POLITICAL FINANCE REGULATION AND DIGITAL CAMPAIGNING: A PUBLIC PERSPECTIVE

GfK UK report for qualitative research findings

The
Electoral
Commission

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1   Executive Summary

1.1   Introduction

The Electoral Commission commissioned GfK to carry out research amongst the general public to explore:

- Expectations and understanding regarding current regulation of political parties for election or referendum campaigns in the UK.
- Priorities and principles considered important in regulation of political parties for election or referendum campaigns in the UK.
- Reaction to election and referendum campaign materials in the UK received digitally or accessed online including views towards potential concerns (fake news, bots and trolls, micro-targeting, dark ads and dark money).
- Suggestions for regulatory responses to help address concerns regarding the regulation of policitical parties for offline and/ or online election or referendum campaigns in the UK.

1.2   Research approach

Qualitative research was carried out to allow for open and exploratory investigation. This involved a deliberative approach allowing researchers to gather spontaneous feedback from participants as well as provide information regarding current regulation and potential areas of concerns for online campaign materials. A total of 15 deliberative focus groups and 24 deliberative depth interviews were carried out. The sample was designed to include a mix of demographics, political attitudes and political engagement. Research sessions took place between 6 – 16 March. It should be noted that fieldwork completed before news reports emerged regarding claims that Cambridge Analytica had used Facebook data to help political campaigns.

1.3   Attitudes to politics and political campaigning

A combination of cynicism towards politics and politicians, cited complexity of political issues and a feeling that politicians were often privileged and distanced from real people meant that participants tended to claim to be disinterested or disillusioned with politics. With this in mind they also tended to take a sceptical view towards campaign materials in general. Participants reported a range of ways for personally assessing whether political information they came across was trustworthy. Some simply noted that they avoided politcal information in general. Many looked to mainstream news sources as trustworthy (although most felt that they were likely to promote a particular political agenda) and others avoided traditional media sources seeking alternatives that they felt provided a more balanced perspective. There was a general view that individuals should take responsibility for assessing the trustworthiness of sources and messages.

1.4   Engagement with campaign material – digital, online and traditional sources

Participants noted that they often ignored campaign materials due to lack of interest in politics, or concerns regarding credibility of messages. Most initially recalled traditional campaign materials although as conversation developed online materials were also recalled. Participants did not always readily identify campaign materials, often recalling seeing something about a topic of interest (e.g. something about the NHS) rather than linking this to a specific campaign. However, it was noted that attributes of online

campaign materials often made them engaging including use of graphics, entertaining and humorous video clips, opportunity for discussion and debate and filtering on social media accounts which meant that you were more likely to see material that was of interest.

1.5 Digital campaigns

Participants reflected that traditional and online campaign materials differed noting that online materials were ubiquitous, greater in volume and therefore more likely to gain their attention. Participants reported being more vigilant and less trusting of online materials. Key concerns focused on the **content** and **source** of materials. Participants noted a greater potential for less credible sources to promote messages that misled people, spread false information or simply promoted poorly-informed views. Individual assessment of the credibility of online information focused on their own capacity to employ common sense, seek out credible news brands and check facts by looking at other sources. However, it was agreed that not all people would seek to or be able to to verify messages, making any message potentially influential.

1.6 Responses to stimulus material on potential concerns and digital technologies for online campaigns

Participants were provided with information about fake news, bots and trolls, micro-targeting, dark ads, and dark money. Whilst participants had already expressed concerns regarding the **content** and **source** of campaign messages, these technologies prompted them to further consider the role of **funding** and **application of technology** in campaigns.

- **Fake news:** comments regarding fake news fell into a spectrum ranging from manufactured news (entirely made up with the intention of misinforming people) to distorted news (news presented in a misleading way to promote a specific agenda). Participants were concerned about the potential reach and speed of influence of fake news when using online technology and agreed that the source should take responsibility for ensuring news was not fake.
- **Bots and trolls:** participants cited two key concerns regarding the use of bots and trolls: creating a false scale of support for a viewpoint through fast creation of trends; and promoting fake news. There was surprise that trolls would be paid to promote views and this led to concerns around who funded this type of activity.
- **Micro-targeting:** whilst micro-targeting was considered a normalised marketing practice there were some queries and concerns around how personal data had been gathered and was being used. A few queried who was funding this type of activity and a couple began to query whether this type of targeting could have a more sinister use in the promotion of fake news to individuals[1].
- **Dark ads:** the intention behind the use of dark ads impacted participant views about this technique. Dark ads used as a way to manipulate people or promote fake news was most concerning and led participants to query the source of dark ads.
- **Dark money:** whilst most had not heard of dark money, participants agreed that they would feel most strongly about this where there was clear evidence of collusion with a party or campaigner. However, many queried how this type of spending could be controlled or identified.

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[1] It should be noted that this viewpoint may be the result of a research effect, where participants were already thinking about fake news and the promotion of false news.

1.7   Summary of concerns

Content of campaigns	• Is the content believable and trustworthy?
Source of information	• Does the source have a particular political agenda? • Is the source distorting content to suit a particular agenda? • Is this a bona fide source, or a source that could send false information?
Funding of campaigns	• Who is funding parties/ campaigns, what is their motivation to do this and what influence does this have on the content the public consumes during an election? • What assurances are there that there is not any foreign influence in the content the public consumes during UK elections? • Who is funding fake news and tools that shape the content the public consumes during UK elections? • Who is funding via dark money and why is this funding being hidden?
Use of technologies in campaigns	• How are tools used to shape the content the public consumes during UK elections? • Who is funding use of tools that shape the content the public consumes during UK elections? • How is personal data gathered and used and is this done ethically?

1.8   Regulation of election campaigns

Participants were provided with a summary of current regulation and provided feedback:

- **Spending:** participants assumed there would be a cap for campaign spending but were often surprised by the amount, feeling that spending limits were very high. Some suggested a set budget across all parties would ensure fairness.
- **Funding:** participants agreed that there should not be any foreign funding and influence in campaigns. There was scepticism about the motivations of major donors in general with queries regarding what donors expected in return for their support.
- **Content:** there was some surprise that rules did not cover content especially as many had spontaneously raised concerns regarding the believability of campaign messaging.
- **Fines:** participants felt that current fines that the Electoral Commission can impose were too lenient especially given how much money could be spent on a campaign. Stronger sanctions were suggested.
- **Reporting:** whilst participants were positive towards publication of campaign funding and spend there were queries around how accessible this was to the public, how reliable self-reporting was, and how valuable it was for this information to be published after an election when it would be too late for the public to take any action.

1.9   Awareness of the Electoral Commission

There was low awareness of the Electoral Commission but an expectation that there would be a body responsible for overseeing regulation of political campaigns. Participants sought reassurances that the Commission was truly independent from goverment and suggested that greater publicity of the Commission and the rules governing campaign spending and funding would be useful to the public.

1.10 Views on social impact

Participants took an individualistic perspective on the concerns around use of technologies in online election campaigns, rather than considering any overall impact on society. Individual concerns focused on personal ability to negotiate potential implications of technology use and how future regulation could support this.

