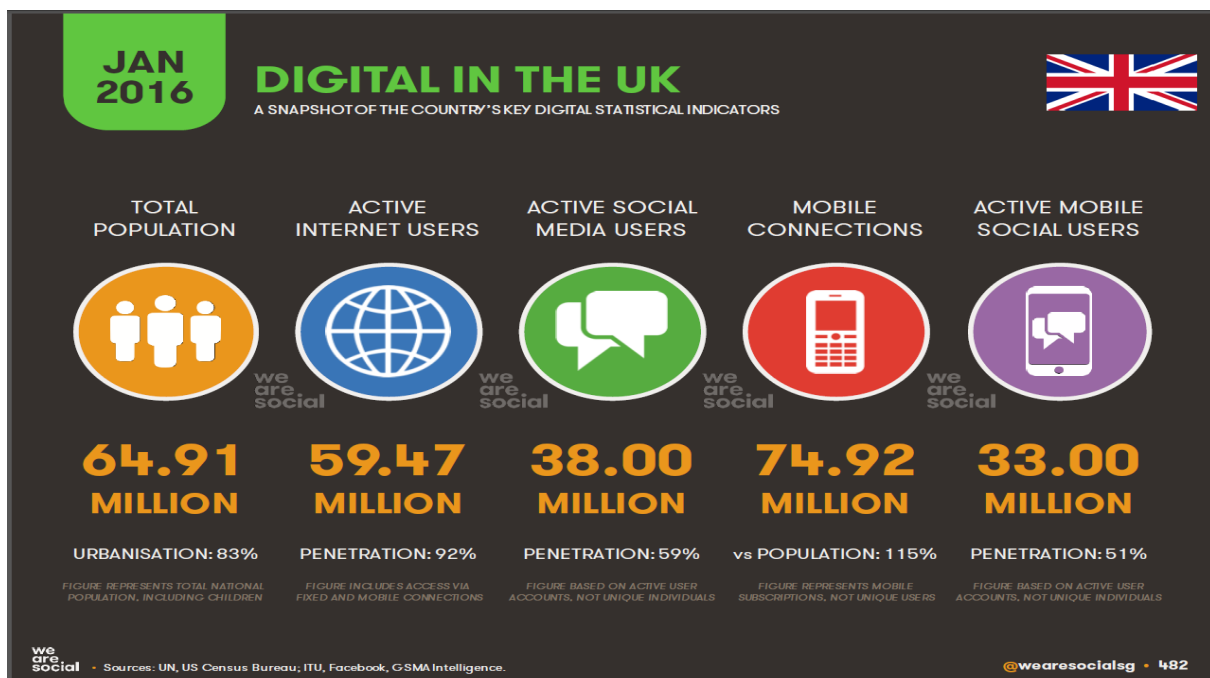
Figure 8 Screenshot from We are Social (2016)

This graphic shows that from a total UK population of 64.91 million, there are 59.47 million internet users and 38 million active social media accounts in the UK. The following graphic shows that the 38 million active UK social media users, represents 59% of the UK population:

UK Social Media Use
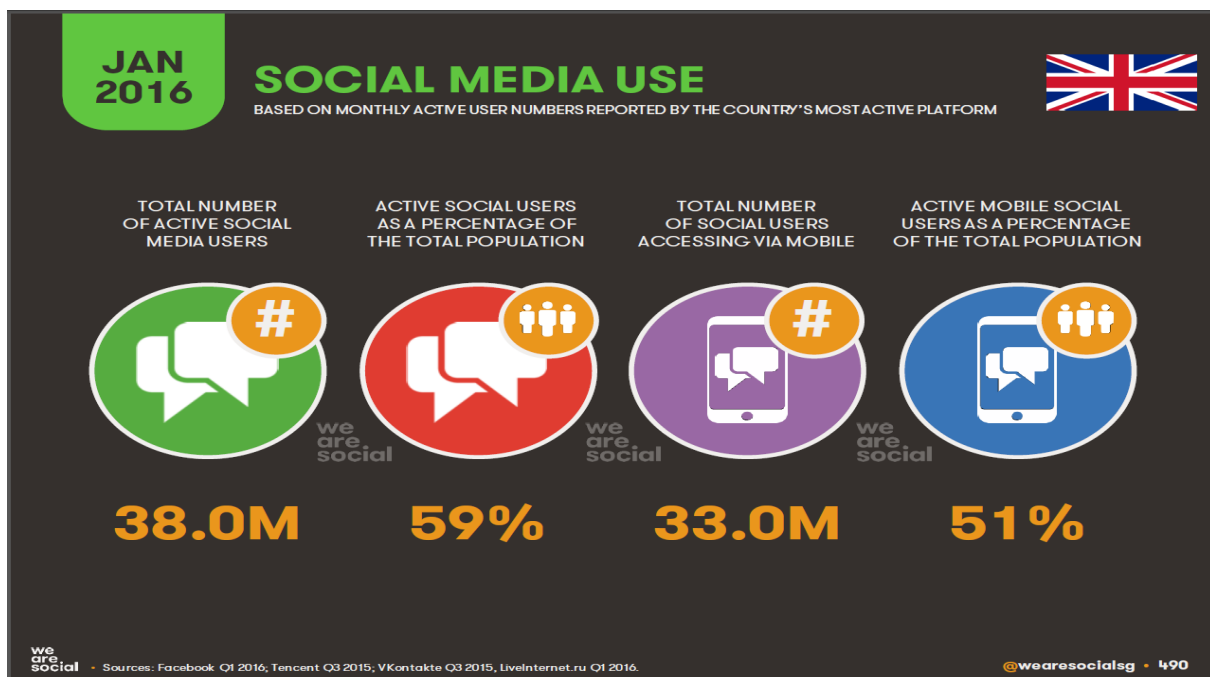
Figure 9 Screenshot from We are Social (2016)

Twitter is one of the most commonly recognised social media platforms, it was founded on March 26th 2006 by Jack Dorsey and approximate to the time of writing Twitter boasted 500 million registered users (Lunden 2012). Twitter users are posed a simple question by the application - what's happening? During the data collection period of the empirical study users were limited to 140 characters per posting or *tweet (*this has now been increased to 280 characters) with the enforced brevity of the posts being a key difference to other social networking sites. The main difference between Twitter and other social media platforms is real-time posting, which is visible to anyone on the site if they opt to *follow* that account or access it as an occasional visitor, as opposed to limiting visibility of posts to an accepted network of friends. This important distinction allows the emphasis of Twitter as social *media* rather than a social *network*, 'Twitter has similarities to both blogs and chat rooms, but its emphasis on accessible dialogic communication in the public domain is unique' (Murthy 2013 p.9). This transforms Twitter from being a message board for friends to a real-time news service for those who choose to use it in that way.

Hash tags, the inclusion of subject titles accompanied by the symbol #, encourage users to read and/or participate in distinct conversation topics with people outside of their personal network. For example, #indyref will take you to all posts that have included that particular hash tag within their tweets. Multiple hash tags were commonplace during the independence referendum campaign such as #indyref, #SNP, and #YesScotland. Clicking on each will take you to the most recent information posted within each one of those streams.

Retweets allow people to forward messages of interest so as to encourage all those in their personal network to read that message. Retweets are important because, similarly to the use of hash tags, they often result in a snowball effect which can bring the specific topic to the attention of large sections of the audience, or in Twitter parlance to become a *trending* topic. Murthy (2013 p46) states that, 'Kwak et al (2010p.6) note that once a tweet is retweeted, regardless of the number of followers the original Twitterer has) it reaches an audience (mean) size of 1000'. According to Murthy, the attribution of the author of original tweet is often consciously/subconsciously lost and attributed to the *retweeter*. Empirical analysis, particularly of many politicians' accounts, shows them to have an extremely high proportion of *retweets* versus *tweets* with some only ever *retweeting*. This reduces the impact of those accounts to information dissemination as opposed dialogic communication.

The ability to include media such as photographs and video links within a tweet often makes posts more appealing to explore and is increasingly used to bypass the 140 character limit per post. For example:

Figure 10 Screenshot from Twitter (2017)

The above graphic is exactly what the user will see while scrolling through their newsfeed without any requirement to click through to an article. However, of more significance to the independence debate is the use of links by tweeters to link back to an external website or blog, whether that be their own or that of another person or organisation. Initially blogs were simply a list of links to other websites before people began to publish their own thoughts within that particular blog (Bradshaw 2005). The role of Twitter as a conduit to external blogs and websites is part of the empirical research and is discussed in the results chapters.

It was in the early 1990s that the internet first came to prominence as a tool with significant potential to impact upon broad conceptions of democracy and more specifically upon the electoral process. In America, the 1992 presidential election campaign has been credited as,

'the first internet election' (Chadwick and Howard 2010 p.151) with the internet entering UK public consciousness 2 years later, though this was largely restricted to societal elites (Ward & Vedel 2006) and with less apparent commitment than their American counter parts (Gibson & Ward 2000). It was the later presidential contest in 1996 which was subsequently documented as being 'the first to attract millions of citizens looking [online] for information on candidates and results' (Lusoli 2005 p. 155).

This significant leap in the capability of communication technology led to various predictions regarding the expected impact of the internet upon the electoral process, some of which have become reality whilst some have not. Chadwick and Howard (2010) summarising Morris (1999) details many of these predictions which were focused upon the electoral process in the USA. At that time there was a belief that the internet would lead toward a more direct democracy whereby decisions would be made via online referendums and the role of the media in the decision- making process would significantly decrease. This move toward a more direct democracy was predicted to moderate the prevailing role of finance during election campaigns with a democratically invigorated youth playing a central role in online political campaigning (ibid.). Advertising was predicted to diminish as internet users could control their exposure to media messages while political campaigns would be waged via endlessly repeated 30 second messages. Online voting was forecast to replace traditional voting and the role of political parties was projected to wither (ibid.). Additional, more fanciful predictions included the prospect of campaigning being focused upon virtual conversations between electoral candidates and voters. More prophetically, there were claims that the traditional print media would be significantly less powerful as newspapers became freely available to all via the internet and that campaign messages would be tailored and targeted to specific voting groups, allied to a process where online analytics would allow campaign managers to more quickly decipher which tactics were working during a campaign (ibid.). The role of targeted emails at crucial points in the electoral process was also foreseen.

Predictions such as these generally see the internet as a positive force upon the democratic process and are indicative of academic theories which are classified as *equalising* the suggested current disparity regarding where power lies in the electoral/democratic process (as relates to the Hindman quote at the beginning of this chapter, see also Fuchs 2010). This applies particularly from the perspective of the potential for minor parties as they are able to compete with the more established (and far wealthier) major traditional parties. The basis of this can also be taken as an increase in plurality as power is moved away from the established media, and therefore also the traditional parties which they have historically tended to support. This concept is more commonly referred to as *levelling* the political playing field. Conversely,

there is an established school of thought which holds that such suggestions are overly optimistic and that the established players in the political spectrum will *normalise* the role of the internet upon the democratic process, by establishing a level of control of the medium which will result in *politics as usual* (the *normalisation hypothesis* being self-attributed to Margolis, Resnick and Wolfe 1999)*.* A similar conceptual framework as the equalising/normalising debate is that of *mobilisation versus reinforcement* (Nam 2012; Cantijoch 2009) whereby, more specifically, the internet is seen as enabling and encouraging the mobilisation of previously marginalised sections of society within the democratic process or, conversely, that the status quo will again endure through a *reinforcement* process equivalent to that of *normalisation* as already mentioned (Lusoli 2005).

From a United States perspective, the first examples of political campaigns exploiting ICTs can be traced to Al Gore's unsuccessful campaign in 2003 (Benbunan Fich and Arbaugh 2006 in Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez 2011). More notably, Democratic Party candidate Howard Dean revolutionised electioneering practices when he introduced the DemocracForAmerica.com blog which is credited as the first blog of its kind dedicated to a presidential candidate (Chadwick 2006 in Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez 2011). It was however, the successful Obama campaign of 2008 which saw ICTs being credited as perhaps having the potential to decide election campaigns through cost-effective methods of mass-mobilisation, though importantly only when coupled with a credible candidate, backed by coherent policy proposals in a campaign combined with traditional electioneering methods (ibid.).

From a UK perspective, the predicted progress toward a more level playing field has been far from linear. Jackson (2007, citing Gibson 1998 and Auty and Nicholas 1998) states that the 1997 general election saw smaller parties exploiting the internet to a far greater extent than the major parties. However, that position changed in the 2001 election, 'with more traffic being guided to larger party websites' (ibid. p.252). By 2005 the position had seemingly reversed again with smaller parties stating that the playing field had indeed been levelled, largely through their use of publicly available e-newsletters (Jackson 2006). In summary, Jackson (2007) suggests that although minor parties felt that there was a move toward equalisation, in reality it was the major parties which were dominating internet use during UK elections at that time. In another UK study, also situated in the 2005 general election, Norris and Curtice (2008) went further than looking at the use of ICTs by political parties and focused upon the question of who was accessing and using the information which by now was becoming increasingly available online. Their findings supported the *normalisation* side of the argument in that it was mainly the already politically aware who were accessing online political information, an

argument which was also supported by Chadwick and Howard (2010). However, Norris and Curtice (2008) also suggested that broader public awareness was eventually being enhanced through a two-step flow of information whereby the already politically aware, were particularly likely to further share the information they had retrieved online during subsequent discussions with their fellow citizens.

More recent studies, such as Gibson and McAllister (2015), suggest that to be locked in a binary argument around equalisation and normalisation is to miss the point, and instead advise that the toing and froing of the argument ought to be 'better understood as distinct phases that map on to technological developments within the medium itself' (ibid. p.541). It should however also be noted that the same study was, 'generally supportive of a linear trend toward normalisation rather than a cyclical move from major party dominance to equalisation' (ibid. p.543).

Whilst this thesis may help to cast some light on the equalisation versus normalisation debate during the Scottish independence referendum 2014, it seeks more specifically to focus upon the use of micro-blogging in the form of Twitter during the campaign which preceded the referendum, in order to present and discuss exemplars relating to existing conceptual models of political communication (see Freelon 2010).

Jackson and Lilleker (2011) explicitly focus upon the use of Twitter by MPs in a UK study conducted in 2009. They find that *impression management* - what is effectively an exercise in public relations and self-promotion - is a significant driver for MPs' use of Twitter with the servicing of constituency related issues very much a secondary consideration. They do however find merit in Twitter use by MPs in term of bridging the gap between themselves and those whom they represent, stating that Twitter use 'can encourage greater trust and interest and build upon an impression of the MP that surpasses pejorative media narratives' [such as those discussed in earlier chapters of this thesis] (ibid. p.101). In a study conducted around the same time, Margaretten and Gaber (2012) specifically focus upon the Twitter use of Scottish MPs with the aim of analysing whether authentic Twitter dialogue between MPs and the public can improve the levels of distrust which currently exist between them. Their findings were particularly positive in this respect, providing that the content of the communications between the two groups was meaningful, in a way which surpassed established norms of one-way political broadcasting, which otherwise simply results in *the old politics* being conducted at a faster pace on a different medium. Baxter and Marcella (2013) summarise a series of investigations into e-campaigning and e-politics with specific reference to election campaigning. Again, however, the conflicting findings of relatively comparative studies is

present in that whilst they find that there has been a steady progression in the adoption of various methods of online technology, by both individual candidates and political parties, they find that this has generally been restricted to one-way political broadcasting as opposed to reciprocal communications. In this respect, the authors find that they 'would argue that these patterns of information exchange are unlikely to have encouraged an already apathetic and cynical electorate to participate more fully in the democratic process' (ibid. p.85). Additionally, they emphasise their hesitance in linking 'direct associations between politicians' online efforts and their electoral success or failure' (ibid. p.85).

Proponents of the democratizing effect of social media and Twitter often point to widely publicised events such as the, 'Arab spring uprisings' of 2011 as being proof positive of the ability of Twitter to mobilise citizens. Others, however, suggest that the effect of social media in that event has been hugely overestimated. The headlines at the time spoke of a *Twitter revolution* which seems to suggest that the absence of social media would have meant the uprisings which took place within Egypt and other countries simply would not have happened (Howard and Hussain 2011. Khondker 2011. Stepanova 2011). However, In 2009 Egypt had 12000 registered twitter accounts which was equal to 0.00014% of the Egyptian population (Murthy. 2013). This individual statistic contextualises the volume of Twitter traffic within the country as being miniscule at the time of the uprising. We ought to, however, acknowledge that lack of volume does not necessarily negate the potential political power of even one single tweet. The argument here is whether Twitter actually mobilises citizens or not.

Social media can provide access to elites and this new-found voice can be used to hold political elites to account. (Holt, Shehata and Stromback 2013 p.19) found that the propagation of information by younger social media users 'can function as a leveller in terms of motivating political participation', in a study focused upon a Swedish political campaign in 2010. Similarly, meta-analysis of 36 studies into social media use and participation, Boulianne (2015 p.524-538), found positive results in terms of increasing participation although noting only a minimal impact upon election campaigns.

To be more specific, in terms of how the political power dynamic is allegedly being redressed by social media, the suggestion is that alternative views from that of the mainstream media are being presented in a number of ways. Blogs are taken as having a key role in this regard. The world's top political blog in terms of followers, according to recent figures is *ThinkProgress*, a project of the Centre for American Progress (CAP) which has 1,761,340 Facebook fans and 666,620 Twitter followers (Feedspot 2017). From a UK perspective regarding blogs which could be classed as non-partisan and independent of traditional media

organisations, Politics.co.uk is number 19 on the list with 7,182 Facebook fans and 34,745 Twitter followers (ibid.). Alternatively, for example, social media platforms such Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are places where information which is free from the constraints of corporate ownership and influence can be found, and these are the focus of the empirical study.

In terms of the role of social media in high profile world events, such as the *Arab spring,* Rosen (2011) summarises the counter argument by stating 'Internet schminternet. Revolutions happen when they happen. Whatever means are lying around will get used' (Murthy. 2013 p99). Rather than being a causal factor then, Twitter is perhaps better seen as an enabler with power to report and disseminate information in real time from those at the heart of these events whether they are participants, citizen reporters, or mainstream media reporters. In addition to those who believe the impact of social media and the internet upon democracy is overstated, there are others that believe social media is in some ways impacting negatively upon democracy.

Central to these criticisms is the notion of ideological fragmentation/homophily, often associated with Cass Sunstein and *Republic.com 2.0* (2009). Sunstein focuses upon the manner in which internet communication can be self–filtered (and then further filtered by platforms themselves) to restrict users to only encounter the content that interests them, in what he encapsulates as *the daily me.* This is seen as a threat to democracy in that individuals who are not exposed to a multiplicity of content and views, will not be able to make rational political choices based upon an assessment of competing options. If this were indeed to be the case, it would likely have a tumultuous knock on effect over time. The abundance of options available to citizens in relation to media content is not the issue here, and there is no suggestion that social media is fundamentally bad for our democracy. Indeed, a proliferation of media sources is exactly the hope for media pluralists, the self-limitation and/or the limitation by intermediaries being the issue in point.

Sunstein also discusses the concept of echo chambers in his work - *echo chamber* being a term that is particularly prominent contemporarily - with regard to social media. The term itself is an extension of ideological fragmentation, with the assertion being that online inhabitants of blogs and social media platforms, consist of communities which are merely reinforcing their own narrow viewpoints. Twitter is particularly associated with the term echo chamber, with a more specific assertion that, in political terms, Twitter generally consists of those at the elite end of the socio-political spectrum consisting of politicians, journalists and those of an already heavily politicised disposition. This means that if true, such platforms are hardly democratic.

The term *echo chamber* is generally accompanied by the allegation that those communities not only restrict themselves to homogenous points of view, but that they are also unaware that they inhabit a niche market place of views. The suggestion is also that they attribute disproportionate credence to the impact of social media generally, whereby the overwhelming majority of society are engaged in broader traditional media, such as television, radio, and the printed press, and it is these platforms that have genuine, opinion forming capabilities and influence. In terms of recent academic research into the concept of echo chambers, the results are mixed. Gilbert, Bergstrom and Karahalios (2009) suggest that the overwhelming amount of agreement found in comments sections to blogs suggests a level of homophily. Flaxman, Goel, and Rao (2016), meanwhile, find in a study of 50,000 internet users' browsing histories, that users tend to seek out mainstream news outlets and are actually more at risk of being exposed to arguments contrary to their own political position, while Garrett (2009) finds that people are only marginally less likely to seek out news stories that align with their political preferences. Garret concludes that 'worry that the internet will lead to an increasingly fragmented society appears to have been overstated' (Garrett 2009 p.281). Ideological fragmentation/homophily is a central theme in the empirical study and challenges these different hypotheses specifically regarding Twitter use during the Scottish independence referendum campaign.

There are a number of other reasons, other than allegations of ideological fragmentation, to argue that Twitter is not wholly democratic. What should be acknowledged firstly, though, is that Twitter is a business just as Facebook and other social media platforms are. Though they may have had democratic origins, they are certainly not principled attempts to build genuine social networks or foster the spread of knowledge or democratic debate, in a not-for-profit benevolent way such as *Wikipedia* almost uniquely is. As with many such sites, once Twitter established itself in the market place it began to introduce methods to make it profitable. This began by *promoted tweets* (essentially adverts) appearing at the beginning of certain search pages. These advertisements are understandably costly to the firm promoting them as Twitter is one of the most popular websites globally and is essentially an incredibly valuable database, in which its billion plus users have wilfully signed over some of their most personal information.

Further to this, Twitter charges search engines like Google and Yahoo for access to its content. This combination makes Twitter a significant sized company which was floated for $14.2 billion in 2013. Although this does not automatically mean Twitter should be seen as dispossessing democratic benefits, the business model it is now resigned to fostering means we ought to increase user scepticism as to its content and output. The manner in which Twitter is moving was highlighted in 2016 when an algorithm, similar to the one used by Facebook,

which ranks posts in an order different to the previous real-time posting (which was the reason so many academic researchers use Twitter in preference to Facebook) in favour of *popular* tweets, was introduced. Originally there was a way of opting out of this feature but at the time of writing this was no longer the case.

There are other reasons why Twitter may be seen as not wholly democratic. The internet generally has been seen by certain countries which prefer to have control over the information citizens can access, as being a major threat to the way in which it governs. In 2012, Twitter applied new technology that could 'selectively block tweets on a country by country basis' (BBC 2012). The site sought to justify this by stating that, 'its international growth meant entering countries that have different ideas about the contours of freedom of expression, citing France or Germany which ban pro-Nazi content as examples' (ibid.). Understandably, this was seen by some, such as *Reporters Without Borders* as censorship and an affront to free speech (ibid.). Whilst concerns that the internet and social media specifically have become merely another tool to be controlled by government, in ways such as these, are worrying, the political and technical difficulties in controlling internet communications suggest that such concerns ought to be restricted to the most extreme, none democratic regimes, such as North Korea, and to some extent China.

4.7   Conclusions to Chapter 4

Media pluralism is overwhelmingly accepted as a vital component in modern liberal democracies. However, the power wielded by multinational media corporations has been shown to curry disproportionate amounts of favour with successive UK governments. These have been highlighted to the public at large in the wake of the events which led to the Levenson Inquiry. The printed press, however, continue to face justified criticism in not providing genuine plurality of content when contrasted with the political preferences of many UK citizens. In terms of broadcast media, institutions such as the BBC ought to safeguard media plurality within the UK. However, the performance of the BBC, for some, is not to the requisite standard. The possibilities afforded by social media platforms such as Twitter, which can largely overcome issues of media ownership and certainly theoretically overcome practical issues of plurality of available content, is for many a partial answer to the issues regarding media performance and its subsequent impact upon UK democracy. This assertion, in line with Hindman (2008) is the key theory which provides the back drop to which the empirical study considers the role of deliberation and agonistic pluralism during the 2014 referendum campaign.

5 Methodology

5.1   Overview of chapter 5

This chapter details the choice of research methodology for the project. It explains the evolution of the methodology from the beginnings of the project through to the final methodological selections. It begins by discussing the critical theory research philosophy and the choice of a qualitative study. Prominent academic works in the field of social media research are then presented. The methods of literature search are described and the activist groups which are focused upon during the study are provided. Data collection methods, the interview process, and the methods of coding and data analysis are also explained. Finally, the ethical considerations within the thesis are given and the research limitations are noted.

5.2   Research philosophy

The research philosophy sets out the researcher's position on the methodological approach of the study. Epistemologically, this study is situated in critical theory in terms of sociocultural assumptions and critique. This is driven by the assertion that the impact of social media upon democracy is normatively situated in its potential to extricate political communication from the neo-liberal capitalist constructs in which it is situated. Neoliberalism is generally conceived as relating to 'the repudiation of Keynesian welfare state economics and the ascendance of the Chicago School of political economy—Von Hayek, Friedman, and others' (Brown 2009 p.37). Alternatively, in the context of political communication, neoliberalism represents the deregulation and free-market commodification of the distribution of political messages in the media (see Freedman 2008; Harvey 2007), having detrimental effects upon the requirement for open information flows if citizens are to make genuinely informed political choices. In this regard this thesis is aligned with other authors who discuss social media from a critical theory perspective (see Fuchs 2017, 2011, 2010, 2007; Rohle 2005). Critical theory is rooted in the works of Karl Marx (at least in Marx's critique of capitalism and analysis of social relations) and is synonymous with the Frankfurt School of thought, originating in Germany with thinkers located at, or with links to The Institute of Social Research, Frankfurt, in the early 1930s. The main philosophers and social theorists of the Frankfurt School are Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Leo Lowenthal and Erich Fromm.

More recently, social scientists outside the Frankfurt School such as Bourdieu, Althusser and Foucault are strongly associated with critical theory (Horkheimer 1982). The Frankfurt school itself was 'concerned with developing a revolutionary philosophical variant of Western

Marxism, opposed to capitalism in the west and Stalinism in the east' (Horkheimer 1982 p.2). It should be noted however, that later iterations of critical theory have branched out from its Marxist beginnings, and as Edgar and Sedgwick (2007) state, critical theory has commonly been associated with thinkers linked to structuralism, post-structuralism and postmodernism. This broad conception of critical theory means that clear definitions of the theory are difficult to pinpoint.

Critical theory has though, been expressed as:

> A foundational perspective from which analysis of social action, politics, science and other human endeavours can proceed. Research drawing from critical theory has critique (assessment of the current state and the requirement to reach a desired state) at its centre (Given 2008 p.179).

Given (ibid.), goes on to state that critical theory can be broken down into three phases. The first was the Frankfurt School as mentioned, and the second encompasses the early works of Jurgen Habermas and *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1992 - first published in German in 1969) in which Habermas' analysis of the public sphere 'was firmly historical in that he drew his analysis from the manifestation of public political and social behaviour' (Given p.179). When considering the third movement, synonymous with the already mentioned French postmodernist authors such as Foucault, authors are more focused upon human actors and their historical development, drawn from political economy, sociology, cultural theory, philosophy and anthropology (Crotty 1998; Best and Kellner 1993; Kellner 1990). Whilst the German and French approaches, and indeed contemporary critical theorists such as Nancy Fraser who cannot be classified as fitting neatly into either approach, differ in their critique of societal oppression, they are, however, unified in their expression of its existence.

A key extension of critical theory in relation to this study is the manner in which:

> Adorno and Horkheimer developed a Marxist sociological approach to media studies. They saw the media as a cultural industry that maintained power relations and served to lessen the 'resistance standards' of cultural aesthetics by popularising certain types of culture (Horkheimer 1982 p.3).

The *certain types of culture* are those that support the position of the prevailing hegemony through the broadcast of programming and printing of stories tailored to reinforce the

predominant position. This may not only be in a positive sense, whereby, in the case of Scotland's place in the United Kingdom for instance, there may be a multiplicity of reinforcing messages, but also in a negative sense regarding Scottish independence, whereby positive cultural/political/economic possibilities are perhaps notable by their absence. This argument is an often-repeated allegation in relation to the broadcast media, particularly in the form of the BBC and also the majority of the UK printed press throughout the Scottish independence referendum campaign of 2014 (see, for example, Robertson 2014; Walker 2013).

This perception of the implicit motivation and effect of the media as put forward by Adorno and Horkheimer (ibid.) is one which still resonates today. The role of capitalism in the mass media, particularly regarding newspaper ownership and its subsequent impact upon output, is of concern on a global scale (Downing 2011 in Wasko, Murdoch and Sousa 2011; Thomas and Nain 2004; Doyle 2002). Subsequently, the possibilities for new/alternative media (Fuchs 2010) to counter the prevailing hegemony are the focus of many debates regarding media plurality. A pertinent example of the application to, and appropriateness of, critical theory as the epistemological grounding of the study lies in the *equalisation versus normalisation* debate as discussed in the previous chapter. Whilst there has often been debate as to the reality or otherwise of sufficient plurality in the British media, this concern has grown exponentially since the refusal of then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to refer the takeover of *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* in 1981 to the Monopolies and Mergers Commission, a takeover which, as discussed in earlier chapters, was preceded by secret meetings between the two which were always denied but later exposed (Travis 2012).

That corporate takeover was arguably a typical embodiment of establishment collusion, evidenced by the meetings between Thatcher and Murdoch, the result of the takeover being, by design or by default, significant restriction of the plurality of UK media output in their ideological favour. Over three decades later, the *equalisation versus normalisation* debate is another that is entrenched in the media plurality debate, asking whether there is now a technological capability, in the form of the internet and social media, to disrupt the domination of the establishment upon media output which serves to perpetuate the hegemonic position. In this respect the study of social media's influence on media plurality seems an obvious and appropriate choice to be studied from a critical theory perspective. As Kellner states, 'critical theory insists that one needs a theory of society grounded in a theory of capitalism to make sense of socio-historical processes and developments because the dynamics of capitalism play such a constitutive role in social life' (Kellner (1990 p.22). This study comes from a theoretical perspective of society being disadvantaged in terms of making informed political choices, as a consequence of the impact that neo-liberalism has had upon political

communication output. In terms that are increasingly relevant to this empirical study, Kellner goes on to state that historically, critical theorists 'analysed the new relationships between the state and the economy, the role of new technologies and mass communication as new modes of social control' (ibid. p.26) only later to conclude that there has been a surprising failure in recent times for works situated in critical theory (the works of Fuchs - 2017; 2011; 2010; 2007 and others as notable exceptions) to theorise developments in the media, socialisation practices, and new cultural developments. Kellner finds this surprising, given previous contributions from scholars linked to critical theory. This study responds to Kellner's call for scholars to provide 'theoretical analyses of developments within the capitalist economy and of changes in class stratification, the labour process, new technologies, the media and politics' (ibid. p.31).

In practice, critical theory seeks to provide the big picture, 'that positivist schools which root their theories in isolated facts fail to provide' (ibid. p.13). Horkheimer (1982) sets out three explicit conditions that critical theories must therefore meet:

- They must be explanatory: explain what is wrong with the current social reality.
- They must be practical: identify the actors to change it.
- They must be normative: provide both clear norms for criticism and achievable practical goals for social transformation (ibid.).

Horkheimer also states that critical theories must fulfil these set criteria at the same time in order for it to be genuinely transformative. In terms of this study, the current social reality which requires confrontation is that while having a positive commitment to democracy, the present system has significant failings. With this in mind, the study undertakes an immanent critique of liberal democracy whereby liberal democracy is currently failing to live up to its expectations by failing to achieve its own ends. To be more specific - the ontological assumption is that we have a media (particularly a printed media) which fails to provide a plurality of political views due to the capitalist structures which dominate it. The actors to change this position are social media users, who may, in the correct circumstances, have the capacity to correct the issue of media plurality. In terms of being normative - this is the specific premise of the empirical study, to discuss the ways in which social media was achieving practical consequences during the Scottish independence referendum 2014 through the conceptual framework of Freelon (2010). This involves a focus upon the impact of social media upon the normative premise of deliberative democracy, agonistic pluralism, and also Dahl's 5 democratic ideals (2000) and Kuhn's 5 functions of the media (2007).

With reference to the first two of these three criteria put forward by Horkheimer, Given (2008) firstly states that the explanation of the reality is best gathered through a process of observation. Secondly, Given states that observation alone is not sufficient for a critical theory approach and that the observation should be supplemented with interviews, stating that, 'the meaning of perceptions can be comprehended by researchers only by inquiring of the individuals' (ibid. p.181). With this in mind, the methodological approach of the empirical study is to sequentially employ both methods (see subsequent research design and interview process subsections) to analyse the extent to which the Scottish independence referendum of 2014 was characterised by elements of deliberative democracy and agonistic pluralism, and also the role of pluralist group theory in aiding understanding of Twitter based activism during the campaign.

The critical theory paradigm is, of course, not immune to criticism (see Edgar and Sedgewick 2007; Kellner 1993; Norris 1992 amongst others). Freundlieb (2000) suggests a number of basic weaknesses in the theory, stating the most serious to be the dismissal of metaphysical philosophy in preference for only the empirical. Developing the first point, he goes on to state that limiting all philosophical assumptions to analysis of language is in itself limiting. The focus upon *sociologism* in critical theory, for Freundlieb, is also troubling in that, 'it is by no means clear or obvious that the most pressing pathologies of contemporary western societies have social causes' (ibid.). Edgar and Sedgewick (2007) meanwhile, refer to Christopher Norris, who was an early advocate of the theory in the 1980s. They state that Norris' work, *Uncritical Theory* (1992) focuses in part upon the antirealism of critical theorists such as Baudrillard, suggesting that deconstruction in the name of critical theory had, 'over stepped the boundaries of reason and ethical responsibility' (Edgar and Sedgewick 2007 p.94). The prevailing view of the Frankfurt School and those that were influenced by their view of technology as an instrument that should only be seen as negative force of domination, is challenged by Feenberg (1991). Feenberg finds both the Frankfurt school and Habermas' later instrumentalist view of technology to be overly pessimistic and asserts that technological advancement can be a positive force for social transformation if its design, use, and practices are tailored accordingly.

The strength of critical theory, however, is that it gives strong criteria for judging the workings of democracy by holding liberal democracy to its principles and showing how the principles are not fully achieved, and this can sequentially provide criteria for considering what might or should be done to remedy the situation. It is for this reason that critical theory has been chosen as a guiding philosophy for this project, in its aims to assess the contemporary socio-political implications of the internet and social media within the democratic process.

5.3   Qualitative research

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were considered at the start of this project (Neuman and Robson 2014; Patton 2005; Berg 2004). In terms of quantitative research, there was some consideration of, for example, measuring traffic flows on Twitter in the run up to the independence referendum. It quickly became apparent, however, that a study which was attempting to explain online political communication behaviour over the duration of a political campaign culminating in a democratic vote, was overwhelmingly suited to a qualitative approach. As Miles and Huberman (1994) state:

> Qualitative data…are a source of well-grounded, rich descriptions and explanations of processes in identifiable local contexts. With qualitative data one can preserve chronological flow, see precisely which events led to which consequences, and derive fruitful explanations…Words, especially organised into incidents or stories, have a concrete, vivid, meaningful flavour that often proves more convincing to a reader – another researcher, a policy maker, a practitioner – than pages of summarized numbers (Miles and Huberman 1994 p.1).

The key determining factor, then, in deciding upon a qualitative design, was the desire to find explanations behind trends in political communication rather than simply produce and analyse numerical data. As mentioned in the opening chapter and further detailed in section 4.6, the majority of studies in the specific subject area have taken a quantitative approach. There is therefore a comparative lack of qualitative research which subsequently means that there is therefore a lack of rich descriptions and explanations of processes as described in the previous quote taken from Miles and Huberman (ibid.). This study has been conceptualised as contributing towards this in a similar way to that of Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez (2011) in terms of its use in future quantitative studies. Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez' (ibid.) prominent study focused upon the impact of web 2.0 and social media upon participation and civic engagement in the presidential election of 2008 which saw victory for Barack Obama in securing his first term of office. Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez' (2011) study was also qualitative and was conducted with an explicit intention of producing a conceptual framework that could aid understanding of events in the campaign. They envisaged that the conceptual framework could then be utilised in later quantitative studies in the area. Similarly, the core focus of this empirical study is to implement Freelon's (2010) conceptual framework in assessing the modes and prevalence of identified classifications of political communication during the Scottish independence referendum 2014. The study then seeks to clarify if these modes are sufficient in their explanations or whether adapted/new models are required in this

regard. This has again been done on the premise that the study can lay the foundations for future quantitative studies in different campaign settings.

To be specific, the objectives are to assess the impact of social media upon three overlapping areas of democratic theory, namely, agonistic pluralism, deliberative democracy, and pluralist group theory. To guide this intention the project has two research questions:

Primary Research Question

• How could you tell if the #indyref were characterised by deliberative democracy or agonistic pluralism?

Supplementary Research Question

• How does pluralist group theory aid our understanding of Twitter based activism during the Scottish independence referendum 2014?

Table 4 Research questions

The study is situated in the context of a particular narrative which was put forward by, though also personally disputed by, Hindman (2008):

> The internet is redistributing political influence, it is broadcasting the public sphere, increasing political participation, involving citizens in political activities that were closed to them, and challenging the monopoly of elites (Hindman 2008 p.6).

5.4   Social media research paradigm

At the beginning of the project in 2013, existing works regarding politics and social media could be divided into four distinct areas: those of elections, democracy, mobilisation and the burgeoning crossover and interdependency of traditional and new media. As regards Twitter and elections, the general questions posed concerned whether Twitter could be classed as an effective campaigning tool (Elmer 2013; Vergeer 2013; Larsson and Moe 2012). The debate around the democratising possibilities of the internet had received attention (Fuchs 2017; Nilsson and Carlsson 2014; Sunstein 2009; Hindman 2008), whilst more recent works

had focused upon the impact of internet 2.0 on political participation (Larsson 2013; Jackson and Lilleker 2009).

Twitter as a fundamental tool in political activism was in the media spotlight from headlines relating to the Arab Spring uprisings and this received a generous amount of academic attention (Gleason 2013; Khondker 2011; Howard and Hussain 2011; Stepanova 2011). Whilst the subject of the impact of new media upon traditional media formats had been a prominent topic in academic literature in the fields of information technology, journalism, and media plurality (Bruns and Burgess 2012; Hong 2012; Kwak et al. 2010; Fuchs 2010; Ackland 2009). Chapter 4 is devoted to media pluralism and a comprehensive discussion of the role of social media is also presented.

5.5   Research design

As defined by Jahoda et al. in Kumar, 'a research design is the arrangement of conditions for collective analysis of data in a manner that aims to combine relevance to the research purpose with economy in procedure' (Kumar 2011 p.74). The challenge then is to identify the best method to fulfil the aims of the research given the limitations of the research project. Yin suggests that:

> The most important condition for differentiating among the various research methods is to classify the type of research questions being asked. In general, 'what' questions may either be exploratory or about prevalence. 'How' and 'why' questions are likely to favour the use of case studies, experiments or histories (Yin 2008 p.10) .

This distinction led to the early choice of a mixed methods approach of observation, case studies, and interviews. Observation of Twitter was chosen as the best method to identify relevant themes and issues as the campaign unfolded particularly in a study such as this which is grounded in a critical theory research philosophy (Given 2008). This was particularly useful in staying true to qualitative methods whereby the project was led by the empirical data during the campaign. There were of course a number of prominent themes documented in existing literature which were expected to emerge but an approach which followed the debate, day by day, allowed for unexpected themes to be documented. Case studies were initially considered as a possible approach following the relatively significant event which became known as *donorgate* (see chapter 6). It was felt at the time that if a number of such events occurred, then a case study approach could provide a holistic method of exploring developments in the democratic process regarding social media activism. For reasons already mentioned,

interviews are methodologically vital within a study based upon critical theory in order to both foster reflective dialogue and triangulate events by exploring them in depth with relevant stakeholders (ibid.).

As the Debate progressed, it became apparent that potential, significant events which would be suitable for use as case studies such as *donorgate* would be at best few and far between and at worst non-existent. As a result of this, a decision was made that the use of case studies should be dropped from the project. Instead it was decided that the issues that were being raised and identified through the observation of Twitter, in combination with an appropriate range of intensive interviews, would be suitable to deliver a robust analysis of proceedings. This choice of methods also reflected the preferred methodology in terms of a specific critical theory approach, as already noted with reference to Given (2008). As a result, the following choices were decided upon as a research design:
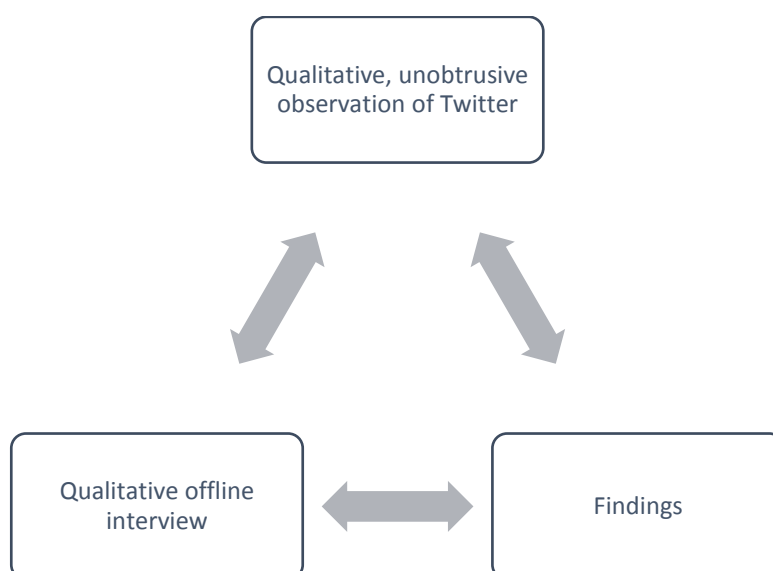
Figure 11 Research design: Sequential triangulated multi-modal

In practice, the research process was genuinely iterative in that not all the key data was identified through the observation of Twitter. Some issues and themes were first identified during the interview process, something that was only made possible by employing a semi-structured approach which by design is employed to allow for themes to emerge in such a manner. A rigidly structured interview process would not have allowed for such events and would have been to the detriment of the quality and breadth of the data which was collected. When such themes emerged during interviews, these were triangulated through online research and catalogued with other relevant data.

5.6 Method for literature search

The study covers four distinct subject areas and the literature search was also subdivided in this way:

- Democracy
- Political pluralism
- Media pluralism
- Social media

Political pluralism (then subsequently agonistic pluralism and deliberative democracy) was identified very early in the study as being the key foundational theory emerging from the democratic literature. Recognised early philosophical pluralist authors were focused upon to begin with. This approach focusing on the works of authors such as William James (1908) gave a grounding for the many sub theories of political pluralism. The establishment and maintenance of a clear line of thought that was relevant to the project was the major challenge of this section of the study. This was overcome by identifying key hypothesises such as by Dahl (2000) in relation to democracy, Kuhn (2007) in terms of the media in a democracy, and Hindman (2008) in relation to the role of social media in a democracy. A similar pattern for the identification and retrieval of relevant literature in the fields of media pluralism and works in the emerging field of social media literature were also employed. Identification of key authors was the starting point, then once their key texts had been obtained, the reference lists again helped identify other relevant works. The literature review process dominated the first year of the project with certain articles and texts still being identified and used, though to a far lesser extent, through until the writing up stage of the study.