1.11 Ideas for future regulation in the context of digital campaigning

Participants identified a range of actions to help tackle concerns around digital campaigns:

- **Regulation:** there was a desire for online campaign content to be regulated by a politicially neutral organisation and ways for the public to report fake news. This led to some debate regarding how effective this type of regulation would be given the speed at which information spreads online and how a balance between regulation and freedom of speech could be reached.
- **Strong sanctions:** participants felt that stronger sanctions such as tougher fines, public 'naming and shaming' and criminal convictions would act as powerful deterrents.
- **Transparency of campaign activity, spend and funding:** it was agreed that extended and improved publication requirements would help to increase trust in campaigns and enable the public to take this information into account when voting. Suggestions included real-time reporting, publication of spending budgets and campaign manifestos prior to the campaign period allowing actual spend and messaging to be checked against this, and disclosure of online activity.
- **Ways to verify information:** participants felt that the public could be supported in assessing whether campaign content was trustworthy by providing ways to check information. Suggestions included a kite mark, clear links to the source website for online content, and factual information hosted by a trusted body. Participants noted that it would be a logical step to extend the use of imprints to online content.
- **Education:** participants reflected that the information they had been presented during the research was new information and therefore felt there was a clear role for educating the general public on these topics.

1.12 Conclusions

▶ People tend to approach digital campaign content with a sceptical and wary attitude anticipating that not all information is true and that not all sources will be credible.
▶ However, the research suggests that people are unlikely to be aware of the extent to which they may be influenced by these materials. Whilst they believe that they are savvy and able to assess the veracity of content and source, they do not typically take into account factors such as funding of the materials or application of technologies.
▶ Additionally, many are likely to engage with campaign material where they do not readily identify it as such, or where the content is engaging (e.g. humorous) regardless of the trustworthiness of the source.
▶ The concepts discussed during the research were new to most people and often difficult to engage with. However, once better informed many felt that some concepts were concerning. Greatest levels of concern were expressed for the use of technology to promote messages that mislead the public, and the use of dark money where there was clear collusion with a party or campaigner.
▶ Although there was some discussion around the role that regulation can play in a fast-moving online space, there is agreement that current regulation does not address concerns regarding new technologies. Key improvements suggested include real-time reporting of funding and spending, public education, stronger sanctions and an increased public profile of the Electoral Commission.

2   Introduction

The Electoral Commission is an independent public body established under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 (PPERA).

The aim of the Electoral Commission is to ensure integrity and public confidence in the democratic process. It has responsibility for regulating party and election finance and setting standards for well-run elections.

In regulating political finance, the Electoral Commission works to increase transparency, ensure compliance and pursue breaches of the rules. This work includes:

- Registering political parties

- Publishing information about donations and loans, party accounts and campaign spending

- Providing guidance and advice to support people in understanding party and election finance rules

- Investigating allegations of non-compliance with the party and election finance rules

- Advising government on proposed changes to the rules and making recommendations for change

- Advocating changes to our democracy to improve efficiency, fairness and transparency.

The Electoral Commission appointed GfK to carry out research to explore public views regarding **regulation of political party funding and spending for election or referendum campaigns in the UK**. The four key research objectives were:

1   Identify what the public understand about the current regulation of political parties for election or referendum campaigns in the UK with a focus on:

- Awareness of regulation

- Expectations for regulation

2   Explore the principles and priorities that are important to the public when they consider the regulation of political parties for election or referendum campaigns in the UK.

3   Understand how the public respond and react to election and referendum campaign materials in the UK delivered digitally or accessed online with a key focus on:

- Any concerns about the transparency of online campaign materials.

- Any concerns about the influence of online campaign materials.

Exploration of potential concerns to include: fake news; bots and trolls; micro-targeting; dark ads; dark money.

4 Identify where possible, potential regulatory responses generated by the public to help address any concerns regarding the regulation of political parties for offline and/ or online election or referendum campaigns in the UK.

3   Research approach

A qualitative research approach was chosen as most appropriate for this study enabling an open and exploratory approach to gathering public views regarding regulation of political parties for offline and online election and referendum campaigns in the UK.

3.1   Method

The methods selected for the study were deliberative focus groups and deliberative depth interviews. A deliberative approach was employed across the research sessions to allow researchers to gather spontaneous feedback from participants, as well as provide information regarding election and referendum campaign regulation and potential concerns for consideration. Deliberative research is built around three stages:

Stage 1: gather spontaneous views from participants to understand existing knowledge/ attitudes

Stage 2: participant briefing providing information (stimulus material) about the topic under discussion

Stage 3: discuss this information provision, how does it change views, and what do participants think about the topic now that they have more knowledge?

This staged approach is reflected in the discussion guide design (see section 0).

3.1.1   Deliberative focus groups

Deliberative focus groups were chosen for the following benefits:
- Participants were able to share experiences of receiving/ coming across election and campaign materials.
- Information could be provided to participants in a standardised way; all participants saw the same information at the same time.
- A group session provided a forum where participants could work together to consider and generate suggestions to address any concerns regarding the regulation of political parties for offline and/ or online election or referendum campaigns in the UK.

A total of 15 focus groups were carried out. Between six and eight participants took part in each session. Each session lasted for two hours to give adequate time to explore all of the research objectives with participants.

3.1.2   Deliberative depth interviews

Deliberative depth interviews ensured an inclusive approach to the research, providing an appropriate method for including people in the research who may have been reluctant to participate in a group, or where it was valuable to tailor the depth interview session to the accessibility needs of the participant.
24 depth interviews were carried out in total. All interviews were one-to-one and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes.

3.2 Sample

The sample was designed collaboratively by the Electoral Commission and GfK. A mix of characteristics were taken into account:

Demographic profile: the sample structure was designed to include a good spread of gender, age and socio-economic group across the research sessions (focus groups and depth interviews).
Depth interviews further took into account the following criteria:
- People with English as a second language.
- People with learning difficulties/ low literacy.
- People with a visual or hearing impairment.

Location: research locations were chosen to ensure research took place in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Locations included a spread of regions within the nations, and included:
- England: London, Birmingham, Sheffield
- Wales: Cardiff, Colwyn Bay
- Scotland: Glasgow, Aberdeen
- Northern Ireland: Belfast

Research sessions in Wales were carried out by a bilingual moderator ensuring that the sessions could be run in English or Welsh depending on participant preferences.

Political attitudes: a key stratifying characteristic for the research was whether participants had voted to leave or remain in the referendum on UK membership of the European Union (EU)[2]. The rationale for stratifying groups on this basis was to ensure positive group dynamics to encourage open discussion and sharing of views. Careful consideration was given to the potentially controversial nature of the research topic in light of related media coverage questioning the credibility and influence of the campaigns in advance of the referendum. With media coverage on this issue often reflecting the strongly divisive tone surrounding the referendum, it was agreed that this potential division be reflected in the sampling to avoid a negative impact on group dynamics. With this in mind, groups were structured amongst those voted for or broadly sympathized with the arguments of the leave **or** remain campaigns. Within this, a spread of support of political parties was included across research sessions to ensure good inclusion of views.
In Northern Ireland, research sessions were stratified on the basis of whether participants identified themselves as a Nationalist or Unionist as this was considered to be a stronger determinant of positive group dynamics. Voting behaviour/ sympathy with the leave or remain campaigns fell out naturally across research sessions in Northern Ireland.

Political engagement: to further ensure positive group dynamics, groups were stratified on the basis of separate research amongst those with higher and lower political engagement/ interest. This sampling approach was adopted to mitigate the potential for those with less knowledge feeling inhibited and reluctant to make a contribution to the discussion. Engagement levels were ascertained through voting behaviour (whether participants had/ were likely to vote) and self-reported interest in politics.

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[2] The referendum on UK membership of the European Union took place on 23 June 2016.

3.2.1 Sample structure

The sample for the research sessions is shown below.

Location	Focus groups		Depth interviews
	High political engagement / interest	**Low political engagement / interest**	
England			
Sheffield	**Group 1** 60+ years BC1C2 Voted leave	**Group 2** 25 – 44, years C2DE Voted remain	• **Depths 1, 2 & 14**: English as a second language • **Depths 3, 4 & 16**: Learning difficulties/ low literacy • **Depths 5 & 6**: Visually/ hearing impaired
Birmingham	**Group 3** 45 – 59 years C2DE Voted leave	**Group 4** 17-24 years BC1C2 Voted leave	
London	**Group 5** 25 – 44 years BC1C2 Voted remain	**Group 6** 45 – 59 years BC1C2 Voted leave	
Bristol	-	-	
Wales			
Colwyn Bay	**Group 7** 45 – 59 years BC1C2 Voted remain	**Group 8** 25 – 44 years C2DE Voted leave	• **Depths 7 & 8**: English as a second language • **Depths 9 & 10**: Learning difficulties/ low literacy • **Depths 11 & 12**: Visually/ hearing impaired
Cardiff	**Group 9** 25 – 44 years C2DE Voted leave		
Scotland			
Glasgow	**Group 10** 25 – 44 years, C2DE Voted leave	**Group 11** 60+ years, C2DE, Voted remain	• **Depth 13**: English as a second language • **Depth 15**: Learning difficulties/ low literacy • **Depths 17 & 18**: Visually/ hearing impaired
Aberdeen	**Group 12** 17-24 years, BC1C2 Voted remain	**Group 13** 45 – 59 years, C2DE Voted remain	
Northern Ireland			
Belfast	**Group 14** 17 – 24 years C2DE Nationalist	**Group 15** 60+ years BC1C2 Unionist	• **Depths 19 & 20:** English as a second language • **Depths 21 & 22:** Learning difficulties/ low literacy • **Depths 23 & 24:** Visually/ hearing impaired

3.3 Discussion guide development

The discussion guide for use across research sessions (focus groups and depth interviews) was designed collaboratively by GfK and the Electoral Commission. The discussion guide was structured to follow a deliberative process of gathering spontaneous views from participants and then reaction to further information about the topic delivered via participant briefings.

The discussion guide flow is summarised below. A full copy can be found in the appendix.

Discussion guide section	Coverage
Introductions	• Introducing the research and research process to participants • Participants introducing themselves • Discussion of general sources of/ interest in political information
Regulation of parties and campaigns	• Recall of campaign materials seen during recent elections and referendums • Trust in campaign materials • Concerns regarding campaign materials • Knowledge of and expectations for rules around campaigns • Participant views regarding rules governing election and referendum campaigns in the UK* • Reaction to the rules including identification of any additional rules that could address existing concerns around campaign materials • Views on who is responsible for regulating the rules
Focus on digital campaigns	• Recall of digital campaign materials and views on these • How online materials compare with offline materials • Review of example online materials • Views on **trust** in materials including: any concerns; views on fake news*; what could help mitigate concerns; who should be responsible for mitigations • Views on the role of **source** of materials including: any concerns; views on bots and trolls*; what could help mitigate concerns; who should be responsible for mitigations • Views on **targeting** of materials including: any concerns, views on micro-targeting*; views on dark ads*; what could help mitigate concerns; who should be responsible for mitigations • Views on **funding** of materials including: any concerns; views on dark money*; what could help mitigate concerns; who should be responsible for mitigations
Summary and close	• Overall views on whether online campaign materials are fair and transparent • Identification of key concerns and potential mitigating factors • Discussion of who should be responsible for mitigations

	• Views on possible mitigating factors such as inclusion of imprint* information for online materials and publication of information such as spending, targeting, campaign and advert details • Sum up, thank and close

*Participant briefings were provided for these topics. A copy of the stimulus material used across the research sessions is provided in the appendix. Definitions are also provided in the glossary (see section 4.3).

The discussion guide was tweaked following the first research sessions to streamline the initial sections, providing further time for exploration and discussion during the latter sections of the discussion guide.

4   Reporting notes

4.1   Strength and limitations of the research

A qualitative approach was employed to explore public views regarding regulation of political party funding and spending for election or referendum campaigns in the UK. This allowed researchers to gather rich insights, which were increased by using a blend of deliberative focus groups and deliberative depth interviews.

The key strength of a qualitative approach is that it enabled researchers to gather spontaneous attitudes and insights, as well as highly nuanced feedback about the research objectives. Whilst qualitative discussions follow a clear structure, they emphasise the role of the participant in leading and driving the conversation through allowing them to answer in their own words and leading to responses that are full of rich insights. Participants are not limited in the way they answer the questions by being required to choose from multiple-choice answers as they would in a quantitative study.

The main limitation to using a qualitative research approach is that it emphasises self-expression and insight over numerical outcomes and so relies on detailed discussion with relatively small sample sizes. Whilst we included people from a wide range of backgrounds and with a variety of demographic characteristics and political engagement, the overall sample size means it is not statistically representative. The findings in this report focus on participant views and opinions; the findings do not attempt to quantify these.

4.2   Research context

Research sessions took place between 6 – 16 March 2018. During this time, the following news may have impacted participant views.

Attempted murder of Russian double agent and his daughter in the UK
- On 4 March former Russian spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia Skripal were found in Salisbury.
- On 12 March it was confirmed that the substance used in the attack was manufactured in Russia and set a deadline for Russia to respond to the situation.
- Following a statement from Russia denying involvement in the attack, on 15 March British government announced sanctions against Russia. The UK's position is supported by France, Germany and the US.

Publication of donations and loans figures for Northern Ireland Political Parties
- On 12 March the Electoral Commission published information regarding donations and loans for Northern Ireland Political Parties from July – December 2017

BBC School Report educates school children on fake news
- On 14 March the BBC School Report launched a series of tools to help children identify fake news (http://www.bbc.co.uk/schoolreport).

It should be noted that fieldwork concluded before news reports emerged regarding claims that Cambridge Analytica used Facebook data from people based in the UK, without individuals' permission, to help political campaigns.

4.3   Glossary of terms

The following terms are used throughout the report. Participants were provided with information about these topics via participant briefings and stimulus materials during the research sessions (please see the appendix).

Term	Explanation
Bots	Fake social media accounts that are programmed to generate messages automatically to support or put out specific messages often creating misleading trends.
Campaign materials	Advertising and other campaigning activity that takes place around elections and referendums in the UK
Dark ads	Online adverts that are only seen by the recipient (unless the recipient chooses the share the advert with someone else).
Dark money	Money that is spent or used during a campaign where the source of the money is unclear or unknown often because it is spent by a person or organisation that is not the campaigning party or candidate.
Fake news	False information deliberately used to misinform the public and often appearing or shared on social media platforms.
Imprint	Information that must legally be provided on printed election or referendum campaign material. This information must identify who is behind the campaign and who has created the materials.
Micro-targeting	The analysis of personal data to segment people into groups. Each group can then be targeted with tailored adverts.
Trolls	Fake social media accounts managed by real people who are paid to put out ideas and messages that might not be their own views. When working together, troll accounts can create misleading trends.

5   Context to the topic

5.1   Attitudes to politics and political campaigning

Research participants tended to express a negative, cynical attitude towards politics and politicians. In particular, they had a distrustful, disbelieving attitude towards claims made by politicians, especially during the course of election campaigning. Participants tended to say that they were irritated by negative campaigning, and candidates and campaign messages seeking to denigrate the opposition were particularly disliked.

> *"I feel like they are all just arguing with each other. I just leave them to it."*
> *Birmingham, 17-24 years, lower engagement*

> *"It is quite irritating because that is questioning somebody else rather than directly answering what they are asked. They kind of completely start talking about what the others are doing wrong or under their government what happened and they are trying to improve but in fact they are not. I do find it actually quite irritating."*
> *London, 25-44 years, higher engagement*

Participants tended to feel that there was a lack of truthfulness in campaign messages, and that deliberate distortions are an expected feature of the information that they receive during election campaigns. There was a particular scepticism about campaign pledges, as many felt that these were not sincere, and were instead specifically designed to win votes.