The primary method for searching for democratic literature in the early part of the study involved the online library catalogue system at Robert Gordon University, in order to obtain detailed texts which could provide a comprehensive understanding of relevant political theories and concepts. The strategy in terms of searching the library database and subsequent other databases such as *Sage Journals,* was to begin with broad subject search terms such as 'history of deliberative democracy' and then to introduce searches encompassing the specific research topics such as 'developments of deliberative democracy and social media'. For more targeted results, once the aims had been established, exact phrases were searched for, such as 'examples of deliberation on Twitter' and then Boolean searches were used to access more refined results such as '(deliberation OR deliberating) AND (Twitter OR Tweeting OR Tweets) and derivations thereof. The research strategy when using databases such as

those already mentioned, was to conduct a general search across all disciplines and then refine these depending upon the results and the specific focus of the search in question. For example, a general search of *Sage Journals* was then refined to specific subject areas of 'social sciences and humanities' for articles based in political science or 'communication and media studies' for media-based approaches. In addition to *Sage Journals, Web of Science* was also often used and, using the same process, *Web of Science* would offer different subject categories by which to refine the most frequently used being 'political science' and 'communication'. A third database which was utilised in the same manner was *Springer Link,* which could be refined to 'political science' and, most usefully 'political communication'.

Journal databases provided the facility to set custom date ranges for results which was useful in identifying older texts for foundation theories and more recent articles for contemporary viewpoints. As already detailed in previous chapters, both democracy and broader notions of pluralism can be traced back over centuries rather than decades, and therefore substantial text books which document their individual iterations were easily accessible via RGU library searches. However, the less mature subject area of deliberative democracy and media pluralism required a more targeted approach. For example, searches for foundational theories of deliberative democracy were focused upon databases including *Web of Science* with date ranges from the 1980s to the turn of the century, whilst contemporary articles were searched for by restricting the date range to the year, or the months, preceding the date that the research was carried out. As the issue of media plurality as a consequence of media de-regulation and commodification, driven by neo-liberalism, is the philosophical grounding of the study, for earlier works it was appropriate to search within a time-range between 1980 and 1995. As the subject area is wide ranging, to be able to target specific literature, alternative search terms such as 'the media and democracy' were found to be more productive in terms of useful search results. Again, contemporary articles were searched for by restricting the search terms to a relatively short period of time prior to the date of the research exercise, and widening the search if there was a paucity of material returned by the initial searches.

As already noted, the volume and breadth of democratic literature meant that resources were plentiful, but the challenge was, once overarching principles had been established, to narrow the concept down into relevant elements of the theory. A key tool in doing this was to be led by the citations and bibliographies of the primary texts that were used. This citation chaining simplified the process for finding appropriate literature in the democratic sub-theories. These would either be books that could be sourced again from RGU library or, if they were not held there, these were occasionally obtained through the RGU inter-library loans system. In addition to databases, *Google Scholar* also played a vital role in obtaining more targeted

relevant literature, particularly in searching for more recent material relating to deliberative democracy, agonistic pluralism, and material relating to the emergence of social media in a democratic context. As the search for more targeted literature increased, *Google Scholar* was used to identify gaps from initial searches and was particularly useful in that the credibility of search results is immediately apparent through the presence of the number of citations being contained in the headline search results. *New Media & Society* and *Information, Communication & Society* were particularly useful journals throughout the social media literature review.

5.7   Data collection method –Twitter, blogs and other digital sources

From the beginning of the study an initial seed list of Twitter accounts was 'followed' using a new Twitter account created in anticipation of the project. The accounts were deliberately chosen as was envisaged would be the case of a non-affiliated observer with an interest in the Scottish Independence referendum debate. The two official campaign accounts and those of First Minister Alex Salmond and the head of the Better Together campaign Alistair Darling were chosen, along with two activist accounts with a small number of followers from both sides (neither of these accounts developed into anything notable and latterly did not feature in the study) as well as a celebrity led group.

As the observation progressed a snowballing sampling technique (Browne 2005) was employed, which meant more accounts were followed as would be the likely organic progression of anyone else following the debate on Twitter. The accounts included news organisations, journalists, bloggers, independent activist campaigns, affiliated activist campaigns, dedicated university observation accounts, newspaper and magazine accounts, social movements and government accounts. In total, by the time of the final vote around 100 accounts had been followed (see appendix 1).

Care was taken to ensure a balanced number of accounts from each side of the debate were focused upon in order to avoid any potential accusations of bias. There were of course many more accounts which could have been followed but the intention was to only follow a total number of accounts which could be realistically, rigorously analysed by a solo researcher. These accounts were monitored on a daily basis from early March 2013 until the end of December 2014.

To aid the gathering of data, a service titled *The Referendum Daily* provided by *pressdata.co.uk* was subscribed to. The company, in return for a fee, provided a service of

delivering daily information via email to subscribers detailing activity on social media, the printed press, television, radio and blogs regarding the independence referendum:
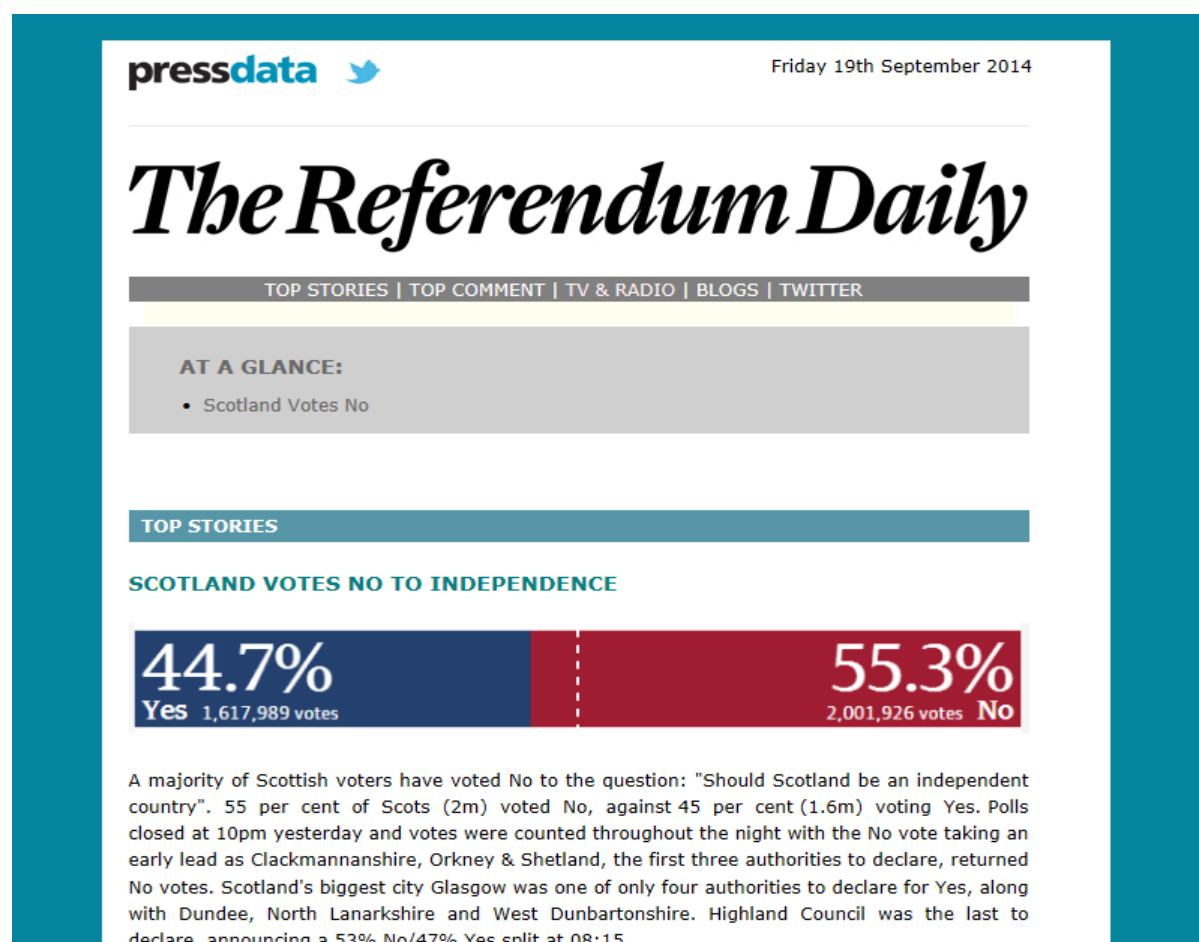
Figure 12 Screenshot from The Referendum daily (2014)

Methods for online data handling were planned at the beginning of the data collection process. Approximately 210,000 Tweets were read during a collection period of 18 months**,** 193 of which (see table 5) were selected for further analysis based upon strict selection criteria themes, and topics to be discussed during the interview process in line with critical theory research philosophy (Given 2008), and these were then stored in digital folders. Hard copies of the Tweets and articles linked to the tweets where appropriate, were printed off in hard copy format and catalogued by date in box files on a weekly basis. These were then used to identify issues which were relevant to the study. In the early days of the project, *relevant to the* study, meant they related to issues that had already been identified in the literature review process such as, for example, Tweets that related to *trolling*. Other Tweets deemed relevant were ones that linked to blogs or newspaper articles such as the role of identity in the referendum campaign. As time progressed there were also new topics which arose organically and had not necessarily been foreseen as likely to occur from existing literature. For example, the

perceived *rebirth* of the town hall meeting became apparent and itself became a topic of discussion between the members of online communities and then in the mainstream media and the BBC.

The tweets and articles were catalogued with similar examples of identified issues and provided evidence which was later used in the results chapters of the thesis. Additionally, the catalogued Tweets in digital folders could be electronically identified using keyword searches and again used in the results sections of the thesis. The catalogued Tweets and articles also provided a basis for identifying the three key demographic groups, namely activists, MSPs, and journalists within the referendum debate.

Following the identification of the three main stakeholder groups, the key activist groups participating in the online debate were identifiable. Once identified, shortlists of potential interviewees from the three groups were compiled and approached to participate in the study. The body of evidence from the catalogued Tweets and articles was also instrumental in identifying the subjects to be discussed during the interview process. Once key account holders had been identified, such as the official campaigns, their leaders and the key activist groups, the numbers of followers they had and also the number of accounts that they themselves followed, were also chronologically catalogued on a weekly basis. This was important to be able to identify the progression of interest in the respective accounts as the debate unfolded.

5.8   Data collection method –traditional press

Earlier in the project, an initial consideration to test the impact of social media upon the democratic process was to contrast the reporting of events on social media sites in comparison to the traditional press. This was at a stage when the methodological approach of the overall project was undecided and discourse analysis was being considered to ascertain if social media reporting was improving the democratic process or not, in terms of its lack of restriction as it operates free from the commercial interests of traditional news organisations.

This approach was eventually decided against in favour of concentrating upon identifying specific issues, events, and topics for detailed analysis for example, issues of trolling and instances of significant mobilisation. The reason for this decision was primarily based upon the notion that these previously documented issues, alongside new ones, when interpreted through a unique setting of a Scottish independence referendum, would make a more important academic contribution than an approach restricted to discourse analysis. This still

required structured monitoring of the traditional press in combination with social media monitoring. Scottish newspapers such as *The Herald* and *The Daily Record* along with Scottish editions of *The Daily Mail*, *The Sun*, *The Times*, *The Mirror*, *The Telegraph*, *the Guardian* and *The Independent* were chosen to give a balanced spread of tabloids and broadsheets.

Newspaper databases such as *LexisNexis* and *International News Stand* were to be used to search for articles to contrast with coverage of the same stories in blogs and Twitter (often highlighted by *The Referendum Daily* as detailed in the previous subsection), and latterly to identify issues as previously discussed. It was presumed that this would be a simple process of searching for articles via search terms such as 'SNP independence white paper', however, what soon became apparent was that accessing specific Scottish editions of UK titles was far from straight forward. In publication searches within *International News Stand* there are thousands of available titles ranging from *The Bombay Times* to *The Hackney Gazette*, however, when searching for example for *The Scottish Daily Mail,* there was no such title to be found, although Scotland specific titles such as *The Daily Record* were easily accessible.

Assuming that there must be a simple answer to the problem, a meeting was arranged with the senior librarian for the RGU Business School. The librarian had a detailed understanding of both *LexisNexis* and *International News Stand* but had not come across this issue before. It was decided that it was not possible to access such titles and suggested that a different approach should be taken, and contact was made with The Scottish National Library and the British Library for suggestions of other ways of accessing titles digitally. Again, however, no solution to the problem was found and it became apparent that the only way to access this information was to plan visits to the Central Aberdeen Library and manually search historic copies of the chosen titles, a procedure which would be significantly onerous and would be likely to mean a revision of overall planned activity with the research design. Consequently, the only option was to use national titles via databases and Google searches which largely restricted content to digital UK editions.

It is important to note that a decision was taken early in the project in keeping with the qualitative approach, to search for articles relating to specific targeted exemplars of content initially based upon both general occurrences and significant topics, which could be categorised as those which fulfilled Kuhn's *five functions of the media* (2007) (as discussed earlier and also in the following subsection relating to interview structure and anonymity) and latterly the units of analysis contained in Freelon's *Model of Democratic Communication* (2010) (see subsection 5.11).   The focus was to compile deliberative and agonistic

occurrences during the debate rather than compiling and analysing a random time-based sample. Additionally, a broader range of literature in both the traditional and new media was collected detailing the major events and general story of the referendum which could then later be used to make a secondary search on Twitter to compare how the social media debate played out in comparison to traditional sources. When Freelon's *Model of Democratic Communication* (2010) was identified, the existing sample and additional sources were collected that fitted not only with deliberative democracy and agonistic pluralism, but also liberal individualist and communitarian behaviour, in order to adequately test Freelon's model against the reality of the independence referendum debate.

In a similar method to that employed to collate the data collected from Twitter, relevant articles from the printed press were saved digitally and also printed out in hard copy and catalogued together with the Twitter data. The collection of Tweets, digital articles, and articles from the traditional press were then segmented into the units of analysis taken from Freelon (2010) (see data analysis section). This provided a valuable, chronological, timeline of events and issues as the debate progressed which was subsequently instrumental in the data analysis section of the study. Formalised data collection from both traditional press sources and Twitter began in November 2013 and ceased at the end of January 2015, however, certain reflective works beyond this date were also considered as part of the study. The following table details the number of Tweets, digital articles, and traditional press articles chosen for further analysis, segmented by unit of analysis:

Unit of Analysis	Tweets	Blogs/digital articles	Traditional press articles	Total
Monologue	16	11	15	42
Personal revelation	9	6	4	19
Personal showcase	14	3	0	17
Flaming	38	28	16	82
Ideological fragmentation	10	7	4	21
Mobilisation	28	17	7	52
Community language	19	20	2	41
Intra-ideological questioning/reciprocity	18	11	3	32
Rational-critical argument	13	7	8	28
Public issue focus	-	-	-	-
Equality	23	26	4	53
Discussion topic focus	-	-	-	-
Inter-ideological questioning/reciprocity	5	3	2	10
Total	193	139	65	

Table 5 Data variables segmented by unit of analysis

5.9   Identification of research subject demographics

The identification of activist groups which were having a meaningful impact upon the democratic process within the Scottish independence referendum debate, was a key factor in the development of the methodology within the study. The activist groups concerned were identified during the observation of Twitter in the early part of the project. The groups were chosen firstly based upon the fact that they were primarily or completely based online, in order to test the suggestion regarding the impact of the internet on the democratic process, put forward by Hindman (2008) and discussed earlier, as opposed to a secondary platform for existing offline organisations. Other factors taken into consideration were that they were *grassroots* in nature, meaning without explicit links to the official campaign. This was important to primarily test the assertion that the internet is redistributing political influence as opposed to again merely providing another media platform for existing social elites. The choice of groups was also based upon the quality and quantity of their online interactions as well as their number of Twitter followers. Below, are brief synopses of the groups focused upon within the study, the figure in brackets is the number of Twitter followers at the date of the referendum vote in September 2014.

- National Collective (19,100) – National Collective (who effectively ceased to exist post-referendum) formed as a cause group in support of Scottish independence upon the announcement of the independence referendum. The group generally consisted of young people, many of whom were students with links to the arts and creative communities.

- Women for Independence (17,100) – Women for Independence were also formed to support independence during the referendum campaign. The group continued to campaign post-referendum, mainly upon feminist issues (under the theme of Independence for Women). The group founders were experienced political activists and included Natalie McGarry who was elected as an SNP MSP but was forced to resign the party whip following an enquiry into WFI finances post-referendum. The group attracted an impressive number of followers, at the time of writing almost 23,000 on Twitter, mainly composed of women who had little or no political experience prior to the referendum (in the words of one of their founder members expressed during an interview with myself).

- Wings Over Scotland (23,300) – Wings was another group formed in contemplation of the independence referendum of 2014 and also continues to campaign post-

referendum. The group, which is the sole enterprise of the self-titled Rev Stuart Campbell has a numerically impressive Twitter following (43,000 at the time of writing) which is the largest of all the groups focused upon within the study. Wings is a controversial group and received both high praise for tireless campaigning and the success of some campaign publications, in particular *The Wee Blue Book*, which purported to provide *truths* around alleged misinformation and so-called scare stories labelled as *project fear*, so long as they were to the detriment of the Unionist argument and not the nationalist side.

- Bella Caledonia (20,500) – Bella existed prior to the independence referendum, and as such had broader interests than the independence referendum itself, including ecology, community, social justice, innovation and media, international affairs and movements, and arts and culture. The group was started by Mike Small and Kevin Williams in 2007 (and latterly with external contributors) both of whom were experienced writers. During the independence referendum campaign, the group dedicated practically all of its time to supporting the independence cause and were notable as providing rational critical arguments in a way that the other groups perhaps did not.

- Other notable groups – Radical Independence, Newsnet Scotland, and Common Weal. Whilst these groups made an important contribution to the Yes Scotland online movement, due to time limitations of the project, these were focused upon to a lesser extent than the other groups in question.

Activists were obvious as a targeted choice of research subject demographic as they were a distinct body of individuals who were required to be focused upon to ascertain if, in line with Hindman's assertion, the internet was redistributing political influence, increasing participation and involving citizens who were previously closed off from the political process. Similarly, groups had to be identified and focused upon in order to primarily answer the second research question regarding the relevance of pluralist group theory in the era of the internet and social media. Journalists could specifically offer a vital perspective on the impact of social media upon the traditional media and answer the many accusations which were laid at their door, including those detailed in the theory section of the thesis and from many proponents of new media whose viewpoints were encountered during the study.

MSPs were able to give a first-hand perspective upon the impact that social media was having upon our democratic representatives, for example, to ascertain if the existing political elites

were being held to account by social media in a way that they previously were not. All three groups were then used to help answer more general questions of how they communicated online, which contributed to areas such as the primary research question around the propensity for social media as a space for deliberation or a more agonistic public sphere. Journalists and MSPs were shortlisted and then subsequently approached, based upon the level and quality of their Twitter output, as it was important to interview those who had a genuine commitment to using the platform during the referendum campaign.

5.10   The Interview process

Interviews with identified stakeholders form a key element of a critical theory research philosophy (Given 2008) which underpins the choice of research methods within the study. Interviewing as a construct for data collection has both advantages and disadvantages, as do all other methodologies (Brinkmann and Kvale 2014; Rowley 2012; King, Cassel and Symon 1994). Advantages include the ability to analyse more complex situations in depth, while questions can be explained in more detail to ensure subject understanding, and information gained from the observation of Twitter could be supplemented with data provided by the interviewees. Disadvantages include quality of data being dependent upon the quality of the interaction, and quality being dependent upon the ability of an inexperienced interviewer, and also the possibility of complications presented by either interviewer/interviewee bias (Kumar 2011).

Thirteen interviews with the three distinct groups were carried out to enable triangulation of the data sourced online and to give the opportunity to examine, in some depth, the major issues identified firstly in theory, and secondly online, as is requisite in critical theory. The three groups were activist groups, professional journalists (both from the written press and television) and members of the Scottish Parliament. In addition to this, a policy officer based at Holyrood with previous experience as a social media officer was interviewed as well as an aide to a former Party Leader who had campaigned during the independence referendum. The breakdown was as follows – six MSPs; two party workers; three journalists and two activists. The shortlisting criteria for the interview subjects was primarily based upon their presence on Twitter. The prevalence and quality of their Twitter output was an important consideration in that those that seemed less than committed users of the platform were not considered. For example, accounts were omitted from shortlisting if they only used Twitter as a one-way broadcasting medium in favour of those accounts where there was evidence of genuine interaction with other users. Furthermore, if accountholders failed to follow more than 100 other accounts they were also omitted from the shortlist, as this again suggested a failure

to seriously engage through the platform. Further criteria included ensuring the inclusion of views from MSPs on both sides of the referendum debate and from different political parties. With representatives from the SNP, Labour, and Conservative parties all being included, this made a total of six in favour of Better Together and two in support of Yes Scotland. Similarly, a representation of journalists from both sides of the debate were shortlisted with the end result being two journalists who backed the Union and one in support of independence.

The main challenge regarding the interviews was the difficulty in identifying activist groups in support of the Better Together campaign, not because they would not willingly participate but because they simply did not exist in the form in which they did on the Yes Scotland side of the debate. It also proved to be extremely difficult to gain access to activists from the Yes Scotland side and this was the main frustration during the data collection part of the project. Activists from Bella Caledonia and Women for Independence represented the two groups interviewed. Wings Over Scotland twice agreed to a telephone interview (all other interviews were done in person) as Wings is based in Bath, England, but these never saw fruition as Wings failed to reply to emails. It was subsequently offered that the interview be conducted in Bath, such was the perceived value of interviewing Wings, based upon the impact of the group during the online referendum debate, but again this failed to elicit a response. Many efforts were made to contact National Collective, but the group simply did not respond to these requests. Radical Independence were the third group to be approached for interview, but this again never came to fruition.

The impact of the paucity of interviews from the activist population was overcome by utilising the manner in which the activist groups acted in an unrestricted manner on Twitter in comparison to MSPs and journalists. MSPs had to adhere to the restrictions which their positions in public office place upon them when using social media. Similarly, the journalists interviewed were constricted in their online activity by their professional employment obligations. The grassroots activist groups, however, and particularly the likes of Wings Over Scotland, lived their lives online in a way in which was not the case with MSPs and journalists. This often manifested itself as what was practically a running commentary of their lives, both personal and with regards to their activism. This provided a detailed picture of their thoughts and activities which revealed themselves in a way that was far removed from that of the other two populations. In this regard it was far more important to have fulfilled interviews with MSPs and journalists to be able to make qualitative judgements which positively contributed to the overall study.

5.10.1 Interview structure - anonymity

The interviews were semi-structured (Dicicco-Bloom and Crabtree 2006; Drever 1995) and altered to gain the most from the interviewee dependent on the stakeholder group which they originated from (see appendix 2 for interview prompts/questions). For example, when interviewing MSPs, it was appropriate to focus upon the manner in which the different parties on both sides of the debate used social media and the perceived impact this had upon their role in this campaign compared to previous *offline* campaigns. More appropriate to the study when interviewing activist groups, was for example, to explore the manner in which their own group was formulated and evolved in line with pluralist group theory. There was, of course, some commonality in interview questions regarding matters which crossed over the different groupings, for example, accusations of online bullying during the campaign. As a starting point for compiling the semi-structured interviews, the following proposition (detailed in chapter 4) of the role of the media in a modern liberal democracy, was used to maintain a guiding focus true to the objectives of the project:

- The role of information provider.
- A part of the agenda setting process.
- The role of public watchdog.
- A driver of political mobilization.
- A means of regime legitimation (Kuhn 2007 p.21)

There was also a conscious effort made during the interviews to be conversational in terms of not rigidly restricting interview questioning to only the predetermined subject areas and questions. This allowed for different subjects to emerge and then be developed where it seemed appropriate in-line with qualitative interview theory. Anonymity was granted to all participants therefore within the results chapters, activists are coded A1 – A2, journalists J1 – J3 and MSPs and party staff M1 – M8. Anonymity was something which seemed to have a major impact upon the willingness of the interviewees to be open and honest in their responses (particularly with MSPs and their staff). Without such expressed guarantees there seems little doubt that the quality of the data obtained would have been hugely impacted upon. All interviews were conducted in person in preference to telephone or video conferencing. The personal, face to face setting, intuitively gained a much quicker and stronger rapport with the interviewees which in turn led to productive interviews in which the participants appeared at greater ease and more willing to share detailed information.

Each interview was arranged with the individual in question on the basis of a 45-minute time slot. However, in practice many of the interviews ran for over an hour. Each interview was captured using an audio-recorder in order to allow the conversation to flow smoothly without the distraction of manual note taking and to also ensure no details were missed. Interviews which took place later in the process began to markedly decline in length and when combined with the multitude of data collected from Twitter observation, this was an indication that *saturation point* was being approached. Saturation point is described as the point in qualitative research whereby 'the evidence is so repetitive that there is no need to continue' (Baker, Edwards and Doige 2012). This signalled that the interview part of the process was reaching a point where the interviews could stop, and the data could be prepared for analysis.

5.11 Data analysis – (directed) content analysis

Following examination of the numerous options for data analysis (Ritchie et al. 2013; De Vaus and de Vaus 2001; Miles and Huberman 1994; Patton 1990; Weber 1990) directed content analysis was chosen as the preferred method. Content analysis, in both its basic form and as directed content analysis, fits well with a critical theory research philosophy in that 'content analysis is a flexible research method for analysing texts and describing and interpreting the written artefacts of a society' (White and Marsh 2006 in Beach et al. 2009 p.129). This is particularly appropriate to this study due to the proliferation of different 'artefacts' collected from Twitter, blogs, and other electronic sources and also the traditional press and transcriptions of the research interviews. Similarly, Weber (1990 p.5), in a way that again matches the types of data collected in this project, suggests that 'social scientists who must make sense of historical documents, newspaper stories, political speeches, open-ended interviews…to name a few – will find the technique indispensable'. Content analysis has also been described as having advantages in preference to other analytical approaches as 'it allows a closeness to text which can alternate between specific categories and relationships' (CSU 2018). This again corresponds with this study in the way that it is focused explicitly upon the categorisation of data in relation to a number of different strands and models of political communication. Another attributed benefit of content analysis, which also tallies with the approach of this study, particularly concerning initial data collected from Twitter, is the manner in which content analysis is suggested to be particularly suited to unobtrusive research methods (ibid).

Directed content analysis 'is guided by a more structured process than in a conventional content analysis approach. Using existing theory or prior research, researchers begin by

identifying key concepts or variables as initial coding categories' (Hsieh and Shannon 2005 p.1281*)*. This is appropriate to this study as part of its central aim is to test existing strands/models of democratic communication against the data collected during the #indyref. The coding categories to the primary research question are discussed in detail in the following sections*.* This was initially done by formalising data categories in line with an abductive reasoning approach, whereby the pertinent themes were identified through analysis of the literature included in the theory section of the thesis and also from the research interviews. This approach can be classed as abductive as the themes identified did not guarantee any conclusions, as would be the case with a deductive reasoning approach. The research approach, for instance, took the form of broader categories of data relating to deliberation and agonism and data which could be appropriated to one or more of Kuhn's five functions of the media (2007). These broader categories of data were then finally pared down at a later date into the sections and indicative units included in Freelon's (2010) model of online democratic communication (these will be discussed in section 5.13).

Nvivo software was used to collate and analyse data. Nvivo software is specifically designed for qualitative research and can be used to store, analyse, and model data collected across different mediums. Nvivo was also used in the transcription of all the interview recordings, and this was done by uploading interview recordings on to the database and then manually typing the recordings as the audio was played back. Although this technique takes some time, it facilitates the researcher to become immersed in the data and also allowed specific highlights in the data to be appropriately tagged and easily re-engaged with at the appropriate time in the analysis process.

Led by the literature review in the earlier parts of the study, it was decided that the empirical project should focus upon the consideration of both deliberative and agonistic theory during the independence referendum campaign. This was an organic process as it quickly became apparent that there was a paucity of any kind of genuine deliberation during proceedings on Twitter. The more conflictual nature of overall proceedings resonated better with agonistic theory and particularly that of Chantal Mouffe in *On the Political* (2005). This was later confirmed during the data allocation process relating to Freelon's (2010) model which was limited to three approaches, namely – liberal individualist, communitarian, and deliberative. At this stage, all the existing data from Twitter, the traditional press, and the interviews was manually reallocated into groups relating to each of Freelon's units of analysis (see section 5.13).   Though the data fitted into these categories to one extent or another, the lack of an agonistic strand of the model seemed inappropriate.   Such a combined approach of

deliberation and agonism has been proposed by others in the field such as Karppinen, Moe and Svensson (2008) who suggest:

> Consensus and conflict are two co-existing impulses of political communication and political life in general…not disregarding differences [between consensus and agonism] we argue that an openness to potential combinations of the two approaches might have positive implications for media and communication research (Karppinen, Moe and Svensson 2008 p.11).

In order to support this analytical strategy, it was important to produce a robust methodology, and as already touched upon, this was derived from the work of Deen G. Freelon in *Analyzing online political discussion using three models of democratic communication* (2010) (again, see the following section).

The supplementary research question explores the relevance of pluralist group theory in relation to Twitter use during the Scottish independence referendum 2014. This question stands separate to the primary research question, as detailed earlier in this chapter, with regard to data analysis. Initially, the method of analysis for this question was to simply add another unit of analysis in addition to those in Freelon's model and assess the data related to theoretical debates around group theory, particularly those identified in Dahl's seminal work in the area – *Who Governs?* (2005). Further detailed analysis resulted in a more specific coding scheme taken from Dahl and Lindblom's *Politics Economics and Welfare* (1976), where the authors identify five distinct political effects of social/interest groups:

1. They are more effective than individuals
2. They facilitate healthy political competition
3. The group bargaining process creates a barrier to extremism
4. Overlapping memberships of social groups discourages unilateral thought and action
5. Extensive pluralist networks help to ensure the spread of information (Dahl and Lindblom (1976 p.302-305)

This maintained a very specific focus on applying data to theoretical work in the subject field in the same way that the coding and analysis relating to the primary research question had with the use of Freelon's (2010) model. In addition to this, one further category was added to the process regarding group/state personality, as generally appropriated to the works of the English pluralists such as Laski, Cole, and Figgis (see chapter 3). This was through a desire

to assess if the phenomenon of social media had changed classical conceptions of the relationship between the state and its citizens.

5.12   Data analysis - coding

This section provides a critique of existing approaches to coding qualitative research data in the field of political communication with a particular focus upon studies which have sought to identify online deliberation, culminating with an explanation of the reasons that Freelon (2010) was ultimately chosen as the preferred model for the coding and analysis of the research data.

A code, as pertaining to qualitative research has been defined as 'most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language based or visual data' (Saldana 2009 p.3) Coding as a research process is the organising of data to be able to effectively conduct research analysis and evaluation, which if done effectively, ought to enhance the likelihood of producing robust results and conclusions. As Strauss (1987 p.27 in Saldana 2009 p.1) states, 'any researcher who wishes to become proficient at doing qualitative analysis must learn to code well and easily. The excellence of the research rests in large part on the excellence of the coding'.   The principal focus of this study is the question of *how could you tell if the #indyref was characterised by deliberative democracy or agonistic pluralism*. A methodological starting point in doing so is to focus upon existing academic literature which relates to the coding of social media with the purpose of recognising and evaluating, firstly, coding relating to deliberative democracy.

There is a distinct body of coding literature which has developed as social media has increasingly become a recognised arena of political communication. A number of these studies have focused upon coding online political communication for purposes other than identifying the presence of deliberative democracy, as is the focus of this study. These studies do, however, provide insight into a selection of coding methods which can be considered as appropriate methodological designs for research projects focused more broadly upon online political dialogue. Such studies are predominantly focused upon election campaigning and also the utilisation of social media platforms, such as Twitter, by elected politicians.

A number of such studies have built upon Banwart's (2002) Webstyle content analysis coding scheme, which was developed as a means of assessing gender difference of candidate self-presentation to potential voters through online political advertising. This extensive scheme

includes 58 categories which consist of 212 variables (ibid. p.297-238). Trammell et al. (2006) used an expanded version of the scheme to analyse political blog content, with Wang (2010) again applying the model in assessing online political discourse during Taiwan's 2008 general election campaign. Other approaches in assessing online dialogue include those at the other end of the spectrum in terms of the level of categorisation and analysis. Grant, Moon and Busby-Grant (2010 p.584) building upon Leavitt et al. (2009) took a broader approach by limiting initial coding categories to those of, 'broadcast', 'broadcast mention', 'reply' and 'retweet' in an assessment of Australian politicians' use of Twitter. In a quantitative study focused upon social media use in the Swiss national election of 2011, Klinger (2013 p.724) again preferred a limited coding scheme with primary cluster categories restricted to 'information', 'mobilisation', 'participation' and 'other'. Secondary coding in the study then identified sub-clusters of, 'information', 'mass-media references' and 'transparency'. Golbeck, Grimes and Rogers (2010 p.1614-1615) used a slightly more targeted approach in assessing Twitter use by US Congress members, with six categories of 'direct communication', 'personal message', 'activities', 'information', 'requesting action', 'fundraising' and 'unknown'. In a later study of the Twitter feeds of Scottish MPs between 2008 and 2010, Margaretten and Gaber (2012) coded MPs' tweets as:

> *Hashtags* for evidence of topic diversity; *@signs* for indications of direct conversations with constituents; RT for *retweets*, ostensibly to offer additional points of view to the group; *URLs* for evidence of promoting engagement and *mentions* for calling attention to another user in the conversation (ibid. p.337).

In a more recent study, again focusing upon politicians in Scotland, though this time analysing MSPs' use of Twitter, Baxter, Marcella, and O'Shea (2016 p.447) took a more granular approach by initially using four broad categories similar to those already mentioned, but then segmenting data across a further 31 subcategories.

Whilst the works previously mentioned give an insight into broader studies of online political communication, more pertinent to this study are those within a growing body of literature that is unambiguously focused upon coding schemes which can be utilised to identify online deliberation. As early as 1998, Wilhelm devised deliberative coding categories in a study which asked how deliberative online discussion is within Usenet newsgroups. These were based around the principles of Habermasian rational argument (see chapter two), which is also the theoretical basis of a number of the subsequent models which were developed by authors in later studies. Lincoln Dahlberg's prominent study (2001) coded deliberation in categories of, 'exchange and critique of reasoned moral-practical validity claims', 'reflexivity',

'ideal role taking', 'sincerity', 'discursive inclusion and equality' and 'autonomy from state and economic power'.   Graham and Witschge (2003), were writing at perhaps the peak of increased optimism regarding the potential for the internet and social media to foster online political deliberation.   Their study sought to 'develop a method for examining the extent to which internet forums meet the normative requirements of rational-critical debate, reciprocity and reflexivity' (ibid. p173).   Trenel (2004) formulated a detailed coding scheme that comprised of, 'equality', 'rationality', 'respect', 'constructiveness', 'interactivity', 'personal experience', 'emotional balance' and 'reflexiveness'.   Janssen and Kies (2005 p.326-330), presented an overview of existing research which evaluates the quality of online political discussions with which they aimed to operationalise methods of measuring online deliberation.   The coding characteristics they identified, followed what was becoming an emerging pattern, including, 'reciprocity', 'justification', and 'reflexivity'.   However, they also included codes of, 'ideal role taking', 'sincerity', 'inclusion and discursive equality', and 'autonomy from state and economic power'.

In an inductive study which sought to depart from deductive notions of deliberation, typically taken from theoretical standpoint of authors such as Habermas, as already mentioned, Mansbridge et al. (2006 p.18-34) identified coding categories of, 'reason and emotion', which was a nuanced but important departure from 'rationality', alongside 'common good vs. common ground', 'free flow' and also three separate facets of equality, those being, 'extensive and inclusive participation in discussion', 'self-facilitation and group control' and 'fair representation of views'.   Stromer-Galley (2007 p.4-7) devised a coding scheme which was designed to measure deliberation in both face-to-face and online settings. The coding scheme consisted of, 'reasoned opinion expression', 'disagreement', 'equality', 'topic' and 'engagement'. In a significantly more detailed dialogical framework, devised by Graham (2008), a three-phase process was formulated and is detailed in the following diagram:

```
Coding Phases

1                                                          2            3

Message type                    Response type      Evidence type    Communicative
                                                                     empathy

a) Initial
                  a) Reasoned claim  → a) Counter      a) Fact/Source   a) Empathetic
                                       b) Rebuttal     b) Comparison       exchange
i) Initial argument                    c) Refute       c) Example       b) Third-person
ii) Initial assertion                  d) Affirmation  d) Experience       exchange
                                          Initial argument

                                                                        Discursive
                                                                        equality
                  b) Non-reasoned claim → a) Counter assertion
b) Response →                             b) Non-reasoned rebuttal      a) Degrading
                                          c) Non-reasoned refute        b) Neglected
                                          d) Non-reasoned affirmation*

                  c) Non-claim response → a) Directive-Informative      Discursive
                                          b) Commissive                 freedom
                                          c) Usage-declarative
                                          d) Expressive                 a) Curbing
                                             i)  Acknowledgement
                                             ii) Emotional comment
                                             iii) Humor
                                                                 Argument   Sincerity

                                                                 a) Reflexive   a) Questionable
                                                                    argument       sincerity
```

Table 6 Coding Scheme Overview (Graham 2008)

The three distinct phases of the coding scheme were designed to firstly identify message types, followed by sub-categorisation of 'reasoned', 'non-reasoned', and 'non-claim' replies, with the final phase assessing, 'communicative empathy', 'discursive equality', 'discursive freedom' and 'sincerity'. Most recently, Halpern and Gibbs (2013 p.12-13) focused upon the likelihood of both Facebook and YouTube as catalysts for online deliberation. In doing so, they included codes of 'logic and reasoning', 'conversational coherence', 'equality of participation', 'politeness', 'civility' and 'message length'.

In summary, these different approaches to coding online deliberative democracy tend to be based upon Habermasian concepts of rationality, reciprocity, reflexivity and derivations of equality. In contrast, more granular coding schemes which take a more detailed discursive approach include numerous further codes which deconstruct types of arguments and responses, as well as levels of communicative sincerity. It is important to note, however, that the authors of these studies found some significant difficulties with operationalising such coding categories. For example, a common issue was the difficulty in assessing reflexivity within a discussion as reflection, in most cases, probably takes place outside of the discussion forum as individuals reflect on the points made by others, which potentially renders reflexivity as intangible within the textual data posted in the online forum. Authors such as Given (2008

p.26) sought to overcome this through considering *rebuttals* and *refutes* to incorporate a certain level of reflection, this, however, could be classed as a tenuous assumption in terms of genuine rational reflection upon the issue in question. The suggested remedies to the issue by other authors, such as Wilhelm (1998) were the triangulation of online data with research interviews in order to question individuals on their propensity to reflect during such exchanges, whilst Jensen (2003, in Janssen and Kies 2005) asked research subjects to document reflection in supplementary research surveys (other such coding issues are discussed as part of the coding scheme critique in the following section).

On consideration of all of the approaches detailed here, a final decision was made to proceed with a comparative model formulated by Deen G. Freelon titled,- *Analyzing online political discussion using three models of democratic communication* (2010):

Model of democratic communication	Indicative metric
Liberal individualist	Monologue
	Personal revelation
	Personal showcase
	Flaming
Communitarian	Ideological fragmentation
	Mobilization
	Community language
	Intra-ideological questioning
	Intra-ideological reciprocity
Deliberative	Rational-critical argument
	Public issue focus
	Equality
	Discussion topic focus
	Inter-ideological questioning
	Inter-ideological reciprocity

Table 7 Models of online democratic communication and their indicative metrics (Freelon 2010)

This model was particularly appealing in that it was conducive to the project given that it followed the less complex dialogic approaches detailed in this section, which whilst appealing in terms of rigour, would have been inappropriate in a relatively longitudinal study of an open forum such as Twitter, where the focus upon discussion topics was particularly wide-ranging.

Also, the opportunity to assess the data which had been collected during the project against the norms of liberal individualism and communitarianism, which are also contained in Freelon's model, offered additional perspectives to which the Twitter debate during the independence referendum could be benchmarked against in addition to the central model of deliberative democracy. Freelon's work sought to introduce a new framework of analysis building on existing models proposed by Jürgen Habermas (1996) and Lincoln Dahlberg (2001). The framework is based upon three distinct yet overlapping strands of democracy namely, the liberal, the communitarian, and the deliberative democratic. In so doing Freelon claims that:

> This framework enhances the ability of researchers to contextualise disparate online discussion cultures with respect to one another, characterise particular cases in terms of distinct scholarly conceptions of democracy, and testing existing theories of online political communication in new ways (Freelon 2010 p.1173).

Such a framework, the author suggests, is necessary in response to the proliferation of deliberative models (such as those recently discussed) which fail to take into account many of the features of online political expression which exist outside of, or in contrast to, the deliberative model (the three strands of the model are classified by the indicative units in table 7). Freelon's model was used to code both the Twitter and interview data. This involved taking each separate piece of data and considering which, if any, of the units of analysis it applied to. If it applied to more than one it was designated to how ever many units were appropriate. At the end of this process each unit of analysis contained a distinct body of evidence which is then discussed under each unit heading in chapter six. This process then, allowed for triangulation of the data in terms of evidence collected from Twitter, tested against the accompanying discussions as taken from the interviews which could in turn be compared with the theoretical assertions identified in the earlier part of the project.

The structured analysis of the data gave a strong indication of the relevance of Freelon's units of analysis to this particular study. The vast majority of the units of analysis identified recurring themes and issues that will be discussed in the following results chapters of the thesis. This was not, however, the case with all of the indicative units in the table above. There were different reasons for taking these decisions, ranging from the particular nature of the referendum debate rendering the units as inappropriate, such as Freelon's definition of *equality* (see the following section for the redefined metric in this specific context) to the absence of evidence of the metric being significant in itself, such as *public issue focus,* as the lack of evidence specifically defined the nature of the debate. Each metric/unit of analysis is given a heading in the results chapter relating to the primary research question and

explanations are provided if the unit of analysis is *omitted* or *restricted* in the volume of evidence which is present. At the end of chapter 6, a critique of Freelon's model is presented and detail is given as to the positive and negative outcomes of the application of the model to the data collected within the study. The next section further details Freelon's (2010) model and includes a critique of the application of the model to the data analysis during this project, which is intended to aid future scholars in terms of replicability of the methodology of this study in future projects.