> *"Empty promises really."*
> *Birmingham, 17-24 years, lower engagement*

> *"They're selling you a product that doesn't exist."*
> *Aberdeen, 45-59 years, lower engagement*

> *"You read it (political info) and you're just thinking that well, you're saying the same as them, and they're saying the same as them, and you're all making promises you can't really keep."*
> *Sheffield, 25-44 years, lower engagement*

> *"What they say on the paper is what they claim to do. Claim and delivery has never matched in politics…so psychologically we humans don't believe it. We would like to…it's probably a 4 out of 10…more hope than trust."*
> *London, English as a second language*

For some, this distrust was linked to a scepticism about mainstream media's reporting of political issues which was thought to distort news stories to support the agenda of a particular party, or of the establishment as a whole. For example, attempting to discredit certain candidates by highlighting or exaggerating negative stories about them.
This meant that even for messages carried by established mainstream sources, although the sources may be trusted as bona fide, the messages themselves were not necessarily trusted to be truthful.

> *"You can trust it in a way, it's just a matter of can you believe what they're saying...you trust the source, they're just passing the message, it's just a case of whether you can believe it."*

Birmingham, English as a second language

"You have to get lucky to find an objective view on something, where they say right well this is positive and this is negative."
Sheffield, 25-44 years, lower engagement

"Certain newspapers favour certain parties so there are rules. They are probably broken but no one knows about that."
Cardiff, 25-44 years, higher engagement

Many participants, particularly younger people, felt that political issues could be difficult to understand in depth, and that the complexity of the issues made news and campaign material more difficult to trust.

"I think it can become quite confusing to people, like the Brexit thing. I will put my hand up and say I didn't really understand half of it. You have got everybody saying to do this or do that…some of them had to admit they got the figures wrong. So if they get it wrong how am I supposed to understand it?"
Birmingham, 45-59 years, higher engagement

They also cited the wealth and privilege of the political class, which was thought to provide an unfair advantage to certain politicians, and to distance politicians from the concerns of real people.

"Corporates and politics is not really for the people for me. You remember [the expenses scandal] 'duck house', they lie. They are such barefaced liars. As a whole all of them... How can you believe when they get caught out on 'duck house' and the expenses? How can I even relate to people that are making decisions for me that live in a gated house somewhere that I am paying for? They are too far removed."
London, 45-59 years, lower engagement

For these reasons, participants tended to claim to be disinterested or disillusioned with politics. This also meant that participants tended to take a sceptical attitude to campaign materials in general, or to reject or ignore them. Younger people were more likely to say that they had no interest in politics. However, this overt rejection was often belied by the fact that those who claimed to reject politics did have an interest in political issues, although they did not necessarily identify these issues as political. For example, although participants claimed not to have read or engaged with campaign material at the time of the election, some had taken an active interest in materials about NHS funding and nurses' pay.

Participants varied in their approach to negotiating the difficulties around complexity of information, lack of trust, and low credibility of political claims. Many looked to traditional news sources to help negotiate these concerns, as they felt that they could broadly trust the information from these sources. However, as already described, some preferred to avoid traditional media sources and instead to look for alternatives which they felt provided a more balanced perspective. Some claimed to check facts using a variety of sources. Others said that they preferred to avoid paying attention to news or political messages altogether. There was a general expectation that individuals should take responsibility for assessing the trustworthiness of sources and messages.

"After a while you get a bit immune to it [election advertising]."
Birmingham, 45-59 years, higher engagement

"I think you get disillusioned don't you…it is the same old thing."
Birmingham, 45-59 years, higher engagement

"If it was like fact-checked and stuff like from the BBC or something like that I would probably trust it a little bit more."
Birmingham, 17-24 years, lower engagement

"I would trust it if it came from a reliable source like BBC News …they wouldn't be allowed to give false information."
Aberdeen, 45-59 years, lower engagement

Local politics was thought to be more trustworthy, as participants felt that they were better able to understand the local context around the arguments being made, and therefore were in a better position to judge the truthfulness of statements. There was also a greater level of trust in politicians at a local level. This was particularly mentioned in Wales and Northern Ireland.

"When I see a lot of these criticisms I think they are more on a national scale. I feel at the grass roots level and you have individual candidate posters, they are more reflective of the social reality of the political environment that they are in."
Belfast, 17-24 years, higher engagement

5.2 Engagement with campaign material – digital, online and traditional sources

Participants were able to recall seeing campaign materials in advance of elections, and when asked to provide examples, tended to mention billboards, bus ads and campaign leaflets. Most had difficulty recalling specific messages or images, except those that had come to prominence in the media as a result of a controversy.

"The slogan written on the side of the bus that didn't happen…The stuff they always promise that never happens."
Cardiff, 25 – 44, higher engagement

When asked specifically about campaign materials, participants tended to initially recall traditional campaign materials, and were less likely to mention digital campaigns. However as the discussion developed they recalled seeing digital materials, especially those delivered via Facebook, YouTube and Twitter.

"On Facebook you see stuff. A lot of my friends will share stuff if they are more Labour or Conservative. You see quite a bit popping up."
Birmingham, 17-24 years, lower engagement

Some of those with more interest in politics said that they had a low level of engagement with campaign materials, as they preferred to focus on information that was more in-depth, or focused on policies. Participants overall reported a higher level of engagement with

news media reporting than with campaign materials at the time of an election, including TV leadership debates and news analysis.

When asked about the reasons for their low level of interest in campaign materials, participants tended to say that they preferred to ignore campaign materials, and to actively avoid engaging with these. Most commonly, this was because of a lack of interest in politics, and a sense that the claims made in such materials are not credible because they are made by politicians aiming to be elected and therefore likely to include false promises.

> *"They all contradict themselves don't they? They say that they are going to do this for the NHS or they are going to do this for the working class or to help other people and then you vote for that campaign. It's just deceit."*
> *Colwyn Bay, 45-59 years, higher engagement*

There was some debate as to whether participants were more likely to actively engage with traditional or digital campaign materials. Younger people in particular were more likely to say that digitally delivered content was their only means of receiving political content.

> *"It reaches people that otherwise would not - like I never watch the news; I don't have a TV, and if it wasn't for social media I wouldn't know anything about the news."*
> *Aberdeen, 17-24 years, higher engagement*

> *"Phones are so personal now so the fact that for a lot of people it is a connection to the outside world. It has got your diary on it. It has got where you have got to be. There are so many different things because for a lot of people it is literally your life. So many people do spend so much time on Facebook or social media."*
> *Cardiff, 25 – 44 years, higher engagement*

For some, traditional campaign materials were more easily dismissed, as they could be quickly identified and avoided. For example, people often claimed to throw away campaign leaflets unread, where social media couldn't be disregarded so easily. For others, political material such as campaign material did not manage to attract their attention on social media and was therefore disregarded.

> *Before, I just changed; like you're saying, you just change over the channel but you can't help but reading that because it's popping up all the time. You end up reading it because you say, 'I've seen that before; why does this keep coming up? It must be important so I'll read it.'*
> *Aberdeen, 45-59 years, lower engagement*

> *"On Facebook you have got a choice of whether you are going to follow that party of follow that person and unless you do or your friends share something, you don't come across it. So in a way we are all filtering what content we have online."*
> *Birmingham, 45-59 years, higher engagement*

It is worth noting that during this discussion of campaign material, participants did not always readily identify certain material relevant to campaigns as linked to a campaign. Messages on social media surrounding particular areas of interest, such as the NHS, were not always seen as campaign materials. Digitally delivered campaigning material of this kind, sometimes linked to an area of interest rather than an official party or

campaign, was often very interesting and engaging for participants. Visually appealing communication devices such as use of charts, graphs or videos were thought to add to the appeal of these messages.

> *"I saw like a graph and the graph basically said in Basingstoke more people didn't vote than voted for the Tories. It was basically telling you just get out and vote rather than have the Tories in power. Stuff like that is engaging because it is a pictorial approach to it. You are actually seeing stuff and getting the graphs which is probably more interesting than reading two or three paragraphs. The pictorials are better and engaging."*
> *Belfast, 17-24 years, higher engagement*

> *"On Facebook you could be casually scrolling past and in your own personal time you may not have a political mind. So you do get a lot more influence from Facebook."*
> *Cardiff, 25 – 44 years, lower engagement*

Digitally delivered information about politics could also be entertaining, particularly in a video format. Video clips could be funny and enjoyable to watch and in this sense more engaging.

> *"I would click on a parody. There is a Nick Clegg song that has been parodied like 'I am sorry. I am sorry. I am so, so sorry'. I would click on that but I wouldn't click on the election material because it is just not interesting*
> *London, 45-59 years, lower engagement*

> *"There was a clip from LBC where a politician got the price of policing dramatically wrong and they ridiculed them…It was Diane Abbott wasn't it? Yes. They put her on the spot and she made up an even more absurd figure. That is where I think politics does get interesting."*
> *London, 25-44 years, higher engagement*

The opportunity for discussion and debate that was provided by social media was also valued by some.

> *"Online is more opinionated because you don't walk past a billboard and see 15 people arguing at each other."*
> *Birmingham, 17-24 years, lower engagement*

> *"I think it is different because the politician is going to speak instead of you reading something."*
> *Birmingham, 45-59 years, higher engagement*

A few participants across the research noted that in the online setting, there are limits on the material that is seen, as some filtering is likely to have taken place for example to a social media feed, or a tailored news media feed. This was considered an advantage of digital media by some, as the filtering meant that they were more likely to see material that was of interest to them. For some others, this created an 'echo chamber' effect which meant that people are more likely to see material that aligns with their own views, and therefore less likely to see a balanced coverage of important issues.

6   Digital campaigns

Participants were conscious that their style of consumption of digital campaigns was distinct from traditional campaign messages. For some, especially those who consumed more social media, digital campaign material was more ubiquitous, greater in volume, and therefore more likely to gain their attention.

> *"Everybody is on Facebook. You scroll down and at every general election you see posters. It doesn't matter who it is but it is one or the other. When people see that sort of stuff it sticks more rather than a flyer through my door. You get religious flyers or the flyers from the different parties I take them and I put them straight in the bin. It doesn't do anything for me. If I see something it will stick in my head because probably I am annoyed at seeing it but it will still be stuck there. From a psychological perspective that just sticks with people more so than being able to just go like this and there is the bin. You can't really escape it on Facebook because it is going to be there."*
> *Belfast, 17-24 years, higher engagement*

> *"The Facebook stuff, the stuff online if it does pop up like that, because it is there in front of you and it has started playing.... You probably have about 10 or 12 seconds of it playing before you decide whether you want to turn it off whereas with a leaflet you don't even have to read it. You can see it and throw it in the bin."*
> *London, 45-59 years, lower engagement*

For some, the high volume of political content was thought to be overwhelming, or even intrusive.

> *"It is quite intrusive actually. I just don't really want it... I think it happens so much now that I am quite desensitised to it. I have taken Facebook off my phone and I don't go on it on the computer and I have also got a mic block on my phone now."*
> *London, 45-59 years, lower engagement*

Participants tended to say that they approached online material differently to traditional materials, as they regarded digitally delivered material to be less trustworthy. This was because of the potential for less credible sources to bring information to prominence online. This could include sources that sought to deliberately mislead people, such as unscrupulous campaigners spreading false or misleading information. It could also include information created or shared by poorly-informed commentators or individuals. This awareness of the potential pitfalls of digitally delivered information appeared to lower the credibility of information received via online platforms overall, making people more vigilant to the possibility that information delivered digitally could be untrustworthy. People reported approaching digitally delivered information with less trust, and with a more sceptical attitude than traditional materials.

> *"On the Internet, I really can't take much. There is such a small element of truth and the standard of reporting is pretty low. I take it all with a pinch of salt. There might be an element of truth."*
> *London, 45-59 years, lower engagement*

"I would say on Facebook politicians find it easier (to deceive voters) because you can just have a YouTube video. If I saw it on a big billboard I would be like maybe they actually do want to do this.
Belfast, 17-24 years, higher engagement

"You hear these folk that just set up false pages, so I wouldn't imagine there'd be as much rules governing what information they're putting in social media as there is in paper."
Aberdeen, 45-59 years, lower engagement

"I don't think anyone in our age group would think to themselves I need to make a decision based on what they say on Facebook."
*Sheffield, 25-44 years, lower engagement*

"It is quicker to spread. Anyone can share it and people believe anything that they read online."
Belfast, 17-24 years, higher engagement

"I trust the stuff in the post more readily because it has obviously come from the party and you don't know whether a clip that is sent to you has really come from them."
London, 45-59 years, lower engagement

Diagram 1: factors considered when discussing digitally delivered campaign materials.
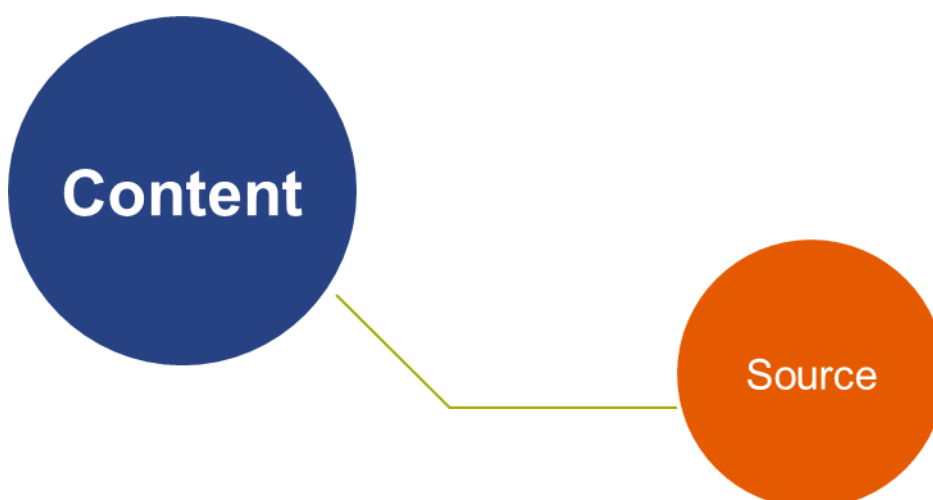
When discussing concerns about digitally delivered materials, key concerns emerging at the spontaneous level were around content and source.

As with traditional materials, participants had different approaches to verifying that the information they saw digitally was bona fide and trustworthy. For most, this was addressed by seeking out credible news brands to provide reassurance. Some claimed to carefully check facts that they read online by looking at other sources. Others said that they simply relied upon common sense, personal knowledge, or considering certain features of the messages themselves to assess the extent to which they were willing to trust them. In this sense people tended to rely upon their own capacity to distinguish truth from fiction online.