As a recognised, though a generally more contentious model of political communication theory, as part of the review of existing models and coding schemes of deliberative democracy, similar searches were made to identify and analyse coding schemes focused upon agonistic pluralism. This search, however, failed to find any such models in the academic literature. As a result of this, the final coding scheme (which follows in the next section) incorporates the process of considering the current strands of analysis of liberal individualism, communitarianism, and deliberation in relation to the norms of agonistic theory. Again, in chapter six, which is the first results chapter, the results are further assessed against the norms of agonistic pluralism and the conclusions to chapter six includes the suggested structural basis of such a model, which it is argued would complement existing strands/models of democratic communication.

5.13   Data analysis - final coding scheme

This section provides a comprehensive overview of the units of analysis which make up Freelon's (2010) model. It also details how these units were applied to the empirical study and reasons are given as to how, and why, individual units were omitted or adapted (as encouraged by the author) to fit with this particular task. Additionally, a critique of the application of the model is presented with the intention of informing future scholars of the issues, both positive and negative, which were encountered in this study. Suggestions are also given as to potential improvements which could be made when employing a similar coding approach to data extracted from social media platforms in campaigns preceding future elections and other online political campaigns.

5.13.1 The liberal individualist strand

Liberal individualism encompasses all characteristics of online conversation involving personal expression and the pursuit of self-interest. From various literatures, four

features can be placed into this category: monologue, personal revelation, personal showcase and flaming (Freelon 2010 p.1178).

Monologue

Monologues are endemic in broader political communication and fit with Kuhn's functions of the media as basic information provision, the likes of which would be common during offline political speechmaking. Monologues, though ubiquitous, by their textbook definition generally defeat the post-internet2.0 capabilities of interaction, whether in real-time or on message boards. As Freelon notes 'monologue is anathema to deliberative democrats because it represents a triumph of the individual's desire to make her or his voice heard over the basic deliberative imperative to listen and respond thoughtfully to others' (ibid. p.1179). Whilst this may well be the case, the monologue is the realistic platform for any debate and is almost certainly inevitable, though it is the response to a monologue which may or may not result in any desired form of deliberation. The monologue would cause no issue for agonists in light of the acceptance of passionate political opinion on any given issue, the like of which would be the precursor of the majority of political monologues regardless of whether they are on or offline (see also Hill and Hughes 1998; Shank and Cunningham 1996).

In practice, the majority of the research data could have been classed as monologues, in keeping with Jensen's (2003 p.357 in Freelon 2010 p.8) assertion that online debate tends to be dominated by individuals who seek to dominate discussion from a virtual 'pulpit'. However, the 140 character limit, which was latterly raised to 280 characters, lends itself to short statements which often seek no reply other than perhaps the 'likes' or 'retweets' of other users who had read the tweet in question, as opposed to the possibilities offered by platforms such as Facebook where such limits do not apply. The suggestion being that to quantify users' specific proclivity to indulge in lengthy monologues, the research design should perhaps be targeted to platforms other than Twitter. Alternatively, the use of hyperlinks to monologues on other online platforms used by account holders may also be conducive to a more effective means of analysis.

Personal revelation

In differentiating personal revelation from monologue, Freelon states 'whereas monologue is a formal characteristic of forum communication, personal revelation is a content-based criterion that embodies the liberal individualist proclivity to focus on oneself' (Freelon 2010 p.1179). Freelon's definition is relevant, though one sided in failing to acknowledge the positive way that personal revelation may be situated. Freelon acknowledges the argument of Fraser (1990) who suggests that Habermas' unwillingness to encourage personal revelation

in the public sphere is a way in which the existing power dynamic is reinforced, the suggestion being that the existent hegemony is protected through a uniform *establishment* persona devoid of human characteristics. Personal revelation can be applied to agonistic theory in two of the identified components, those of *hegemony* and *identity*. The importance of hegemony to agonistic theory has been previously stated and overlaps with the role of identity. Mouffe's agonism, as previously detailed, sees identity as a major fuel of the democratic process; therefore, the choice to maintain an *establishment* identity or to adopt a *humanised* position through personal revelation poses an interesting argument for the agonist and this is also discussed in the empirical study.

The coding of data as relating to personal revelation within this study is focused upon the manner in which politicians, in particular, do or do not welcome the opportunity to *personalise* their social media accounts. This is mainly done with reference to the deliberate tactic of politicians to *humanise* themselves with the aim of repairing the fractured trust which has been referred to in previous chapters. It would, however, have been possible to extend the identification of personal revelation to the other two focus demographics within this study, or indeed, any demographic within future studies, if it was seen to be relevant to the overall aims of the study.

Personal showcase

The link between liberal individualism and personal showcase is suggested by Freelon as the act of seeking attention for one's own material outside of the discussion forum, perhaps on the individual's personal blog or website. As previously stated, Twitter is largely a conduit to other websites necessitated by the 140 character limit of each post (at the time of the referendum). Individuals and groups within all three of the demographics relevant to the study, those of politicians, journalists, and activist groups will routinely use Twitter as a personal showcase. It is the lifeblood of grassroots political organisations, the like of which were so important in the empirical study as many relied purely upon gaining support for their cause through Twitter alone or in tandem with other sites like Facebook to redirect readers to their own websites. Personal showcasing does not easily fit with, nor have any demonstrable relation to, agonistic pluralism.

In practice, the identification and coding of personal showcase within the dataset of this study was a relatively straight-forward process, partly through the restriction of characters within each forum post, and also by the tendency of individuals to use hyperlinks to the material which the individual was encouraging other users to seek out. With this in mind, a quantitative study aimed at examining levels of personal showcase in perhaps a larger data set may be

suited to a research design centred explicitly upon the use of such hyperlinks, in a similar manner to Williams et al. (2005), as discussed in the previous section.

Flaming

The unrestricted manner in which participants conduct themselves online is one of the most controversial and pervasive issues as regards social media theory. *Flaming*, defined by Alonzo and Aiken (2004 p205) as 'hostile intentions characterised by words of profanity, obscenity, and insults that inflict harm to a person or an organisation resulting from uninhibited behaviour' (Freelon 2010 p.1179) is a catch all term for the issue at hand. The meaning attributed to the term almost always (see Hill and Hughes 1998 and Mitra 1997 in Jones 1997 as notable exceptions) invokes negative connotations and is often referred to as *trolling.* Hardaker (2010) makes a distinction between the two terms classifying *flaming* as, 'response to perceived threat as an end its own right' (ibid. p.215). Such a nuanced distinction has important agonistic connotations. Response to perceived threat may possibly be associated with *ineradicable antagonism* which is central to Mouffe's agonistic theory. Trolling, on the other hand, would almost certainly fall foul of agonistic theory in that it falls outside of the agonistic respect which forms *the rules of the game.* The task at hand then is to solve the dilemma of how and when these ineradicable antagonisms can be subsumed into the type of *conflictual consensus* in Mouffe's agonistic pluralism.

With reference to the identification and coding of data relating to trolling/flaming on Twitter, the specific definition of the concept being characterised by profanity and obscenity again allows for easy identification of such forum posts. As already detailed, this study followed a process of manual data collection over a relatively long timescale of approximately 18 months. Future studies focused upon, or including, identification and quantification of flaming in its strictest sense, that being the inclusion of profanity, could use a simpler method of a standard retrospective search for such use of language via the Twitter homepage, which facilitates the inclusion of specific accounts and hashtags over a designated period. It should, however, be noted that 'hostile intentions' can also be comprised of dialogue which does not necessarily only consist of profane and abusive language.

5.13.2 The communitarian strand

Online public spaces that are predominantly communitarian uphold the cultivation of social cohesion and group identity above the fulfilment of individual desires. The five measures associated with this [strand] – ideological fragmentation, mobilisation,

community identification, in-group reciprocity and in-group questioning – all reflect this overarching goal (Freelon 2010 p1180).

Ideological fragmentation/homophily

Ideological homophily is commonly associated with Cass Sunstein (2009) amongst others, whereby he conceptualises *The Daily Me.* This refers to the technological capabilities which allow internet users to streamline their media feeds (as well as a multitude of other interests, such as television, shopping and music) to be restricted to their own personal interests and favourites. Ideological homophily is commonly referred to as *fragmentation*, a potential result of which is a self-marginalised citizenry who exist in their own *media bubble* through a lack of exposure to differing perspectives and points of view. Previously, media users may well have chosen their newspapers and other media in line with their own political preferences but never to the extent which the internet both enables and encourages. Whilst Sunstein focuses upon the negative democratic impact of ideological homophily, others, such as Fraser (1990), take a more positive, communitarian view of a citizenry which is enabled politically through communication with those sharing the same political preferences. Here then, there is an intuitively welcome possibility that individuals who may be put off political participation through the fear of intimidation or being *shouted down* by other more vocal and perhaps more knowledgeable participants, find a safer place where this is less likely to be the case. As the individual becomes more politically active and emboldened through communication with like-minded individuals, they may latterly have the confidence to participate in the wider, more adversarial, public sphere. Agonism and Ideological homophily as described by Sunstein share concerns regarding the impact of an unwillingness (whether deliberate or not) to firstly hear the opposing side of view and secondly, to acknowledge the legitimacy of that counter position. The communitarian view of ideological fragmentation can be seen as a channel in which the passion which is an essential part of *the political* finds a space to grow and eventually emerge into the wider (virtual) public sphere.

Identifying and coding ideological homophily presented a more significant challenge than many of the other coding categories within the study. In a similar way to the complexity of coding reflexivity (as discussed in the previous section), ideological homophily is not a dialogue trait which can be ascertained through the examination of individual tweets, or even conversations on Twitter, or blog posts on other platforms. This led to homophily within this study mainly being focused upon the numerous broader discussions of 'Twitter bubbles' and 'echo chambers' which were relatively prevalent on Twitter during the campaign. Instead, the identification/quantification of abstract concepts such as ideological homophily would require

a different approach. This would likely necessitate any specific attempt to study ideological homophily to be done in conjunction with research participants, rather than remote analysis of forum posts, through means such as research questionnaires ideally triangulated with research interviews exploring the online information consumption habits of those particular research subjects.

Mobilisation

Freelon refers to Mutz (2006) in suggesting that those with *communitarian* traits that are active in online forums are more likely to mobilise politically than the *liberal individualist* or *deliberative.* In doing so, the resultant political action may remain online in the form of activities such as petition signing and financial donation or progress offline to perhaps attending political meetings or protesting in organised political rallies. The empirical study addresses the difference between political *engagement* and *mobilisation* as the two were often inappropriately intermingled during the independence referendum.

Political engagement invokes a sense of those referred to as engaging, likely through media, with the democratic process, and following the arguments on either side of the debate. Whereas mobilisation suggests manifest participation in support of one group or another in one of the ways previously referred to. The empirical study is concerned with those that were mobilised to participate politically through social media. Two of the core features of Mouffe's agonism are those of *conflict* and *passion* which by definition suggest mobilised participation and therefore appear to sit comfortably with both respective models.

The fact that this study was centred upon a particularly participative UK vote, (as demonstrated by the final turnout of 84.6%) and included research demographics of activists and politicians during the campaign meant that tweets relating to mobilisation were unsurprisingly abundant. The focus, again, however, was upon identifying exemplars of such examples of possible mobilisation rather than a quantitative endeavour. It became apparent though that future studies aimed at quantifying such activity would likely be suited to a design based upon the targeting of precise terminology. There was a proliferation of Tweets that were prefaced with language such as 'join us', 'come along' and other such phrases that denoted direct calls to mobilise. Of course, other more subtle language designed to engage people through means such as encouragement to watch video clips of speeches and such like would be more challenging to incorporate into quantitative research designs. A carefully designed categorisation of such language could, however, be beneficial as a starting point in mining for text relating to mobilisation in larger datasets in future campaign studies.

Community Identification

Freelon includes community identification in his model with an emphasis on discourse analysis showing how individuals perceive themselves to be part of a distinct group or movement. Freelon states that:

> Several studies unconnected with the online deliberation literature have used community language such as 'we', 'us' and 'our', as operational measures of identification with the online community in question (Cassell et al. 2006; Birchmeier et al. 2005) (Freelon 2010 p.1181).

Whilst detailed discourse analysis is not part of this study, identity is central to much of the debate which took place, which is perhaps unsurprising in the context of a vote upon the constitution of Scotland and the United Kingdom. Identity is another of Mouffe's theoretical bases of agonistic pluralism and similarly to the last unit of analysis of mobilisation, sits comfortably with both respective models.

For those wishing to identify the emergence of communities within particular forums, perhaps during political debates, or campaigns focused upon research subjects with initial, undecided allegiance, the use of community language as defined here could be particularly useful. Within the collection and coding of data within this project, which was not focused upon quantitative judgements, whereby the majority of Twitter users seemingly already had ultimate allegiance to one side, or the other, prolonged discourse analysis was deemed to be inappropriate. The type of community language detailed above, however, helped to quickly identify numerous exemplars of community identification which are presented in the following results chapter.

Intra-ideological questioning and response

Intra-ideological questioning and response refers to conversation between community members and is classified by Steibel and Esteves (2015) as a further indication of individuals perceiving themselves to be a member of a broader community. Reciprocation between members of the same community, largely without major disagreement, distinguishes communitarian response from that of deliberation. Evidence of response between groups from the same side of the independence debate but from separate groups or organisations, could be seen as evidence of a broader *movement* rather than simply groups sharing a common goal. The capabilities of internet2.0 for conversation, would in democratic terms, be seen as a welcome progression from monologue as previously discussed. Moving from basic response to actual questioning, Intra-ideological questioning as argued by Stromer-Galley (2007) in Freelon (2010) is a subset of *reciprocity* and again strengthens community ties as a specific

response is required, the act of which builds relationships within communities, the absence of which may fracture that community. Evidence of Intra-ideological response and questioning could be again seen as components of identity building in line with agonistic norms.

In practice, manually identifying and coding intra-ideological questioning on Twitter during the referendum campaign presented challenges. Identifying initial tweets which were an appeal to other recognised accounts, including a question, was relatively straightforward. However, identifying if such a tweet had been responded to, is not immediately apparent from the 'front page' of one's Twitter feed. This necessitated a fairly lengthy, repetitive process in order to assess if messages had been replied to. This coding category would lend itself to an approach such as the method presented by Graham (2008) in order to analyse open questioning and the presence, or otherwise, of reciprocation from account holders within the same side of the debate. The process of doing so manually, however, would remain a relatively arduous one.

5.13.3 The deliberative strand

In contrast with liberal individualist and communitarian forums, the deliberative strand is marked by Habermas' conceptual trio of rational-critical argument, public issue focus and putative equality. A relatively high quantity of cross-cutting discussion is usually also considered an essential element (Delli Carpini et al. 2004)...six of the most commonly utilized [are]: rational-critical argument, public issue focus, equality, discussion topic focus, out-group reciprocity and out-group questioning (Freelon 2010 p.1181).

Rational critical argument

Rational critical argument suggests logical, structured application of thought to the subject in question and Freelon claims that rational critical argument is 'arguably the lynchpin of the Habermasian public sphere' (ibid. p1182). In line with deliberative democracy, the notion of rational critical argument suggests that the individual has applied more than merely his or her own personal, emotional response in a way that fits with an expression of Kantian enlarged thought, as discussed in previous chapters. In saying such, it ought to be again acknowledged that later deliberative theorists such as Mansbridge et al. (2010) allow for self-interest in deliberation in a way that Habermas would not. Rational critical argument seems on appearance to sit uncomfortably with basic agonistic pluralism which is unashamedly based upon conflict and passion. However, there is no specific reason as to why these are mutually exclusive elements of political debate. The empirical study examines the possibilities of the deliberative and agonistic theories working in tandem and whether they are nuanced aspects

of essentially the same theoretical position. The conflict of the desire for a social media separate from the mainstream media, perhaps to the detriment of rational critical argument associated more with professional journalists than bloggers, is an important debate in terms of the future of the democratic communication process.

As noted in the previous section, rational critical argument was a principal component of the coding approaches which aimed to specifically recognise online deliberation. Coding rational critical argument involved manually scrolling through tweets which initially portrayed a respectful invitation to discuss any given issue. Being able to recognise and quantify rational critical argument within any dataset would again be suited to one of the more detailed dialogical approaches such as Graham (2008) or Trenel (2004). Trenel, suggests that there are two core components of rational argument, the first being validity claims supported by appropriate reasons, and secondly that those reasons must be framed in terms of the common good (ibid. p.3). In total there are eight stages in the process of rational critical argument, in Trenel's model (ibid p.7). These are, 'equality', 'rationality', 'respect', 'constructiveness', 'interactivity', 'testimoniality', 'emotional balance' and finally 'reflexivity'. Future coding schemes containing such categories ought to ensure a robust means of assessing rationality, although the same issues previously discussed regarding reflexivity will continue to be an issue with datasets exclusively drawn from online forums.

Public issue focus

The method by which the data for the empirical study was collected meant that only relevant political discourse focused upon the referendum was studied as opposed to studying the broader content on a given forum. Therefore, public issue focus is omitted from the study.

Equality

Equality in Freelon's model is focused upon 'the extent to which forum contributions are spread evenly among participants' (ibid.). Freelon goes on to detail this concept of equality as another essential component of the Habermasian public sphere. Whilst this kind of assessment may have been desirable as it would help answer accusations of social media as politics as usual in merely a different setting, such an analysis was beyond the scope of this project due to the fact that it was centred on an open forum with a large number of participants. In light of this, equality is re-interpreted in line with Karppinen, Moe and Svensson (2008) in their critique of Habermas and Mouffe, whereby they suggest in terms of agonistic norms, equality to encompass the opportunity for minorities to express themselves in a way that may contribute to challenging the existing hegemony. Evidence of social media as a leveller recalibrating democracy away from political elites would give weight to those that suggest the internet and

social media has the capacity to achieve such laudable aims. The interplay of hegemony and counter hegemony is another basic tenet of Mouffe's agonistic pluralism. It is, however, fundamentally different from the deliberative unit of analysis in Freelon's original model.

The re-imagined coding of this unit of analysis required a retrospective analysis of tweets regarding certain issues and occurrences, which could be classed as having presented a challenge to the existing hegemony. In studies which included the specific goal of measuring the level of equality in terms of actual participation, this would be a relatively simple task to measure in any closed forum via a simple mathematical breakdown of the number, length and authorship of forum posts within the study sample. Such a study would not particularly lend itself to open forums such as Twitter, whereas platforms such as Facebook, which, as noted by Halpern and Gibbs (2013) generally has a more 'egalitarian distribution' (ibid. p1159) of forum messages, would be more suited to such a task.

Discussion topic focus

Discussion topic focus very simply assesses 'the extent to which posts within discussion threads address the initial thread topic (Stromer-Galley 2007; Herring 2003)' (Freelon 2010). In order to effectively consider discussion topic focus, a concentrated discourse analysis would need to have been applied early within the project. This was not within the aims or remit of this project so has been excluded from analysis within the results of the empirical study and is not considered to have any direct relevance to agonistic theory.

Inter-ideological questioning and response

The act of responding to, and questioning, those on the other side of the debate, from Yes Scotland to Better Together and vice versa within the independence referendum, changes the categorisation of the act to deliberative rather than communitarian. Freelon, very importantly, suggests that inter-ideological response and questioning that display the indicators associated with flaming or trolling should primarily be considered as such as this negates them from being considered as deliberative. This type of mature discourse can be seen as an extension of rational critical argument as previously documented and would be the preferred discourse of the majority of proponents of democracy.

Opponents of agonism would perhaps suggest that a theory which emphasises conflict, passion and hegemony, would see inter-ideological response make this unit of analysis anathema to the theory. There is, however, no specific reason or theoretical statement put forward by Mouffe and other agonists that suggests that this is the case, and it could well be seen as an example of Mouffe's conflictual consensus which has been previously discussed.

If that were to be the case, it would give credence to those that suggest agonism and deliberation are nuanced variations of the same theory (see Karppinen, Moe and Svensson (2008).

In terms of coding, the complexity of identifying and quantifying inter-ideological questioning and response is the same as the previously discussed intra-ideological questioning and response unit of analysis (see the previous communitarian strand), the only difference being the allegiance of the intended/actual responders to the initial tweet or forum post. For reasons already noted, the coding of such messages is suited to the more in-depth approaches such as Given (2008), which facilitates the opportunity to analyse streams of dialogue consisting of multiple message responses.

5.14   Ethical Considerations

Online research presents the researcher with numerous challenges as regards ethical conduct. According to Kozinets:

> Not only is netnography optionally as invasive and personal as ethnography, but in its conduct we also make lasting impressions, leaving our own tracks and trails leading to other people. We are conducting a type of outreach during which we have the opportunity to enlighten, to offend and even to do harm (Kozinets 2015 p.136).

The researcher is further challenged by the fact that many ethical issues are open to interpretation and contestation as to what is and what is not ethical. The Association of Internet Researchers have formed their own 'ethics guide' to assist the researcher in this challenging area, while most institutions and disciplines have their own broader codes of practice few have comprehensive codes as regards internet research:

> **Key guiding principles - we find the following principles to be fundamental to an ethical approach to internet research:**
> - The greater the vulnerability of the community / author / participant, the greater the obligation of the researcher to protect the community / author / participant.
> - Because 'harm' is defined contextually, ethical principles are more likely to be understood inductively rather than applied universally. That is, rather than one-size-fits-all pronouncements, ethical decision-making is best approached through the application of practical judgment attentive to the specific context (what Aristotle identified as phronesis).

- Because all digital information at some point involves individual persons, consideration of principles related to research on human subjects may be necessary even if it is not immediately apparent how and where persons are involved in the research data.

- When making ethical decisions, researchers must balance the rights of subjects (as authors, as research participants, as people) with the social benefits of research and researchers' rights to conduct research. In different contexts the rights of subjects may outweigh the benefits of research. (Markham and Buchanan 2012*)*

These guiding principles were referred to throughout the online research process in addition to the RGU ethics procedure which was used as a working guide and fully adhered to:

https://www.rgu.ac.uk/file/research-ethics-policy-pdf-60kb.

As already stated, the individual participants in the interview process were all afforded personal anonymity and false names have been used within the thesis. Activist groups have been named as interview participants at a group level, though the names of the individual participants have been withheld. All interviews were done in person and participants were given a comprehensive overview of the project prior to the interview. Participants were asked to consent to audio-recording of interviews prior to the interview commencing and consent forms were signed face to face on the day of the interview.

5.15 Limitations of the methodology

The main limitation to the methodology within the study was the limited number of interview participants from the activist group demographic. This was purely down to the limited number of key activist groups and the unwillingness of the targeted groups to participate. In an attempt to overcome this, the date and method (telephone rather than face to face) of interview was offered but this was to no avail. This was overcome by rigorously analysing the proliferation of detailed data which was available in most circumstances by the nature of the openness of activist groups, who largely expressed themselves online in a manner which was manifestly apparent when contrasted with the MSPs and journalists in the study.

Confirmation bias can be an issue in any study of this nature as the researcher, usually subconsciously, seeks out data to suit their own personal beliefs whilst again perhaps subconsciously ignoring data which are detrimental to their own position. This was avoided by being aware of the propensity for this to happen from very early in the project and also seeking out, and more importantly being receptive when obtaining feedback from supervisors,

colleagues, and others, throughout the overall research project. Presenting parts of the research to different audiences within my own institution, at conferences, and other outsider audiences was particularly helpful in this regard.

Whilst it may have been possible to use data mining techniques during the desk-based data collection stage, the immersive nature of doing this manually was seen to be a benefit to the overall study when backed up with the press-data, *Daily Referendum* subscription. Without this, however, there may have been a propensity to overlook key issues and events.

6 Results to the primary research question – How could you tell if the #indyref were characterised by deliberative democracy or agonistic pluralism?

6.1 Introduction to the results chapters

The previous chapters have set the background to the empirical project by firstly presenting the contemporary challenges facing UK democracy, then, the relevant democratic theories of deliberative democracy and agonism were detailed. Following that, the forerunner of agonism, in the form of political pluralism was explored before explaining the largely uncontested importance attributed to media pluralism, as being prerequisite for an effective democratic process. The methodology then went on to explain how the research project contrasts and combines deliberative democracy and agonistic pluralism in its assessment of Twitter activity which took place during the campaign which preceded the Scottish Independence referendum of 2014. In this section, the results of the empirical project are presented using the units of analysis adapted from Freelon's *Three Models of Democratic Communication* (2010) (as explained in detail in the previous chapter) in order to provide rich descriptions of the categories within that model, which helps answer the primary research question which seeks to ascertain the following:

How could you tell if the #indyref were characterised by deliberative democracy or agonistic pluralism?

Chapter 7 then addresses the supplementary research question which asks:

How does pluralist group theory aid our understanding or Twitter based activism during the Scottish independence referendum of 2014?

The units of analysis will follow Freelon's model by firstly presenting the *liberal individualist* strand, followed by the *communitarian* and finally the *deliberative* strand. Each unit is presented using the same sequential structure for each subtopic within the broader unit of analysis:

- Section outline.
- Sub sections – including cases and examples from empirical online data supported by interview data.
- Relationship to deliberative democracy and agonistic pluralism (this is presented collectively at the end of the liberal, communitarian and deliberative sections).
- As detailed in the methodology chapter, each theme was identified during the data collection stage of the project and then discussed with the relevant interview subjects.

6.2   Empirical units of analysis

In terms of the empirical study, there are numerous themes which are presented here for purpose of definition, along with academic literature relating to them. The same units are included in the results chapter with evidence of their appearance and impact during the Scottish independence referendum of 2014. The units are taken from a model of online political communication by Dean Freelon (2010) which itself is derived from the work of Jurgen Habermas and Lincoln Dahlberg. Some of the categories are addressed in their entirety if they fit with data analysed from the empirical study. Each metric is then scrutinised in terms of their applicability to the empirical study. Such scrutiny is not necessarily a criticism of Freelon's model, as in some cases it simply has not been viable to apply the given theory due to the structure of the study itself. Freelon's model (as detailed below and discussed in the previous chapter) incorporates three distinct, yet overlapping strands of democracy, namely, the *liberal*, the *communitarian* and the *deliberative*.

The following table represents a summary of the use and adaptations of Freelon's model, as discussed in detail in the previous chapter:

Strand of Freelon's model	Unit of analysis	Implementation
Liberal individualist	Monologue	Unaltered
	Personal revelation	Unaltered
	Personal showcase	Unaltered
	Flaming	Unaltered
Communitarian	Ideological fragmentation	Unaltered – though applied through a retrospective approach focusing upon broader academic/media discussions of fragmentation during the #indyref
	Mobilisation	Unaltered
	Community Language	Unaltered
	Intra-ideological questioning and response	Unaltered
Deliberative	Rational-critical argument	Unaltered
	Public issue focus	Excluded
	Equality	Redefined in line with Karppinen, Moe and Svensson (2008) to encompass the opportunity for minorities to express themselves through achieving both voice and coverage, enabling the challenge of existing power structures
	Discussion topic focus	Excluded
	Inter-ideological questioning and response	Unaltered

Table 8 Final coding scheme

6.3 Results – To what extent was twitter activity characterised by elements of deliberative democracy and agonistic pluralism in the Scottish independence referendum campaign 2014?

6.3.1 The liberal Individualist strand

6.3.1.1 Monologue

The term monologue suggests a lengthy pronouncement on any given issue. However, the 140 character limit (latterly 280) of Twitter posts means that monologues during the referendum campaign were more a case of short, sometimes general though often pithy statements:
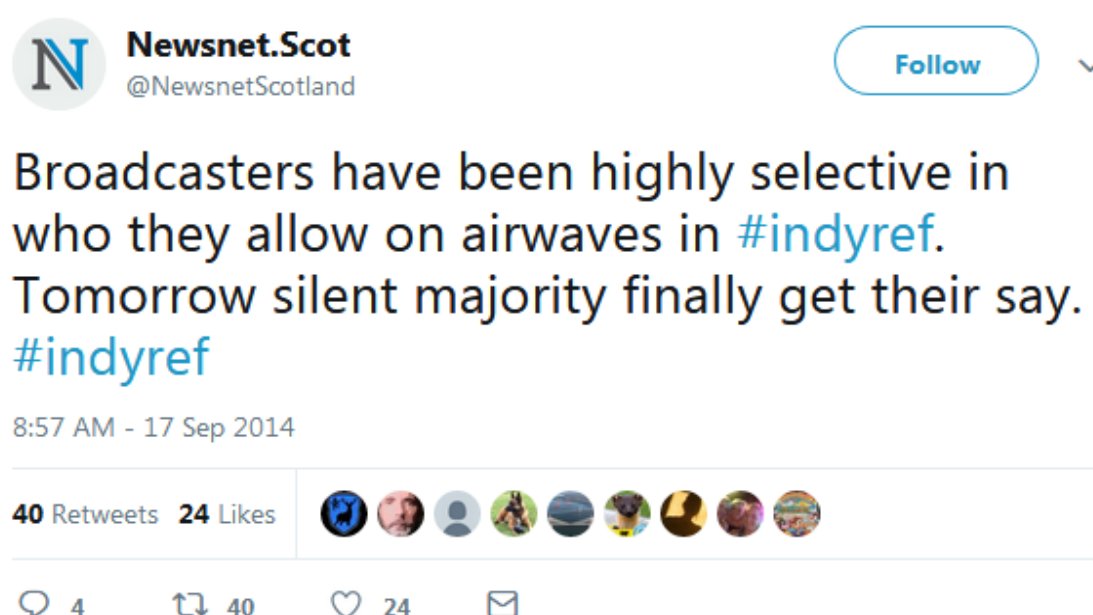
Figure 13 Screenshot from Twitter (2014)

As the focus of this study was on activist groups, politicians, and journalists, the overwhelming amount of Twitter posts chosen for analysis were linking to other pieces of information. This was usually either via their own website or blog, the website or blog of somebody else, or to newspaper articles and perhaps studies or surveys. These links would often carry what could be classified as monological communication regarding personal showcasing (see following subsection).

The quality of Twitter posts was something which was discussed with all of the interviewees. The majority were quick to point out that for tweets to engage people they needed to be more than basic statements/monologues:

I think using it as a means of you know, here's our message, here's our message, here's our message, had diminishing returns. I think it was much more used (sic) in an interactive fashion which was great, used simply as a propaganda machine? Not so. (M3)

A similar opinion was given by another MSP:

[Sometimes people are] just retweeting the party line, tweeting links to their speeches in parliament and their latest press release and I kind of think [pauses] well, I'm not saying I wouldn't necessarily do that myself but I do think that you should mix it up a bit and actually tweet some ordinary comment about things. (M7)

The above statements were made by MSPs but the same sentiment was common with activists and journalists. The second comment suggests that tweeting the party line was particularly unhelpful within the debate. The MSP concerned went on to state that the, 'comment about other things' could be something completely separate from political statements and this was particularly important for politicians so as to meaningfully engage with people.

Monologue then, was present during the online debate but in line with deliberative thinking was generally perceived as unhelpful in engaging people on social media. Monologue cannot though be dismissed as totally unwanted, or unmerited, as making and receiving political speeches is an important part of the dialogical process and often a precursor to later, perhaps deliberative interactions.

6.3.1.2 Personal showcase

Personal showcase, as described by Freelon (2010), is part of the liberal individualist strand In keeping with some of the other units of analysis such as personal showcase, mobilisation and ideological fragmentation, a broader perspective could see these units overlap into more than one of the three distinct strands. A further discussion of this and the overall merits of the model is provided in the conclusions to this chapter.

In Freelon's classification personal showcase relates to the act of using online discussion forums to *advertise* other platforms where that user has other content available. That content may have been visual such as YouTube, oral such as a podcast or textual such as a personal

website or blog. As stated previously the (original) 140 character limit on Twitter means that brevity is compulsory, and that brevity has been acknowledged as one of the reasons for its success (Kwak et al. 2010; Zhao and Rosson 2009). Subsequently, the structure of Twitter makes the act of redirecting one's followers to a different platform a routine practice for a great many users.

6.3.1.2.1 Activists and personal showcasing

As far as activist groups were concerned, it would be commonplace for the Twitter account of the group to be used in tandem with a separate group website or Facebook page or sometimes all three and occasionally four or five different platforms in total. The motive for having a number of different platforms was different for the three demographics of the study. The motive for activists was perhaps less *individualist* and more *deliberative* than that of the other two groups. Activists would generally refer people onwards with the broad aim of garnering engagement/support for their side of the referendum debate. However, in many cases the name of the group member/s who had written the article would be displayed and they could therefore gain an amount of personal credit for it. The most common action that was observed within the activist demographic would be from a Twitter post to the group website, for example:

Figure 14 Screenshot from Twitter (2014)

The activists interviewed displayed different relations to personal showcase theory dependent on the group structure. For example, one particular group was run by two persons, one of whom required funds raised through the group to support himself financially. This would mean selling articles, selling advertising online, and in a print copy of their work. This meant that their fundamental motivation for engagement was blurred. In contrast, another activist interviewed represented a group which was entirely voluntary, and all members had other jobs or means of income with all funds raised going back into the group finances. The fact remained however, that showcasing was more pertinent to those with *individual* material/political gain at stake such as MSPs and journalists.

6.3.1.2.2 MSPs and personal showcasing

In terms of *personal* showcasing, MSPs would use Twitter in a number of different ways. It is important to note that many MSPs had used Twitter prior to the referendum campaign and therefore already had established practices in place prior to the referendum. MSPs then, might showcase links to publicity photos from personal appearances they had made; speeches they had made; articles they had written or had featured in; newspaper, TV or radio appearances. For example:

Figure 15 Screenshot from Twitter (2014)

The manner in which MSPs *showcased* themselves was a prominent topic in the interviews, though the aim was more about gaining political capital through portraying themselves as *in tune* with constituents/the general public, than for financial gain as was the case with journalists.

The following MSP, a self-acknowledged *techy*, took a holistic approach (far beyond that of other MSP subjects) to managing social media in a way that showcased his work to the greatest advantage:

> I'm on Twitter, I'm on Facebook, I'm on Linkedin, Google+ and I have a Kilter account that I don't really use and I also have my own website. (M8)

The MSP went on to describe how he used software such as *Blogger* to synchronize messages posted across multiple platforms.

MSPs, at the time the interviews took place, were acutely aware of the general mood regarding the popularity of all politicians which had moved at the time from anger, following scandalous occurrences (as noted earlier) to be gradually transformed into a general malaise towards all concerned. In almost all cases, subjects saw social media as a way to address this concern as well as showcasing themselves to the other groups within this study. The following example was typical of many:

> It is a good way [social media] of showing people that you are thinking and showing people that you are busy…I think on Twitter that you can build up a reputation amongst your peers, by showing them, other politicians, journalists and activists, what you are doing and what you are thinking. So it can be used that way and constituents are active on Facebook so it's good to show you are on there too. (M2)

The manner in which subjects used Twitter as a conduit to other platforms was also expressed:

> I use it as a push for my blogs, so if I post an article on a blog I will tweet links to it to try and push people to read them. (M4)

Another MSP had gone to great lengths to portray themselves in a way which she felt brought her closer to her constituents, creating a hashtag to emphasise the fact that she used public transport:

> I also have a hashtag that I invented for myself which is ………[removed to preserve anonymity] because in the constituency, I use public transport quite a lot and because there is a big thing about politicians and the whole thing about how we live this cosseted lifestyle, I try to make a point about [being like them]. One or two folk from the constituency have [used the same hashtag] as well, to kind of catch it on (sic) so

it's more about making the gentle point that I am actually [using public transport] [Laughs] as opposed to always sitting in the car. (M7)

Whilst cynics might suggest that such premeditated actions to ingratiate an MSP with their constituents is uncomfortable, public relations driven exercises have long been part of the role of a politician, much in the same way as kissing babies and shaking as many hands as possible during election campaigns in order to create the desired public persona.

6.3.1.2.3 Journalists and personal showcasing

Journalist's motivation for personal showcasing understandably bore more relation to liberal individualism than the other two groups included in the study. Journalists, often working freelance, rely on the volume of people consuming their articles in order to secure further work and build their career profile. Therefore, with great regularity, journalists would primarily tweet links to their own newspaper columns. They would also tweet links to books they had written and also to advertise TV appearances prior to the programme, and sometimes link to recorded clips of their appearance, for example:

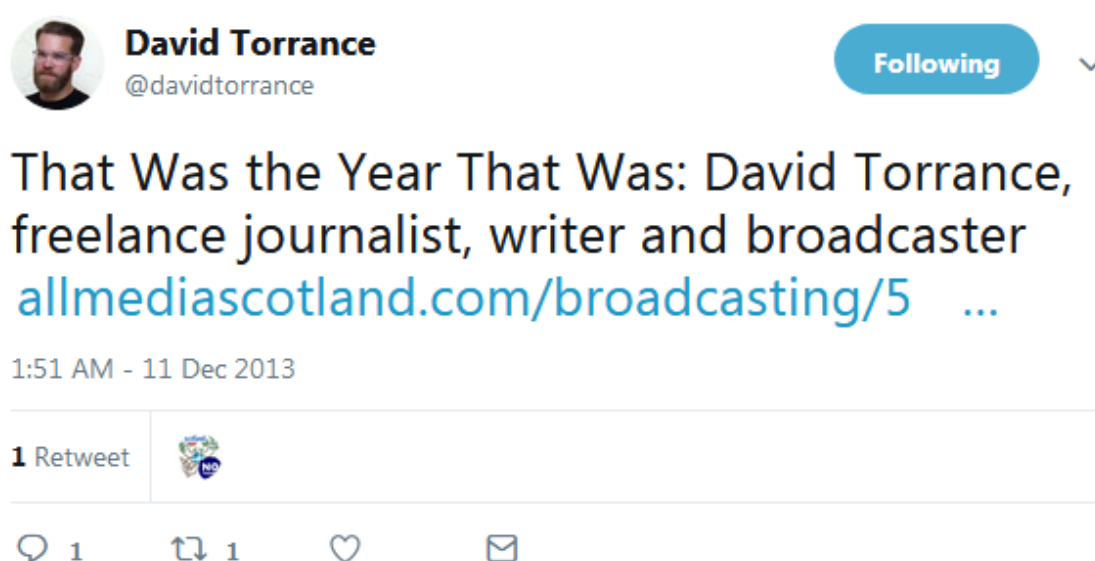**Figure 16 Screenshot from Twitter (2013)**

Journalists would not restrict links to only their own work but also to the work of other journalists and activists, either in praise or in disagreement of the work in question.

As noted above, for journalists, personal showcasing is more typical of the liberal individualism in Freelon's (2010) model and the independence referendum was an opportunity for many to

showcase their work and build their reputation. The following quote is from a press journalist and TV commentator:

> [I use social media] primarily for directing people toward stuff I've written or done. It directs people towards stuff that they may have seen anyway or maybe not, primarily that's what I think social media is for. [However] I would rather keep my analysis for a column or an article or TV or something. My focus, ironically, is still upon things in the traditional media, i.e. my column, TV appearances etc, the same things I would have done 20 years ago. (J2)

The previous quote gives a perspective of *showcasing* which was typical of the journalists interviewed. Journalists had carefully thought about social media and Twitter, they had strategies to use the medium to engage with other account holders but primarily as a vehicle for their other works, which would provide the financial remunerations which social media would not. The same journalist went on to give a prescient example of the way in which social media created work opportunities:

> The day that Obama stated that he thinks the UK should stay together, I just tweeted something about an interesting parallel with Bill Clinton and Quebec in 1995, and half an hour later a producer from Radio 4 called to ask me if I could go on the PM show at 4pm with Eddie Mair and talk about this, which was on the basis that he had seen my tweet. (J2)

The journalist went on to state that though this was a rare occurrence, it was a prime example of the power of, 'that awful buzzword – connectivity' (ibid.) expediting processes that prior to social media were significantly onerous in terms of tracking someone down via a landline telephone number.

6.3.1.3 Trolling/Flaming

The issue of *trolling* or *flaming* (Hardaker 2010 as noted, states a nuanced difference in the terms, thus they are therefore referred to as either depending upon the context) is probably the most prominent issue regarding online political communication and the Scottish independence debate was certainly in keeping with such an assertion. This ranged from general low-level concerns about the quality of the debate online, to accusations of targeted, vitriolic abuse, particularly upon well-known/celebrity Twitter users.

Concerns over the issue of flaming were deemed serious enough for the UK government to amend the Criminal Justice and Courts Act in February 2015, the amendment increased sentencing powers to a maximum of two years in prison for serious offences. While in Scotland the offence is covered in the Offensive Behaviour at Football and Threatening Communications (Scotland) Act (2012) (legislation.gov.uk 2012). The issue was regularly making headlines in the mainstream press from the early days of the campaign right through until and after the vote itself. It was a subject that was spoken about at some length with little or no prompting in all of the conducted interviews. However, attitudes towards the subject were different depending on the interviewee's role as an activist, MSP, or journalist. Whether an interviewee was a supporter of the Union or of independence also elicited different responses on the majority of issues.

There were three types of flaming which came to light during data collection. The first was verified flaming of extremely prominent Twitter users, such as the very highly publicised case of J.K. Rowling (which is addressed immanently). Secondly, there were unverified allegations by Twitter users as in the case of comedian Susan Calman. Thirdly, there was the type of flaming which was low level and generally carried out by the type of people classed as *cybernats* and their Unionist equivalents. These individuals, at the start of the debate were unknown but (some) became subsequently known to Twitter users, largely due to the way that they conducted themselves online. The best example of this was that of Stuart Campbell in the form of activist group Wings Over Scotland

6.3.1.3.1 Celebrity trolling

The case of J.K. Rowling, the world renowned author of the *Harry Potter* book series, related to a series of online attacks following her public backing of support for Scotland to remain in the United Kingdom. Rowling publicly displayed this support with a £1 million pound donation to the Better Together campaign. She subsequently received numerous abusive tweets to her account, for example:

> If I had a spare few million I'd buy every last copy of Harry Potter, put them in Tory HQ and fucking burn both sets of shite (Aitken 2014).

Rowling explained how receiving such abuse had affected her:

> I found this extremely distressing and aggressive. Language like this makes me feel unsafe to voice my opinions online and in the independence referendum as a whole (ibid.).

The J.K. Rowling incident was widely reported by the majority of other daily newspapers, including *The Independent* and *the Guardian*. It brought the phenomenon of flaming into the public spotlight and was acknowledged as being unacceptable by both sides of the official campaign.

The case of Scottish comedian Susan Calman was indicative of the second type of flaming which included lesser known people who were still in the public eye, and the incident in question became known in referendum circles as *Calmangate*:

Fiona Hyslop tolerance call after Susan Calman abuse

Susan Calman considered leaving Twitter

By
BRIAN FERGUSON AND TOM PETERKIN

Published: 11:42 Thursday 02 May 2013

Figure 17 Screenshot from The Scotsman (2013)

Ms Calman was allegedly subjected to profane abuse and death threats (the death threats were never actually substantiated) following an appearance on BBC Radio 4 comedy show *News Quiz* in April of 2014, in which she fairly innocuously mocked the choice of the Yes campaign in seeking to retain the pound and not to adopt the euro in the event of becoming an independent nation:

> Initially Alex Salmond said, it is definitely the euro. It is going to be totally the euro. And then Europe said 'naw' and then he said, it is totally the pound. It is going to be the pound. But this *wee* Osborne and Danny Alexander – flying in like a ginger Supergran – said, Naw, you're not getting the pound. And Alex was like: Haud on, what if we want the pound? The problem is that whenever Conservative ministers tell us about independence, to some Scottish people it sounds like the teacher in Charlie Brown – just going wah…wah…wah. It is really difficult because with things getting a bit closer, we kind of need to know what's happening if people do vote for independence. At the moment, it is just two people shouting, 'Aye, we will have it' and someone going 'No, we won't' (ibid.).