"To me that (social media commentary) doesn't make me decide that I want to vote for that party. If you go to BBC News or parliament when they are arguing with each other, you haven't spent money there and you are spending it there and what is going on, that is where you hear the truth."
London, 25-44 years, higher engagement

"I wouldn't just base it on what other people have commented because people sometimes have odd opinions. I would go to the original source."
Glasgow, 25-44 years, higher engagement

"It is down to common sense of what you believe and what you read into and how believable and true it is…. You choose to believe what you believe."
London, 25-44 years, higher engagement

"I do quite a lot on Facebook. I always check and always make sure it is a reliable source."
Cardiff, 25-44 years, higher engagement

There was acknowledgement from some that although people may approach online messages with scepticism, there was a risk that unverified information could still have an influence to some degree. There was an acceptance that the nature of digital campaigns made it difficult to discern the source of all the materials that they receive.

"It's having the time to do these things as well because most people are quite busy. I think you just want to get information. Unless you're really, really into it, then you would go digging away."
Aberdeen, 45-59 years, lower engagement

"If it has gone viral and you can't see where it has come from originally, that is the issue that you are stuck with. So you are being bombarded with a news story that you are a little bit sceptical about. If you take the time you can then go and look into it but it honestly depends on how interested you are in that specific story."
Cardiff, 25 – 44 years, higher engagement

"I think you get bombarded with so much now and I don't think you have time to stop and think about where it is coming from. You accept that that is just the nature of today and the nature of social media. That is just the direct marketing process that they use now."
Glasgow, 25-44 years, higher engagement

"I think it's hard because you're given so much information by various different parties and, to be honest, I get a bit bamboozled with it all."
Aberdeen, 45-59 years, lower engagement

"When it is something totally irrelevant then I wouldn't have any interest and I would just keep swiping and keep going. Sometimes if it is like a subliminal message, even though you are not properly reading it, you swipe because we all do and then stop when you see something of interest. But because it is there and it keeps coming up.... "

Colwyn Bay, 25-44 years, lower engagement

As with traditional campaign materials, identifying a trustworthy source was important in establishing the credibility of a message. However, although identifying a trusted source helped to reassure participants that campaign material was bona fide, this did not always mean that they believed the information contained in the message. This is because there is a distrust of campaign messages and statements made by politicians more generally. Participants were generally aware that 'promoted' or 'sponsored' posts on social media constituted paid-for advertising. This was accepted as a feature of social media, with no strong feelings about this, although some objected to the use of social media for advertising. Others found it reassuring, as it indicated a bona fide source. There was no evidence that participants checked the source of the message when they saw this type of post.

"I feel like because it is my social media I choose who my friends are and I choose who I follow and what I like, but then doing that [promoted messages] removes that choice. I am not choosing to see that, so it is a bit invasive maybe."
Birmingham, 17-24 years, lower engagement

"If you put something that's sponsored and paid for, I think I'd be more likely to believe that it's a more genuine page."
*Aberdeen, 45-59 years, lower engagement*

6.1 Responses to stimulus material on potential concerns and digital technologies for online campaigns

During the research sessions, participants were provided with information about the following topics. The stimulus detailing potential use and implications of digital technologies for online campaigns:

- Fake news
- Bots and trolls
- Micro-targeting
- Dark ads
- Dark money

Consideration of these technologies and potential implications encouraged participants to broaden out their thinking about election and referendum campaign material.

Diagram 2: factors considered once prompted to consider potential concerns and use of digital technologies for online campaigns
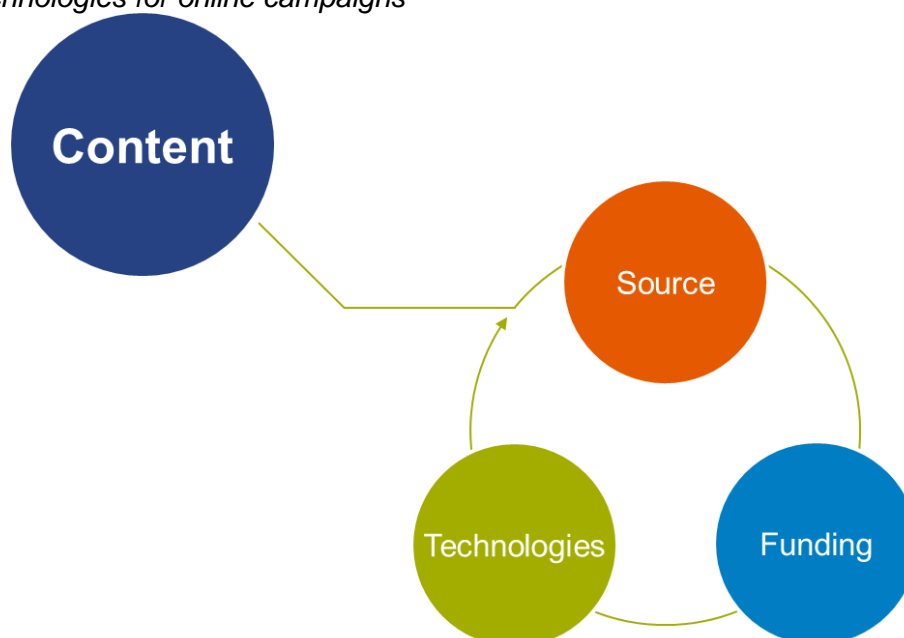
As discussed in section 5.2, at a spontaneous level most participants had thought about the content and source of election campaign materials. Participants frequently noted that they felt that believability and the trustworthy nature of campaign material content was crucial, and where clear, a source could reinforce trust in content or call into question its believability.

Once prompted to consider potential concerns and use of technologies, participants also began to consider the role of campaign funding and applications of technology in online campaigning.

> *"To be honest, I hadn't really thought about where the money comes from for campaigning! It's not something that I'd have thought of before, actually."*
> *Aberdeen, 45-59 years, lower engagement*

6.1.1 Fake news

➔ Fake news encouraged participants to further consider believability of content of campaign materials, and the source of these.

At a spontaneous level, most participants had heard of the concept of fake news. Some initially mentioned Donald Trump, and associated fake news as a term politicians might use to express dislike or disagreement with certain information.

Overall, fake news was described in a variety of ways by participants; all focused on false information. A spectrum of fake news emerged ranging from news that is distorted through to news that is entirely manufactured.

Diagram 3: the spectrum of fake news
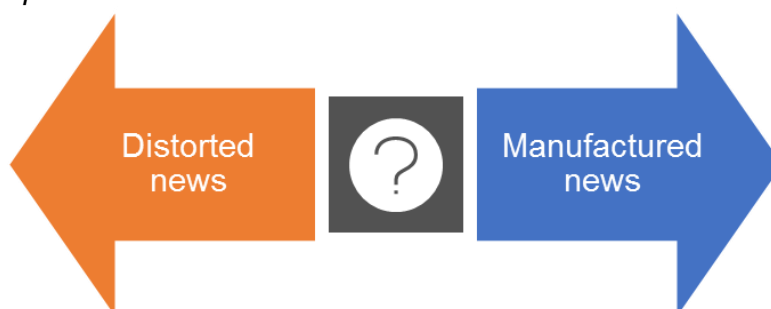
Manufactured news

The 'manufactured news' end of the spectrum captures comments that participants made in relation to news that was entirely made up with the intention of misinforming people. Participants felt that intentions behind manufactured news were negative in nature, and therefore expressed concern about this type of news, the influence it had, and who backed or initiated it.

> *"They make you believe something that is untrue."*
> *Glasgow, 60+ years, lower engagement*

Distorted news

The 'distorted news' end of the spectrum captures comments that participants made regarding news that is presented in a misleading way to support a particular viewpoint. This could include information that is exaggerated, or highlighting specific angles to support a certain viewpoint. This was generally linked to the view that certain media sources are biased and therefore distort news to fit their particular agenda.

> *"They have all got allegiances anyway to parties."*
> *Birmingham, 17-24 years, lower engagement*

> *"They spin it to suit their own agenda."*
> *Belfast, 17-24 years, higher engagement*

> *"I think fake news is obviously a dangerous aspect anyway but then also equally dangerous is news organisations not actually reporting certain aspects of news which are real news, monumental pieces of news which they choose not to share with you because it is shady politics."*
> *Cardiff, 25 -44 years, higher engagement*

Views regarding distorted news were also linked to a general cynicism regarding politicians, and a widespread view that politicians manipulate news to their advantage. Participants noted examples where they felt that politicians made exaggerated claims or referenced untrustworthy statistics to reinforce their viewpoint.

"All the politicians will have an agenda to get what they want and manipulating people is a means for them to do it."
Glasgow, 25-44 years, higher engagement

"If you get somebody coming out and saying if you vote for independence or you will lose your tax powers or the health service won't be there and all this kind of thing, that is fake news because that is the scaremongering."
Glasgow, 60+ years, lower engagement

Across the research it was clear that the high level of cynicism regarding politicians and pre-election promises meant that for participants there was a fine line between whether a statement made by a campaigner was seen as merely an over-exaggeration, or a full fabrication made to gain votes and garner support.

"Every campaign is all fake news. They are going to spend on this and on schools and hospitals."
Glasgow, 25-44 years, higher engagement

Across the research participants agreed that in this definition, the phenomenon of fake news was not new and that distortion of the truth was a tactic used across both traditional and online campaign materials. To this extent, some distortion of the truth was seen as inevitable in relation to election campaigns. However, participants noted that online technology played a crucial role in the reach and speed of influence that fake news had.

"It is just easier to spread fake news now with social media."
Birmingham, 45-59 years, higher engagement

When participants considered that the content of information they saw could constitute 'fake news', they reflected on the role that the source of information played. Whilst some felt that political parties and media organisations were biased, they also concluded that the source of news around elections needed to take responsibility for ensuring that news was not fake and manufactured.

"I think the source has to be responsible enough for everything that they show has to be thoroughly research and checked and they are responsible for everything they show…and if something isn't right they take appropriate action."
London, English as a second language

"If fake news is spread about a political party, you don't know whether to believe it or not because we are very cynical about political parties."
Birmingham, 45-59 years, higher engagement

6.1.2 Bots and trolls

➜ Information about bots and trolls encouraged participants to further consider the way in which technologies are used in online campaigns, and the source and funding of these.

At a spontaneous level, participants had heard of bots in relation to automated technology that placed adverts on websites/ social media pages based on previous searches you had carried out online. Participants mentioned seeing adverts for products such as clothing and holidays based on searches they had carried out online.

"If you were say looking at shoes, it can show up on all the different platforms in a matter of minutes."
Belfast, 17-24 years, higher engagement

Trolls was also a recognised term for many, and related to online bullying and harassment. Some participants were aware that in some cases, legal prosecutions had been made against trolls in high profile cases.

"Trolls is when people on the computer are abusing people."
London, 25-44 years, higher engagement

Those most engaged and interested in political news recalled news coverage about the use of bots and trolls in political messaging. These participants mentioned political parties using trolls, the use of trolls and bots in the US presidential election and online activity originating in Russia.

However, most participants had not considered the role of bots and trolls in relation to online election campaigns.

Once participants had been provided with information about bots and trolls two main concerns emerged. These concerns focused on the potential for these technologies to influence content and therefore peoples' views.

Diagram 4: key concerns regarding bots and trolls

1. Participants felt that bots and trolls could create a false impression of the scale of support for a viewpoint through fast creation of trends.

"People start believing it. If it is trending then straight away you look at this and then go and tell somebody and have you heard about so and so? That is just the power of the internet."
Birmingham, 17-24 years, lower engagement

2. Participants felt that bots and trolls would make it easy for fake news to be quickly promoted. Alongside this was the concern that people would not be aware that these technologies existed or were being used in relation to political messaging, and that this could result in messages being taken at face value.

"They influence people I know because people don't realise that this is happening and people who aren't educated and don't read up and don't investigate claims that they see will just see whatever comes up as gospel."
Glasgow, 25-44 years, higher engagement

Participants were often surprised that trolls would be paid to promote views that were not their own. They in turn wondered who funded this activity, expressing concerns over who was influencing political messages and promoting fake news.

> *"It is lies. It is wrong. If someone is paying them to go out and tell lies it is worst. You have got to find who is paying them first."*
> *Birmingham, 45-59 years, higher engagement*

6.1.3 Micro-targeting

➜ Information about micro-targeting encouraged participants to further consider the way in which technologies are used in online campaigns, and funding of this.

Participants were asked for their views regarding the use of micro-targeting in online election campaigns. There was strong agreement that targeting was a normalised marketing practice which was simply an effective way of advertising to the appropriate groups.

> *"It is not terrible. That is what you do isn't it? When you are advertising you go for your target audience. That is the most effective way of doing it."*
> *Birmingham, 17-24 years, lower engagement*

> *"If the information they are targeting you with is still true then okay."*
> *Colwyn Bay, 25-44 years, lower engagement*

Participants did, however, raise queries and some concerns regarding how their data had been gathered and how it was being used.

> *"Having the source of information and where the information is coming from is a huge concern. If there is one source it should be from our local council rather than sourcing it from little quizzes that you do on Facebook or God knows where people are getting this."*
> *London, 25-44 years, higher engagement*

> *"They may be in cahoots with Facebook. My profile is pretty closed and private but it is still getting stuff which isn't on any public things."*
> *Birmingham, 17-24 years, lower engagement*

Whilst participants were familiar with online search histories flagging up interests that were used to target them with advertising, they were unsure how political parties would source this type of personal data.
A couple of participants queried the actual process for micro-targeting, and there were some assumptions that this type of task would be costly, resulting in these participants querying how this type of activity was funded.

> *"Would it cost a lot of money for somebody to analyse all this data?"*
> *Glasgow, 60+ years, lower engagement*

A few participants also began to query whether micro-targeting could be used to promote false information to groups of people. It should be noted that this type of comment may be the result of a research effect, where participants were already thinking about fake news

and promotion of false news. However, it did prompt some participants to consider whether micro-targeting could have a 'grey area' or more sinister use.

> *"I think it is actually quite a smart technique to target people. But it depends on the context. Like a lot of the things we have been looking at today, it is very grey."*
> *Belfast, 17-24 years, higher engagement*

6.1.4 Dark ads

→ Information about dark ads encouraged participants to further consider the way in which technologies are used in online campaigns to promote information.

The use of micro-targeting to deliver dark ads was not something that participants had previously considered or were aware of.

Views regarding the use of this technology were dependent on the intention behind its use. Where it was used to deliver legitimate messages at an identified group its use was considered more acceptable.

> *"If they are micro-targeting me or some sub-group that I follow, if they are telling me about political policies that this party is going to do for me then that is relevant and informing me. I would be fine with that."*
> *Glasgow, 25-44 years, higher engagement*

Some reflected that if they were not interested in the advert, they would simply ignore it regardless of whether it was something that only they saw.

> *"If I get anything like that and it is only seen by me, I can delete that. It is no big problem, I don't think. You can just delete it unless you start showing it to other people."*
> *Glasgow, 60+ years, lower engagement*

However, some felt that dark ads were a way for campaigners to manipulate people.

> *"Yes. This is concerning. This is Big Brother that is like manipulating me. That really does concern me."*
> *London, 45-59 years, lower engagement*

> *"It is easier to get the vote if you have that dark ads and if people were able to do that because it is easier to sway the vote because no one else can see it apart from that individual. So it is easy to create a bias there."*
> *Belfast, 17-24 years, higher engagement*

Greatest levels of concerns regarding dark ads were voiced where there was a concern that they were promoting fake news.