Calman detailed the reaction to these comments on her own blog which included vitriolic, expletive laden abuse and alleged death threats, and these were subsequently discussed by Logan (2013) in defence of Calman's comments during the show. The article describes how Calman was accused of betraying her own country, of being racist and also of being a cunt. Fellow comics did, however, seek to defend Calman, the most notable of which was Rory Bremner. Douglas Alexander MP was subsequently accused of seizing upon the opportunity to accuse independence supporters of lowering the tone of the debate:

> This truly appalling episode is just the latest example of the hate-filled outpouring of the so-called 'Cybernats', *The Telegraph* quoted Alexander as saying, whose characteristic is general intolerance to everybody and anybody who does not share their outlook (ibid.).

This was followed by activist group Wings Over Scotland suggesting that the story was invoked by Unionist supporters to blacken the name of online Yes supporters (the subject of anonymity and possible agent provocateurs is addressed later in this chapter). This allegation was indicative of the third type of flaming which involved everyday Twitter users in distasteful, unedifying, antagonistic displays. In this case it led in turn to Wings receiving online abuse alleging he was 'misogynistic' a 'poisonous bastard' and by Calman herself 'the vilest possible

person on Twitter' (Eaton-Lewis 2013). This in turn, regardless of the veracity of Ms Calman's claims as alleged by Wings Over Scotland and others, became proof positive of the phenomenon itself from the ratified tweets which were subsequently sent to the account of Wings Over Scotland by Calman herself.

6.3.1.3.2 Activist trolling -involving high profile personalities

Wings Over Scotland and the way he (Wings is referred to as *he* as it is a solo account run by an ex video game journalist living in Bath, England) conducted his account moves the manner in which flaming impacts upon the quality of online debate during the referendum, as opposed to the subject of *Twitter personalities* being anonymously trolled. Wings was in some ways one of the democratically heart-warming successes of the independence campaign in terms of an individual having a sizeable impact on the democratic process in relative terms (those successes will be detailed in later sections see *Mobilisation* and *Equality* sections). The fact at hand here, however, was the controversial manner in which Wings conducted himself online, a fact that led to Wings being the only activist account which either side of the official campaign felt it necessary to publicly distance themselves from (Gardham 2014). For example, on 1/10/2014, following a speech made by former PM Gordon Brown in which he made an impassioned plea to the people of Scotland to vote to remain in the Union, Wings tweeted that he had 8000 signatures for the following petition he had initiated on change.org:

Figure 18 Screenshot from change.org (2014)

The petition was accompanied by the following statement:

> Because, Scotland is sick of listening to your wobble faced lies, you useless absentee ex-politician shitebag.

Whilst almost certainly offensive to some, particularly to Mr Brown, such a post could be taken as perhaps humorous, and the petition itself found support from 13,908 people who were willing to put their name to it.

Some of those that were interviewed suggested that humour ought to be understood as a part of online communications and that, particularly in certain geographical regions, such humour is a cultural norm and was being mistaken for offensive flaming. On this subject, an MSP stated the following:

> To be honest a lot of it is that it's a forum for taking the piss, for example this morning Keith Brown has put himself forward for deputy leader of the SNP and somebody has tweeted something saying 'I can't think of anybody better than Keith Brown as deputy leader as SNP' and I've tweeted back saying 'come on think hard there must be someone on the planet better' [laughs]. (M5)

The MSP quoted above went on to make an often repeated remark that the issue with social media communications is the lack of tone and/or context, in that as we discussed the exchange face to face it was obvious that the comment was made in jest but that it may not have come across that way to someone reading it on Twitter.

One activist from Glasgow (noting that I myself have a particular regional accent) made the following statement about regionality:

> Well you will know then, that if you love somebody you tend to abuse them [without genuine malice but in jest] you know there is that, and it's the same in places like Belfast and Liverpool, where you slag people off and it doesn't always translate on to Twitter [because there is no tone]. (A2)

The prevailing issue then, regards the subjectivity of when a post moves from the borders of humour into the realm of genuine abuse.

6.3.1.3.3 Low level everyday trolling

The next example, though regarding football in a tweet after the independence referendum, demonstrates the level of some of Wings Over Scotland's more extreme tweets:
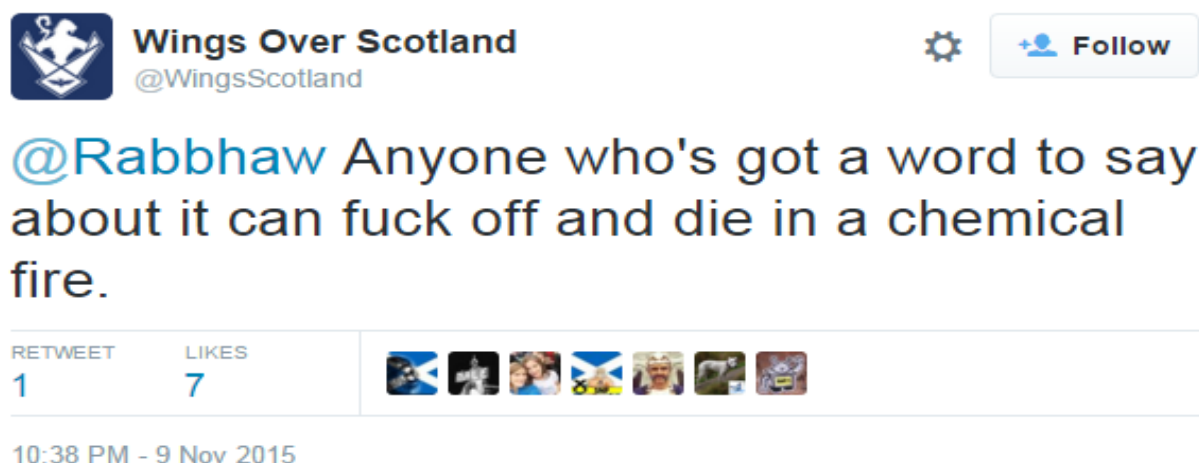

Figure 19 Screenshot from Twitter (2015)

There were also examples of trolling coming from Unionists as detailed in the following article which related to events in the months following the referendum:

Figure 20 Screenshot from Herald & Times (2015)

The story included allegations relating to Tweets which contained the following text:

"Cut her f***ing head off". "Punchable gobshite". Comparisons to Nazis and Hitler and fake accounts which portray the SNP MP Natalie McGarry in pornographic adverts (Rodger 2015).

Finally, in a now deleted tweet on the 5th April 2014, Wings stated that:

I hope there's a special, extra-bad cancer that only spammers get (Twitter 2014 - now deleted, hard copy available).

The examples presented give a broad representation of the types of social media posts which attract so much criticism, to what is generally accepted as a pluralistic democratic tool. It should be noted however, that Wings was certainly not the only individual or group regularly offending people and drawing negative attention to social media. He was however, the one with the most followers which amounted to 23,000 by polling day and currently 43,000 at the time of writing. The *mobilisation* and *equality* sections detail the achievements of Wings as a group and explains why some of his supporters were frustrated with the way he conducted himself as it negated many of the positive achievements he is rightly credited with. It should also be again noted that Wings was approached numerous times and initially agreed to be interviewed, only subsequently to choose not to take part in the study, even with the offer of telephone interviews and for myself to travel to conduct an interview in Bath, England where he lives and works.

6.3.1.3.4 Was trolling/flaming over reported?

The most prevalent issue in terms of flaming was around how important or not the issue was and whether it was gaining unmerited or genuinely warranted attention, both online and in the broader mainstream media. This was a subject that was raised with all of the interviewees in the empirical study. There was a fairly even split between those that saw it as being far less of an issue than the one focused upon in the broader media and those that felt it was a significant issue in the debate and more broadly for the democratic communication process as a whole. What was immediately apparent during the interviews was the manner in which almost all subjects remained partisan to the narrative which had been previously established, dependent upon which side their loyalties or their employer's loyalties were positioned.

Activist groups, when interviewed, did not deny that flaming was an issue during the campaign. They did however, tend to qualify the extent to which the issue was being reported and tended to focus upon the unprecedented importance of the referendum and suggested that the size of the issue in some way excused some of the behaviour. The following response summed up the general feelings of the activist groups which were interviewed:

At its worst yes, [it is an issue] I actually think though that the debate is quite good and that people are too scared of conflict and conflict is ok, we are in a democracy during a period of big change and having an argument is alright, express yourself, [ask people] what do you think?...it's all digital and nobody is getting [pauses] it's been said before that not a shot has been fired [tails off]. (A1)

A1 went on to elaborate how appeals to 'dampen down' the debate were general uncalled for, stating that he himself did not want to intentionally exchange insults with those of an opposing opinion, but A1 also stated that he accepted (in line with agonistic norms) the reality of heated debate relating to the most important political issues such as those relating to sovereignty.

The majority of MSPs and their staff were generally quick (quite understandably) to state that they themselves were used to the fact that their profession positioned them as easy targets for those that are inclined to offensive online behaviour. They also, unwaveringly, saw the argument through a prism of their own party position with the issue accepted as a real one though played down by SNP representatives, and seen as being a much bigger issue, largely only attributable to nationalists, by those in support of the Union. The lack of control over the activist groups by the official campaigns made it convenient for SNP MSPs to distance themselves from the controversy of the likes of Wings Over Scotland, whilst still celebrating and taking credit for the positive aspects of such groups. A typical overview of the size of the issue, as perceived by either side, was for example, firstly a Labour MSP:

My impression was that [trolling] was much more prevalent on the Yes side and I thought it was orchestrated. (M2)

Secondly an SNP MSP:

[On Wings Over Scotland] He does go way over the top, having said that, the work he was doing with the research and analysis was absolutely brilliant. (M7)

These Labour and SNP responses reflect what would be expected from those on either side of the argument. The following from two journalists when questioned on flaming was also typical from those on either side, firstly from a newspaper backing Better Together:

Well the No campaign was much less visible....it was just really the *Yessers* (sic) and that was a bonus and a drawback for the Yes campaign, because one of the things

you had was the 'cybernuts' (sic) and they weren't in control of these people, and a lot of them were fairly obnoxious and odious. (J1)

Secondly from a publication backing Yes Scotland:

I think the cybernat thing was way exaggerated, I mean out of all proportion, when we came out in favour of Yes we got lots of abuse from British nationalists, which some of whom wanted the paper to close, and I'm not bleating about that, not holding my hands up saying please, please stop! We are big boys and big girls and we can withstand that so all of it is fine and I just wouldn't think that some of the so called *cybernattery* (sic) was like that, it wasn't as bad as people say. (J3).

In general, however, those from the journalism profession were more ambivalent to the reality of the issue or its negative consequences and perceived damage to the political process. It ought to be noted though, that the underlying sentiment intuitively felt as though the professional nature of journalism and government, meant both groups were fulfilling an expectation that they have to be tough enough to cope with online abuse. The reality over time has on occasions contradicted that and some of those interviewed have subsequently been highly critical of online flaming and have taken breaks from Twitter, with statements of intent to never return, specifically because of the practice and prevalence of trolling.

6.3.1.3.5 Parody/ghost accounts/anonymity

The primary driver/enabler of online trolling is widely accepted as being the physical absence between the troller and the trolled. To quote the vernacular, certain individuals become *keyboard warriors* as they are emboldened by the absence of face to face discussion and communicate things online that they perhaps would not dream of stating in a physical setting. The fact of physical separation and the possibility of anonymity during online discourse was identified as the key factor in terms of enabling trolling, along with use of alcohol which led to people tweeting things they may never would have done so if sober. M2 likened the practice to that of anonymous letters to newspapers and stated the following:

I have always felt that the anonymity of the internet, like the people who write to the papers as well, I think that if I were the editor of the paper that I would insist that they have to put their name to letters or they don't get published…I think that social media has to a large extent [facilitated] all these people that use pseudonyms, that make you think well why don't you just use your real name? (M2)

Parody accounts were a regular feature of the online debate in the build up to the independence referendum. Such accounts involved prominent political personalities such as Alex Salmond, the most notable of which was the account of *Angry Salmond*:

Figure 21 Screenshot from Twitter (2014)

This account would almost certainly fall into the *humorous* accounts previously mentioned which generally avoided falling into the realms of trolling behaviour. The popularity of the account is demonstrated by the fact that the account is still in operation and has almost 55,000 followers at the time of writing. There were other accounts which included parodies of the head of Better Together – Alistair Darling.

The manner in which Twitter discourse takes place between people in remote settings, using accounts which require no verification, allows for the possibility of not just parody accounts but *ghost accounts.* Ghost accounts (Marwick 2011) are accounts which have been set up by individuals to hide their real identity and some may be set up to attempt to take someone else's identity (frequently associated with people looking to take the identity of a famous person). The suggestion during the independence referendum was that individuals on either side of the debate set up ghost accounts, pretending to be a supporter from the other side and then trolled people with the specific aim of shedding that side of the campaign in a negative light.

Figure 22 Screenshot from Twitter (2014)

The number of subjects who believed in the prevalence of such accounts was surprising. Generally, the accusation was made by pro-independence supporters stating that they simply did not believe that a lot of the online abuse attributed to their side was genuine and that it was the work of *agent provocateurs.* The following statement on the subject was made by an SNP MSP:

> I don't want this to sound conspiracy theorist in any way but online, it is incredibly easy to create an online presence without needing to verify in any way shape or form that that online presence is credible. So I think that for example, I could if I wanted, establish an anonymous Twitter account with a No campaign *Twibbon* and use it to throw abuse at Alex Salmond and Nicola Sturgeon and just for the record I didn't [laughs] but it would have been phenomenally easy to do so. (M3)

The suggestion was from J3 that having done so it would be incredibly easy to make headlines about allegedly abusive No campaigners. The MSP concerned went on to state that they had no evidence to support these claims but that they would be utterly shocked if this was not happening in certain instances. It was, however, beyond the remit of this study to be able to prove these assertions. Whilst Twitter has its own scheme of verifying accounts which it deems to be in the public interest (denoted by a blue tick immediately adjacent to the username) it is currently not possible to self-verify or easily verify the accounts of others. Numerous of the three interview subject groups did agree with the statement of the MSP, and those interviewed did not intuitively present as easily fooled or open to conspiracy theories. Such distrust of

social media has an obvious impact on the democratic possibilities of the medium, particularly in light of the manner in which social media is seen by many who have lost trust in the mainstream media, as a more trustworthy media source. Further studies which have the capacity to establish the truth or otherwise regarding *ghost* political accounts, would be welcome to shed more light on the phenomenon so as to gauge its impact upon the democratic value of social media communications generally, and more specifically from an academic research perspective.

6.3.1.3.6 Faux outrage

Another recurring theme on the subject of flaming was that of *faux outrage*. This usually took the form of people who were generally not personally *trolled* (or overly concerned if they were), going to great lengths to be outraged on behalf of those that were, for example:

> [On trolling] I think a lot of it was manufactured offence. You know if I made a fuss about every offensive tweet that was [directed at me] [pauses] a journalist did come to me and say that he wanted to do a big piece about it [trolling] and I just thought about it and I said no. All you do is make it worse and feed the trolls and I was absolutely gobsmacked by some of it [irrelevant events being overstated]. (M2)

Similarly, a Conservative MSP who was obviously from the other side of the debate, when asked if the issue was over exaggerated, said:

> I think it has. If you don't want to be bullied on social media then get off it…a good example is the other day with SNP councillors who were burning the Smith Commission, the level of faux outrage out there about these things is just ridiculous. (M4)

What is notable in these examples is that M2 admits to being on the receiving end of online flaming, as did every single person interviewed in the study, whilst M4 is suggesting flaming has to be accepted. These facts suggest that there is undoubtedly something to be at least *concerned* by if not *outraged.* Faux outrage it seems is partly an accusation of not being prepared to accept the abuse that you are inevitably going to be a recipient of. Whilst also being a political opportunity to aim attention at political opponents with accusations of wrongdoing that would not actually personally offend the accuser.

When questioned upon what action, if any, subjects took when victims of abuse, all were aware of the capability to mute, block, and report individual accounts. Most preferred to mute as opposed to block, as the person blocked will know you have chosen to do so, whilst muting allows you to not see what they have posted *without* them knowing you have made that decision. The choice to *mute* rather than *block* was preferable as it avoided any potential confrontation (which could still take place within the forum in general posting if not through direct communication) or ill will on behalf of the *blocked* user. Some stated that it gave them pleasure that the blocked user was still likely trolling them but that through the blocking procedure, they as the intended recipient were blissfully unaware. No subjects said they had reported anyone for trolling/flaming.

6.3.1.4 Liberal Individualism section - deliberation and agonism

The results relating to the liberal individualist section started by briefly touching upon the role of monologue during the online debate. This was seen as an inevitable part of political communication but was limited by the structure of the Twitter platform. The interview subjects generally perceived monologue as particularly unhelpful in terms of engaging with others in a thought process which is symptomatic of deliberative theory. Deliberation requires a reciprocal exchange of ideas, however, narrow notions of monological streams of facts and opinion, though still useful at the beginning part of the process, require additional deliberative components to have a constructive impact upon the decision-making process.

As stated in the methodology chapter detailing the definitions of the units of analysis, personal showcase has no demonstrable relation to the agonistic/deliberative debate. It does not relate to agonism/deliberation as it is descriptive without having any positive or negative mechanistic attributes regarding democratic decision making. It does, however, help us to contextualise the motives for social media use within certain groups within the democratic process, in this case particularly MSPs and journalists.

The public opinion of professional journalism has been detailed in earlier chapters and those concerns are addressed in this results chapter. Regardless, however, professional journalism is vital to the democratic process in terms of skill, access, and balance. For these reasons alone, social media and professional media should be two component parts of the democratic process. The balance of professional journalism and citizen contributions contributes to a pluralistic democracy in terms of enlightened understanding of the demos. Those benefits as such have been detailed in both political and media forms in their own dedicated chapters earlier in the thesis. Both groups have a vital role, particularly in holding each other to account,

which aids citizens in how they view the information output of each group respectively. Professional journalism in some people's eyes is under threat mainly due to the growth of social media, and if the trade-off for professional journalism's presence on social media is the advertisement of paid work on other platforms, then this seems a reasonable reciprocal state of affairs.

MSPs had different motivations during the independence referendum and subsequently afterwards for showcasing other aspects of their work as described earlier. They were shown to be acutely aware of their contemporary unfavourable social standing. This has led them (occasionally with slightly cynical undertones) to attempt to utilise social media to bring them closer to their constituents and the general public as a whole. Within that context, cynicism aside, personal showcasing can be seen as helpful in repairing the democratic disconnect and mistrust between the two social groups.

Deliberative democracy, as stated in chapter 2, has evolved from earlier Habermasian theories centred upon consensus, most notably in the works of, for example, Mansbridge (2010). Mansbridge holds that there are still some explicit conditions required for deliberation – mutual respect, equality, reciprocity and mutual justification. Mouffe focuses upon mutual respect in her theory of agonism, whereby each party is required to hold the position of their adversary as legitimate. This was generally accepted as being absent during the debate and was specifically commented upon by many participants and commentators, including many interviewed as part of this project. Addressing the quality of the online debate, politician Jim Sillars referred to his late wife, SNP MSP Margo MacDonald, when he said:

> The Margo MacDonald way is to recognise that you are dealing with opponents not enemies, not with ogres but with fellow human beings with whom you can disagree but must do so without malice (STV News.com 2014).

Ms MacDonald had expressed such concerns in relation to Holyrood politics, however, the general tone of online debate during the referendum as detailed in this section, regularly featured more overtly antagonistic episodes than even the most conflictual day of Holyrood debating.

Flaming stands contrary to all of these notions. Habermas (2005), upon the evidence shown here, was right to question the possibilities of deliberation in online settings. Habermas, in terms of online deliberation, foresaw the manner in which a lack of face to face interaction between participants, coupled with a lack of reciprocity (which is still held as central to others

such as Dryzek) between speakers and addressees as being wholly problematic for online deliberation. In line with the evidence presented in this section, it is reasonable to argue that flaming raises enormous questions regarding social media as an appropriate environment for successful deliberation, certainly when it involves *hot* (Dryzek 2005) deliberation regarding issues such as sovereignty. It should be noted, however, that not all communications during the online independence debate fell into the category of flaming and these positive interactions are addressed in other sections such as *rational critical argument* in the deliberative strand of the model.

Agonistic theory came into being largely due to early pluralist theory focusing upon consensus in a manner which failed to accept the reality of conflict in the democratic process. Flaming, though objectionable, is proof positive of the type of conflict which Mouffe would class as antagonism. The Scottish Independence referendum, in line with the European Union referendum, rightly received great credit for engaging a nation politically, though both were dogged by criticisms of the tone and quality of debate (see McColm 2013) particularly online. It would again be reasonable to argue, in line with evidence presented here, that Mouffe has been proved right in her insistence that passion and conflict are key components of the political, however unpalatable that may be. This ought to be qualified though in respecting the likelihood of the level of conflict in a referendum regarding sovereign issues to be heightened in a way that every day politics may not.

It would seem sensible then to focus upon transforming antagonism into agonism. However, it could be reasoned that agonists such as Mouffe would not believe that trolling/flaming is acceptable or to be encouraged, though what actually constitutes offensive online behaviour will always be subjective to the ideals of the recipient or the person reading the comments concerned. Whilst agonists such as Mouffe focus upon antagonism and conflict, they do not do so in a manner which legitimises practices which are undeniably contrary to democratic values of open expression without the fear of reprisal.

6.3.2   The communitarian strand

6.3.2.1 Ideological homophily

Ideological homophily (or the more pejorative term - fragmentation) according to Freelon, relates to 'the proposition that citizens tend to assemble themselves into politically homogeneous collectives that rarely if ever engage with outsiders' (Freelon 2010). Social media, it is often suggested (see Sunstein 2009) is encouraging ideological homophily which is a growing concern democratically, as the starting premise for an informed electorate is to

be exposed to different points of view which in turn enables informed political decision making. In this section, a number of different themes are presented which explore why social media, with all of its supposed democracy enhancing capabilities, is seen as being a threat to democracy in terms of fragmentation and the reasoning behind these claims. Additionally, the often overlooked, positive facets of social media and ideological homophily are discussed.

6.3.2.1.1 Twitter bubbles and echo chambers

Critics of social media and particularly criticisms of the actual reach and impact of Twitter, will often speak of the *Twitter bubble* which is generally followed by a supporting statement claiming that social media more broadly is merely a so-called *echo chamber.* The implied narrative of claims of a Twitter bubble is that those who frequent Twitter, mistakenly believe that the platform is representative of the political priorities and prevalent opinions of the broader population as a whole. The term *echo chamber* emphasises the notion that people on social media forums are indeed limiting themselves to the views they choose to hear, and those views tend only to be the ones with which they themselves also hold. The following article addresses the concept of the Twitter bubble with particular reference to journalists:

Figure 23 Screenshot from the Guardian (2016)

The article, which is specifically referring to the *Twitter bubble* as relating to journalists, is one which can be applied to all communities of Twitter users but the term does tend to be characterised by suggestions that the Twitter bubble is one which is generally inhabited by elites (such as journalists, politicians, academics) and the inhabitants of the bubble are failing to listen to the largest group within the public sphere, namely the broader electorate or the colloquially termed *ordinary woman and man*. The article makes an important point about the reach of different social media platforms:

> When I say 'everyone is talking about Zola', who is 'everyone'? And what's at stake when journalists get the answer wrong, or disregard the question altogether? Getting to that truth requires taking a more basic step that most of us forget even exists, but is nevertheless crucial in dealing with this issue: who uses Twitter? We like to think we understand it, but we rarely think of its reach relative to Facebook and more traditional platforms (ibid.).

The reason journalists tend to talk about Twitter in terms of public discourse is the same reason why the majority of academic social media analysis takes place on Twitter. The reason is that it is genuinely public and accessible (not completely, but certainly in comparison to other platforms such Facebook). The criticisms, however, remain valid and are ones which were accepted as being so by journalists, politicians, and activists alike during data collection from interviews during the study. The quote below is from a journalist when asked if he was aware of the concept of the Twitter bubble:

> Yes and I find myself slipping into it where you become convinced that a certain tweet is hugely important from a recent exchange and occasionally people text me asking, did you see this tweet from such and such? To which I think no, and nor did four million other people…in the grand scheme of things most people will not make up their minds [about their voting preference in the independence referendum] based upon it [Twitter]. (J2)

The fact that the journalist in question had himself quantified the impact of Twitter and the concept of the Twitter bubble, as had others, is particularly important. For the Twitter bubble to be taken seriously it necessitates those involved to be unaware of, or, overstate the reach and impact of Twitter and that simply was not the case in terms of the journalists interviewed. In stark contrast, they had very realistic opinions about the reach and impact of Twitter and if anything tended to be more guarded about its impact than others within the study. Similarly,

most newspaper articles, in line with the previous *Guardian* article above, if anything tended to err on the side of caution regarding expectations around the importance of Twitter, as a proportion of the overall population of concerned parties, particularly with reference to political campaigns and debates.

Politicians were also tentative regarding the reach of Twitter and the impact of social media more broadly, whilst generally acknowledging the impact of social media on the democratic communication process during the Scottish independence referendum. One MSP stated:

> I think we forget that it is a pretty small pool of the people that are engaged on social media, particularly when it comes to politics because it is an even smaller chunk. I think where social media is important though is in terms of opinion forming. So, for example, a lot of my followers are journalists or political commentators so there is a way there of actually influencing the broader debate, but I don't think we should kid ourselves that social media is taking over in terms of the wider general public. (M4)

The statement above is of particular interest as it shows that the MSP in question believes the impact of social media is perhaps overstated whilst also tacitly acknowledging a particular type of Twitter bubble, where elites are talking to elites about political issues. In contrast to the notion that this is a negative phenomenon, the suggestion seems to be that the facilitation which Twitter provides to connect networks of people with high levels of social capital, is a positive tool for politicians in terms of impacting upon opinion formation. Another MSP, perhaps unintentionally, reiterated the standing of the demographics she engaged with on Twitter:

> I think on Twitter that you can build up a reputation amongst your peers by showing them, other politicians, journalists and activists, what you are doing and what you are thinking. So it can be used that way, and constituents are active on Facebook so it's good to show you are on there too. (M2)

The suggestion that politicians were acutely aware of the limitations of Twitter in the context of communication with the public at large, was in evidence when another MSP stated the following:

> I have 60,000 constituents. I have less than 6,000 followers on Twitter and not all of my followers are constituents. So if I put something on Twitter, then 1% of my constituents will probably see it so I am realistic about that. (M3)

M3 then developed this point by suggesting that if anyone were to knock on the door of constituents in the area and ask if the resident followed their MSP on Twitter, that the result would likely be a blank stare of confusion. M3 also suggested that the best method of political campaigning is out on the doorstep, but that social media was a welcome and useful addition in that regard.

Again then, in line with the earlier statements from a journalist, contrary to misjudging or overstating the impact of Twitter the politicians interviewed had at least, a very realistic understanding of the limited impact of Twitter whilst acknowledging that it probably had *some* influence on proceedings.

Another MSP acknowledged the Twitter bubble but saw it as having positive connotations in terms of *information provision* (in line with Kuhn's five functions of the media):

> The reason I would urge caution is that you can overstate the numbers of people that are actually involved. I think there is a 'Twitter bubble' as well as a 'politics bubble' and all the rest of it, and what I have found most interesting is that [the] Twitter bubble concept is there, but things come out of it now because a lot of the mainstream media are actually getting stories from this Twitter bubble. (M7)

This viewpoint was an entirely different take on the matter and saw the Twitter bubble as enhancing news provision as opposed to fragmenting exposure to different points of view.

6.3.2.1.2 Activists/general forum participants and homophily

The evidence presented in the previous subsection suggests that allegations of journalists and politicians existing in a Twitter bubble, unaware of the limitations of Twitter and social media were largely unfounded in relation to this study. The question remains, however, as to whether this was the same for activists and other forum participants. There is of course a fine, intangible line between a coming together of likeminded individuals in support of the same cause and the equally intangible abstract notions of homophily. To attempt to redress the balance, in a following section the positive connotations of homophily are discussed.

A further complication in assessing the presence of homophily during the debate is that the vote itself was to decide upon the fragmentation, or not, of the UK political system. This in itself perhaps made it almost inevitable that a vote of this nature would lead the supporters of fragmentation, namely independence supporters, to be labelled as *unthinking* and

indomitable, particularly if they were certain in their desire for independence. To hold a certain position is in itself not contrary to deliberative democracy as long as individuals are willing to reflect upon ideas which are contrary to that position.

At times, however, it seemed that perhaps the only people given credit during the debate were those that were willing to come out as undecideds. Though of course there was a majority of voters who were committed either one way or the other from the start of the debate and would likely not be swayed regardless of being exposed to a balanced media or not. An example of this kind of attitude towards those committed to one side of the debate was expressed by a journalist on discussing the group National Collective:

> They used to be much better when they started, they were much more engaging and open minded. Their Twitter account now has just lapsed into echoing Yes Scotland in a pretty unthinking and tribal way and that for me just isn't interesting. (J2)

The desire of the journalist quoted above was that of many critics of the debate, the desire for open-mindedness which is entirely understandable and is more commonly associated with the ideals of deliberative democracy. However, the reality of this campaign in particular, was much closer to agonistic pluralism whereby the deep-rooted passions and resulting intransigence of many, ought not to be mistaken as undemocratic but perhaps simply support of a position which they were entirely committed to.

What was in evidence during the debate which it seemed was perhaps mistakenly seen as fragmentation enabled by social media, was the general failure of value pluralism throughout the debate (see chapter 3 dedicated to literature on political pluralism). On a number of occasions, the sentiment of the quote below from another journalist was repeated:

> If you disagree with someone on [any] issue you are evil or corrupt [in their mind] or mentally insane. There is no recognition that there is just a person with a different point of view which I think is one of the problems with political debates being conducted on social media and the pervading of social media as the dominant platform (sic). That's just not healthy. (J1)

In a similar vein, an MSP stated:

I think though that there are people out there who view the world through a prism where everybody against you is the enemy and they are horrible individuals and awful people, you know, I just don't think that kind of attitude or approach is helpful. (M3)

Such allegations as the ones above were unfortunately entirely legitimate and accurately described the prevalent tone, particularly with reference to conversational exchanges between individuals throughout the debate. The failure of people to accept the legitimacy of their opponents, particularly when combined with repeated trolling/flaming was the genuine democratic disappointment of the debate and was far more evident than the allegations of widespread homophily, whether from activists, journalists, or politicians.

In the opening sentence of this section, Freelon's description of ideological homophily is quoted, which requires 'collectives who rarely if ever engage with outsiders'. This was not the position during the online Scottish independence referendum campaign, it was more a case that the engagement was generally ill tempered and dismissive to the point where productive engagement seemed at times to be impossible. It would be logical to conclude then, that social media did indeed foster such disdain for political opponents in the same way in which it has enabled flaming/trolling, but this behaviour falls outside of definitions of homophily as put forward by Freelon in his model of democratic political communication.

6.3.2.1.3 Broader notions of fragmentation inside and outside of the Scottish independence referendum

During the interview process, conversations regarding the broader notion of fragmentation/homophily beyond those of the Twitter bubble revealed some important insights on the subject.

In terms of ideological fragmentation, it is important to state that the level of exposure to differing viewpoints is entirely at the hands of the account holder rather than the platform itself. For example, this study, in line with many other Twitter users, deliberately followed accounts from both sides and all areas of the debate in order to deliberately be exposed to different points of view. Fragmentation is construed as being the result of a lack of exposure to different points of view. The allegations of ideological homophily and its propagation by social media lie in the assertion that traditional news platforms, such as television news bulletins and some newspapers, are either required by statute to provide balance, as is the case with the BBC, or take an editorial policy in line with professional journalistic standards, whereby reporting counter-positions is generally standard practice (at least to some extent or another). A

campaign official pointed out the threats posed by social media if it were to (though he believed it would not) establish a significantly greater audience than now:

> I think there is a fragmentation of the kind of public discourse we have and these people live in a fundamentally different space to me, in which the kind of trusted watchdog role I have afforded organisations like the *BBC* or *The Guardian* does not exist. That role has been devolved to places like *Newsnet Scotland* and *Wings Over Scotland* and because of that we are now fundamentally incapable of engaging in a discussion. (M6)

The campaign official went on to discuss how rumours regarding tales of newly discovered oil fields which had allegedly been kept secret from the general public, due to the way that they would support the financial case for an independent Scotland were problematic. Suggesting that small, militant groups such as *The 45* and *The 45 rising*, who made such arguments, were examples of a mind-set which made broader debate a futile exercise. The same campaign official when pressed upon the potential of a significant rise in people relying on social media for their news provision, explained why he believed that human curiosity overrode ideologically homophilic tendencies, using the referendum campaign to explain why:

> There is a problem that we have with the internet that we didn't have before in that when we allow fragmentation and identify in ever smaller groups and we limit our exposure to wider networks of people. I don't think [however] that you can ever defeat the innate curiosity of individuals and I think the independence referendum with the hashtag indyref demonstrated that. (M6)

M6 elaborated by discussing how there was a certain proportion of people that were served by an ever-diminishing circle of information but that in his opinion, the vast majority were engaging somewhere else with people on both sides of the debate. The official here then, has based his opinion of the willingness of people to engage with both sides of the debate on the prevalence of the use of the #indyref. This hashtag was unquestionably the dominant one throughout the course of the referendum campaign with 5.8million tweets of which 2.6 million were sent in the month preceding the final vote (Crossley 2014). #indyref was populated by both sides of the debate in a way that #YesScotland and #BetterTogether, including derivatives thereof, would logically not be. This would tend to provide further evidence of a lack of a Twitter bubble or echo chambers within this study which stands contrary to popular opinion.

The same official emphasised his point regarding a willingness of individuals to seek out a balance of viewpoints when asked if legislative action should somehow be taken to ensure the presence of a pluralistic media within the UK:

> I'm not sure we do. I think there are problems with that model and I don't think it is sustainable, and you end up in a position where I can see the BBC, who have a duty to be balanced, but on You Tube I can find somebody saying exactly what I want to hear, then why will I keep watching [as people indeed currently are] the BBC? (M6)

The official went on to suggest that plurality of exposure is user driven and that the most successful events during the referendum were the ones that were perceived as being balanced. The issue of balance is an issue that is ever present in media discussions in the present day. The official here is extolling the benefits of a balanced, pluralistic media whilst suggesting that this ought not to be imposed, and that the general appetite for balance will see individuals seeking out balanced content on their own terms. This assertion is evident in the success of hashtags during the campaign which were populated by both sides of the argument.

6.3.2.1.4 Homophily as a democratic positive

In line with the majority of democratic literature, the lion's share of this section has focused upon the negative connotations of ideological homophily. There are however positive connotations of ideological homophily which ought to be acknowledged. The human instinct to form communities of homogenous collectives ought not to be seen as overwhelmingly negative in democratic terms. Associations are at the heart of political behaviour (as detailed at length in the political pluralism chapter) and subsequently, political power and influence is derived from such associations. Plurality voting - the party association with the most votes, is still at the centre of our parliamentary process whilst majority voting is the way that we decide the result of referenda, in line with the democratic process of the Scottish independence referendum 2014.

Individuals find political strength and voice through being part of a collective. Much of this study is dedicated to the democratic achievements of Yes Scotland supporting activist groups, so to dismiss homophily as being entirely negative flies in the face of the general sentiment expressed within the project. Mutz (2006) finds that, 'lower levels of citizen exposure to diametrically opposed viewpoints are associated with higher levels of political participation'. While Fraser (1990) 'considers the absence of fundamental disagreement as a necessary

condition for the construction of ingroup-specific strategies and narratives'. This is not to suggest that insularity in a broader social/political context is preferable to exposure to different points of view which challenge pre-conceived views and opinions, rather that strength from association has a valid role within the democratic process.

We ought to not then forget that the capacity for social media to connect likeminded people ought to be considered as one of its democratic positives rather than negatives. Whilst the anonymity and distance of social media is correctly linked to entirely undesirable phenomena such as trolling and flaming, it also enables those that are particularly inhibited to find voice through the confidence of congregating in online communities, allowing them to express political viewpoints where they otherwise may not in traditional political settings (see mobilisation section). A campaign official quantified this position when asked about the scale of the threat to democracy that social media affords, as held by Sunstein (2007) and others, where he felt the long-term reality would see:

> A mix of mainstream and new media organisations and individual users, and for some people this will lead to a fragmentation [which works against pluralism] and does pose a threat to democracy but I think if you imagine a continuum, it will lead to a richer, more pluralistic democracy in the centre where largely we are better informed and largely we are more engaged and inter-connected. (M6)

To take such a position is to generally stand out from the contemporary take on ideological homophily and the perceived threat which it poses to the democratic process. It is however more representative of the evidence within this study, if we genuinely consider ideological homophily and the notion of Twitter bubbles and echo chambers as separate to the disappointing evidence of a failure to conform to ideals and standards of value pluralism and reciprocity.

6.3.2.2 Mobilisation

Mobilisation, according to Freelon's model, is classed as communitarian, and regards the manner in which online political communication both drives and enables individuals and groups to take part in political activities. Freelon states that 'the action thus mobilized can be offline, such as protesting or volunteering for a political campaign; or online, such as donating to candidates through a web form or emailing one's state or federal legislators' (Freelon 2010). The manner in which citizens were *mobilised* during the independence referendum campaign was generally accepted as being a major positive in democratic terms. With this in mind, after

discussing the nuanced differences between political engagement and mobilisation, the evidence of social media mobilising political activity is specifically focused upon

6.3.2.2.1 Engagement or Mobilisation?

It is important to distinguish political mobilisation from political engagement as much of the political discourse during the independence referendum campaign, and indeed during data collection from interviews, the two were often conflated as being one in the same. Political engagement can be taken as being aware of the matter in question and following issues and arguments (generally through the media) over the period of the campaign without specifically taking part in political activities which are related to proceedings. Mobilisation necessitates a wilful act of participation, for example, from joining a political party or pressure group to financial donations to political causes, taking part in a demonstration or simply signing a petition. Both are important factors of the democratic process and engagement can be seen as a precursor of mobilisation and vice versa. At interview, a newspaper editor spoke of the manner in which he sensed a level of engagement which was unprecedented during previous campaigns:

> I guess social media did engage people and I think you saw the street engage people, just walking down the street through George Square and Buchanan Street and seeing people demonstrating and meeting and having conversations everywhere you went and people were talking about it. I mean, bus stop conversations about the European currency or a currency union! When does that happen? And for me that played a huge role in making sure that everybody was actually up for this debate. (J3)

Whilst the above quote was one which was similar in nature to numerous others, the supposition that social media was *the* main driver of engagement is contestable. It could equally be argued that the enormity of the referendum issue was the real driver of engagement. The growth in the use of social media in comparison to prior campaigns and the fact that the electorate were more engaged and mobilised, tend to be seen to be dependent on one another. However, the correlation between the two does not necessarily assure specific causal links, so any such claims ought to be treated with caution.

6.3.2.2.2 How does social media facilitate mobilisation in ways other media cannot?

If we are to accept predominantly anecdotal claims of the power of social media to mobilise where traditional media forms cannot, this requires us to detail the evidence which supports or refutes this. This assertion was discussed with all interviewees, and while for some the

opinion was that social media is simply a supplement of traditional media, the pertinent points can be categorised as the following:

- Connectivity
- Livestreaming/event sharing
- Social media as a technical campaign tool

6.3.2.2.2.1 Connectivity

Social media has the power to connect people and establish networks in a manner that the traditional media generally cannot. The following is an example of the way that an activist group secured the services of a well-known music artist to come and play at a political event during the referendum campaign:

> The connectivity you can have (sic) if you have a relationship with somebody online [means you can] suddenly get Billy Bragg coming to Edinburgh to play at a festival, and that's because *National Collective* connected with him through Twitter. Now that wouldn't have happened previously because you would have had to go through an agent or something so there is that direct stuff (sic). So I can see somebody's tweet and say, I love that, and ask them to write for us and it all connects up. (A1)

Of course, it would still be possible for National Collective to establish contact with Billy Bragg without Twitter but the activist in question, with experience of the process of doing so, recognised the way in which Twitter simplifies the process. In this context, then, the ability to connect with a popular figure who is willing to participate in a political event may mobilise individuals to attend an event that they may not have otherwise. This is no different from celebrity endorsement in traditional political campaigns but in the opinion of the interviewee this would not have been possible without online communication. An SNP MSP spoke of connectivity and how social media mobilised the general public to attend and participate in political events:

> What the real social media contribution on the ground in a sense was, was what you call *mobbing* if you like, whereby you say something about an event and suddenly 100 people turn up. So people like Radical Independence Convention were able, through social media, to get 200 people out to Wester Hailes on a Saturday and get people signed up [to their campaign]. (M8)

Again, the influence of social media is based upon supposition. However, the view from those at the centre of the campaign was that social media was mobilising people in ways that the traditional media could not. Traditional media perhaps being the act of taking out an advertisement in a local newspaper or on local radio prior to an event in an attempt to attract people to attend.

6.3.2.2.2.2 Livestreaming/event sharing

Livestreaming political events simply means the live broadcast of the event in question, livestreaming online allows for *virtual participation* whereby people who could not attend an event or simply did not feel motivated enough to attend an event in person, can still take part in real time. Event sharing refers to the capacity of event organisers to archive an event which has already taken place so as interested parties who could not attend the event, or became aware of the event after the fact, could still experience the event in question. The following statement by an activist group succinctly described how this manifested itself during the independence referendum campaign:

> It [social media] has got people to advertise their events and share their events. So for example, Tariq Ali came and spoke in Edinburgh and Glasgow and I couldn't go because I was looking after my kids but I was able to watch it live online. That is through collaborations of people saying [to themselves], well I have the technical skills to either livestream this or capture and broadcast it afterwards, which means thousands more people who were unable to attend these events are getting the experience. (A1)

The capacity for livestreaming and event sharing has been adopted by the traditional media on TV and radio platforms and digital newspaper formats. It is, though, obviously technologically beyond the capabilities of the traditional printed press. In 2014 however, the phenomenon was very much in its infancy and it was particularly exploited by the *Yes* movement as they sought to find new channels as opposed to the usual ones which they felt were closed to them in the traditional media. In summary of the impact of livestreaming and event sharing in combination, an independence activist went so far as to state:

> I think the attraction between the two has been the dynamic that has driven the independence movement. (A1)

6.3.2.2.3 Social Media as a technical campaign tool

The official campaign groups also used social media as a tool to mobilise people in support of, or opposition to, Scottish independence. The complex manner in which polling organisations and others exploit the internet and social media in contemporary election campaigns, is though, beyond the boundaries of this project. However, an official who worked directly in this area during the campaign provided some basic details of the way in which this happened, and it is worthwhile to briefly touch upon these in order to understand the various ways in which the internet and social media are impacting upon the democratic process from a top down perspective.

Certain tactics were employed to attempt to mobilise individuals to participate in actual events rather than just the perhaps expected targeted Tweets and advertisements, which were commonplace and obvious to anyone who used social media during the campaign. For instance, if individuals replied to prospective emails (which were often generated through online behaviour which suggested users were favouring one side or the other) asking which side of the campaign they were in favour of, the following tactic was used:

> If you entered your postcode [when prompted] it would show you where your nearest door knocking, canvassing, or debate event was happening within 20 miles of your house…we would then send a live email saying, 'hi this is your nearest event and we are inviting you along'. (M6)

M6 went on to describe how technical skills were used to compile a database of 25,000 new contacts which had interacted with Better Together during the campaign. These contacts were then targeted with emails which said:

> Hi this is polling day and your nearest polling station is *X* your nearest campaign shop is *Y* and if you would like to spread the message online, do it via these social media channels... (M6)

For the more technically minded internet/social media user, these kind of tactics and the manner in which online interaction can trigger such events would perhaps be no surprise. For others however, when presented with the conversation above it has been obvious that they are unaware that their information is being used in this way.

The same campaign official described the differences in the user profiles of those that used Twitter opposed to social media platforms such as Facebook during the campaign:

> Twitter is entirely self-selecting [in who somebody follows and hence the views they are exposed to] and political Facebooks, even during the referendum, were largely speaking to people who had made up their minds. (M6)

M6 then explained that it was still crucial that the campaign was present on Twitter because a significant proportion of those who inhabited the platform were, for example, journalists, politicians, or community leaders and therefore carried influence 'due to their respective ranks of *social capital*' (ibid.). This meant that the potential impact of the media outputs of such users necessitated that the Better Together campaign serve that interest. That being said, such comments regarding the capacity of Twitter and Facebook to change people's minds on their voting intentions during the referendum are not uncommon, though Facebook is viewed as perhaps having more enhanced discursive characteristics than Twitter (Harcup 2015). Importantly though, if we accept the opinion of M6 to predominantly be the case, this casts doubt on the level of impact of social media during the campaign and suggests that firm opinion formation is being influenced by other means.

6.3.2.2.4 Crowdfunding

Crowdfunding is the act of raising funds through online appeals and is accepted as an alternative method of political participation (see Belleflamme, Lambert and Schwienbacher 2014; Mollick 2014; Hemer 2011). Websites such as *Kickstarter.com* and *Justgiving.com* can facilitate this or other methods can be used. The phenomenon was very much in its infancy during the referendum campaign and was a key demonstrable example of the way in which social media empowered the *Yes* movement in particular. Crowdfunding during the independence referendum attracted media attention on several occasions:

Independence activists use crowdfunding to dig into their supporter's pockets

Crowdfunding has become a significant source of income for independence activists and bloggers, as they dodge disputes over rich donors, raise their own profiles and even earn a living

🛈 Pro-independence supporters have donated more than £150,000 to a series of crowd-funded initiatives and websites Photograph: AFP/Getty Images

Figure 24 Screenshot from the Guardian (2016)

Jack Foster ✔
@jackfostr

Following ⌄

If you value new media's role in #indyref, stop what you're doing a second & look at @bellacaledonia's crowdfunder >> indiegogo.com/projects/backi...

10:17 AM - 9 Dec 2013

1 Retweet **2** Likes

💬   ⟲ 1   ♡ 2   ✉

Figure 25 Screenshot from Twitter 2013

Figure 26 Screenshot from Twitter (2013)

Although blogging is technically a 'free' way of circulating journalism (whether it be citizen journalism or otherwise) realistically there are numerous costs incurred in devoting oneself, fulltime, to cover a lengthy campaign such as that of the Scottish independence referendum. Bloggers still require at the very least, a personal income and this is where crowdfunding can be exceptionally useful.

The reason Yes Scotland targeted social media is almost certainly due to the fact that almost the entire UK traditional press were editorially against them. Writing in the weeks following the referendum result the former head of digital for Yes Scotland summed up the position:

> As some of you may have noticed, during the campaign, Scotland's traditional newspapers almost universally backed the No side, supported by 55 per cent of voters. Only the *Sunday Herald* backed Yes Scotland. In stark contrast, blogs, social media voices and 'new media' news sources were almost universally in favour of Yes Scotland, supported by 45 per cent of voters. As the head of digital at Yes Scotland, this gave me a great deal of pleasure – and was a key part of our digital strategy. And yes, I do know that we lost but we did increase support for our cause by 20 percentage points (Kirkpatrick 2014).

Kirkpatrick's quote confirms that Yes Scotland targeted digital platforms such as social media and blogs in order to attempt to address the imbalances in the traditional media landscape with which they were faced. This still depended upon supporters who were willing to populate digital media spaces and self-finance their efforts. The table below details the crowdfunding amounts raised by selected Yes Scotland activist groups:

Group	Crowdfunding
Wings Over Scotland	£330,000
Women for Independence	£70,000
Newsnet Scotland	£22,000
Common Weale	£25,000
National Collective	£18,000

Table 9 Independence activists' crowdfunding figures

As we can see, Wings Over Scotland in particular was tremendously successful in terms of crowdfunding, raising over £330,000 in crowdfunding during the campaign (a figure officially ratified when Wings was fined £750 by the UK Electoral Commission for accounting anomalies, post-referendum) (Carrell 2014). Further to this, a booklet titled *The Wee Blue Book* published by Wings had 400,000 downloads in addition to 250,000 self-distributed hard copies in a country with approximately 4.4 million eligible voters (ONS 2015).

Wings over Scotland was not the only grass roots campaign to raise substantial amounts of money through crowdfunding. Women for Independence raised £30,000 and £40,000 respectively in two online, pre-referendum campaigns and £15,500 in just 14 days after the final vote. When asked if this amount of money could have been raised in the same manner in an off-line campaign, an experienced activist representing the group stated:

Oh my God that [crowdfunding] is wonderful, it's amazing. The last two internet fundraisers we did, we just tweeted people until they gave us money. I mean the last £15,500 which I remember best, was entirely raised via Twitter because although it was in our newsletter and things, we didn't want to hit the women who had just got involved and had paid for membership. I don't know how you would raise that amount of money [so quickly] for a campaigning organisation without Twitter. (A2)

A2 went on to explain that the approach taken was to target those that were sympathetic to the ethos and goals of Women For Independence but could never be members because, for example, they were male. The same activist went on to speak of the methods they employed in terms of targeting users with social capital in order to quickly achieve funding goals:

The marketing techniques on Twitter are about hitting up the people that have a good social reach and asking if they can share our fundraiser. Like *PeatWorrior* [internet activist], a lot of lawyers and that type of people [sic] follow him and they were willing to donate, so we would get on to him and ask him to tweet our link and put his own endorsement on it. (A2)

A2 then went on to extol the marketing potential of Twitter for political activism, heralding its capabilities in reaching out to different populations. She then explained how in her opinion, that many commercial organisations do not understand how to maximise this potential, but when they do the rewards are significant.

A former SNP cabinet minister acknowledged the success of crowdfunding during the referendum campaign, making the point that they believed that crowdfunding of alternative media sources was in itself a protest against the traditional media:

Yes there have been some astonishing fund raising successes during the referendum with some of the websites that were doing daily stuff, like Bella and Wings and Newsnet, who were raising pretty astonishing sums of money in some cases. So it isn't that people aren't prepared to pay. What's happening, is that people aren't prepared to pay for the traditional medium and way of doing things. People are not going to put money into a newspaper that they are enraged by. (M7)

As detailed in the previous table, the other crowdfunding campaigns alluded to by the former minister during the independence campaign, included, Newsnet Scotland with £22,000 over two fundraisers; £25,000 was raised by Common Weale; National Collective raised over

£18,000 and Bella Caledonia over £13,000 (Carrell 2014). Whilst the amounts raised by Wings over Scotland are extremely impressive, and by Women for Independence are significant, we should keep them in context by comparing them to the official campaigns which both spent £1.5 million approximately (which they were officially limited to) as the official campaigns, and a cumulative total figure inclusive of donations of roughly £6,500,000.

The phenomenon of crowdfunding during the independence referendum quite rightly grabbed headlines in the press. Crowdfunding is only one way of funding political organisations, another is the payment of party membership subscriptions. In the weeks following the referendum the SNP saw an unprecedented surge in official membership subscriptions, almost doubling in size within one week of the referendum, from 25,642 to 52,034 (Scotsman 2014). On interview, an SNP MSP who was part of the team taking phone calls to meet the demands for new memberships, spoke of the commitment which the £5 membership fee meant for some of the prospective members:

> It [the demand for membership] was flabbergasting and some of the calls were very interesting, in that…some of them were from older folk who could just about scrape the five quid together and I heard the phrase more than once - 'I want to be a part of this' and in some cases it was people who didn't have the 5 pound that week. So we posted the form out to them for when they next had the money. (M8)

M8 went on to reinforce at some length, the point that it seemed that many of these people were not previously engaged in political participation and that their backgrounds dictated that the outlay of £5 was financially significant for many of them. A gesture which had made M8, a very experienced MSP, very emotional, both at the time of the event and also recounting the experience during the interview.

Although the demand for new membership of the SNP falls outside of the way in which social media prompted and facilitated mobilisation during the referendum, it is indicative of the passionate political engagement which was in evidence. Crowdfunding, however, is something which (as stated above) empowered Yes Scotland to take on the traditional press which, without overstatement, was truly a *David versus Goliath* effort due to the overwhelming majority of the traditional press being against them. The possibilities afforded by social media in this context, are fuel for those who understandably believe the broader mainstream media does not represent them in their political views in the present day.

6.3.2.2.5 Examples of mobilised participation

The previous subsection detailed the manner in which social media promotes and facilitates mobilisation in three different ways. This subsection presents some examples of mobilised participation which saw online activism crossing over into what would generally be classed as traditional campaigning. Presented first, are some examples of large scale events and participation in the form of Yestival and The Festival of the Common Weale. This is followed by evidence of what was termed the rise/revival of the town hall meeting, followed by the story of Women for Independence from their Twitter origins to an organisation with the capacity to mobilise over 1000 women at a rally in 2014.

6.3.2.2.5.1 Yestival/ The Festival of the Common Weale

As detailed in earlier chapters, National Collective generally consisted of young people, many of whom were students with links to the arts and creative communities. In July 2014 they organised a comprehensive, nationwide *tour* in support of Independence which they titled Yestival. The tour visited the Scottish Borders, Dumfries and Galloway, the Central Belt, Argyll, Highlands and Islands, Orkney, Shetland, the North East, Angus, Perthshire and Fife as well as all of Scotland's seven cities:

National Collective
@WeAreNational

Follow

Yestival: Week #1 Programme - eepurl.com
/XLO0X

4:10 AM - 26 Jun 2014

7 Retweets

↻ 7

Figure 27 Screenshot from Twitter (2014)

The commitment required to organise, promote, and stage Yestival would be no mean feat in just one town, for one day, but to co-ordinate it in so many locations is testament to the passion displayed, not only by National Collective but by many of the pro-independence activist groups. The following graphic shows that then Deputy Leader of the SNP and now First

Minister Nicola Sturgeon, was a speaker at the Glasgow leg of the Yestival tour. The fact that Nicola Sturgeon was a speaker at the event, which anecdotally had around 500 visitors, is evidence of how Yes Scotland and pro-independence activist groups worked in tandem to mobilise support for the independence cause:

Figure 28 Screenshot from National Collective (2014)

The following day in 2014, *A Festival of the Common Weale* took place. Both events were jointly advertised and there was obviously collaboration between the two groups. Bella Caledonia also promoted the event and had worked collaboratively with National Collective on several occasions.

Independence activist groups often collaborated in their organisation, staging, and promotion of events. As detailed in the poster above, the festival was a comprehensive programme of discussion, music, and comedy. It was these types of collaborations, cross campaigning and eclectic programmes which brought attention to Yes campaigning and earned them the tag of

being 'vibrant' in a way which was difficult to in any way attribute to the Better Together campaign:

Figure 29 Screenshot from Common Weal (2014)

6.3.2.2.5.2 The rise of the town hall meeting

Whilst the focus of this study is predominantly the digital campaign of the Scottish independence referendum, to get a genuine overview of the broader campaign it is important to present other developments in mobilisation and participation. Such events may confirm or contradict those that proclaim social media to have had a key role in the relative successes of the growth in the Yes Scotland vote, or, more likely, show a more complex picture where the internet and new media are interlinked with traditional campaigning.

A notable phenomenon in terms of mobilisation during the campaign, were claims of the rebirth of the town hall meeting, which was somewhat of a paradox in terms of campaigning in the age of digital media. Prior to the campaign the town hall meeting had generally been written off as a feature of the political past.

The BBC published the following article on the subject in March 2014:

Figure 30 Screenshot from BBC (2014)

The article described how hundreds of people were attending local meetings during the campaign and how many of the speakers were people who had never publicly spoken before at a political event (somewhat coincidentally however, Yes Scotland Chief Executive Blair Jenkins was one of the participants in attendance at the event in question). The article went on to state that the meeting was organised by Yes Scotland and that Better Together were advertising similar events on its own official website. Professor James Mitchell, from the school of Social and Political Science at the University of Edinburgh, was quoted in the article as saying:

> We all thought that the days of the big public meetings had died. Hundreds of people

are turning out in small towns for not necessarily big names. It's certainly generating interest among the activists. It's encouraging people to become active. We don't know what they do after a public meeting. Do they speak to their friends, their neighbours? That's the hope of the 'Yes' side (ibid.).

However, the Professor was also quoted as stating;

> We should be very careful here. Even with these large public meetings, it's still a tiny, tiny proportion of the electorate which is turning out (ibid.).

The theme of the town hall meeting was one which was raised a number of times during the interview process and most were positive affirmations of such meetings, representing a positive turn in the attitude of people with regard to participating in political events. On the subject of recorded increases in public meeting participation, one political activist stated:

> What you have seen in the last year is the rebirth of the public meeting across Scotland... I think it was incredible that for most of my adult life I remember reading stuff about politics being dead through apathy, mass disinterest generally and people just don't care, blah blah blah, and that is really not what we are seeing which is a complete revival. (A1)

An SNP MSP was also extremely positive on the subject from the experience of some of the public meetings he had personally organised:

> We had the miraculous revival of the public meeting which over the years had vanished because we just gave up trying to make it happen, but now, suddenly, you found that people came along and they were engaged and had questions. (M8)

Others, however, were more cautious regarding the revival of public meetings. The following Conservative MSP explained his understanding of the situation:

> One of the aspects of the campaign that I thought was quite interesting, was we heard about how all these meetings were taking place all across the country, like Radical Independence and Tommy Sheridan and Jim Sillars were all having meetings but it was all the same people going to the meetings. (M4)

M4 went on to clarify his point by explaining how such meetings in his area such as ones

organised by those already mentioned, and also for example Yes Scotland, Christians for Independence, and Business for Scotland, would be attended by the same 60 or so people as opposed to different groups of individuals. Some may dismiss this as being the cynical perspective of a Better Together supporter, influenced by the broad acceptance that his/her side lost the battle in terms of a visible groundswell of mobilised support in comparison to Yes Scotland. However, in line with Professor Mitchell's quotes also, the suggestions of hundreds of people turning out to *town hall* events (regardless of whether this was a repetitive movement of the same committed activists) perhaps ought to be treated with caution in terms of a genuine, sustainable upsurge in mobilised democratic participation.

6.3.2.3 Community identification

The question of sovereignty is one which feeds and challenges the concept of personal and national identity in a way that possibly no other political debate can. Identity politics poses both negative and positive challenges democratically (Gutmann 2009) and identity politics can constrain and divide society whilst also enabling the marginalised and oppressed to unite and prosper politically. Identity, in line with many democratic theories, is one of the key drivers of Mouffe's theory of agonism and the referendum debate provided a multitude of examples and debates by which to test the theory. Freelon's (2010) model focuses upon discourse analysis to identify the manner in which groups form (primarily) in the mind of individuals. This study however, does not use discourse analysis *per se* and in a separate chapter, using content analysis, the role of groups and pluralist group theory in the digital age is addressed. Here, the focus is upon identity in broader democratic terms in the manner in which Mouffe sees identity as a component of *the political* in her theory of agonism. *The political*, being taken as the emotional drivers of political inclinations and subject perspectives, often displayed as antagonism, viscerally fuelled by common identity.

6.3.2.3.1 The emergence of nationalist activist communities online

The independence referendum campaign saw the emergence of *grass roots* activist groups from various different communities. The relative success that these groups achieved is demonstrated by many still being highly active and visible on social media over 2 years after the independence referendum. This was seen by many as a major democratic success within the campaign. Of the many nationalist activist groups supporting independence there were four, with distinctly different identities, that were particularly prominent and became a main focus of the study, (figures in brackets denote the number of Twitter followers on the date of the referendum. For a more detailed description of the groups see the methodology chapter*)*:

- National Collective (19,100)
- Women for Independence (17,100)
- Wings Over Scotland (23,300)
- Bella Caledonia (20,500)
- Other notable groups – Radical Independence, Newsnet Scotland, Common Weale.

For those that take an interest in democratic communication and innovation, the relative success of campaign groups who, like the above, operated mainly on social media has been the enduring legacy of the independence referendum campaign. The reason for such optimism came from the organic nature of the way these groups formed in what was a relatively short timescale. They did so through social media and whilst difficult to quantify, it seems highly unlikely that they could have achieved what they did in the offline world. The connectivity and the manner in which the internet and social media can expeditiously raise awareness and drive campaigns was very much in evidence.

The activist groups studied served those that identified with various demographics, from the young artistic members of National Collective to the generally previously inexperienced female activists of Women for Independence. An activist from Women for Independence explained the process of their group formation:

> We officially launched in November 2012 before the official Yes campaign even launched, so it was more of womenhood coming together and chatting online more than anything else…Our logo is the feminist symbol with a cross on it and I was at the meeting when we chose it and it could have been a rainbow I think, but we were conscious that we wanted the feminist symbol there…There were two strings to our bow, not just Women for Independence but Independence for Women, which from a strategic point of view was genius in that if and when we lost the referendum we still had a raison detre. (A2)

The manner in which Women for Independence came into being was typical of other groups formed upon social or professional identity, including that of National Collective and a number of other groups such as, for example, *Farmers for Yes* and *Lawyers for Yes*. The evidence showed groups generally forming based upon an allegiance with those of a shared demographic.

Wings Over Scotland appeared to have a broader demographic following, attracting those with a hard-line attitude to independence. As has been detailed in the *flaming* unit of analysis, the group was, and still is, the most controversial independence supporting activist group but was also the group with the most Twitter followers. It is right to point out that some account followers (as was the case with this study) had different motivations for following certain accounts, other than being wholly in support of them, this kind of following includes a recently termed phenomenon of Twitter *hate following*. In this context, accounts may be followed as a means of keeping an opponent in plain sight, so as to be aware of, and possibly act upon, the content of that account or also purely for the sake of general interest. However, as detailed in the *mobilisation* unit of analysis, not only did Wings Over Scotland have the most Twitter followers but also comprehensively raised the most money through crowdfunding donations. Although unpalatable for some, we must acknowledge that a large number of people identified with this account which must be taken as an expression of their solidarity with the views, actions, and conduct of what was, and still is, at the very least, an unpleasant campaign which the official Yes campaign felt the need to officially distance itself from.

6.3.2.3.2 The absence of Unionist activist communities

If the emergence of effective grass roots activism on the Yes side of the debate was impressive and a cause for democratic optimism, the virtual absence of corresponding groups in support of the Union was hugely disappointing. As such, there were no groups to study as was the obvious initial intent of this empirical study. The only groups which emerged in support of the Union, beyond the official campaign, could not be classed as *grass roots* upon even the loosest definition of the term. Those that did emerge, generally followed a format of, for example, Academics *Together* or Farmers *Together*. These groups consisted of people from the communities in question being willing signatories, and, arguably token members of groups with accompanying launch day press releases and photographs. It appeared then, that such groups to all intents and purposes, ceased to exist or at least did not actively campaign like the aforementioned grass roots independence groups did.

The question of why this was the case was posed to all of the research subjects during the individual interviews and there were three prevailing reasons identified. Firstly, it was suggested that the initial forecasts for the result of the vote had roughly two thirds supporting the Union and only the other third in support of independence. Consequently, there was a level of apathy from Unionists which nationalists could ill afford if they were to have any chance of winning (it should be remembered that in spite of the nationalists' successes on social media, that the final result was still 55% to 45% in favour of the Union). Secondly, it was

suggested that a campaign for change will inspire activism in a way that a (expected landslide) campaign to maintain the status quo ever could:

> Yes were selling a vision where we were selling the status quo which was much more difficult. (M1)

Selling a vision allowed the Yes camp to make promises and promote an independent Scotland that would fit with the aspirations of the electorate, without the hindrance of an actual political history which Better Together were encumbered with. The political challenges that Scotland within the United Kingdom face today, do so as part of a 300 year old union with the rest of the United Kingdom and the evidence is there for all to see. The Yes campaign however, were able to say they would fix problems and create a better nation, and that is exactly the campaign strategy which they followed.

Thirdly, it was abundantly clear to all interested observers that the mainstream media channels were overwhelmingly in support of the Union and the status quo; therefore, the space which nationalists could exploit was social media. To put that argument in to context, the only national title to proclaim official support for the nationalist movement was *The Glasgow Sunday Herald*, a Scotland only title with a circulation of just 25,000 from a combined total of roughly 650,000 newspapers sold in Scotland each Sunday and 600,000 each weekday (Audit Bureau of Circulation 2016). *The (Daily) Herald* proclaimed support for the Union but only on the condition of further devolution of powers to Holyrood (Herald 2014), however this still meant that around 20 other UK newspapers including all of the other Scottish titles, both sole Scottish publications and UK titles with Scottish editions, did not. In combination all three of these arguments can be taken as significant contributors to the absence of grass roots Unionist activist groups.

6.3.2.3.3 The Better Together campaign strategy and its sacrifice of identity

There were other important factors in evidence regarding the role that identity played during the campaign in the expressed strategy of the Better Together campaign and the practical sacrifice of exploiting identity driven politics (Cram 2014). Better Together employed the digital strategy and advocacy firm Blue State Digital, the same firm that ran the successful digital campaign for President Barak Obama in 2008 and 2012. In simple terms the strategy was to target undecided voters only, ignoring those who were already definitely Yes or No and focusing upon those that came to be colloquially known as the *missing million*. A Labour Party worker and prospective MSP candidate stated:

> I think the worst thing was that we thought there was a real focus on the million undecided people that they [the official campaign] had identified using this mosaic [polling] system. One of the Liberal Democrat guys said to me that Better Together don't believe in leafleting? We were doing it anyway by stock-piling everything they would give us because we had the network and the capacity to get stuff out as and when it suited us, but Better Together weren't interested in us doing that, they were focused on the million undecided voters and that was it. (M1)

Then once it was established that the majority of undecided voters were concerned with the potential negative economic impact of independence, this became the unrelenting focus of the Better Together campaign. The strategy to focus upon the potential negative consequences of an independent Scotland, in tandem with the neglect of positive historical examples of the UK, built upon common identity, resulted in the prevailing narrative that Better Together had resorted to a campaign based upon *project fear.* The term, *project fear*, was self-admittedly coined by Better Together director Rob Shorthouse (Gordon 2014) and has become synonymous with negative political campaigning as shown in the EU referendum of 2016. The same party activist of the previous quote explained the frustration of those campaigning on the doorstep for Better Together:

> There was some stuff coming from Better Together that may have had some truth in it, that for example there was a story about mobile phone tariffs [going up if Yes Scotland won] which looked like scaremongering. Whether it was true or not, it was just lame and I thought this is just not where we want to go and I know that a lot of people we were campaigning with felt the same, and it was project fear kind of stuff and that's not the arguments we were trying to sell on the doorstep. (M1)

M1 went on to describe how the actual vision which they wanted to sell was one which was based upon the UK track record of solidarity and cooperation rather than seemingly frivolous tales of an increase in the cost of mobile phone tariffs

The fact that Better Together won would suggest that the campaign was indeed successful. However, support for independence by polling day was the highest it had ever been. One poll in 2013 had as little as 23% of the population in support of independence (Carrell 2013a) so the final vote of 55% to 45% suggested that independence supporters had won the battle if not the war, a term which was often used post referendum. Although the Unionists won the war, it came at a cost in terms of the manner of the victory and its legacy in Scotland. As one political editor for a Scottish national title stated:

If you are part of the 48% that believes intrinsically in the UK, it is going to depress you that the emotional argument wasn't made; the social solidarity argument; the joint tradition in history. It depresses you [that] those arguments aren't made but if you are in that percentile, where they have got your vote, they don't care about you because they are only interested in the 30% that are going to decide the outcome. (J1)

The insight which the internal polling team headed by Blue State Digital had during the campaign is striking in that the same journalist was told on the eve of the referendum, by Blue State Digital, that the Better Together campaign would win by 56% to 44% (only 1% point out). The impact that ignoring the emotional arguments around identity and solidarity had, was a recurring theme from those interviewed on the Better Together side of the argument. It was apparent that this was a generally deflated group who at times could easily have been mistaken for being on the losing side of the vote. Time, of course, can see moods change depending upon the circumstances but there remains the possibility that the neglect of Unionist identity could hamper further Unionist campaigns in the event of a second independence referendum, which is now entirely possible following the *Brexit* vote of 2016.

6.3.2.3.4 Identity politics – the cost of cross-party allegiances

It would be rational to suggest that certain arguments such as sovereignty are cross-party issues which generate cross party alliances and therefore lead to cross party campaigning, but identity is not rational. It is emotional and visceral. The independence referendum campaign in Scotland generally consisted of, with some exceptions, Labour, Conservative, and Liberal Democrats allied in defence of the Union with the Scottish National Party and Scottish Green Party allied in pursuit of achieving Scottish independence. This resulted in some uncomfortable shared platforms on TV and radio debates and other public rallies and appearances. The most notable and uncomfortable alliance was that of the Labour Party and Conservative Party in both their Scottish and UK forms. The reason that this was controversial was due to the (previously) generally accepted notion of the Conservative Party in Scotland as being highly toxic, for many reasons, though generally associated with the governments of the late Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Under Thatcher, the Conservative Party all but surrendered its mandate in Scotland which subsequently led to the institution of a devolved Scottish Executive, later to become known as the Scottish Government.

For many Labour supporters the sight of their democratic representatives sharing platforms with Tory ministers and commentators was inexcusable, and this was readily seized upon by

the Yes Scotland campaign and the SNP. The disparaging accusation of the Labour Party being *in bed with the Tories* was commonplace at the time and is still spoken of at the time of writing. Many consider the virtual annihilation of Labour seats, and the accompanying landslide victory for the SNP in Scotland in the general election of 2015, as partly attributable to the notion of Labour being in bed with the Tories during the 2014 referendum campaign. A Labour MSP stated the following when asked about the Better Together campaign and cross-party cooperation:

> The Tories are toxic in Scotland whether we like it or not. People were making it an easy target to say *oh you [Labour] are in bed with the Tories*, which to be quite honest was nonsense because it is like saying, *Brian Soutar, billionaire homophobe, has the same views as Patrick Harvie*, it is just nonsense and rubbish. (M5)

M5 reinforced this point by going on to make a further analogy of how the fact that both the Conservative Party and the Communist Party of Britain were both campaigning for Better Together, but that it would be ridiculous to categorise these parties as political bedfellows. He did however accept that exploitation of the point in question by Yes Scotland put them in an advantageous position during the campaign.

Although it is entirely reasonable to point out the lack of fairness in the implied associations as stated above, the unfortunate fact for Labour was that the allegations were skilfully targeted and tirelessly repeated by the SNP in particular, and this seemed to resonate with the Scottish electorate. It was also noticeable that former Scottish Labour leader Kezia Dugdale made a point of not sharing a platform with the Tories during the EU referendum campaign, which suggests lessons had been learnt during the Scottish independence referendum campaign. When asked about the legacy of the referendum on Scottish politics of the *in bed with the Tories* sentiment, a Scottish daily newspaper editor said the following:

> You have a surge in SNP membership with people saying that they want to be involved in this, and how am I most likely to achieve what I want, and they have decided you know [sic] that the way to that is to join the SNP and some have joined the Greens and some to the Radical Independence movement. So all those movements are in very rude health and the Labour Party, I guess, is paying a heavy price for its involvement with Better Together and its lack of an identity in Scottish politics now. (J3)

This was clear evidence of the value attributed to identity as a political mechanism and the cost when the identity of a party is in some manner damaged by external events. When asked

the question about the effect of cross party campaigning, a Conservative MSP explained why the situation was different and therefore less damaging to the Conservative Party:

> It wasn't a problem for us because, and the polls confirmed this, the Conservatives were the most committed Unionists with 97% of people that voted Tory voting No, and therefore in the Conservative Party people were far more inclined to see the bigger picture and put the Unionist aspect before party loyalty. (M4)

M4 did, however, concede that it was much more difficult for the Labour Party because there was a greater proportion of the membership that were naturally inclined to vote for independence, and that:

> The SNP were very clever in trying to paint Better Together as a Tory campaign, and Labour were in bed with the Tories, and I can see why that made Labour feel more uncomfortable. (M4)

It intuitively felt that the MSP quoted above was correct in the way that the Tory Party was seemingly unscathed by the platforms shared in the way that the Labour Party was. What was remarkable, however, was the manner in which First Minister Nicola Sturgeon shared platforms with Conservative Ministers during the campaign to decide the future of UK membership of the European Union in the referendum of 2016. The First Minister did this in much the same way that she had derided Labour for doing during the independence referendum, and this was on TV platforms which had vastly greater exposure across the UK than during the Scottish independence referendum. Any suggestion that Ms Sturgeon was merely representing her members does not bear scrutiny, as 65% of Labour supporters voted to remain in the UK (Guardian 2014) whilst 66% of SNP members voted to remain in the EU (Curtice 2016). It would be easy to suggest this as being hypocritical on the part of Ms Sturgeon but is also perhaps testament to her popularity across the political spectrum at the time, which meant this act was largely unreported with only a few exceptions (see Harris 2016). This highlights the complexity of the role of identity in politics and in the independence referendum campaign, as the act of cross party alliances in the Scottish independence referendum is deemed unforgivable, whilst in the EU referendum it passes almost unnoticed.

6.3.2.3.5 The launch of the National Newspaper- a response to an under-represented community

A common question that was repeated following the democratically positive debate, fuelled by the type of grass roots activism already discussed, was whether there would be a lasting legacy or was this merely a one-off display of democratic fervour? A tangible event that supports a positive legacy is that of the birth of the Scottish daily newspaper, *The National*, which was created to serve a community whose identity and political focus was hereto ignored prior to its existence. *The Sunday Herald* (part of the Herald & Times Group which also own *The National*) had come out in favour of independence late in the campaign but could hardly be classed as having a purely nationalist editorial position, but with its exception, the vast majority of other titles were in support of the Union with only a handful taking a neutral stance.

It is common knowledge that newspaper circulation is falling across the UK, the impact of which was again demonstrated earlier in 2016 when *The Independent* ceased to produce a print publication and moved its entire operation online. The publishing of a new daily newspaper bucks the general trend and although the newspaper only sells around 17000 copies at the time of writing (BBC 2015c) down from around 50000 at its launch, it is proof of the way in which a community which has previously not had its identity served, are willing to pay for journalism which represents their views (at least) in the wake of a positive independence referendum campaign.

6.3.2.4 Intra-Ideological Questioning and Response

The later subsection titled *inter*-ideological questioning and response, which focuses upon deliberative notions of reciprocity between individuals and groups on either side of the referendum debate, provides disappointing results in terms of evidence of online deliberation during the referendum campaign. This section however, suggests that there was evidence of a genuine communitarian theme during the referendum campaign, particularly between the independence supporting activist groups which are the main focus of the study. This had positive implications for the question of how online communications can have a constructive impact upon the democratic process in the UK.

This section will firstly provide evidence of solidarity between activist groups and the manner in which they collaborated and supported one another. It will then discuss, with one particular example, retrospective questioning of the left wing of the independence movement immediately following the final vote. Following this, there are examples of how partisan the debate was and how the refusal to self-question or criticise any part of the movement led to

accusations of an authoritarian movement where any such questioning was scorned upon. This leads to a rare but powerful example of intra-ideological questioning which saw a prominent campaigner move from the *Yes* camp to the *No c*amp.

The manner in which social media fostered a communitarian response by like-minded supporters of independence, was probably *the* democratic achievement of the Scottish independence referendum of 2014. The manner in which citizens were mobilised during the campaign is covered extensively in a separate unit of analysis. This section concentrates more specifically on both positive questioning and response, which benefitted support for independence and, rare examples of negative questioning and response which perhaps caused harm to the cause despite being democratically legitimate.

6.3.2.4.1 Positive communitarian response by independence activist groups

The later deliberative unit of analysis titled Inter-ideological response and questioning, describes a campaign used by independence supporting activist groups such as National Collective, Bella Caledonia and Women for independence. The campaign was aimed at encouraging undecided voters to submit questions which the afore-mentioned groups would answer. An extension of this was the hashtag #IndyReasons. This exercise took the form of encouraging individuals from the same side to tweet and share the reasons that they were voting for an independent Scotland in the referendum, for example:

Figure 31 Screenshot from Twitter (2014)

The above tweet was directly placed by Bella Caledonia but the vast majority of IndyReasons tweets were contributed by individuals as opposed to activist groups themselves:

Figure 32 Screenshot from Twitter (2014)

Figure 33 Screenshot from Twitter (2014)

The word cloud below is a culmination of the reasons that people included in their tweets:

Figure 34 Screenshot from Twitter (2014)

The above graphic, which itself was included under the IndyReasons hashtag, is an effective representation of the hopes and beliefs which many people have for an independent Scotland. It is easy to see how many people could be drawn into support independence if the stated democratic goals such as fairness and equality were deemed to be realistic outcomes. As mentioned elsewhere in the study, the way that independence supporters could sell an image of a new and different system, where many of the current issues would be improved upon, was a luxury which the Unionist side of the debate struggled to counter as they campaigned for the status quo.

The phenomenon of #IndyReasons was an excellent example of the power of social media communications going viral, the result was that the campaign was a positive example of social media gaining exposure in the mainstream press:

News › UK › UK Politics

Scottish Independence: Twitter weighs in with reasons to vote Yes

#Indyreasons trends on what would be Scotland's Independence Day, capturing the imagination of those in favour of separation

Felicity Morse | @FelicityMorse | Monday 24 March 2014 | 0 comments

4K shares

Figure 35 Screenshot from The Independent (2016)

#IndyReasons was also indicative of the type of campaign which began with the grass roots activist groups and was then acknowledged and supported by the official campaign, in this case by the then Deputy Leader of the SNP, Nicola Sturgeon:

Nicola Sturgeon ✔
@NicolaSturgeon

Just caught up with the fantastic #indyreasons hashtag - well done everyone #positivecampaign #voteyes

RETWEETS 75   LIKES 89

1:01 PM - 24 Mar 2014

75   89

Figure 36 Screenshot from Twitter (2014)

This kind of groundswell of democratic fervour around political issues is the type of phenomenon which proponents of the democratic possibilities of the internet and social media can draw upon and hope to foster in the future.

The IndyReasons hashtag, as represented above, was indicative of a movement that was collaborative and also an example of a movement where people followed, or were members of, multiple campaigning activist groups within a broader movement:

The kind of people that follow us will follow all of the independence groups. (A2)

There was also evidence of people with conflicting views or different priorities being willing to put those to one side for the sake of the broader independence movement:

It might be about convergence because there are different groups, such as we come from the left politically but we also engage with people who would define themselves as more nationalist and might not see themselves on a left right spectrum…I suppose we bring different communities from a green perspective and a left perspective into the people who are discussing sovereignty, which is a challenge (A1).

6.3.2.4.2 An independence movement unwilling to question itself?

Questioning followed by response, in the sense which we are talking of here, is a subset of reciprocity. The process of questioning and response (when the response is affable) within a community, sends a message that people's contributions are valued and that others are willing to listen to them. The internet, and social media more specifically, is the perfect tool for communities to question and challenge in a way which if fostered correctly, may have positive implications for the group in terms of democratically bonding communities together.

This study considers at length, in different sections, the democratically heartening way in which a community came together in support of independence and more precisely, how social media was a major contributory factor which facilitated this. If there was one particular issue which reoccurred, and which negatively portrayed the Yes Scotland campaign and its supporters, it was allegations of a community where to question was seen as dissent. The narrative was one which held that to question any part of the Yes movement was to be seen as a traitor to the cause which could very quickly lead to the types of exchanges we have discussed in the flaming section of the study. Again, it would be for a different, quantitative study to provide statistical analysis of the prevalence of this. It was however, something which was regularly evident both on Twitter itself and during the evidence collected from interviews.

The issue of a movement that was perhaps unwilling to listen to its members was raised in the following series of articles published online at Bella Caledonia. The author of the first article, Ewan Morrison, is an award-winning author and screenwriter and a personal friend of Bella Caledonia joint editor Mike Small. His decision to join Yes Scotland in May 2014, following a

period where he classed himself as one of the *missing million*, was applauded by independence supporters in the comments section of the following article:

Figure 37 Screenshot from Bella Caledonia (2014)

However, only a few days before the date of the referendum, Morrison made a public decision to change his allegiances in support of the Union:

EWAN MORRISON – YES: WHY I JOINED YES AND WHY I CHANGED TO NO

Ewan Morrison is an award-winning Scottish author and screenwriter.

Figure 38 Screenshot from Wakeup Scotland 2014

The three-page article cited the reason for Morrison's change of heart as being the result of being part of a movement where questioning (with all its deliberative benefits based upon the notion of reciprocity) was frowned upon:

> Four months ago, I joined the Yes camp out of a desire to take part in the great debate that the Yes camp told me was taking place within their ranks. Being a doubter I thought maybe I'd failed to find this debate and that it was exclusive to the membership of the Yes camp, so I joined hoping I could locate it and take part. But even as I was accepted into the ranks – after my 'Morrison votes Yes' article in Bella Caledonia, I noted that 5 out of the meagre 20 comments I received, berated me for either not having decided sooner or for having questioned Yes at all. Another said, and I paraphrase: 'Well if he's had to mull it over he could easily switch to the other side.' That comment in Bella Caledonia worked away at me like a stone in my shoe. Beneath it, I realised, was a subconscious message: 'Now that you're in with us you have to toe the line – ask questions about Yes and you're out' (Morrison 2014).

Such an articulation of the issue, from somebody who had rationally considered both sides of the argument, had made a decision and then recanted due to an environment where to question the movement was frowned upon, was fairly damning. It was an articulation of a phenomenon which was present online and which was particular to the Yes Scotland side of

the argument. It was more common for Unionist supporters to acknowledge current issues within the Union but still maintain the Union as the sovereign entity of choice. Morrison went on to explain how he was troubled by the response to reasonable requests from within the Yes movement for economic projections relating to, for example, oil revenues or the balance of payments in an independent Scotland, being greeted with a stock answer of:

> We'll sort that out after the referendum, this is not the place or the time for those kinds of questions (ibid.).

Additionally, Morrison alleged that those who sought such answers were accused of negativity that would play into the hands of the Unionist side of the debate. This general narrative was often spoken of during the interviews, though only ever by Unionist supporters and not once by supporters of independence. The following quote was made by a Labour Party MSP on the subject:

> I think it's a terrific piece [the Morrison article] and very illuminating, it's as if, and this is a bit tongue in cheek, it's like some dissident coming forward from the old USSR [exposing practice] where nobody has told us what it's really like, where all the time I just found the whole thing cult-like. (M5)

M5 also found a lack of critique from outside of the movement regarding Yes Scotland campaign publications to be troubling. He claimed that the independence white paper was glossed over in that a supposed left wing movement had no redistributive policy intentions, and instead relied upon hackneyed claims of *cutting red tape* in order to become a competitive economy. On this, M5 stated:

> Well for working people, competitive means low pay and shit conditions. Yet this went by without critique, so I found all of that within the Yes Scotland side very remarkable because everything on the *No* side was critiqued as being a sell out by somebody and I just found that really strange. (M5)

Regardless of where observers stood on the position of an apparent lack of scrutiny of the Yes Scotland vision of an independent nation, the Morrison piece prompted discussions about the apparent unwillingness to accommodate any internal questioning within the Yes movement. Others, of course, simply suggested that such views were vastly under-representative of what was in actuality a united campaign where the reality was that there was very little internal dissent to begin with. The question could also be asked as to whether the

Better Together campaign was open to internal scrutiny and challenge, or if it suffered with the same alleged issues as the Yes Scotland campaign. As is detailed elsewhere in the thesis, there were numerous internal criticisms of Better Together which were mainly based upon the negative campaign messages that were employed. In light of this, it is perhaps the case that a winning campaign can quickly forget its own misdemeanours whilst a losing one will see such issues perhaps unfairly focused upon, even in the case of Yes Scotland which increased its support from the low 20 percentile to 45% at the conclusion of the campaign.

6.3.2.4.3 Intra-ideological questioning and response as a meaningful critique of the broader movement

The previous subsection detailed events which were based upon a positive (some would argue idealistic) vision for the future which was easy for members across the independence movement to group together in support of. However, as was stated in the *rational critical argument* section, communications which were self-critical of the independence movement were rare. This made the ones that were critical, stand out and appeal to the study in a way that blind rhetoric or even positive collaboration, as in the last subsection, did. The following article, posted by Bella Caledonia, was an excellent example of a willingness to be self-critical in a way that could help the movement prosper in the future:

Figure 39 Screenshot from Bella Caledonia (2015)

Although the above article was posted in the aftermath of the referendum when introspection, though not the order of the day, eventually became evident to a limited extent, it still represents a willingness to be rationally self-critical in a way that very few individuals or activist groups did. This was perhaps representative of Bella Caledonia being an activist group with its roots in professional journalism, as such self-questioning was not evident in the other targeted activist groups.

6.3.2.5 Communitarian section – deliberation and agonism

To begin with ideological homophily, Freelon classifies this as communitarian but it is also relevant to debates around deliberative democracy. Certain commentators (Balkin 2004; Stromer-Galley 2003) go beyond negative connotations of homophily and detail positive communitarianism which unites likeminded individuals. Additionally, they claim that the internet is also enabling people from contestable political positions to come together and deliberate upon the issues in question (Dahlberg 2007).

More negative theories and current expectations of the prevalence of ideological homophily as a result of internet-based communication, would suggest that this study would have evidence of groups living within Twitter bubbles and echo chambers, overstating the genuine impact and reach of social media. This was not the case. The focus demographics of the study were, if anything, perhaps overly pessimistic as to the impact of social media and saw other communication channels as significantly more important whilst accepting that social media still impacted on the Scottish independence referendum, when placed in conjunction with other media platforms. Whilst the evidence shows a willingness on all sides to seek out opposing views (at least externally as opposed to within the same campaign), this did not translate into positive deliberation. There may be many reasons for this, but the most likely is the adversarial nature of the binary independence referendum in the hottest of political settings.

The most damaging aspect of the debate which was in all likelihood fuelled by social media with its unique facets of distance and anonymity (though this is difficult to specifically quantify) was an unwillingness to acknowledge the legitimacy of the position of persons on the other side of the argument during the referendum campaign. A failure to do this makes any attempts to foster deliberation practically impossible. In contrast to many other norms of deliberation and agonistic pluralism, the requirement for such an acceptance of the position of political opponents applies to both deliberative and agonistic democratic theories. Mouffe's agonistic pluralism is based upon, and accepts, the passion and (to a certain extent) the conflict which was endemic during proceedings. However, for *conflictual consensus,* which is essential to Mouffe's theory, the acceptance of the legitimacy of opponents is paramount. This again suggests that for social media to be a productive part of the democratic process in the future, the priority perhaps ought to be focused upon fostering the legitimacy of political opponents ahead of perceived threats to democracy regarding ideological homophily.

Freelon summarises Mutz's (2006) findings to suggest that communitarian forums are the most likely to mobilise politically. The findings of this study fall in line with that hypothesis. There was a genuine community dynamic within Yes Scotland which was not in evidence to

the same extent within the Better Together campaign, and this was reflected in the types of mobilisation documented in this section. These efforts were aided by the utilisation of social media capabilities which were not possible until recently, such as livestreaming, event sharing, and crowdfunding which perhaps surprisingly, resulted in a two-way effect that fuelled traditional political campaign methods such as town hall meetings.

Whilst Freelon restricts mobilisation to communitarianism, there are obvious links between mobilisation and deliberative democracy. The discursive properties of social media allowed onlookers to observe the online debate and perhaps also contribute to the arguments. This in itself is a loose form of deliberation. The crossover into traditional campaigning as documented in this chapter in the form of town hall meetings, Yestival, and the Festival of the Common Weale, are all to differing extents forums for discussion. Whilst we have little evidence of Twitter facilitating deliberation which resulted in individuals moving from Yes to No and vice versa, we perhaps ought not to expect so, on a platform where contributors appeared to be convinced of their preference at the start of proceedings. The fact, however, that the Yes Scotland side of the argument saw such an enormous leap from support in the low twenty percentile to 45% in the final result, means that at the very least, many *don't knows* made the move to Yes. As is proven in other sections of this study, the vast majority of the traditional media supported the Unionist position which in itself suggests that the social media campaign may have had a role of converting a number of the *undecideds* to support independence, though this remains unquantifiable.

Mouffe's agonistic theory is fuelled by conflict and passion which were both evident in the Yes campaign, and particularly through their supporting activist groups. Antagonism and conflict are particularly evident in other sections such as flaming. Quantifying abstract notions such as *passion* is inherently difficult and whilst there was undoubtedly passion in both the independence and Unionist camps, the types of innovative mobilised campaigning detailed in this section, suggest that Yes Scotland were fuelled by a passion which (at least outwardly) surpassed that of their Unionist counterparts. This was evident in the fact that there was a complete absence of grass roots Unionist activist groups, although as explained elsewhere, the reasons for this are perhaps more complex and relate to the difficulty of motivating from a position of the existing hegemony.

Deliberative democracy involves a process which is intended to result in *better* decisions, arrived at through a process which limits the extent of exclusion in contrast to majoritarian voting procedures. The concept of identity is communitarian and precedes the decision-making process. It is concerned with making sense of political motivations and allegiances

based upon common values, influenced generally by social and cultural commonalities. Within the independence referendum identity was largely a matter of a community, with supporters of Scottish independence finding a place on social media due to the fact they were largely opposed by traditional media organisations. Identity politics has been seen by some as a significant hurdle to deliberative democracy. Dryzek (2005) sees nationalism as being the toughest type of political issue where any victory is by definition exclusionary, with regard to the suppression of the defeated side(s). He also, however, believes that the installation of deliberative institutions, when those institutions are distanced from the state, have the power to negate the level of exclusion in such societies divided by identity politics. This study, however, was limited to the empirical observation of identity politics in an election context, and at that, an election where only one side focused upon the relevance of identity, whilst the other chose to practically ignore identity altogether.

Mouffe's theory of agonism sees identity as one of the key political motivators, although the role of identity in the political process is relatively common with pluralists such as Robert Dahl (1976) and advocates of deliberative democracy such as Amy Gutmann (2009). The themes in this section demonstrate the manner in which identity, both in broad terms of nationalist identity and the sub communities within that movement, was indeed evident in the evolution of their groups. Two of the four activist groups detailed in this section saw a coming together of communities, - the artistic students of National Collective and the female membership of Women for Independence. These two groups had memberships which were active online whilst also physically mobilised to attend meetings and rallies. The other two, Bella Caledonia and Wings Over Scotland, were generally based online, controlled by one or two people. These two groups grew their strength and reputation based upon the amount of visitor traffic on their websites and the number of Twitter followers that they had, this was aided by contributors writing articles which were shared on the sites.

The absence of grass-roots Unionist groups has been detailed and explanations have been put forward backed up by the evidence from interview subjects. The resonating evidence in terms of agonistic theory is the expressed frustration of the Unionist community when their identity was purposefully neglected by the official Better Together campaign and their partners Blue State Digital. This could be argued as positive affirmation of the importance placed by agonism upon the requirement to recognise and foster identity to formulate a fully functioning democratic process. The failure of Better Together to do so, has left a frustrating legacy for core Unionist supporters and is a key contributor to the argument that Yes Scotland *won the battle* (certainly on social media) even though they *lost the war*, which was decided by the concluding ballot of the referendum campaign.

In a different respect, the damage which can be done to an identity in certain circumstances was demonstrated by evidence regarding the impact of cross-party alliances within the Better Together campaign. Many people were willing to accept that the referendum was a cross-party issue of sovereignty and (uncomfortably) accepted their leaders sharing platforms with their greatest adversaries. This was not, however, acceptable to many others and the SNP recognised the conflict of interest between Labour and Tories and skilfully exploited the issue of identity to capitalise upon an already discontented Labour support. The evidence of this is in the testimony of the interview subjects and this was perhaps part of the reasons that resulted in the landslide election result for the SNP in 2015.

There is evidence that the *in bed with the Tories* episode perhaps had some role to play in the choice of Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn to refuse to share a platform with the Tories during the European Union referendum 2016. Following the final result, Corbyn was roundly condemned for not sharing those platforms suggesting that in that situation he could not win either way. The successful launch of the National Newspaper and the fact it is still in operation more than three years following the independence referendum, was further confirmation that a community which was not having its identity catered for is willing to pay for journalism which serves that identity, at a time when other newspapers are in financial turmoil as reader numbers continually fall year upon year.

Freelon (2010) notes that communicative response is central to both deliberation and communitarianism, with the distinction being the relationship between the two involved parties. Intra-ideological questioning can be indicative of a community which is open to challenge its established norms and positions, at the same time, this reciprocal process can ensure that members of the community feel valued and bond communities together. This was not generally evident as detailed previously. The Morrison article was duel faceted in that it was a rare example of the Yes movement questioning itself, ironically, upon the issue of the propensity of the movement to question itself. It was unfortunately a rare exception which proved the established narrative of a movement which was closed to self-questioning. This may be argued to be evidence of a united community and this did seem to be the case, but the evidence remained that those who did question were generally made to feel inherently wrong for doing so.

The Subsection which discusses intra-ideological questioning and response is one that clearly illustrates the normative premise of agonistic pluralism and deliberative democracy. Mouffe's agonism is antagonistic and passionate, and this was clearly the case for the broader Yes

movement. To suggest so is not meant as a negative criticism. Mouffe's agonism is not necessarily based in what is ideal political discourse, it is simply describing a recurring element of the theory. The turbocharged passion for independence amongst its supporters was an example of *the political* in Mouffe's theory of agonism, a symptom of this, ironically, was shown in a movement where internal, classically deliberative questioning was hitherto rare in the extreme. If there is a political climate where internal questioning is anathema, there is surely little hope of productive deliberative exchanges between opponents of either sides of the argument. This is precisely, barring a handful of occurrences, the broad narrative which was in evidence during the online campaign which preceded the Scottish independence referendum of 2014.

6.3.3   The deliberative strand

6.3.3.1 Rational critical argument and general quality of debate

Rational critical argument was central to the early versions of the Habermasian public sphere (Freelon 2010) and requires a level of debate that goes beyond traditional concepts of rational choice - the concept taken from economics which posits that individuals will make choices which are in their personal best interest. Dryzek suggests that certain debates, particularly those relating to sovereignty, are vulnerable to falling below the standards required for successful deliberation, particularly in terms of reciprocity which for Dryzek means 'arguing in terms that others can accept' (Dryzek 2010 p. 329).

The Scottish independence referendum was by far and away the greatest peacetime challenge to date of the sovereignty of the United Kingdom. According to Dryzek, then, this study ought to have evidence of a process which failed deliberatively on two grounds, firstly because of the *hot* setting of a contest regarding sovereignty and secondly, because this study is situated online, where Habermas believes reciprocity is even more difficult to foster due to remote communication which is devoid of face to face interaction. More specifically, reciprocity is much more difficult to invoke on platforms such as Twitter as tweets are often generalised pronouncements as opposed to part of a process of reciprocal exchanges based on strength of reason.

The data collection for this project from the online debate was focused upon collecting positive examples of online deliberation as well as negative elements such as flaming. To accurately measure successful deliberation and verify the use of rational critical argument is beyond the remit of this study. However, a recent quantitative study, which also analysed deliberation during the independence referendum campaign, concluded that 'low levels of discussion

intensity, dominance by a few, little knowledge exchange, and high gender inequality illustrate that online referendum discussion lacks deliberative characteristics' (Quinlan, Shephard and Paterson 2014 p.192). Instead, data was gathered which displayed the potential for deliberation through examples of statements and articles which displayed elements of rational critical argument. These were extremely rare in comparison to postings and articles which were collected and deemed antagonistic. The limited positive themes and examples which were identified will be discussed in this section, followed by thematic analysis of the criticisms which were levelled at the quality of the debate and ask how these relate to agonistic pluralism.

The Scottish independence referendum campaign was universally celebrated as vibrant and culminated in a turnout of 84.6%, a record for any UK referendum or election (Electoral Commission 2015). From the early days of the campaign however, there was consistent criticism of the quality of the debate from the media, on blogs, and also from academics (see Nicolson 2014; Hassan 2013; Duncan 2013). The criticisms generally concerned issues of flaming or trolling, the performance of the broader traditional media (usually accusations of bias to either side of the debate), the performance of the BBC in terms of balance and *project fear*, a term that has become ubiquitous in politics following the independence referendum and relates to accusations of scaremongering, which stands contrary to notions of rational critical argument. Each of these themes are individually explored, with flaming discussed in greater detail in the earlier liberal individualism strand of the model.

6.3.3.1.1– Evidence of rational critical argument

It is important to again note that Twitter (at the time of the referendum) had a 140 character limit per post (although the use of pictures of larger amounts of text is now commonly used to circumnavigate this limit) which has obvious implications regarding deliberation. This still, however, makes deliberation within the Twitter forum itself extremely difficult even with the facility of real time posting. Users can, though deliberate by posting tweets which will be seen by all of their followers, they can also directly message other users (but only if they both follow each other) and also deliberate via hash tags which tends to be most effective in concentrating discourse upon a specific subject topic. In practical terms the only communications which resembled deliberation took the form of tweets redirecting others to a blog post or article which was then discussed further, again on Twitter or more often and more effectively in the comments section where the article is situated. This point is an important one for research efficacy in that analysis of Twitter alone, will omit any discussions which take place in secondary forums and comments sections.

The referendum debate outcome was a binary choice and this encouraged tribalism on both sides of the debate. Comments on Twitter or secondary articles thereof, which were willing to question matters relating to their own side of the debate were rarities. Where this was in evidence, the articles in question tended to display genuine, rational critical argument which elevated discussions and the tone of the debate through appeals to the common good.

Figure 40 Screenshot from Bella Caledonia (2014)

The above article was a rare example (Maxwell 2014, see also Burdzeyeview 2013). The content was a criticism of the tendency of the SNP, and therefore the wider Yes campaign, to overstate the positive possibilities of independence, whilst refusing to accept any potential negative consequences. This, as a criticism, if press stories at the time of writing are accurate, may have resonated with Yes Scotland as they are rumoured to be considering a *warts and all* approach to campaigning in the event of a second independence referendum (Gardham 2016). Other examples of approaches which can be associated with rational critical argument were those that sought to take the heat out of the tribal, identity based arguments which were so prevalent during the debate. National Collective provided some notable examples such as the following:

Figure 41 Screenshot from National Collective 2014)

The article, (Vevers 2014) encouraged calm in the debate and a more measured approach to self-determination without the demonization of the rest of the UK and more specifically England. This approach was occasionally used by the official Yes campaign but was largely absent from the online debate. Whilst the motives of such articles were still aimed at persuading readers to vote for independence, the general appeal to the common good in terms of social unity beyond political separation raised the general standard of the online debate.

Some of the most effective campaigning which leant towards rational critical argument was the manner in which certain individuals, but mainly Yes activist groups, encouraged followers to ask questions as opposed to bombarding them with rhetoric. This practice falls into Freelon's model under the heading of intra/inter ideological questioning and is detailed in a separate section.

6.3.3.1.2- Accusations of mainstream media bias

In the democracy chapter of this study an analysis was presented which detailed the challenges facing UK democracy. The performance of the mainstream media, and the growing distrust the public has in the media, was highlighted. With this in mind, accusations of mainstream media bias from social media users is perhaps unsurprising. Most frequently, criticism of the mainstream media came from supporters of independence, but accusations of nationalist bias was also occasionally present. Nationalist critique tended to take the form of

accusations suggesting the mainstream media was unfit for purpose and part of the elite establishment which looked to maintain the existing Unionist hegemony. The performance of the print media, concentrated in the hands of immensely powerful, overwhelmingly right wing ownership, coupled with scandals and confirmation of implicit dishonesty over the last decade make this distrust a healthy one. However, to tar the entire printed press with the same brush is unfair and allegations to this effect require substantiation.

During the independence referendum, these accusations tended to have little or no rational critical argument by which to substantiate them but continued to be the prevailing online narrative throughout the campaign. The criticisms aimed at the printed press were summarised by Richard Walker, the former editor of *The Sunday Herald* and the consulting editor of *The National*, reporting upon a debate he had hosted on the subject during the Edinburgh fringe festival in 2013:

> The more intense the independence debate becomes, the more criticism is flung at the media - or to be more precise, the much-derided *mainstream media*. We are clearly in the pockets of the Yes camp (take a bow, George Foulkes), or the Better Together camp (the so-called CyberNats), sometimes both in the same week, and even in the same story. On the one hand, we are dismissed as irrelevant in a debate which has moved to the blogosphere; on the other we are poisoning minds with our astonishing influence (Walker 2013).

Walker's comments accurately describe the 'no win situation' the mainstream media found itself in. The criticism heaped upon it was in all likelihood unfair as the professional media certainly provided more opinion based upon rational critical argument than social media did. One journalist summed up the situation by highlighting the irony of arguments made by social media users who had no professional obligation to adhere to reasoned argument:

> Whatever people think of journalists, we are fairly responsible about how we approach stories in that we are aware of what we can say and what we can't say with a degree of accuracy and fair comment and if that breaks down…the traditional media is still so much more concious of that and balance as well, because mainstream outlets will be much more scrupulous than a blog will. That's ironic in that what they are attacking is a lack of balance with a lack of balance [laughs]. (J2)

The fact remains, however, that only one national newspaper supported independence. That in itself was reason enough for a sizable proportion of the Scottish electorate to feel aggrieved and that they were not just fighting a cause but the entire Scottish and British media industry.

6.3.3.1.3- Accusations of BBC Bias

If supporters of independence felt generally aggrieved by the broader mainstream media, that feeling of grievance was further heightened when it came to the performance of the BBC during the campaign. The BBC as an institution is core representation of the UK *State* and that fact alone seemed to influence opinion on the issue of balance in covering the two respective positions of the independence debate. The following quote from a pro-independence activist group when asked if the BBC was biased toward the Union, was repeated more than once:

> I think I do agree with that because the giveaway is in the title [British]. (A1)

The BBC is undoubtedly a representation of the Union, which immediately made it a target for supporters of independence. To glibly dismiss the BBC as inherently biased because of its title might be argued to be unfair, and its performance during a debate upon the future of the United Kingdom, and the constitutional arrangement it implicitly reflects, was always likely to put it in a *no win* position. At the other end of the spectrum the following tweet was indicative of the Unionist position on the BBC bias debate:

GRINBINS ™
@Grinbins

Follow

Does anyone get the feeling the only way Yes would see the Beeb as fair would be to say they support the yes camp.

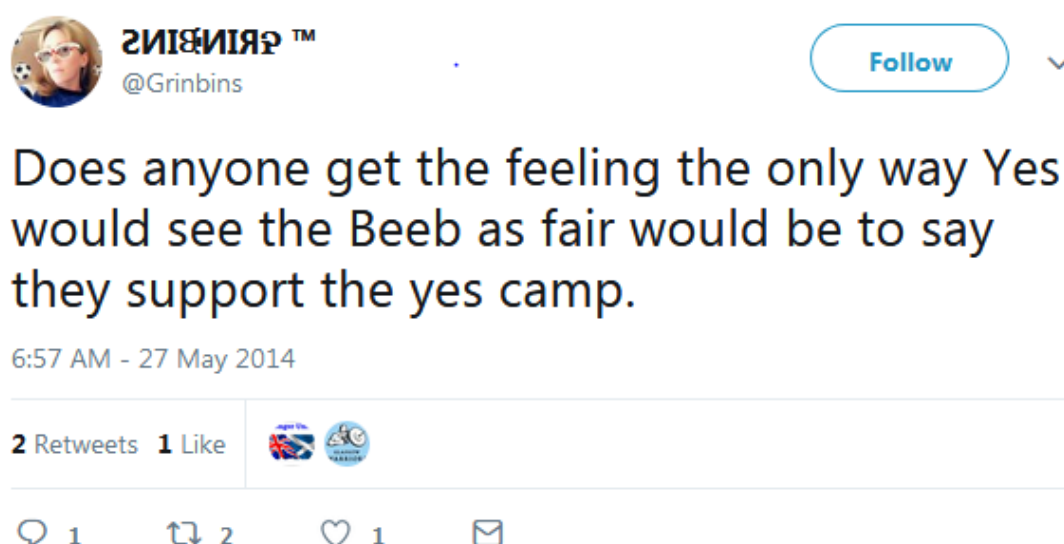6:57 AM - 27 May 2014

2 Retweets 1 Like

1   2   1

Figure 42 Screenshot from Twitter (2014)

There was one piece of academic work which came to the attention of the study, published specifically on BBC bias during the campaign (Robertson 2014) undertaken by a Professor from The University of West Scotland and published online at opendemocracy.net. The author is a self-proclaimed supporter of independence and claimed that analysis of BBC reporting was indeed found to be biased toward Unionist arguments. The report found little or no support from other Scottish academics and this resulted in Professor Robertson criticising both Scottish academia and the mainstream press:

> I would like to condemn the silence of almost all Scottish academics with an interest in this field who might have been expected to challenge censorship of intellectual material (Cromwell 2014).

What was inherently concerning were the substantiated allegations of attempted censorship by Professor Robertson, that the BBC sought to suppress his report and make representations to Professor Robertson's employers, claiming that the report brought the BBC into 'corporate disrepute' (Fraser 2014). The BBC refused to report on the work of Professor Robertson or to give him airtime to defend his work. Such an approach by the BBC seems unjustifiable and is surely fuel for those that bear grievance with the organisation and must also frustrate those that seek to defend allegations against it. Whilst acknowledging the seemingly unjustifiable actions of the BBC in this regard, the vast majority of allegations of BBC bias from social media users, did not bear scrutiny and the vast majority of journalists when questioned on the subject were of the same opinion. The following quote from a journalist and TV broadcaster acknowledged the imperfections of the BBC whilst defending against accusations of institutional bias:

> The BBC thing I find frustrating, not because they are perfect, but they are not institutionally biased. They get things wrong, absolutely, and they make mistakes but that is not the same as institutional bias. (J1)

Of course, the reaction of social media to that statement would understandably be, *well they would do wouldn't they*? In light of this it was relevant to listen to the reaction of a committed independence activist when questioned on the same subject:

> I think that is a bit crude… I think the broadcast media is slightly different [to newspapers] because I think it's that they have good journalists but they suffer from chronic under-funding and bad management. (A1)

In support of the argument regarding underfunding, A1 then explained how the BBC Scotland HQ at Pacific Quay appears to have far fewer people on the premises in relation to the size of the building, even though it was only very recently constructed. Suggesting proof of this was the fact that a friend of A1 had been in the building recently when there was a fire alarm and that there was general shock at the small number of people stood outside, even though the building was confirmed as being fully evacuated. He went on to state that:

> When they were in Glasgow West End there were thousands of people working in that building, so it has been reduced and reduced and reduced, so some of that is about quality rather than political bias. (A1)

Such an opinion in itself displayed rational critical argument to the broader debate around the performance of the BBC which was extremely rare in an argument which was overwhelmingly polarised into positions of BBC good or BBC bad.

There is a general narrative about the BBC which suggests that as long as the BBC is accused of being right wing by left wingers and left wing by right wingers, it is probably doing a good job, regardless of the facts, and this type of duelling narrative may or may not be applicable to BBC performance during the referendum debate. However, the subject of the BBC and bias, particularly in the wake of the work of Robertson (2014), is one that deserves to be paid appropriate academic attention in the wake of the referendum. The accusations have been prominent enough to warrant attention which can add rigour to the performance debate of the national public service broadcaster. The BBC charter, as discussed in chapter four relating to media pluralism, includes the following obligation which is pertinent to the allegations of bias and a *London centric* media output:

> **Representing the UK, its nations, regions and communities** - *BBC viewers, listeners and users can rely on the BBC to reflect the many communities that exist in the UK* (BBC 2016).

It is however a fact that the BBC itself, during its latest review ahead of charter renewal in 2017, found that:

> The priority to represent the different nations, regions and communities to the rest of the UK (priority 1) is one where audiences see a clear need for improvement, particularly in Northern Ireland, Scotland and the North of England (ibid.).

A commitment to make progress in this area was substantiated by the announcement of a new BBC Scotland channel, including a dedicated news programme to be broadcast each evening at 9pm. The channel is set to begin broadcasting in 2018 and will have a budget of approximately £30 million pound per annum, an equivalent to the amount spent on the running of BBC4 (BBC 2017). The announcement was welcomed by the First Minister but also classed as disappointing in light of the rejection of a *Scottish 6* news programme which had been called for (Paton 2017).

What is surely beyond question is that the BBC and the rest of mainstream media is undoubtedly more balanced and journalistically responsible than social media is now, or probably ever will be. The following quote, which has been already mentioned previously, on the mainstream media and the role of public watchdog as opposed to social media, supports that assertion:

> I think there is a fragmentation of the kind of public discourse we have and these people live in a fundamentally different space to me in which the kind of trusted watchdog role I have afforded organisations like the *BBC* or *The Guardian* does not exist, and that role has been devolved to places like *Newsnet Scotland* and *Wings Over Scotland* and because of that we are now fundamentally incapable of engaging in a [rational] discussion. (M6)

There is much to support the above statement in the fact that social media has no obligations to professional journalistic standards of balance or even basic journalistic fact. This, in itself, is the appeal of the medium for many. There is little doubt that social media is doing an important job of holding the mainstream media to account in exposing its shortcomings. However, any suggestion that it would be in the interests of a modern pluralistic democracy to see the demise of mainstream media institutions, including the BBC, fail to recognise the importance of such institutions in the democratic communication process. For the sake of not repeating the role they play in such matters, these are explored in detail in chapter four where they are concisely summarised by Kuhn (2007). Put very simply, the beauty of social media in its free role without any legal or professional journalistic standards is exactly why the professional media, which does have professional and legal standards to fulfil, regardless of its imperfections and the way it will almost certainly fall short of expectations from time to time, is still vital to UK democracy.

6.3.3.2 Equality

As detailed in the methodology chapter, equality in Freelon's model relates to the even spread of contributions between forum participants. Within the broad and prolonged debate leading up to the Scottish independence referendum, a quantitative analysis of this kind was both beyond the realm of this study and inappropriate in such a broad forum such as Twitter. The subject of access is however an important one. So instead, the equality metric has been interpreted in line with Karppinen, Moe, and Svennson (2008) in their critique of Habermas and Mouffe, whereby they suggest equality to encompass the opportunity for minorities to express themselves, through achieving both voice and coverage enabling the challenge of the existent hegemony. Here, a number of different themes incorporating a number of key events are presented to help judge the equalising impact of Twitter and social media during the Scottish Independence referendum campaign. Then, in line with all other units of analysis, the topic is concluded by discussing equality in relation to agonistic pluralism

Social media is ubiquitously heralded as being 'a great leveller' in democratic terms and this was again often heard both during and after the Scottish independence referendum campaign. The expression *leveller* has no specific definition in these terms (see media pluralism chapter for a broader discussion) but can be taken to embody three distinct characteristics. Firstly - access, in terms of the ability to connect directly with others in a way which was previously prohibitive, usually referring to access with politicians in democratic terms. Secondly - voice, in terms of providing a communication channel for those who previously had generally been under-represented, and finally the ability to hold those in positions of power and authority, namely politicians, business, and the traditional media to account. What follows, is an assessment of these three areas supported with evidence taken from study data.

6.3.3.2.1 - Access

Prior to the arrival and rapid growth of social media, access to politicians by their constituents was generally restricted to sending letters by post or attending weekly constituency surgeries. The former generally meant waiting some time for a written reply and the latter often meant queuing for an indeterminate amount of time followed by a brief, time restricted conversation. The rapid connectivity of social media obviously has the power to expedite the communication process in these matters in the same way it is utilised to do so throughout broader society. All the politicians who were interviewed were asked about the use of social media to specifically connect with constituents, and as expected, they all did so and generally spoke of this progression in glowing terms:

I think that's one of the great things about social media in that it's a complete leveller. So I am on Twitter, a constituent is on Twitter, if they want to ask me a question on there I will respond. I think that has really opened up the way people engage democratically. (M3)

M3 then explained how constituents no longer had to go through the laborious process of booking and attending an appointment in person and that issues could now be quickly dealt with from initial contact on Twitter. M3 did however stress that many cases were too sensitive to be dealt with on a public platform, but that dealing with the matter could still be expedited through initial contact on Twitter and then subsequently the issue could be attended to on a secure platform or in person. The inappropriate nature of public forums for the majority of personal constituency business was overwhelmingly agreed upon and most of the MSPs interviewed generally repeated the following statement:

I also use it to communicate with constituents, it isn't really a great forum for that but often people will tweet you with things, so I will tweet them back and refer them to something I've said or answer a question, otherwise I well ask them to move it offline and send me an email if it's a more personal matter. (M4)

Another MSP made a statement very similar to the previous one but pointed out the sensitivities of perhaps being seen as suspiciously secretive when moving a personal constituent matter offline:

You also have to be careful about the language you use so that people don't have the impression that, 'oh you don't want this in public?' So, you try and point out that it's in everyone's interest to deal with this in a private manner. (M3)

In a slightly different vein, one MSP told of the way in which constituents would often complain about constituency issues online but decline an invitation to take the matter offline to be dealt with personally:

They just want to know, *what are you going to do with the number X bus?* I will have an initial conversation that might say, 'what's the issue? Who have you spoken to?' But quite quickly what I will do is say what you need to do is to contact my office directly and we'll have a proper discussion about this but it's amazing how few then do. (M7)

M7 put the lack of follow up on such communication down to individuals simply looking to sound off on Twitter in the pursuit of public attention, rather than reaching a constructive outcome, but did however say that there were some instances when further communication had taken place.

Regardless of those simply wishing to use social media to harangue their MSPs, which in itself can be seen as a democratically positive interaction, the general feeling about the access which has been afforded by constituents to their parliamentary representatives by social media was seen as an overwhelmingly positive one by all MSPs interviewed.

6.3.3.3 Voice – Wings Over Scotland

In other sections of this study, Wings Over Scotland has received attention in somewhat pejorative terms due to his willing conduct in controversial events relating to flaming and generally controversial turns of phrase and use of language, which led him to be the only activist group which Yes Scotland felt the requirement to officially distance themselves from. In others, he has rightly been given huge credit for his ability to crowdfund extraordinary amounts of money during the campaign. Here he again must be given credit in terms of other examples of the voice and reach which he achieved both online, and a crossing over into traditional forms of campaigning.

Wings Over Scotland at the time of writing has 43,000 Twitter followers and raised around £330,000 in crowdfunding during the Scottish independence referendum campaign. Part of the money raised by Wings was spent on the production and publication of *The Wee Blue Book*:
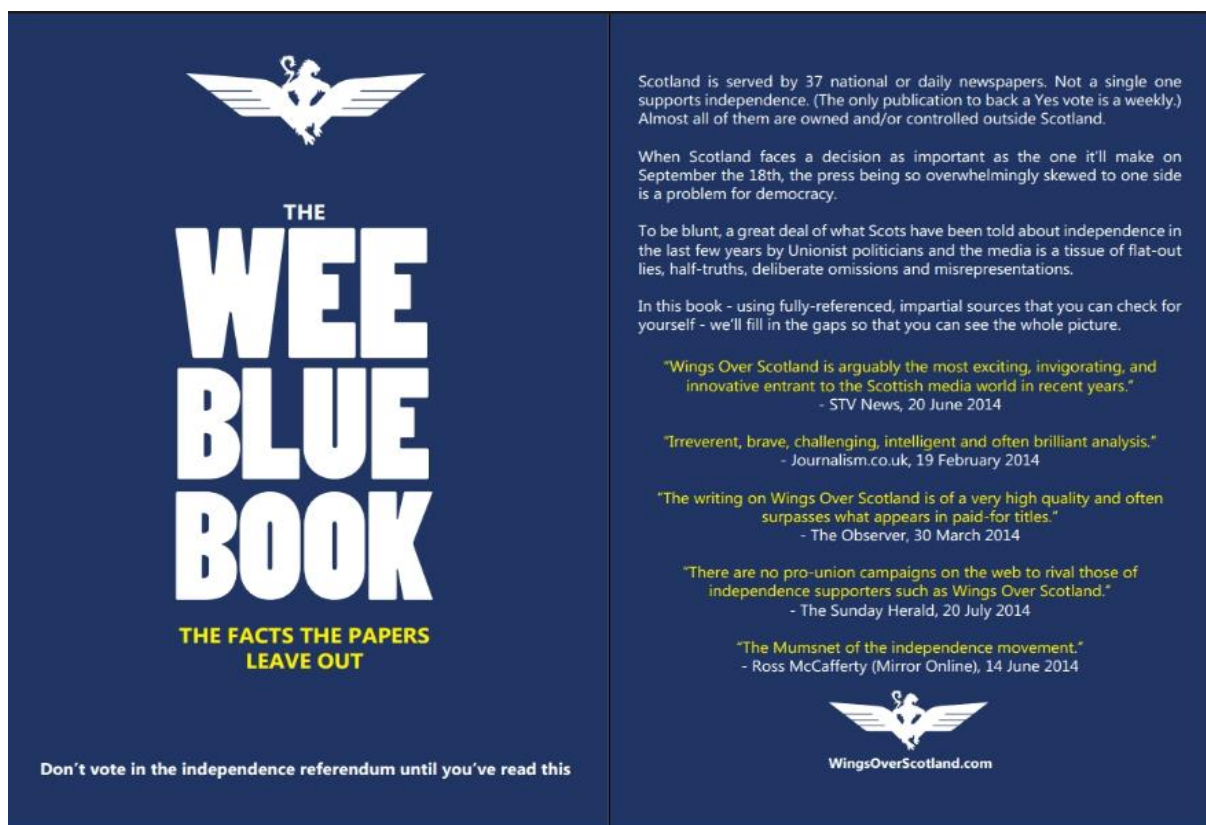
Figure 43 Screenshot from Wings Over Scotland (2014)

The scale of publication and the amount of downloads are again huge for a solo activist, with numbers totalling 300,000 printed, distributed copies, and 550,000 internet downloads according to *The National* newspaper (Learmonth 2017) and Vice news (Bryant 2014) respectively. *The Wee Blue Book* also has its own website. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the veracity of some of the claims within the Wee Blue Book, which, as is evident from the previous graphic, sells itself on being a source of truth which flies in the face of a sea of Unionist lies, are contestable. The following critique is by respected blogger and journalist Kevin Hague:

> **The Wee Blue Book (of Lies)**
>
> Everybody's favourite Bath based cybernat, the "Reverend Stuart Campbell" - erstwhile computer games reviewer and custodian of the separatist cheer-leading site "Wings Over Scotland" - has published a document titled the "Wee Blue Book: The Facts the Papers Leave Out (Don't vote in the independence referendum until you've read this)". He is embarrassingly pleased with himself. It feels a little mean to burst his bubble but - well - he deserves a little of his own medicine. The Wee Blue Book is so riddled with errors, untruths and logical fallacies that it's honestly hard to know where to start a critique. (Hague 2014)

To accurately quantify the levels of accuracy in *The Wee Blue Book* is not specifically relevant in the context of this theme. What is relevant, is the reach and impact that the publication had during the referendum campaign. The numbers quoted above when taken alone would allow for reasonable claims of the publication having a sizable impact on proceedings, even when compared to traditional media sources. Beyond that though, there were some remarkable, verified stories, of *The Wee Blue Book* being used by SNP politicians at Yes Scotland events. This crossover into the official campaign is even more notable due to the fact (already noted previously) that the SNP had judged Wings to be persona non grata for reasons already explained. Stories about the distribution of *The Wee Blue Book* at Yes Scotland events emerged part way through the campaign and these claims were put to MSPs on both sides of the campaign. Firstly, a former SNP cabinet member told why he had no problem with Yes Scotland publicly distributing the publication and that he himself had personally done so:

> I think there were a couple of things with the *Reverend* Campbell early in the campaign that were a bit politically inept which haunted him, but the reality is he produced *The Wee Blue Book* which actually was one of the best campaign books and I gave them out to people. (M8)

M8 then described how he had been to only one house during the campaign which had a Better Together poster in the window, and that he had spoken to the resident and left them with a copy of *The Wee Blue Book.* On revisiting the street some days later the person had removed the poster. M8 stated that they did not know if this was down to reading Wings' booklet but firmly believed it was a worthy publication that at the very least gave people advice on where to find facts on certain matters, even if it perhaps did not contain the facts in the booklet itself.

Another SNP MSP was more guarded about the use of the publication by Yes Scotland, preferring instead to both qualify and defend the merits of the book:

> *The Little Blue Book* (sic) to me, didn't have anything in it that wasn't researched and looked at carefully. I think that some of the conclusions it drew went a little bit far but by and large for most people I know who had read it and started from a position of not being well informed, it spurred them on to look further. It wasn't a deal sealer…I think they read it and thought, 'oh I hadn't thought about it that way' and had then gone to look again, so I don't think I was instinctively worried about it to be honest. (M3)

A Labour shadow cabinet minister was less than sanguine about the use of *The Wee Blue Book* by Yes Scotland, mainly based upon the authors' previous work and controversial campaign history:

> What they [Yes Scotland] were very effective at, was putting out information or disinformation, so you have pretty obnoxious misinformation coming from the likes of Wings Over Scotland and Newsnet, some of it really putrid, which then becomes news and is taken as fact. So Wings, who laughed at 9/11 and blames the Hillsborough disaster on Liverpool fans and spews poison, is actually believed. (M5)

M5 then described how a chance meeting with a Government Minister campaigning within his own constituency revealed that senior politicians were personally distributing *The Wee Blue Book* to the general public:

> I was just fucking flabbergasted! An actual government minister was handing out this book...I saw this with my own eyes, this is not a tale from someone else. I actually tweeted about it at the time if you want to look back over my feed. (M5)

Again, the veracity of the book is not in question here, but the willingness of elected MSPs to utilise the resources of extremely controversial social media activists, during an official campaign, is perhaps troubling. The SNP distanced themselves from Wings for obvious reasons and it is difficult to imagine Wings gaining coverage in the traditional press due to the allegations detailed above. Social media however, allows even the most controversial actors to continue to have voice and reach. Some like the MSP quoted above, find this extremely troubling, while others see no harm in this. Perhaps it would be different if the activist in question was supporting the other side or vice versa but the reality is that no matter how controversial an individual is, she/he simply cannot be silenced due to the largely uncontrollable output of social media. There are no checks and balances on social media and little if any formal recourse. This is the major attraction for many but a significant issue for others.

Wings did not restrict spending the money raised by crowdfunding from its readers to *The Wee Blue Book* but also undertook his own opinion poll commissioning.

Figure 44 Screenshot from What Scotland Thinks (2014)

At the time of writing, *What Scotland Thinks* had 74 polls on its website which were attributed as being commissioned by Wings Over Scotland, and these were polls from both before and after the referendum in September 2014. Again then, we have evidence of social media activism crossing over into traditional political activities. Small scale, amateur opinion polling can of course now be done practically free of charge on social media but these polls were commissioned to professional polling organisations. This type of activity gives a somewhat professional credence to a generally controversial activist like Wings Over Scotland. The fact that the results of these opinion polls are not restricted to being published by Wings itself, or other independence activists online, but also by credible independent social research institutions such as What Scotland Thinks which is part of the NatCen Social Research organisation, is testament to the voice and reach which has, and still is being achieved by Wings Over Scotland.

6.3.3.3.1 Holding elites to account - National Collective and Donorgate

The most strident example of how such a challenge to the current hegemony could be achieved by grass roots activist groups and gain national exposure, was the case of National Collective and the exposure of Better Together funding which became known as *Donorgate*:

Figure 45 Screenshot from The Herald (2013)

The story which emerged in April 2013 involved donations made to the Better Together campaign from the president and chief executive of the firm Vitol, to the tune of £550,000. It is important to note that the information surrounding this donation and the background of the firm and president were already in the public domain. However, it was a 21 year old student reporter from National Collective who pieced the information together and questioned the Better Together campaign directly about it. The concerns expressed were ethical rather than legal and were about allegations of payments made to the Serbian paramilitary leader Arkan, and also to the former Iraqi leader Sadam Hussein, as well as tax avoidance relating to Vitol. The outcome of the piece was that following threats of legal action from Mr Taylor's lawyers, the National Collective website was temporarily closed down and the story was then picked

up by the mainstream media and received attention from, amongst others, *The Herald, The Sunday Herald, The Scotsman, The Scotsman on Sunday, Newsnight Scotland* and *Channel 4 News.*

Donorgate was a genuine example of a social media based activist group challenging powerful institutions who could be suitably categorised as constituent of the prevailing hegemony:

National Collective
@WeAreNational

Follow

On a side note, it was a year ago today we stood up to the world's largest oil trading company, and they backed down. Happy #donorgate day!

5:16 AM - 19 Apr 2014

20 Retweets 14 Likes

2   20   14

Figure 46 Screenshot from Twitter (2014)

Prior to having to close down for a total of seven days, National Collective received 45,000 visitors to their website in the month of March and after the temporary closure they received over 80,000 visitors (this was quite early in the campaign). This helped National Collective to become one of the established activist groups of the broader campaign and certainly constitutes a democratic success in line with the media's role as a public watchdog.

It also though, raised the question of the potential damage that can be done by unqualified correspondents to the journalism profession. As one journalist and TV commentator stated:

> Well there was a story there in the associations he had [Ian Taylor] but they went way too far in linking and making leaps about something that took place 10 years ago and something else, which was where the danger lay for them. (J2)

J2 gave credit to National Collective for flagging the story up, in that it was subsequently picked up by the SNP and some traditional press outlets. However, J2 suggested that they were naïve in their lack of awareness of media law regarding the acceptable parameters to make serious allegations, and that when J2 had pointed this out to them, their response was:

> Well we are standing up against him. (J2)

Such a response, according to J2, was further proof of their naivety in that it was the type of response which could have been expected from undergraduate journalists, which in itself was perhaps unsurprising given the general demographic of the membership of National Collective.

The broader concern of the impact of non-professional social media reporters and the potential impact upon democracy particularly in the areas of balance, legality and redress, were common place (perhaps expectedly) from journalists mainly, but also the other two groups during the interview research process. The overriding concern was the implicit danger if the professional media were ever to become supplanted by social media (a hypothetical argument but one that is occasionally mooted all the same) and this became the preferred method for the public to consume their news at the beginning of the democratic process. For individuals and groups to be in a position to challenge the existing hegemony is welcome in agonistic theory. However, potentially jeopardising the quality of information required when unqualified reporters express positions of fact, without the checks incumbent upon the professional media, this alters *the rules of the game* and has potential negative implications counter to the democratic norms required for agonism to be played out.

6.3.3.3.2 Holding elites to account – politicians and traditional media

The second chapter of this study focuses upon the issues currently facing UK democracy, and provides evidence of an electorate which holds politicians and journalists as the two most untrustworthy professions respectively, when posed with the question - would you generally trust them to tell the truth or not? This is of particular concern in terms of the health of our democracy. A distrust of politicians is hardly surprising but a growing distrust of the press, when applied to their implicit role as public watchdog holding politicians to account, leaves citizens to seek alternative sources of trusted information. This is in all likelihood one of the main reasons that a number of people have turned to social media in search of trustworthy news sources and political coverage. Further to this, people see social media as a secondary

public watchdog who it is hoped will hold the traditional press to account, as trust in their role as the primary public watchdog remains fragile and open to question.

A number of politicians were asked if they felt that social media was holding them to account in a way they were not previously, which led one MSP to respond as follows:

> I think it probably does because if I say something in a press release or in the debating chamber, there will be instant reaction to it, and if I was to say something silly the world would know about it much more quickly than otherwise would be the case if it weren't for social media, because people would pick up on it and tweet it. So yes I think it probably does. (M4)

It seemed from other interviews with politicians, that the second part of the above answer was their primary concern in terms of being held to account online, i.e. *saying something silly* online (generally on Twitter) as opposed to being held to account directly, by say constituents on local matters, or reaction to a speech in parliament. Another MSP seemed to confirm this hierarchy of concern by not even referring to any other issues in terms of being held to account politically, other than slipping up specifically online:

> I look at things and think oh no! He can't say that, take it out of public view. So I've had conversations where I have said, you really might want to rethink that tweet, which is just more about telling people to be cautious and not fall into the trap of circulating unsubstantiated allegations, and you see that a lot on Twitter. (M7)

Throughout the independence referendum campaign, it became apparent that the traditional media were held in particularly low regard by the independence movement, even in comparison to the general disdain for Westminster politicians. This was perhaps due to the ability afforded by social media which allows online activists to *take on* the traditional media by posting their own take on political events. Perhaps the most prominent backlash against the traditional media during the referendum campaign was the story detailed below, involving former BBC Political Correspondent Nick Robinson and former First Minister Alex Salmond. The story arose when Robinson claimed that Salmond avoided a question at a press conference when video evidence showed that he did actually respond. Robinson later claimed he had made a mistake, but the entire episode was further *proof* for independence supporters that the mainstream media was simply another part of the Westminster *hegemony* which sought to undermine their campaign:

Wings Over Scotland
soaring above Scottish politics

Out in the open
Posted on September 11, 2014 by Rev. Stuart Campbell

This is astonishing. From tonight's BBC 6 O'Clock News:

Nick Robinson's blackout

Nick Robinson claims Alex Salmond *"didn't answer"* his question at a press conference earlier today. That is a brazen and quite spectacular lie. The First Minister gave the BBC man a detailed and direct response which lasted for over three minutes BEFORE raising the matter of the Treasury link. You can see that response for yourself below.

For new readers
First-time visitor?
Click here to see what we're about.

ask.fm

Union news
THE SEALAND

About
Wings Over Scotland is a (mainly) Scottish political media digest and monitor, which also offers its own commentary. (More)

Stats: 4,231 Posts, 621,003 Comments

To Search, just type and ente   Search

Recent Posts
01-17   A useful reminder
01-15   The flexibility of figures
01-15   It's not always the headline
01-14   An Act Of Union
01-13   The quiet times
01-10   The Great Urging
01-08   If I'm right and you are sinful
01-07   Data without information
01-07   The only explanation
01-05   The dreams of the walking dead
01-04   Hypocrisy, actually

Figure 47 Screenshot from Wings Over Scotland (2014)

There is no suggestion that the breaking of the story was purely down to social media activism and its inclusion here is aimed to demonstrate why many feel the need to turn to alternative new media sources due to their distrust of institutions such as the BBC. In the days following the incident there was an organised rally outside of the BBC in Glasgow where it was claimed around 4000 demonstrators (this number was contested) protested at an event which more likely was the result of organised efforts on social media.

The same questions regarding being held to account were given to journalists during interviews and the following response from J2 confirmed how this was indeed the case:

> Yes, I think so. For instance if I write something and I tweet it and someone challenges a point I made, or a point of fact, that's holding me more accountable than a column in a newspaper ever could. Yes, they could write to the letters page and point it out but it would be much more slow [sic] and at the discretion of the newspaper whether they print it or not. (J2)

J2 then went on to state that he had been personally reflecting on this matter recently and that although he believed he had always been careful in supporting stated claims with evidence, that he was even more so nowadays with the advent of social media. He then cited an example regarding a piece he had recently written about the underlying elements of nationalist politics. He stated that this had been significantly challenged online, not only from those on

the less than reasoned side of the debate but also from more, perhaps credible critics, and that this was a reminder of the heightened requirement for rigour relating to his journalistic output.

Another journalist confirmed that he knew he would be held to account by social media but felt his responsibility as a political correspondent in a traditional newspaper, was to the readers of his newspaper and not to inhabitants of social media:

> I think it is right that journalists are held to account by their readers but my responsibility is to the readers and not to social media users on a computer. So I suppose [thinks about it] there is an element that social media has actually done that, but what I think is very important and something that I stress to my colleagues, is that what people are saying on social media is not what our readers are saying. They are a voice to be listened to and it would be wrong to ignore them, but we aren't going to be dictated to by a minority on the internet because that would be crazy. (J1)

In summary, the general sentiment shared by politicians regarding being held to account by social media was about concerns of saying the wrong thing on social media, rather than in a general sense. Whilst journalists were more considered in terms of their relationship with social media regarding their journalistic output, and where their obligations lay with regard to this.

6.3.3.4 Inter-ideological questioning and response

A previous section discussed evidence of rational critical argument and its value to deliberation. Inter-ideological response and questioning is an extension of rational critical argument and more specifically analyses *productive* reciprocal exchanges between those situated on either side of an argument. Ideally, in terms of deliberation, there would be evidence in this study of pro-independence supporters and Unionists questioning and responding with each other. Not necessarily to reach consensus but to legitimise decision making and minimalise post-argument sense of exclusion on the part of the unsuccessful. However, as previously detailed, the evidence does not support this and follows Dryzek's hypothesis regarding arguments of sovereignty, and also Habermas' views on the implications of discourse conducted online, which both find severely limit the possibility of productive deliberation.

As a consequence of this, the best that could be realistically hoped for was appeals to the undecided eligible voters, or the *missing million* as they were often referred to. In this section, examples of inter-ideological questioning and response based upon rational critical argument are presented. Such exchanges, raised the level of the debate on Twitter from the deluge of rhetoric which was the norm during the online debate, from both the official campaign and activist groups. A separate section of *intra*-ideological response and questioning falls into the earlier communitarian units of analysis and explores similar exchanges, but importantly represents a different dynamic outside of deliberation, between parties on the same side of the argument.

6.3.3.4.1- Questioning over rhetoric.

The key development of the internet revolution in terms of political discourse, was the possibility of real-time exchanges on API's such as Twitter. This saw the move from political speechmaking simply available on a new medium, to one where interaction was possible between audience members and/or the speechmaker. As the online debate progressed, it was clear to see that activists in particular were searching for strategies by which to get their point across beyond the inevitable one-way political rhetoric.

National Collective, in March of 2014, first employed the tactic of initiating questions from people who were undecided as to which way to vote, this was something they repeated up until the date of the referendum:
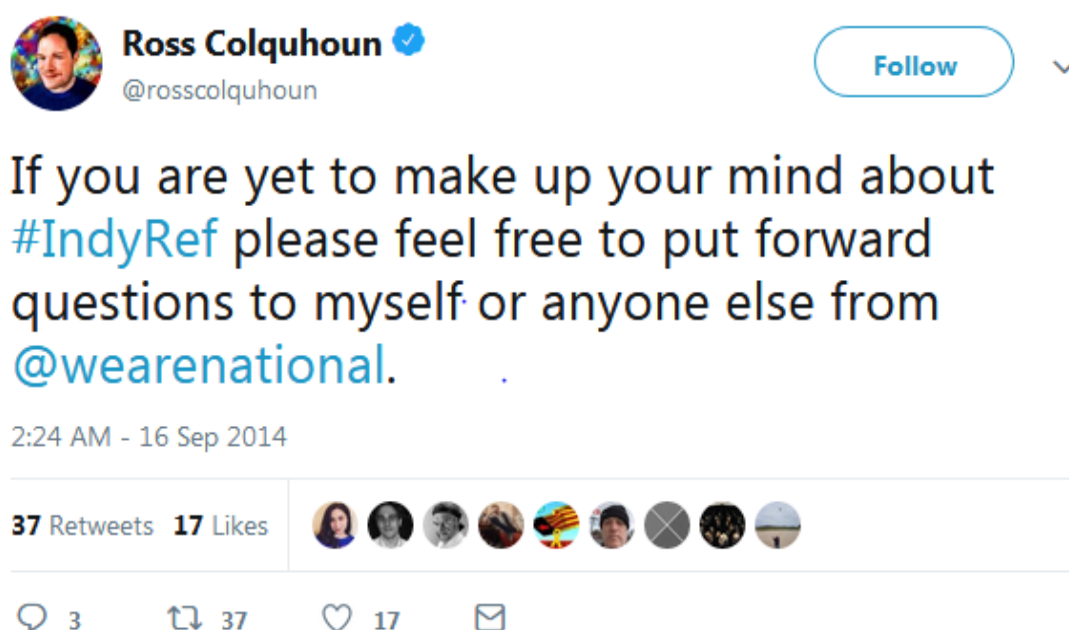

Figure 48 Screenshot from Twitter (2014)

This approach was also used by other activist groups including Women for Independence and Bella Caledonia and was also used by the official Yes Scotland campaign. It may seem remarkable that a basic invitation for question and answer interaction would be highlighted, however, such was the prevalence of heated rhetoric during the online debate, that this genuinely stood out as notable and innovative at the time. During interviews, some respondents spoke of the benefit of questioning over rhetoric, such as the following:

> I think asking questions is good rather than just broadcasting so you are having a conversation, If I am in the right zone, that is what I should be doing rather than just telling people stuff. (A1)

A different mode of inter-ideological response and question was again used by National Collective and other activist groups:
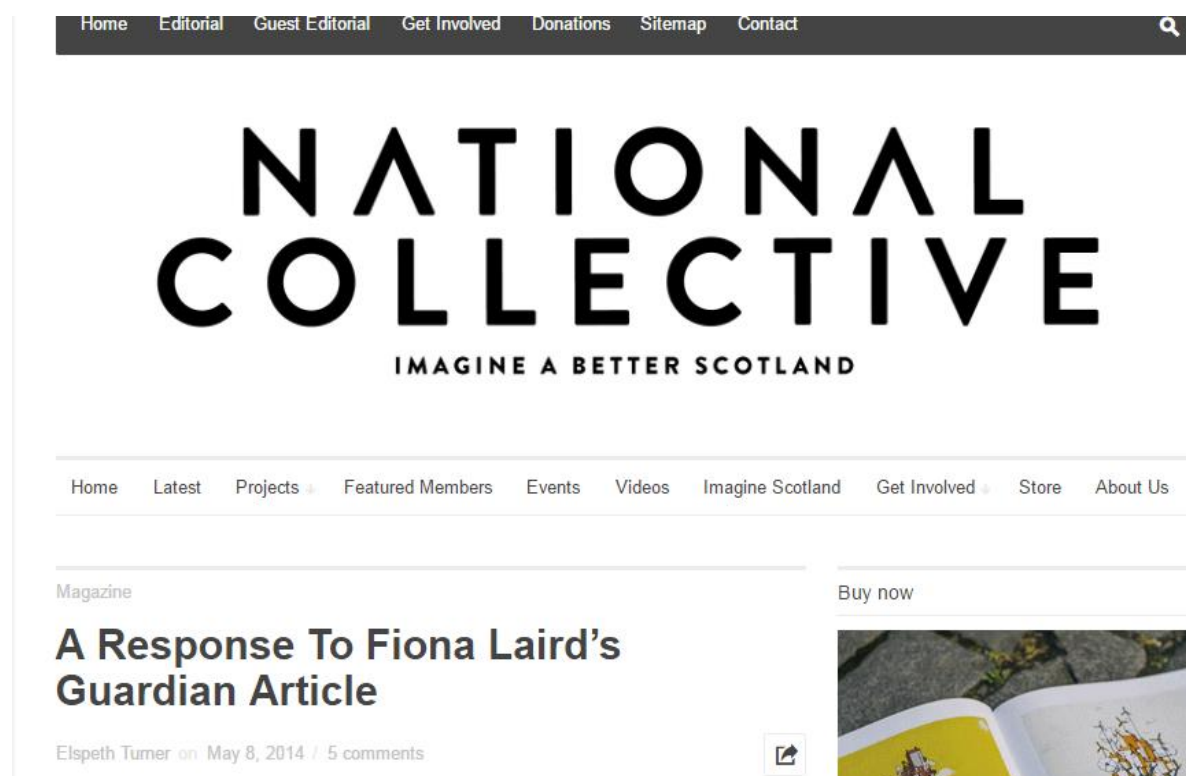
Figure 49 Screenshot from National Collective (2014)

Articles such as this one were well mannered and largely drew upon rational critical argument. They are not strictly deliberative but are positive in terms of allowing respondents such as this one, and their supporters, to feel they have the important power of redress. Whist this has always been available via *letters to the editor* in newspapers, in the event of being lucky enough to have the response published, there was an obvious delay which can be expedited by instead utilising social media.

6.3.3.5 Deliberative strand - deliberation and agonism

Rational critical argument is central to deliberation and is classified by Freelon as the cornerstone of the Habermasian public sphere. Additionally, Dryzek (2005) classifies *hot* settings exemplified by sovereign issues as the most doubtful to be successful in deliberative terms, and Habermas states that online forums are doubtful arenas for successful deliberation. Taken as a whole then, it is perhaps unremarkable that there is a paucity of evidence of rational critical argument in this section. We can then suggest, that the evidence in this project backs up the assertions made by Dryzek and Habermas both in terms of sovereign arguments and online deliberation.

That is not to say that all online deliberation is impossible, but it appears highly unlikely when it involves the type of emotive, binary choices which were central to the independence referendum. Such settings are far more representative of agonistic pluralism which is embodied by antagonism and passion. Again, the focus in such areas may well be better spent upon creating arenas of conflictual consensus as espoused by Mouffe. This is no simple task and still requires parties to come together with a more rational approach than the one displayed during the independence referendum campaign of 2014.

The ongoing challenge and counter challenge of the existent hegemony and counter hegemony is a central feature of Mouffe's agonistic pluralism. This section has focused upon three ways in which social media can, and indeed does, contribute to the challenge of the prevailing hegemony through both day to day constituency politics in the first theme of access, and through the lens of the Scottish independence referendum with challenges to Better Together and Vitol, in the case of National Collective, and to the traditional press in the final section.

In order to challenge the performance of politicians and the government, citizens and groups require the means of direct access to their representatives. Social media's power to connect, facilitates this in an expeditious manner which previously was laborious and at odds with the busy lives of citizens in the present day. Not only does this aid democracy in the connection it affords to citizens but also allows constituency politicians to connect with those they are employed to serve in a manner which they previously could not. Connectivity and access in this form, simply serves to enhance the democratic process in an entirely uncontroversial manner that it seems is overwhelmingly welcomed by citizens and their representatives alike.

Social media easily facilitates any willing person or group to post their support for, or challenge to, the existent hegemony in forums that are open to the public at large. However, for this to

be meaningful we require evidence to show that this voice is having an impact. Earlier, an example was provided of a small, in comparative media terms, activist group in the form of National Collective, gaining sizeable media exposure in their challenge to the ethical standpoint of donations made by Vitol to the official Better Together campaign. The fact that Vitol took legal action to temporarily close down the National Collective website could be taken merely as a large multinational corporation defending its position in a way in which it would to the smallest or largest threats to its organisation. Indeed, if no action had been taken, the story would likely have remained below the radar of the broader population. However, they did choose to take action, and this propelled the story into the mainstream media and gave the group sizeable impact in their desire to highlight the ethical issues in question. It should however be noted that at this stage in the development of social media, we only generally classify such episodes as having impact if they are picked up by the traditional media as opposed to remaining online. Regardless of this fact, the desired outcome to highlight an issue which otherwise may not have come to prominence was duly achieved.

The impact that Wings Over Scotland had with its publication of *The Wee Blue Book* and the commissioning of opinion polls which were made possible by crowdfunding, also must surely be judged as having meaningful impact during the Scottish Independence referendum campaign. The numbers involved alone are testament to a small activist group having meaningful influence on the debate. This assertion was only strengthened by the somewhat controversial decision by independence supporting politicians to distribute the publication at official events, and also by the documentation and publication of the aforementioned commissioned polls by prominent research institutes such as NatCen.

Politicians provided evidence in their own words of the way that they felt they are now held to account by social media, but this was generally based upon the fear of saying something that could be construed as embarrassing to themselves or to their party, rather than their wider political performance record. The mainstream media are seen contemporarily by many as a constituent part of the prevailing hegemony, as opposed to their traditionally held role as the watchdogs over those in power. The journalists interviewed were well aware of this and seemed to be understandably reticent to be regarded in this way. Whether this is justified or not is up for debate. What seems less questionable is the way that social media as detailed in this section appears to have, at least on some occasions, evidently worked as a *leveller* in democratic terms in line with agonistic goals of enabling a counter force on the existent political hegemony.

As is evident from the paucity of material in the earlier subsection regarding inter-ideological response and questioning, there is further confirmation of the lack of deliberation that came to the attention of the study. Genuine, respectful exchanges based upon rational critical argument were the exception as opposed to the norm. The data shows that typical online exchanges between Unionists and independence supporters were generally antagonistic in nature. The type of invitations to submit questions via Twitter were positive examples of interaction at the starting point of potential deliberation, and would likely be useful to those who entered the debate as *undecideds.* This does not mean, however, that online deliberating on political matters is impossible, but does further indicate that *hot* topics such as those of sovereignty are extremely unlikely to be productive.

This suggests that concentrating on a more realistic goal of converting antagonisms into agonisms in line with Mouffian theory is something that ought to be considered in the future. In terms of agonistic theory, there ought to be a sense that participants recognise another person's right to their point of view in a spirit of Mouffian *conflictual consensus.* This again was entirely lacking. The separate section of intra-ideological response and questioning, which falls into the communitarian section of Freelon's model, was far more positive in terms of how social media can have a genuine, positive impact on political communication. However, this was restricted to reciprocation between those on the same side of the argument. For meaningful deliberation there would be a minimal requirement for those exchanges to be replicated between opposing sides of the argument. This requirement seemed fanciful during the online debate surrounding the Scottish independence referendum 2014.

6.3.4   Critique of Freelon's model – Analysing online political discussion using three models of democratic communication

Freelon's model has been utilised to assess the empirical reality taken from the research data sample of political communication on Twitter during the Scottish independence referendum 2014, in the areas of liberal individualism, communitarianism, and deliberative democracy. The manner in which it was applied is detailed in the methodology chapter covered earlier in the thesis. The model was used to guide data analysis in order to present and critically assess exemplars of Freelon's distinct units of analysis.

Though the aim of the project was to present exemplars which would provide rich descriptions of the units within Freelon's model, as opposed to provide quantitative assessments of the prevalence of each model/unit, the paucity of material relating to each category signified a

campaign which did not sit comfortably enough within the existing strands of Freelon's model to suggest the campaign could be described as liberal individualistic, communitarian, or deliberative. This was symptomatic of a debate, particularly when it came to activist groups, which was regrettably situated in an arena populated by only one side of the argument due to the absence of grassroots Unionist groups. Most notably, the paucity of material which fitted with Freelon's deliberative strand was largely expected to be the case from initial assessments of the data in the early days of the project. Although there was a partial resonance with the communitarian strand, this was largely based upon data relating to the two units of *mobilisation* and *community identification* on the Yes campaign side only. It was not reflective of the cross cutting antagonistic nature of the debate which, even when situated in a debate in which the Better Together side was not represented by grassroots activist groups, in terms of normative explanations of proceedings, was much more representative of agonistic pluralism. The model was still useful in this respect, however, as the fact that much of the data was not a comfortable fit with Freelon's original three strands, prompted the move for seeking out other explanations which led to agonism.

There were, however, certain issues with the model, in terms of segmentation of messages or forum data to the individual units of analysis. There were a number of themes which were not purely representative of the parent classification. For example, themes such as mobilisation or ideological fragmentation could both be classified as being deliberative as opposed to singularly communitarian, as they are in the original model. Freelon (2010) does however state that his model incorporates three distinct yet overlapping strands of democracy which signifies that the classifications ought to be accepted on general terms as opposed to rigid segmentation.

Freelon also accepts that not all forums will fit neatly into one individual strand of the model, a fact which was always likely to be the case in this study due to its application to a debate as wide-ranging as the Scottish independence referendum, over a relatively lengthy timescale of approximately 18 months. It should also be noted that Freelon urges users to customise the model. As noted earlier in the methodology chapter, it quickly became apparent that whilst the majority of data could be appropriated to one or more of the units of analysis within the model, that these did not fully reflect the agonistic nature of the online debate during the campaign which preceded the Scottish independence referendum 2014. It was for this reason that a dual approach was applied in line with Karppinen, Moe and Svensson (2008) which meant that in addition to applying the data to ascertain how it corresponded to Freelon's model, it was also classified in relation to agonistic norms. In summary, the outwardly negative aspect of Freelon's model - the loose overlapping nature of some of the units of analysis, is offset by

the fact that Freelon accepts the limitations of the model in that respect. The fact that Freelon invites others to alter and develop the model is welcome and this ought to make the model applicable to analyse a variety of different discussion forums to ascertain how they fit with different aspects of democratic communication.

With this in mind, the evidence from this study suggests that a useful addition to the model would be a further strand of agonistic pluralism. An appropriate starting point for this could be the consideration of the analysis within this study relating to the components of, particularly Mouffe's (2014; 2013; 2005) version of the theory. The methodology of a new strand would require, in line with Freelon's existing strands, detailed consideration of accepted aspects of each component to be included, whereby different existing perspectives are taken into contemplation (see Freelon 2010 p.180 explanation of the unit of 'community identification' as a useful example). As detailed in chapter two, where Mouffe's version of agonistic theory is deconstructed and critiqued at length, there are a number of essential components which embody Mouffe's version of the theory. For example, antagonism is the starting point for Mouffe's agonism with hegemonic struggle being another essential premise of the theory. Some of the units within Freelon's existing model, which have been covered in this thesis, may be considered as partially fulfilling agonistic norms. For instance, flaming could be taken as a representation of antagonism which is the basis of Mouffe's agonism, and community identification could be seen as representative of Mouffe's requirement for the role of identity in agonistic theory, which Mouffe suggests deliberative theory fails to recognise and accommodate. However, there are other parts of the theory which are not represented.

Hegemonic struggle is certainly a component which is not represented in Freelon's model and would require careful consideration for a testable, hypothesised explanation, as would also be the case for passion (as a representation of identity in *the political*) as another essential element of Mouffe's agonistic pluralism. The role of identity is further acknowledged in Mouffe's theory through her reference to the we/they friend/enemy relation as attributable to Carl Schmitt, though re-imagined in a manner which is compatible with democratic pluralism (ibid.) so this should also be included in the new strand of the model. Agonistic respect, whereby exchanges exist in an arena where the rights of opponents to hold contrasting views is in evidence, is another part of Mouffe's theory, as is conflictual consensus – the manner in which disagreements are characterised by a level of agreement at the macro discussion level, alongside often, perhaps significant disagreement at the micro level of the issue in question. The absence of activist groups on the Better Together side of the argument, aligned with the debate being focused upon the *hot* topic of sovereignty, may well be reasons which led to the conspicuous absence of agonistic respect and conflictual consensus in this study. This should

not, however, preclude their inclusion in the new agonistic strand of the model whereby these two vital, though disputed components of Mouffe's version of agonistic pluralism, may perhaps be found in a range of different discussion settings in which the new strand of the model could be tested.

Equally as importantly, the empirical testing of the new strand of the model on Twitter, in a similarly *hot* topic in a referendum or election setting, could also shed light as to whether, as was the case with this study, agonistic pluralism provides a more representative explanation of online political communication than the other existing strands of Freelon's (2010) model.

6.4   Conclusions to chapter 6 – How could you tell if the #indyref were characterised by deliberative democracy or agonistic pluralism?

In its aim to assess how you could tell if the #indyref were characterised by deliberative democracy or agonistic pluralism, this thesis first sought to determine how existing models of democracy related to the overall online debate. Hopes expressed that the internet and social media could perhaps help realise the normative goals of deliberative democracy, were also of interest. The relatively new phenomenon of social media has impacted upon traditional conceptions of at least the possibilities for future media plurality so this was also important to the study. Once it became apparent that agonistic pluralism was representative of the debate, it was appropriate to explore the roots of political pluralist theory. Here, conclusions are presented regarding deliberative democracy and agonistic pluralism in relation to the campaign which preceded the Scottish independence referendum of 2014.

6.4.1   Deliberative democracy

With regard to deliberation, the early chapters of this thesis explored the concept through the works of its primary proponents such as Rawls, Habermas, Dryzek, Cohen and Benhabib. The theory seeks to address the exclusory nature of the ballot box in democracies, whereby although the result is clear, the process is often unsatisfactory in the manner in which the issue is far from *solved*. The discourse theory of deliberative democracy, as strongly associated with Habermas amongst others, is the apparent derivation of the theory which is relevant to political debates around social media. Habermas' work is also the basis of many of the existing coding schemes that have been constructed to identify online deliberation.

The theory has some generally accepted norms, which include a process of giving reasons in justification of supporting a particular position, in a reciprocal manner whereby the argument is constructed and given in terms that others can accept. This egalitarian exchange of reasons, it is hoped, may see either side change their view based upon on the strength of the opposing argument. Earlier Habermasian versions of the theory were rooted in consensus as the expected/desired outcome, whilst later versions accepted that consensus was largely idealistic. It was still argued, however, that even without consensus, the process still leads to more effective participation and satisfactory outcomes which limit exclusion due to the rationality of the practice.

Later generations of deliberative theory turned attention to the institutionalisation of deliberative democracy. These included forums such as citizen assemblies, citizen juries, planning cells and consensus conferences. It is likely that these were all conceived with physical face to face settings in mind, as opposed to online communication, although there have been limited attempts at online deliberation such as Luskin, Fishkin and Iyengar (2004) and Iyengar, Luskin and Fishkin (2003). However, the manifest differences of online communication led theorists such as Dryzek and Habermas to dispute the possibilities of productive online deliberation. The absence of a face to face setting is seen as damaging to the required reciprocal process of deliberation according to Habermas (2006). Dryzek's work (2005) also made distinctions between *hot* and *cold* political issues whereby hot settings, such as issues of sovereignty, were less likely to allow for productive deliberation than cold issues which are perhaps less emotive.

From early on in the project it became apparent that the evidence within the sample that was generated during the study supported both Habermas and Dryzek's concerns regarding online deliberation. Twitter in particular, is constructed in a way that makes deliberation extremely unlikely. The original 140 and later 280 character limit promotes short assertions on the topic in question rather than reasoned arguments. Users have, however, come up with ways to circumvent the limit through posting pictures containing larger chunks of texts and also replying to their own posts, which produces a list of tweets which can form a longer narrative. Regardless of this, however, the site does not lend itself to nuanced political debate, instead the site lends itself to short, often pithy statements, rather than conversations. There were some very rare examples of effective deliberation within the study sample but these tended to take place in secondary forums, on blogs and websites following initial exchanges on Twitter itself.

As mentioned, Dryzek argued some time ago that issues of sovereignty are hot political issues that intrinsically divide people and this makes any reciprocal concession of a personal political position extremely unlikely though not impossible. This hypothesis was highly indicative of how the Scottish independence referendum debate was evidenced within the study, both in terms of the tweets which were sampled and the supporting statements of the interview subjects. The online debate was deeply tribalistic, antagonistic, and conflictual. We have a body of evidence which demonstrated this, as exemplified in the manner in which flaming/trolling was highly evident as participants overstepped the metaphorical lines of decent debate. We know, however, that there were around a million undecided voters during the campaign, so a large percentage of the electorate were positioned in between the two points of Union and independence. There was little if any evidence within this study, however, that those undecideds were actively deliberating on Twitter as they sought to make a decision on their final voting preference.

Taking the manner in which the study resonated with the hypothesis of Dryzek into consideration, the question is raised as to how much we can read into the lack of deliberative democracy during the online referendum debate. In this regard, it seems apparent that seeking examples of deliberation during the independence referendum only confirms Dryzek's position, but this should not mean that online deliberation in a *less hot* political debate, on perhaps a platform more conducive to reasoned political argument, is impossible. With this in mind, the normative pursuit of online deliberation ought not to be perceived as futile on the basis of findings such as those within this study. It is, though, perhaps fanciful to expect productive online deliberation to flourish organically, bearing in mind the limitations raised by both Habermas, Dryzek, and the results of this study. If, however, deliberation *is* taking place, there are a number of existing coding schemes (as discussed at length in the methodology chapter), including Freelon's (2010) that could be tailored to measure deliberation quantitatively. However, this process presents challenges, and there are specific deliberative traits, such as 'reflexivity', which is a common component in many deliberative coding schemes, which pose significant issues if attempting to measure deliberation from textual data alone.

6.4.2   Agonistic pluralism

As previously discussed, in the earliest assessments of the evidence gathered within the study regarding the nature of the debate which preceded the Scottish independence referendum, it became apparent that the debate resonated as agonistic in nature as opposed to classically pluralistic or deliberative. Agonistic pluralism is a theory which is sometimes linked with the

work of Hannah Arendt and is contemporarily associated with Mouffe, Connolly, and Honig. Agonistic theory evolved from dissatisfaction with theories of pluralism and deliberation, primarily based upon the lack of recognition of the inevitability of conflict amongst individuals and groups in society and the suggestion that conflict is in certain instances a positive component of a functioning democracy.

Mouffe's theoretical framework is comprised of two distinct notions of *politics* and *the political. Politics* for Mouffe is procedural and mechanistic embodying political practices and institutions, whilst *the political* embodies the social and that social is driven by antagonism*.* Other normative aspects of Mouffe's theory include the notion of ineradicable pluralism based upon the impossibility of consensus without exclusion, and also the ever-present cycle of hegemonic and counter hegemonic struggle. Further components are the role of passion in the political process and also identity as a key driver of political participation. Mouffe's theory, however, is not without its critics, particularly in relation to agonistic respect and conflictual consensus which has been discussed earlier in this chapter. In light of these normative agonistic traits, there are many reasons why we can say that agonistic theory was more representative of the evidence gathered during the Scottish independence referendum campaign debate which took place on Twitter.

The online Twitter debate was antagonistic in nature from its very beginnings. The UK parliamentary *political* is distinctly adversarial in comparison to other consensus-based decision making governmental systems in Europe and elsewhere. This has perhaps influenced a generally antagonistic body politic, where it is sought to defeat opponents as opposed to seeking agreement or persuasion through reciprocal exchanges which appeal to the common good, as embodies deliberative democracy. With this, perhaps ingrained nature of our political being in mind, social media has a tendency to exacerbate this general state as it removes the key inter-personal aspects of the communication process, namely, remote settings where consequences of behaviour are limited in comparison to face to face discussion, where as a consequence antagonism can fester. The subject of trolling or flaming is testament to this. We must, however, remember that such incidents are not the norm but accept that most would agree, as evidenced in this study, that the general undertone of the online debate was antagonistic. We also should acknowledge that forums which provide a place whereby political frustrations can be vented, may help prevent those frustrations from evolving into the possibility of more troubling, perhaps physical confrontation.

The notion of hegemonic struggle was also representative of the nature of the online debate which was observed during the study, as unsurprisingly was a we/they argument as would be

expected in a referendum campaign which embodies the purest of binary political arguments, with a yes or no choice at the ballot box. Better Together played the role of the existing hegemony as a campaign which generally represented the existing Unionist culture, with a campaign which was largely based upon instilling fear into the minds of the electorate and hence coercing them based upon the proposition that the alternative would be catastrophically worse. Yes Scotland played the counter hegemonic role, demonising *Westminster* as *the establishment* to overthrow, while promising a brave new Scotland where the wrongs of the existing Westminster hegemony could be set right. The binary nature of a referendum on such an emotive sovereign decision was the perfect debate for the hegemonic struggle to manifest itself. The Twitter debate as evidenced in the Tweets sampled, supported by evidence gathered during the interviews, reflected this position entirely whereby the nature of social media exacerbated the argument into two extremes of the evil hegemonic domination of Scotland by Westminster, and Yes Scotland as a campaign representing an idealistic, impractical vision which could perhaps never be fulfilled.

We should, however, remind ourselves that this hegemonic struggle was not representative of UK politics in recent times. The UK which preceded the economic crash of 2008 was criticised as a political system devoid of choice, with no realistic alternative as all parties fought over the centre ground, whilst notions of Scottish independence were still looked upon as fanciful. That said, this study was based in a specific time and place in Scottish and UK political history and the hegemonic struggle that is a component of agonistic theory seemed entirely real based upon the evidence collected within the study.

The agonistic norm of passion was certainly present in the on and offline debate in a way that was perhaps thought of as impossible in contemporary politics, with the turnout of 84.6% being testament to this. Social media certainly had a role to play as an outlet for those passions but also had a role in connecting and mobilising those passions into participation. A key representation being the number of activist groups which began on Twitter and harnessed the passions of likeminded others. Again, this level of passion was an extreme that although replicated to some extent in the EU referendum which followed, is doubtful to be replicated in any consistent nature in every day UK politics. It was instead, perhaps the passion generated by the issue of the day rather than by social media, although social media was an important conduit in the process in between passion and participation.

Agonistic notions of Identity were also very much in evidence throughout the campaign, as would be expected in a debate which would decide whether Scotland would remain part of the Union and the resulting implications of how citizens could officially self-identify. Regardless of

what was promised, or rather sold as a vision of an independent Scotland, the identity of the electorate was for some seen as the key defining question of the debate. This again needs to be kept in context, however, as there was evidence within the study that of those that self-identified as Scottish and not British, only 53% intended to vote for independence (Park, Bryson and Curtice 2014). This statistic alone is representative of the complexity of identity in politics, with national identity perhaps only being relevant to those who had entrenched positions at the beginning of the debate.

Blue State Digital, who coordinated the remain campaign, made a conscious decision to reject an identity driven stance as this was only relevant to decided voters. Instead, they focused upon a campaign based upon the potential negative economic consequences of independence, as it was these which the undecided voters were believed to be more concerned with. In terms of Twitter discourse, the level of importance placed upon identity was perhaps misleading as it was mainly inhabited, certainly in terms of regular tweeters, by those convinced of where their loyalties lay. This does not mean, however, that the absence of an appeal to the cultural identity of committed Unionists was not conceived of as disappointing, as this appeared to be the case for many. This was most evident in the way that a victorious campaign had some supporters who appeared outwardly disheartened upon the result, the suggestion being that the neglect of a positive British identity was in part responsible for this.

With regard to the primary research question – *How could you tell if the #indyref were characterised by elements of deliberative democracy and agonistic pluralism*- this could be done by applying the types of models included in this study to data captured during the campaign. As discussed in the thesis, there are a number of existing models designed to help identify and capture deliberative democracy, however, their variances ought to dictate their appropriateness in different study settings. There are, however, no existing corresponding models of agnostic pluralism. This study has considered the necessary normative components of Chantal Mouffe's interpretation of agonism in relation to the indyref, and the results suggest that there was evidence that the debate was somewhat agonistic in nature during the campaign. However, as discussed previously, the notions of agonistic respect as part of a conflictual consensus were largely missing, and this is where the theory lays itself open to most criticism. Contrary to the criticisms of agonism which suggest the model is overly pessimistic, in this manner it appears to be overly optimistic, and even unrealistic, particularly in 'hot' online debate settings. Karppinen, Moe and Svensson (2008) were quoted in the methodology chapter of this thesis, suggesting that a joint approach including both deliberation and agonism could have positive implications for research in the subject field of political communication. In order to produce a robust, joint approach, a quantitative study containing

a newly formalised strand of agonistic pluralism applied in conjunction with one (or a combination/adaptation) of the more rigorous existing dialogic deliberative approaches, aided by a focus upon the type of exemplars discussed throughout this chapter, ought to perhaps be the preferred method in future assessments.

7 Results to the supplementary research question – How does pluralist group theory aid our understanding of Twitter based activism during the Scottish independence referendum 2014?

7.1 Overview of chapter 7

Earlier chapters of the thesis focus upon theoretical political pluralism and the manner in which it embodies the principles of media pluralism in the present day. This set the scene for answering the first research question - *To what extent was Twitter activity characterised by elements of deliberative democracy and agonistic pluralism during the Scottish independence referendum 2014?* This chapter focuses specifically on exploring the impact of social media upon pluralist group theory in response to the second research question, which asks - *How does pluralist group theory aid our understanding of Twitter based activism during the Scottish independence referendum 2014?* The basis of group theory itself can be traced back to the philosophical pluralism of early writers such as William James with his belief in theoretical, political plurality over monistic singularity. In democratic terms, this can be applied to both the benefit of *internal* plurality within groups, and the *external* plurality of groups within society and the broader political spectrum.

The role of the group within democratic systems is succinctly described by Mary Parker-Follet:

> The group process contains the secret of collective life, it is the key to democracy, it is the master lesson for each individual to learn, it is our chief hope for the political, the social, the international life of the future (Parker–Follett p.97 1918).

Although the above was written in 1918, the continued role of groups within democracies has generally persisted in much the same way as Parker-Follet describes. The main caveat to such assertions has been the decline of political party membership until recent times:

> Membership of the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats has increased to around 1.6% of the electorate in 2016, compared to a historic low of 0.8% in 2013. Across the UK, Labour Party membership increased from 0.6% in 2013 to 1.1% in 2016. Membership of 'other' parties has changed markedly in recent years. In July 2016 SNP membership was around 120,000, compared to 25,000 in December 2013. In July 2016 Green Party (England and Wales) membership was around 55,000,

compared to 13,800 in December 2013. UKIP's membership increased from 32,000 in December 2013 to around 47,000 in May 2015, though has since fallen to 39,000 in July 2016 (parliament.co.uk 2016).

The unforeseen rise in party membership was contrary to general expectation as the trend *had* been a steady decline over a prolonged period, culminating in record low points in party membership as detailed above. Until very recently, UK politics was largely a two-party system of Conservative and Labour support, with a handful of other minority parties (excepting fluctuating, meaningful support for the Liberal Democrats). The prevailing hegemony has been markedly challenged in recent times by the rapid rise (and in certain instances fall) in popularity of parties such as the SNP, UKIP and the Green Party (again, as detailed above). The increase in party membership has in all likelihood been a reaction to the two major sovereign issues of recent times, in the form of the Scottish independence referendum and the UK/EU referendum, as well as a sudden move to the left within the Labour Party with the unexpected success of Jeremy Corbyn in becoming party leader.

Political party membership is, however, only one form of group politics and the focus of this study is the rise in group activism and the impact of social media in this regard. Here then the main focus, in keeping with the rest of the study, is the performance of Yes Scotland activist groups during the Scottish independence referendum. More specifically, the emergence and relative success of these groups provides us with an insight into the impact of social media upon contemporary group politics, as it was social media where they were mainly situated.

The technological capabilities of the internet have changed the definition of a political group from times preceding the digital age. Previously, *official* group support, whether it be for an official political party organisation or an interest group necessitated individuals to become official members through subscription and being an *active* member generally meant physical mobilisation through attending meetings and other activities in person. Social media allows individuals to become *active* through various online means without ever attending events in person, or actually becoming *subscribed* members of the group in question. To aid understanding of the impact of social media activism in relation to group theory, it would help to document the evidence in relation to five distinct political effects of social/interest groups, developed from theories put forward by Robert Dahl and Charles Lindblom:

1. They are more effective than individuals.
2. They facilitate healthy political competition.
3. The group bargaining process creates a barrier to extremism.
4. Overlapping memberships of social groups discourages unilateral thought and action.
5. Extensive pluralist networks help to ensure the spread of information (Dahl and Lindblom 1976 p.302-305).

The fact that the text is from the 1970s facilitates a comparison between group theory then, and the contemporary digital age. Dahl and Lindblom discuss the above factors with a general focus upon leadership, but the categories can equally be applied to the general impact of interest groups on the democratic process. In order to do so, each of these assertions are individually addressed and contrasted with the reality of evidence collected during the Scottish independence referendum campaign of 2014.

7.2   Were activist groups more effective than individuals during the Scottish independence referendum campaign 2014?

'In union there is strength' according to Dahl and Lindblom (ibid.). This is the basis of our democracy: whereby the importance of political issues and the key driver of whether such issues make it onto the political agenda, is generally judged by the level of popular interest. This is the foundation of political interest groups. When Dahl and Lindblom suggest that groups are more effective than individuals, they are referring to the manner in which groups have a greater propensity to influence public opinion which in turn influences political outcomes. As groups form and find voice in communities and perhaps the media, they improve their chances of having an impact upon the political issue in question. The story of Women for Independence gives an insight into the manner in which social media can play a key role in group formation and development in the technological era.

The following are excerpts from an interview with a Women for Independence activist, which begins with a response to a question about how the group initially formed, following a private dinner party consisting of women who had largely met through reading each other's posts on Twitter:

We officially launched in November 2012, before the official Yes campaign even launched, so it was more of womanhood coming together and chatting online more

than anything else. Some, like Natalie McGarry and Shona McAlpine, knew each other and Rosie Kane and Caroline Leckie had been MSPs together, but nobody really knew each other of that group [personally] they really came together in that way [online]. (A2)

We have then, evidence of a group which genuinely formed through a coming together of likeminded people online. On being asked about the relevance of Twitter in the early days of the group, the activist responded:

Twitter was central and the key place they did their work initially, as the impetus was from issues concerning TV panels and the predominance of men on them, and the failure to balance them (sic). (A2)

A2 then explained how the common perception of a lack of gender balance as expressed by other female Twitter users, was the main driver behind the concept of Women for Independence. Individuals such as Natalie McGarry, who were deemed to be 'Twitter personalities', mainly on the rationale that they had a comparatively high number of followers, began to discuss the idea of the group and as the idea gained traction the Women For Independence Twitter account was created. The activist then went on to discuss how the surge in numbers of women following the account meant that the group decided to adopt a formal structure and decided upon geographical units led by volunteers in each location. At the time of the interview (13/11/2014) the activist described how the group had grown:

Well we have 56 contacts for local groups and these are everywhere in Scotland except from Orkney for some reason, with six now in Fife and most of the groups have met at least once, but the groups *are* meeting and if you look at our website for the forthcoming meetings [you will see this] like tonight, I am going to Bellshill for the inaugural meeting there. So we are trying to support them. (A2)

The capability of the group to mobilise an online movement into traditional political activity (without suggesting that one is necessarily superior to the other) is demonstrated in that the group had over 1000 women present at a meeting in Perth in 2014. The activist went on to describe how the group consisted of many women who had not had a *political voice* previously and the effect that this had on them:

We have had a couple of massive meetings post referendum, like one in Perth where

there was 1000 women, which was described by one of my cynical Glasgow pals as, 'a bit hallelujah'. (A2)

By this, A2 explained how she was referring to the way that the group was formed by women who had, until that moment, never had a political voice.   A2 went on to stress how this gave way to genuine emotion, in that the women concerned wanted to express the magnitude of speaking publicly on political issues for the very first time, something the majority of women had expressed as being something that previously they would never have even contemplated doing.

The way in which women who were politically mobilised through association with, or membership of, Women for Independence was verified by an MSP in a separate interview, recalling his dealings with the group:

> I think they had a very positive impact. I did some campaigning with Women for Independence, funnily enough when they asked me to speak at an event and there were people getting engaged in these things. People I knew, who if you said to them when we were at school together, 'you will be politically active and politically engaged and attending public meetings', they would have laughed in your face. (M3)

Finally, with a growing membership and 56 local groups, the activist told of the pressure to formalise the group structure further and the tensions which this created in terms of the original ethos of the group:

> [The growth of the group] is a source of immense credibility for us as a feminist campaigning organisation and it's important that we don't become a political party, though some people want us to, because then we are just recreating an existing structure and it's about doing a new way of politics, and though it's a cliché saying a new way, when we don't yet know what it is, we just know it's new and different. (A1)

We have evidence then of the way that the group was formed online and grew into a notable activist group during the campaign. As the group grew in size they then begun to employ more traditional political group activities and continue to campaign at the time of writing, with a Twitter following of roughly 23,500.

There was further evidence of grassroots groups which formed primarily online during the independence referendum campaign, and then became involved in more traditional political campaigning. National Collective's formation and evolution shared many commonalities with that of Women for Independence. National Collective, who are now disbanded, had their beginnings in a small group of like-minded friends who wanted to get together to support the independence campaign. In something of a postscript to the efforts of the group, National Collective posted the following on their website, which gives an insight into their *collective* structure:

> The public's perception of what National Collective was, and the reality of our determined efforts, are starkly different. Contrary to what some might believe, National Collective was never a huge organisation or institution with a full or even part-time staff…Some of us are freelancers, some of us students, some of us teachers. Some of us are members of political parties. Many of us are not (McFadyen 2015).

The article went on to describe the reality of a small group of people who had become friends and were desperately attempting to make the group work, spurred on by their backgrounds as passionate artists and facilitators attempting to achieve what they believed would make the world a better place. The article then goes on to state that they were explicitly removed from SNP influence and how, in a similar light as Women for Independence, wanted to be seen as *different,* as something which could not be considered as part of the establishment. They state that the thing that brought them together was shared values and that their biggest success was creating a platform for others to come together and participate. They had other shared similarities with Women for Independence, in the way that an online platform grew into something more recognisable as traditional political campaigning:

> Our big success was as a platform for a huge number of people during the campaign – online, in dozens of events [likely referring to the *Yestival* tour mentioned in chapter six], in a book we published and a zine (ibid.).

They again, in line with Women for Independence, experienced tensions when as a group with momentum and growing support there was perhaps an inevitable pressure, to move toward a more formalised campaign structure:

> Of course, there were conflicts between short and long-term goals; between different voices with different views on how things should be done, and of course there were

contradictions – the foremost of these between the need for a directed campaign and the desire to be an open artists' collective (ibid.).

In later excerpts the author talks of the organisational shortcomings of the group and the pressure to become fully constitutionalised in structure. They also, in keeping with Women for Independence, began to organise themselves into loose networks headed by a pool of organisers and spoke of the way that their appeal to many was the lack of formal processes which some members may have found intimidating.

There are then, striking similarities in the formulation and evolution of both groups and particularly the way that groups who set out with intentions to be different, and not fall into traditional power structures, seem perhaps inevitably fated to do so. There is also perhaps, as evidenced with both groups, an inevitable movement from online activism to traditional forms of activism. In terms of groups being more effective than individuals, it is interesting that National Collective allude to the illusory nature of online groups, whereby small groups of individuals can become to be perceived as *huge organisations.* This notion lends itself to the argument that the perceived size of a group is important with regard to how successful it is deemed to be. Dahl and Lindblom's group theory posits that the groups are more effective than individuals and indeed the effective Twitter accounts during the Scottish independence referendum were groups rather than individuals (Wings Over Scotland is discussed in this context presently) and social media, at the very least, facilitated and expedited the group formation process in a way that was hitherto extremely unlikely.

Whilst the connectivity of social media can help interest groups form, grow, and move into more traditional forms of political participation, it also lends itself to individuals gaining political voice and impact and challenges the way that we define *groups* in the era of social media. The most pertinent example of this in terms of the groups focused upon within this study is that of Wings Over Scotland:

Figure 50 Screenshot from Twitter (2016)

Wings Over Scotland is discussed in numerous sections within the results chapter relating to the first research question addressed within the project (see Mobilisation section, Access and Equality section, Flaming section and Community Identification section in chapter six so for purposes of brevity the back story of Wings is not repeated again here.

In terms of assertions of groups being more effective than individuals, Wings Over Scotland raises some important issues. The screen grab above shows that at the time of writing, which is almost 14 months after the Scottish independence referendum, Wings has 49,200 followers on Twitter, and that number continues to grow. It has been stated a number of times in this thesis that Wings stands out from other groups due to the fact that Wings is one person, Stuart Campbell. One person, that is, in that he runs Wings as a solo project. Certainly, Twitter posts (all 241,000 and counting) are his own doing and the vast majority of written articles on the Wings website are attributed to him (lately there have been some which are attributed to others though this was not the case until very recently).

Again, however, much of the credit given to Wings is driven by the number of followers he has, so do we class Wings as a solo venture or do we class followers as part of the group? Social media has blurred the lines between individuals and groups in the traditional political sense. Much of the content on Wings' Twitter feed is the comments of others in reply to his posts, in the same way that much of the content on the Wings website is the comments section which follows each article posted. For example, following this featured article:

Wings Over Scotland
soaring above Scottish politics

Unleashing a firestorm

Posted on February 03, 2014 by Rev. Stuart Campbell

It's not as if the Financial Times doesn't have history with dropping great big payloads of high explosive into the middle of the independence debate late on a Sunday night. But a piece coming up in Monday's edition (and online tonight) is going to choke a few breakfasts in London tomorrow morning.

It's not the information in itself that's new. Most of it is stuff the likes of this site have been screaming for the last two years. But the starkness of the language, and more pertinently the source of it, is going to rock the boat some and no mistake.

Public finances

In contrast to the widely held view that Scotland is a net drain on the UK public purse, the IFS found that government spending per person was higher in Scotland than in the UK as a whole and that the gap between spending and revenues was lower. However, the public finances in an independent Scotland would depend on North Sea oil, accounting for almost 19 per cent of total revenues in 2011-12, compared with 2 per cent for the UK as a whole

Government revenues and spending
2011-12 (per person, £ in 2013-14 prices)
■ Revenue ■ Spending

Gap of £1,550 Per person — £11,079 — £12,629 42.7% of GDP

Gap of £2,939 Per person — £9,342 — £11,381 45.5% of GDP

Scotland   UK (at present)
Sources: ONS; IMF; Scottish government; IFS; Office for Budgetary Responsibility; DECC; BP; HM Treasury

"An independent Scotland could also expect to start with healthier state finances than the rest of the UK", for example, is not what we tend to hear from the UK media. (And doesn't even factor in the effect of Scotland being likely to negotiate a lower debt share than its *per-capita* percentage.)

Figure 51 Screenshot from Wings Over Scotland (2014)

The above article was published on Wings in February of 2014 and as always, a link to the article was posted on Twitter. The comments section for this article ran to over 90 pages (when printed on A4 in a standard font size) comprising of 394 separate comments. These were generally in support of the argument put forward by Wings (and contained a high volume of

discussions that could be classed as Intra-ideological questioning) with Campbell himself contributing to the discussion at times. This amount of comments was sizeable for posts on the site but certainly not without comparison. This type of group communication has only been possible since the introduction of 'Web 2' technology at the turn of the century, and Wings is far from being the only site to have this type of regular discourse posted on political forums, blogs, and websites.

Dictionary definitions of a *group* refer to 'a number of people or things that are located, gathered, or classed together' and 'a number of people that work together or share certain beliefs' (Oxford Dictionary 2017). Political interest groups in the traditional sense invoke thoughts of a core institutional body at the head of perhaps a top down hierarchical structure. Whilst the remainder of the group membership may have their role limited to discussing and perhaps voting upon issues put forward by the leadership, with official publications usually the sole responsibility of the leadership. In the age of social media, a *group* like Wings Over Scotland, still has the agenda set by its sole core proprietor. The inclusion of contributions will still remain the choice of the leader/ship but the comments section, as discussed above, is now memorialised online in a manner which was beyond the scope of traditional offline political organisations. It is in these sections that often the most interesting detail is found, and it is where there is much more chance of finding deliberation in action (though usually limited to internal deliberation/intra-ideological questioning and response) than in the core material posted by the leader(s). The democratic nature of this progression is an important, positive innovation.

We should then classify activist organisations such as Wings Over Scotland as a group. They promoted and facilitated political engagement and discourse during the independence referendum, in what was a positive democratic progression, which has been a direct result of social media. Wings may theoretically appear to be a solo activist at work, but it is the plurality of followers and their contribution which gives veracity and meaning to the overall democratic thought and action of the group, and more importantly a greater power to influence political opinion than that of individuals, which supports Dahl and Lindblom's theory on the issue.

7.3 Did activist groups facilitate healthy political competition during the Scottish independence referendum and did Twitter impact upon this?

Democratic political systems such as that of the United Kingdom, benefit from a plurality of representative views and the interest/activist group is vital in facilitating this aim. Again, as previously noted, for various reasons, the Scottish independence referendum saw multiple grass roots activist groups in support of independence with a practical, complete absence as such, in support of the Unionist campaign.

Healthy competition in any political campaign would ideally see a plurality of groups on either side, coupled with a balanced media both reporting and analysing the campaign as it unfolds. From the beginning of the campaign independence supporters were extremely vocal in their distrust of the mainstream media. In terms of the written press, it is very difficult to argue against this assertion, though allegations of a broader under-representation within broadcast media is more contentious. The vast majority of the UK and Scottish traditional press, with the exception of *The Sunday Herald*, all declared support for the preservation of the United Kingdom with *The Daily Record, Sunday Mail*, *The Independent on Sunday*, *The Observer and The Scottish Sun* officially taking a neutral editorial position, while *The Herald* supported the preservation of the Union dependent upon the devolution of further powers to Holyrood (Herald 2014). This imbalance cannot be seen as representative of the will of the Scottish electorate, as even at the start of the campaign there was roughly a third of eligible voters with a preference for independence.

With the under-representation of the printed press in support of independence and an absence of grass roots activism in support of Better Together, any question of whether interest groups facilitated healthy competition during the campaign ought to be focused upon the role of Yes Scotland activist groups competing with the printed press. The printed press is specifically referred to rather than news broadcasters, as the UK news broadcasters' official position would have been neutral, though this is contentious for many, particularly in terms of the BBC as focused upon elsewhere in this thesis. There is then, a general consensus around the view that social media did indeed facilitate a more balanced debate than would have been in its absence:

> Where Scotland's print and broadcast media were in the main pro-Union or 'impartial' (given that their impartiality has been contested), social media provided space for subjectivity, opinion, and overt ideological bias to be expressed. In this campaign, as

never before in the UK, social media emerged not merely as a tool of communication, but as a weapon in a political campaign of huge constitutional significance (theconversation.com 2015).

There is further empirical evidence which backs claims of the impact of social media during the referendum campaign, indeed, a YouGov poll commissioned by News UK in the weeks following the referendum result, found that 39% of respondents had their decisions influenced by social media and other websites, as opposed to 34% being influenced by the traditional press (Haggerty 2014). However, in keeping with the majority of the empirical evidence in the results relating to the first research question, TV and radio were found to have the highest impact in this regard, with 42% stating that it was *the* major influence upon decision making relating to the independence referendum (ibid.).

The expressed influence of social media detailed above, could of course manifest itself in many forms, and may not be related to activist group activity and we simply do not have accurate data to quantify this. An interesting insight into the difference between the activities of volunteer Yes Scotland supporters and Better Together supporters, and their respective activity on social media, was discussed during an interview with an official Better Together campaigner who also worked in the Labour Party office at Holyrood:

> What I found really frustrating during the campaign was that we would stand on a street corner at 8.30 at night, where there would be maybe ten of us standing putting the world to rights and the difference betwen us and the nats (sic), would be that our opposite 10, standing putting the world to rights, would go home and post things on Twitter, post things on Face Book, post on their blog, and Newsnet and Bella, where our guys were going home to have their tea. (M1)

M1 went on to suggest that this was a key difference, in that people of all ages within the Yes Scotland campaign, whether it be young or old, were embracing social media in a way that the Better Together campaign was not. This viewpoint seemed all the more significant due to the fact that it came from an active Better Together campaigner, rather than someone in support of Yes Scotland. Yes Scotland fully understood the media position in relation to the lack of traditional media support on its side of the argument. A Glasgow University study explained the role of Yes Scotland groups and social media during the campaign:

The Yes campaign was much more permissive. Its primary goal was securing a Yes vote and there was a similar focus on undecided voters. However, Yes Scotland believed that it had to build momentum from the ground up, harness the energies of supporters, enthuse new recruits and bring together lots of disparate groups in the attempt to create a national movement rather than fight a traditional election campaign. The more loosely organised and grassroots orientated structure of the Yes Scotland campaign encouraged more people to channel their energies into a variety of activities including the use of social media (Langer, Commerford and McNulty 2015).

In respect of the question regarding social media contributing to healthier competition during the referendum, we can state with some confidence that Yes Scotland supporting activist groups contributed to helping Yes Scotland compete with the Better Together campaign. Better Together had the broader support of the traditional press and without the social media domination of the online campaign, it is doubtful that Yes Scotland would have achieved the quite remarkable 22 point increase from Early 2013 to September 2014. It is, however, impossible to quantify how many of those points were added by Twitter and in a media landscape which is still dominated by traditional media sources, care must be taken not to overstate the real impact that Twitter and social media more broadly could have had upon proceedings.

7.4 Did group bargaining create barriers to extremism during the independence referendum and did Twitter impact upon this?

Dahl and Lindblom see pluralism as giving rise to political leaders whose 'main skill is negotiating settlements amongst conflicting social organisations' (Dahl and Lindblom 1976 p.304). Their theory in this regard focuses upon the negotiation skills of leaders. The groups in focus during the Scottish independence referendum were very much a loose coalition with the same aim in a relatively short, time-limited campaign, in comparison to some other political cause groups.

There were a few limited examples of what were generally individual Twitter users which perhaps bordered on the extreme, and when these occurred the official campaign groups and the more socially conscious activists would generally voice their disagreement through both traditional and online platforms. This bears little relation to the context in which it was situated by Dahl and Lindblom (1976) which refers to focused collective bargaining rather than voicing general disapproval. However, the motivation to speak out upon such matters is in all

likelihood a product of the normative pluralist commitment, still held by many, though challenged by contemporary populism, which seems intent on pushing at the borders of what was, relatively previously, seen as unacceptable. This challenge to pluralism is one which deserves attention but is beyond the scope of this project and due to the fact that Dahl and Linblom's theory relates to active collective bargaining, which was largely absent from the Scottish Independence referendum, this part of theory does not apply to the context of this thesis.

7.5 Did overlapping group membership on Twitter require moderation and compromise by group leaders?

Dahl and Lindblom contextualise overlapping membership in their theory as relating to multiple membership bringing conflicting values in to play. In this context, leaders need to be wary of alienating their group member(s) by dismissing or opposing the values and interests held by the members' other group interests.

A report commissioned by Common Weale (Black and Marsden 2016) gives an insight into the activity of 993 Yes Scotland volunteers who responded to an online survey. Of the respondents, 66.2% of volunteers were active in more than one Yes Scotland activist group, 30.8% were active with National Collective and 67.7% of the women surveyed were active with Women for Independence. No mention was made of any of the other groups focused upon in this thesis. As those surveyed were all official Yes Scotland volunteers, logic would suggest that the broader Yes Scotland supporting population would have had significantly less affiliation with the activist groups in question.

The prevalence of multiple group membership suggests two prevailing characteristics of the Yes Scotland campaign. Firstly, a group that was overwhelmingly united in its goal of independence, where the activist groups under the umbrella of Yes Scotland fully supported the official organisation and their broader campaign positions and strategy. This certainly appeared to be the case from the evidence in many of the sections answering the primary research question of this study. The feeling during the campaign, was that the independence movement was more than Yes Scotland and more than a political campaign focused on Election Day. It was a social movement within itself. The following blog article describes a movement which had positively grown into something bigger than its parent group - Yes Scotland:

Rather than consisting of activists manning jumble sales, the Yes movement was on its way to creating 300 local community groups, 50 sectoral organisations and dozens of other spin-offs that would flood the country with pro-independence activity. Tens of thousands of people across the country were now involved: from self-generated local Yes groups, to National Collective and the left-wing Radical Independence Campaign (RIC); from individuals manning Yes cafes, to new recruits running drop in centres (Davidson 2014).

The article goes on to describe how the official Yes Scotland campaign knew that the grass-roots campaign was gaining traction from learning about community debates which had been ran in the name of Yes Scotland by groups that they themselves never even knew existed. The suggestion was that the official Yes Scotland campaign was by that point almost redundant, with its main role now being to support the grass-roots movement with campaign materials and email updates. In summarising the magnitude of the grass-roots movement the article states that:

By May 30 this year, the formal starting point of the referendum campaign, Yes was the biggest grass-roots political movement Scotland had seen (ibid.).

The overlapping memberships of Yes supporting activists, adds somewhat to assertions of a *movement* (a movement which should be remembered lost the final vote but a movement all the same) rather than a political campaign, in that it suggests a united coalition of groups forming a broader group personality than that of the individual groups within it.

Secondly, the unity within Yes Scotland groups, perhaps suggested a willingness to sacrifice certain political principles in the pursuit of the overall goal of independence. The reality of this was discussed with an activist group member during the interview process. When asked what his group had brought to the debate, he explained the challenges arising from the implied narrative that everything would be ok once Scottish sovereignty was realised:

We bring culturally left politics into a domain that disrupts some people's simplicity…we have some interesting challenges about things, where we come from more of an ecological perspective as well (sic). So, classically there is the oil debate and our perspective which we push gently, is actually we don't just want to be using that argument for other reasons [laughs, implying ecological] and introduce issues about

climate change and things like that. So what do we bring to it? I suppose we bring different communities from a green perspective and a left perspective into the people who are discussing sovereignty, which is a challenge. (A1)

The conversation related to the fact that the economic case for an independent Scotland was largely based upon North Sea oil revenues, whilst the group had a long-standing commitment to ecological principles which are somewhat at odds with fossil fuel energy production. This situation exactly replicates the theory of Dahl and Lindblom regarding overlapping interests. The quote above leans towards deliberative democratic ideals whereby the group in question is (at least temporarily) willing to sacrifice a key political standpoint in pursuit of on overall goal.

Dahl and Lindblom's theory, however, is focused upon the required awareness of leaders to be aware of plural membership of organisations whereby, 'action by a leader against what seems to be an enemy organisation may in fact strike against his own alliance' (Dahl and Lindblom 1976 p.305). The evidence presented here, however, suggests a different situation altogether. Instead, the evidence shows that groups were willing to compromise their own principles and allegiance to causes which in all likelihood saw them have overlapping membership, which was at odds with the ideals of the overall Yes campaign, in this specific case an oil-based economy and ecological ideals. Therefore, it was the group members were compromising. Whilst it may have been that the Yes Scotland leadership also did, this study has no explicit evidence of this.

This does not mean that Yes Scotland were not aware of the potential political conflicts regarding independence supporters. This was not however particularly detrimental to the independence cause, as the arguments put forward in the case for independence were often general rather than specific. They tended to focus upon the notion that decisions about Scotland ought to be made in Scotland and supporters often stated that the detail was not particularly important, and could be dealt with following a victory. The Better Together campaign focused upon this approach as being entirely unrealistic and that a failure to answer basic questions, for instance about the currency and the place of an independent Scotland in Europe, should move the electorate to vote No in the referendum.

In terms of social media, overlapping group membership and a requirement for moderation and compromise, there are two main points which can be drawn from the evidence presented. Twitter and social media more broadly it seemed, facilitated awareness, engagement, interaction and membership of multiple groups, simply due to the connectivity which social

media affords the user. Pre-internet and social media, membership of interest groups would demand a far greater commitment on the part of the individual if they were to meaningfully participate with one group, let alone multiple groups. There was also, in a positive sense, evidence of social media creating a unified Yes Scotland group, with supporters willing to compromise in order to ensure a strong unified voice from Yes supporters. Contrary to Dahl and Lindblom's assertions, however, it was their supporters who had to be aware of the need to compromise in the interests of maximising the independence vote, rather than the leadership, in a campaign which was light in specific detail. With perhaps the prospect of a second independence referendum on the horizon there will be demands for these generalised issues to be answered. There then will be a better opportunity to assess the extent to which the independence movement can moderate and compromise to satisfy conflicting ideals and perhaps group memberships of the electorate.

7.6 Did Twitter aid pluralist networks in helping to spread information during the campaign?

Information provision and dispersal through connected networks of individuals is the obvious, democracy enhancing capability of the internet and social media. 5.8million tweets were shared under the #indyref in 2014 with 2.6 million of those sent in the month preceding the final vote (Crossley 2014). The internet facilitates the spread of information through interest groups in a manner in which Dahl and Lindblom could likely never have imagined during the formation of their original group hypothesis in the 1950s (later revised in the 1970s).

There is currently much debate about the concept of *fake news* which jeopardises the value of online information. These arguments were not present during the Scottish independence referendum, where veracity of information was still brought into question, though this was primarily focused upon perceived bias and misappropriation of statistics to arguments rather than out and out attempts to deceive. Whilst it could be argued that these social media occurrences were a precursor of the *fake news* phenomenon, the term and specific subject itself was not present at that time. For these reasons the subject is not focused upon in detail here. Social media's role in the spread of information is discussed at length throughout the thesis and therefore is also not further detailed here.

7.7 Was the 'personality of the State' enhanced by their use of Twitter during the referendum campaign?

This section does not relate to the theories of Dahl and Lindblom (1976) as the previous sections have. It instead relates to the theories of the English pluralists, Maitland, Laski, Cole, Barker and Figgis at the turn of the 20th Century (see chapter 3). These authors focused, to differing extents, upon the personality of the state and the relationship between the state and its citizens. Contemporary theories of the democratising potential of the internet and social media are that they have the potential to, for example, 'open up new channels of communication between MPs and the public and could widen/deepen participation in parliamentary politics' (Gibson, Lusoli and Ward 2005). The Scottish independence referendum campaign presented an opportunity to assess if politicians were engaging with the public in a different manner which could improve the tarnished relationship between themselves and the public, as detailed in chapter two.

The relationship between the state and citizens is a common theme in democratic and pluralist political literature (see chapter three). The pluralist narrative in this respect, has been that the state is one of the many competing groups within society (particularly in the earlier works of Robert Dahl) and that it can as such, have its own personality in the same way that groups can. The English pluralists were heavily involved in the development of this theory in the early 20th century. Pluralism also suggests that there are inherent democratic benefits of limiting the state by dispersing power, where possible and appropriate, to civic society, this can be formal decentralisation or informal through democratic participation in the political process. The end goal is a more coherent body politic and a closer democratic bond between the state and its citizens.

The internet and social media with its capacity for connectivity between individuals and groups, certainly has the technological capabilities to assist in this goal. The Scottish independence referendum campaign saw a distinct difference between the performance of UK government, represented by the Better Together campaign, and those outside of the government. On examination this was evident in the general manner in which UK government actors and the opposing Yes Scotland campaign conducted themselves on Twitter. Yes Scotland were largely a manifestation of the SNP, with the SNP being the present Scottish government and therefore one of the institutions which make up the overall state in the UK. However, In terms of social media use, they exhibited democracy enhancing behaviours which surpassed those on the other side of the campaign.

An insight into probable engagement between Twitter users is to see how many followers they have and how many they choose to follow. A Twitter user can still interact with those they do not follow, by replying to the other user's posts, but it would usually be the case that users would follow those that they interact with on a regular basis. For example, the week prior to the referendum vote, the then First Minister Alex Salmond had approximately 90,200 Twitter followers and the head of Better Together, Alistair Darling, had 20,300. The disparity ratio between the two was in general keeping with overall social media activity within the two campaigns. Similarly, the then First Minister had tweeted 1725 times compared with 391 from Mr Darling. The striking difference however was between the amounts of accounts *followed* by the two, Mr Salmond followed 419 other Twitter users and Mr Darling followed only 1, whilst the 419 accounts followed by Mr Salmond was significantly fewer than those that followed him, it is still a significant number if any meaningful democratic activity was to take place between himself and those he followed. Perhaps unsurprisingly, in the weeks following the independence referendum vote, Mr Darling deleted his Twitter account altogether and has not reopened it since.

The lack of interaction on Mr Darling's account was aligned to a repeated narrative during the interviews whereby the suggestion was that the UK Government representatives campaigning for Better Together would have preferred not to have been there, and when they were, the metaphorical barriers between the state and its citizens remained firmly in place. Evidence such as this suggests that the opportunity to positively alter state personality and connect to an ever-growing (though still relatively small) demographic of citizens which inhabit platforms such as Twitter, was wilfully neglected by the Westminster component of the UK state at the time of the referendum in 2014. It ought to be acknowledged, however, that this may have been influenced by the campaign tactics employed by Blue State Digital as discussed in the previous chapter. Though at the time of writing in 2018 some progress would perhaps have been expected to have been made, research shows that Conservative MPs are still far less likely to have a Twitter account than SNP MPs – all 35 SNP MPs have a Twitter account while 261 of the 316 Tory MPs at Westminster are on Twitter, of whom only 43% identify themselves as Conservatives on their account whilst 88% of SNP MPs display their party allegiance (Durso and Doherty 2018). Other reports further emphasise the manner in which the current main party of UK government are still struggling to come to terms with how to use social media, such as Ellicott (2018) who documents, via a leaked internal memo, how Conservative MPs are being coached on how to come across as 'real people' on other platforms such as Instagram, by posting photographs of themselves posing with pet animals.

The *genuine* personality of activist/interest groups during the independence referendum campaign was at times questionable and it is for this reason that this study has been focused upon genuine, grass roots activism during the debate. Searching Twitter using #indyref during the campaign would deliver many accounts that to the perhaps less discerning eye would appear to be genuine interest groups. The following are some of the groups that campaigned in support of the preservation of the Union:

- Business Together
- Academics Together
- NHS Together
- Lawyers Together
- LGBT Together
- Women Together
- Rural Together
- Work Together

Closer examination of these groups showed that these organisations were directly affiliated to the Better Together campaign:

Figure 52 Screenshot from Twitter (2016)

As the graphic above shows, there was no attempt to hide the fact that LGBT Together were a part of Better Together, by the fact that they make this clear on their Twitter page. As has been stated numerous times, the democratic significance of Yes Scotland was the prevalence of grass roots activist groups but there were also suggestions that Business for Scotland, one of the main independence campaign groups, was itself directly affiliated to Yes Scotland:
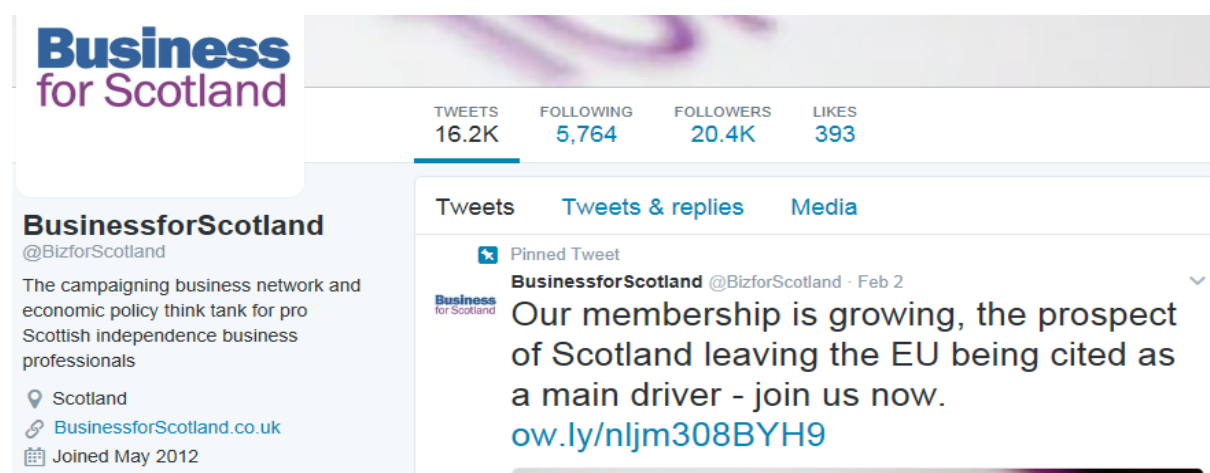

Figure 53 Screenshot from Twitter (2016)

The suggestion that this was the case was brought up by an MSP during the interview process:

> I think what the Yes Scotland side were able to do with all these different groups, was to present the Yes Scotland campaign group as being much more widespread and much more disparate, with all these different voices which give you all these different registered participants. That meant they were able to benefit from the spending limits, [imposed by referendum regulations] whereas Better Together was one umbrella group. (M4)

He went on to state that it was his belief that in this regard Better Together had made a mistake in not attempting to foster the growth of equivalent 'grass roots' activist groups before explicitly questioning their grass-roots credentials:

> A lot of them [Yes activist groups] like Business for Scotland was effectively an arm of the SNP… I mean some of them, I think, like Christians For Independence, that I did a few debates with, in terms of membership, which wasn't very big at all, were funded through a cheque from Brian Soutar for £100,000. That was set up by an SNP MSP

who was the chair, so it was quite clearly an SNP front organisation funded by an SNP donor, so it didn't have anything really grass roots [in its] presence or network. (M4)

The nuanced differences of relationships between activist groups to the official campaigns is important due to the manner in which we attribute democratic legitimacy to *genuine* grassroots activism. The plurality of our democracy depends, for some, upon the reality or otherwise of independent thought and action as opposed to subsidiaries of parent organisations, particularly when the parent group is a component of the state. The reality is that these relationships are complex and interwoven and the search for absolutely genuine grassroots activism, may satisfy our ideals in this respect, but may also needlessly detract from the positive impact of groups with quasi-links to official political organisations. The importance however, is dependent upon the transparency in the links between such groups and that did not seem to be the case in certain respects as those above. This particularly ought to detract from Yes Scotland, as they nurtured and revelled in the grassroots factor and the reality was that this was needless, as there was still a sizeable genuine grassroots presence in the activist groups on whom this study focuses upon.

7.8   Conclusions to chapter 7 - Who governs?

In perhaps the most important work (certainly of its time) regarding procedural pluralism and the role of the interest group in the democratic process, Robert Dahl (2005) asks *Who Governs*? The answer for Dahl was that the United States of America at the time of which he was writing, consisted of the state as an impartial arbiter between competing groups on a level playing field. Dahl's study was primarily an empirical work situated in the state of New Hampshire, aimed at testing his group theory hypothesis. This position was much derided at the time and Dahl later conceded that the playing field was not so level after all and that the power of business and government self-interest, were key elements which had been disproportionately overlooked in his earlier theory. Contemporarily, the state, particularly in the case of governmental institutions, can only be seen to be neutral in the fewest of cases in its perceived role as arbiter, and instead aligns itself to other competing groups in society with which it shares similar values and interests.

The technological capabilities of the internet and the social and political impact of social media have been heralded as perhaps re-invigorating and empowering interest groups to enable a society closer to the one originally hypothesised by Dahl. As one political website/blog states:

Recent years have witnessed a growth in the number and impact of single-interest groups, advancing narrowly defined, self-regarding causes. A number of factors have helped their development (Grant 2011).

Such factors, according to the article, include the growth of 24-hour multi-channel media having a key role in the increased demand for news output with emotional/visual appeal. Additionally, the internet is said to have had a key role in the manner that new groups can form relatively cheaply and more easily attract and mobilise new members, as exemplified by the number of groups in existence on Facebook and the proliferation of electronic petitions which are active on the UK Government's website (ibid.). The manner in which the internet makes it easier and less expensive to form, attract members, and mobilise for action is largely beyond question, and is ratified by the findings in chapter six and seven of this thesis.

Dahl and Lindblom's group theory states that interest groups are more effective than individuals in relation to influencing political proceedings. This theory is supported and compounded by social media, as demonstrated by the way that groups like Women for Independence formed and thrived online, in a matter which would be much more onerous without social media. Additionally, we have evidence of the way in which social media has redefined the way in which we ought to define groups, as exemplified by Wings Over Scotland who typifies the manner in which healthy political participation, ought now to include the comments sections of online activist groups, blogs, and digital newspaper editions.

Dahl and Lindblom also point to interest groups as facilitating healthy political competition. The media play a vital role in facilitating the spread of information in elections, but the plurality of our written press has been called into question as certain groups within our democracy are under-represented by its generally right wing, Unionist composition. Social media, through a combination of a skilful Yes Scotland strategy and an unlikely democratic backlash to the perceived injustices of the traditional media, helped independence support grow from around 23% in January 2013 (Carrell 2013a) to 45% at the final referendum vote in September 2014.

With regard to the final parts of Dahl and Lindblom's group theory, the manner in which the internet and social media facilitates the spread of information is significant and requires little explanation. This is apparent in the fact that 5.8 million tweets were shared under the #indyref in 2014 alone (Crossley 2014).

In terms of group and state personality, which was theorised by the English pluralists in the early 20th century, the evidence within the project suggests that the UK state missed out on the opportunity to bring itself closer to its citizens during the independence referendum. This was metaphorically symbolised by the head of Better Together, Alistair Darling, following just one person on Twitter whilst his Yes Scotland equivalents, followed and successfully interacted with many hundreds. Followed then by Mr Darling closing down his account all together in the days following the referendum. The veracity of group personality within the activist groups aligned to both Yes Scotland and Better Together, was brought into question by apparent links to the official campaigns. This suggests that caution should be urged in celebrating grassroots activism until the true personality of online groups is substantiated.

In conclusion, the evidence within this study suggests that pluralist group theory is still relevant in the present day, and social media has proven to be an important and influential tool in the continual quest for fairer representation of groups in the political sphere of the United Kingdom.

7.9   Original contribution to knowledge

Social media, in relative terms, has an extremely short history, it is therefore unsurprising that there is a paucity of empirical studies focusing upon its impact upon democracy. Comparative work at the beginning of the project in 2013 was generally restricted to considerations of social media and elections, its impact upon participation, and the impact of new media upon traditional media formats. Empirical studies were, almost without exception, quantitative in nature, generally consisting of comparisons between nation states. This study makes a contribution to knowledge in being qualitative, focused specifically upon the United Kingdom, and going beyond purely attending to activism and participation by taking a broader approach in also focusing upon journalists and politicians.

The study has enhanced the understanding of the empirical reality of three strands of political communication, including democratic deliberation on Twitter, by uniquely providing rich descriptions of each category of activity within Freelon's (2010) model. Additionally, it has provided justification for the consideration of the development of a new strand of the model, (as well as presenting the core components which ought to be considered as a basis for that model) which focuses upon agonistic pluralism as another democratically valuable strand of democratic communication with significant relevance in today's political climate, particularly online, which is increasingly awash with antagonistic political discourse.

This project has also offered new perspectives stemming from a critical theory research philosophy and accompanying methodology, with the aim of furthering the tradition of critical theory research to analyse developments in new technologies, the media, and politics within capitalist societies, as called for by Kellner (1990).

The study has made a further contribution to knowledge by taking a pertinent model from Dahl and Lindblom's theoretical works relating to interest groups in the form of *Politics, Economics and Welfare* (1976) and rigorously evaluating their relevance in the present era of computer-mediated communication. In this respect, the study has demonstrated the enduring relevance of Dahl and Lindblom's work in the subject area, some 60 years after its initial publication (as the latest reissue of their work in 2017 would also suggest).

7.10   Suggestions for future research

As noted at various points throughout the thesis, this study has been conceptualised in a similar way to that of Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez (2011) in terms of its potential use in future quantitative studies. The study has sought to explain and present, in some detail, empirical examples of accepted categories of activity in established strands of political communication taken from Freelon (2010). In this regard, it was envisaged that quantitative scholars could build upon the foundations laid in this thesis to operationalise these findings in future studies. This would, perhaps, be particularly useful in research seeking to quantify broader notions of how Twitter and other social media platforms are impacting upon the democratic process in the UK and further afield.

Another suggestion for future research may be to again build upon the findings of this project to formulate and test a specific strand of agonistic pluralism to complement existing strands within models such as Freelon (2010). Such a model could again be jointly applied, with deliberative strands and others, to different political debates, particularly election campaigns, either inside or outside of the political cauldron concerning issues of sovereignty, to assess the presence of agonistic pluralism and whether online deliberation is more plausible in perhaps less emotive campaign settings. Using this approach in a 'cold' (or at least 'colder') campaign may be particularly useful in contrasting the appropriateness of agonism as a normative explanatory theory against the findings of this particular study.

A final possibility which has been prompted by the study in terms of pluralist group theory, would be a future consideration of the manner in which governments may or may not pursue

the use of social media platforms such as Twitter, in terms of enhancing the personality of *the State* by utilising its potential to address the often questionable relationship it contemporarily shares with its citizens.

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Appendix 1 – Followed Twitter accounts

<u>In support of Better Together</u>

Scottish Labour Party @scottishlabour

UK Labour Party @UKLabour

Conservative Party @Conservatives

Scottish Conservative Party @ScotTories

Liberal Democrats @LibDems

Scottish Liberal Democrats @scotlibdems

Communist Party of Britain @CPBritain

UKIP @UKIP

Better Together @UK_Together

Daily Mirror @DailyMirror

Scottish Express @ScotExpress

The Herald @heraldscotland

Daily Mail @MailOnline

Scotland on Sunday @scotonsunday

Sunday Post @Sunday_Post

The Daily Telegraph @TelegraphNews

The Independent @Independent

The Guardian @guardian

The Scottish Daily Express @ScotExpress

The Scotsman @TheScotsman

The Times @thetimes

The Economist @TheEconomist

The Spectator @spectator

Academics Together @AcademicsTog

Business Together @Biz_Together

Lawyers Together @LawyersTogether

LGBT Together @LGBTTogetherUK

NHS Together @NHSTogetherUK

No to Independence @NTSI_VoteNo

Gordon & Sarah Brown @OfficeGSBrown

David Cameron @David_Cameron

Alistair Carmichael @amcarmichaelMP

Alistair Darling – account removed

Ruth Davidson @RuthDavidsonMSP

Kezia Dugdale @kezdugdale

Neil Findlay @NeilFindlay_MSP

Murdo Fraser @murdo_fraser

Johann Lamont @JohannLamont

Jenny Marra @Jennymarra

Michael Moore – account removed

David Mundell @DavidMundellDCT

J.K. Rowling @jk_rowling

Oliver Milne @OliverMilne

Duncan Hothersall @dhothersall

Blair Heary @Blair_Heary

<u>In support of Yes Scotland</u>

SNP @the_SNP

SNP Youth – account removed

Scottish Green Party @scotgp

Scottish Socialist Party @The_SSP_

Yes Scotland @YesScotland

Business for Scotland @BizforScotland

Farming for Yes @Farming4Yes

Generation Yes – account removed

National Collective @WeAreNational

Radical Independence @Radical_indy

Scottish Independence Convention @ScotConvention

Spirit of Independence @Spiritofindy

The Common Weal @CommonWeal

Wings Over Scotland @WingsScotland

Women for Independence @WomenForIndy

Independent Voices @celebs4indy

Sunday Herald @newssundayherald

Academics for Yes @AcademicsForYes

Lawyers For Yes [@Lawyersforyes](#)

Alex Salmond [@AlexSalmond](#)

Nicola Sturgeon [@NicolaSturgeon](#)

Dennis Canavan [@DennisCanavan](#)

Patrick Harvie [@patrickharvie](#)

Stewart Stevenson [@zsstevens](#)

Stewart Hosie [@StewartHosieSNP](#)

Roseanna Cunningham [@strathearnrose](#)

Joan McAlpine [@JoanMcalpine](#)

Mark McDonald [@markmcdsnp](#)

Shona Robison [@Shona_Robison](#)

Jim Sillars [@NaeFear](#)

Aamer Anwar [@Aamer_Anwar](#)

Lesley Riddoch [@LesleyRiddoch](#)

Alan Cumming [@Alancumming](#)

Billy Bragg [@billybragg](#)

Neutral/journalists

The Daily Record [@Daily_Record](#)

Sunday Mail [@Sunday_Mail](#)

The Scottish Sun [@ScottishSun](#)

David Torrance [@davidtorrance](#)

David Clegg [@davieclegg](#)

David Leask [@LeaskyHT](#)

Jennifer Mckiernan [@JMcKiernnanPJ](#)

Richard Walker [@richardwalker5](#)

Andrew Nicholl [@AndrewSNicoll](#)

Hamish MacDonnell [@Hamish_Macdonell](#)

Tom Gordon [@HTScotpol](#)

Andrew Picken [@andrewpicken1](#)

Alan Cochrane [@AlanCochraneSez](#)

Kenny Farquharson [@KennyFarq](#)

Simon Johnson [@simon_telegraph](#)

BBC Scotland News [@BBCScotlandNews](#)

Policy Scotland [@policyscotland](#)

5 Million Questions @Fivemillionqs

Press Data Politics @PD_Politics

Appendix 2 – Interview Prompts

N.B. These questions were the basis for all of the interviews, however, additional questions and alterations to the questions noted here, were tailored accordingly dependent upon the individual in question, and other topical issues unfolding during the time-period of the interview process.

Activist groups

Your organisation:
- Origins
- Membership
- Structure
- Finances
- Followers
- Platforms used
- Decision making process (How democratic is the org)
- Do they measure impact i.e. Hootsuite
- Strategy
- What does your day look like
- previous campaigning experience

Twitter:
- Which groups have impact?
- What impact does yours have?
- Thoughts on BT campaign.
- Thoughts on YS campaign.
- Tone of twitter debate.
- Is Twitter a space for deliberation?
- Bullying/intimidation.
- Landmark events. (can you identify)
- Is the online debate as you would have expected?
- Perceived positive/negative impact of twitter.

- Blogs followed/bloggers within group.
- Pluralism-how inclusive, diverse, access, voice, reach

Traditional Press:
- Establish if engaged at all with.
- Which newspapers/journalists have impact?
- Differences between campaign on twitter and print.
- Opinion on allegations of bias.
- Has your group been reported on by the traditional press?
- Broadcast media
- Pluralism-how inclusive, diverse, access, voice, reach

Democracy:
- Impact of Twitter on democratic process. (unpack more relating to democracy)

Journalist

You/Your newspaper:
- How do you/your paper manage twitter/social media?
- Do you/why do you blog independently of your newspaper?
- What is your/your newspapers strategy for covering indyref offline?
- What is you/your newspapers strategy for covering indyref in print?
- How much freedom do you have as an individual?

The Referendum
- What is your opinion of YS campaign generally?
- What is your opinion of BT campaign generally?
- What is your opinion of YS utilisation of social media/twitter?
- What is your opinion of BT utilisation of social media/Twitter?
- Which activist groups do you believe have had an impact and why?
- Which bloggers do you believe have had an impact and why?
- Can you point to any landmark events online?
- Is the online debate as you would have expected?
- Thoughts on bullying/intimidation online?
- Thoughts of allegations of bias from traditional print media?

- Pluralism (is diversity being achieved)
- Strategy of swarming

Democracy

- What do you see your role as within a democracy?
- How do you think Twitter has impacted upon the debate journalistically?
- How do you think Twitter has impacted upon the debate democratically?
- Is Twitter a space for deliberation?
- What are your thoughts on the long term impact of the internet/social media/Twitter on the printed press as we know it?

<u>MSP</u>

You/Your office/party

- How do you/your office use social media?
- How is social media managed by your party?
- Which platforms used?
- How much freedom as an individual?

The referendum
- Yes campaign generally
- BT generally
- YS Twitter
- BT Twitter
- Is the online debate as you would have expected?
- Who has an impact
- Landmark events
- Bullying
- Bias in traditional media
- Pluralism

Democracy
- Accountability by social media
- Is Twitter a space for deliberation?

- Impact of new media democratically

- Impressions of future developments