> *"My concern is about fake news and fake information. If they are going to send one message to me about immigration say and a completely different one to him, it is a dirty game really."*
> *London, 25-44 years, higher engagement*

"I think it should be forbidden. If they are going to send two different messages to me and somebody else about something....They either stand for one or the other. If they are going to sway somebody who is a floating voter by saying something that is completely not true, it is deceiving."
London, 25-44 years, higher engagement

6.1.5 Dark money

➔ Information about dark money encouraged participants to further consider the funding of campaigns.

Participants had not heard of the term dark money, and only a couple had heard of the concept.

The few who were most informed cited examples including speculation that funding from overseas was received by the DUP to fund an advert in the Metro paper in England during the EU referendum campaign. These participants felt that dark money in this context was problematic especially given the funding link to an overseas donor.

"If that money did come from Saudi Arabia, that is a criminal act. That is outside intervention in British politics."
London, 25-44 years, higher engagement

However the vast majority of participants had simply not considered dark money before, and often struggled to formulate an opinion. The term 'dark money' suggested something negative to many participants.

"It is like people who don't pay tax. It is under the table, undercover."
London, 45-59 years, lower engagement

"It is pretty underhanded then isn't it?"
Birmingham, 45-59 years, higher engagement

Overall, there was some debate about how easy it would be to control this type of spending, with most feeling sceptical that this could be easily controlled.

"But money that is spent without being declared so to speak can always be denied because it is not spent by you so you can't control it. You can just say well, we can't control this person who is our supporter. If they chose to spend £5 million supporting us it is down to them. We can't control them."
London, 45-59 years, lower engagement

Participants also wondered how easy it would be to prove collusion between the party/ campaigner and source of the dark money.

"You can't really hold the candidate responsible for it either. You can't blame them for the actions of someone else."
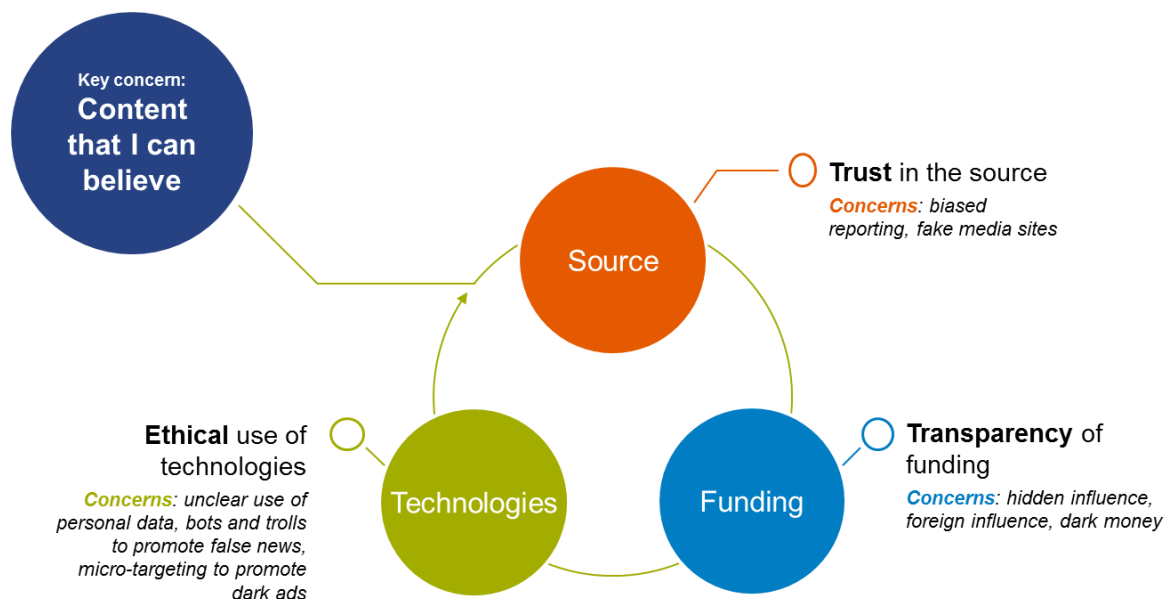*Belfast, 17-24 years, higher engagement*

However, it was agreed that concerns would be heightened about dark money where there was clear evidence of collusion.

6.2 Summary of concerns

Across the research, a range of concerns emerged which are summarized in the diagram below.

Diagram 5: summary of concerns for online campaigns

Content
The **core** concern for participants throughout the research was the believability and trustworthiness of the **content** they consumed during election campaigns.
Fake news was a key component of this, raising questions around what content can be believed and what influence fake news could have on people during election campaigns.

> *"I would say that fake news is probably the biggest issue because it does sway those decisions and the way people vote."*
> *Belfast, 17-24 years, higher engagement*

Concerns relating to **source**, **funding** and **tools** used during online campaigns all linked back to the impact these had on the believability and trustworthy nature of the content.

Overall concerns regarding source were:
➔ Is the content believable and trustworthy?

Source
The **source** of information was considered important – especially where there were question marks around the believability of content. In most cases, participants assumed that content could be trusted if from sources they personally liked or trusted.

> *"If the source is right and the content is wrong then I think everything is lost, then there's no turning back."*
> *London, English as a second language*

However, due to the overall climate of distrust around politics, the trustworthiness and believability of information from trusted sources was sometimes called into question.

Overall concerns regarding source were:
➔ Does this source have a particular political agenda?
➔ Is the source distorting content to suit a particular agenda?
➔ Is this a bona fide source, or a source that could send false information?

Funding

The transparency of **funding** was a concern, with participants expressing general queries and uncertainty about who major donors were. They were often suspicious regarding the motivation for individuals or companies supporting parties and campaigns.

> *"It could be a big bank who wants to have influence in the government or something like that…so indirect power."*
> *Birmingham, 17-24 years, lower engagement*

Participants were particularly concerned about foreign influence on UK elections. Again, they anticipated that there could be ominous reasons for why foreign individuals or companies would fund a UK party or campaign.

> *"It doesn't really benefit them [foreign company] unless they know that something is going to benefit them if they do win, and they get into power."*
> *Birmingham, 17-24 years, lower engagement*

Across the research participants were reassured that foreign influence in UK elections was covered by existing Electoral Commission rules. However, concerns were raised in relation to:
• Situations where donations were legitimately given but money trails could reveal that funds originated in a foreign country.
• Situations where companies or businesses could legitimately make donations to a party/ campaign because they have a UK presence but the company/ business is owned/ ultimately led by a foreign individual.

> *"It should be British companies dealing with it but then again what is British anymore? It is these conglomerates isn't it."*
> *Birmingham, 45-59 years, higher engagement*

> *"You get the likes of an American company like (unclear) coming over here and incorporating in Belfast as well but they have got American roots. They actually were established in America or Canada so that is a foreign influence if they are going to pump money into a political party."*
> *Belfast, 17-24 years, higher engagement*

More broadly, there were concerns regarding **funding** for the following reasons:
• Funding to promote fake news via tools such as bots, trolls and micro-targeting.
• Funding via dark money.

These concerns were raised in relation to any individual or company/ organisation funding these activities – regardless of whether they were from a foreign country. The key

concerns were around the **intent** of these; funding was either hidden (suggesting an illegal or sinister activity) or purposely misinforming the public.

Overall concerns regarding funding were:
➔ Who is funding parties/ campaigns, what is their motivation to do this and what influence does this have on the content the public consumes during UK elections?
➔ What assurances are there that there is not any foreign influence in the content the public consumes during UK elections?
➔ Who is funding fake news and use of tools that shape the content the public consumes during UK elections?
➔ Who is funding via dark money and why is this funding being hidden?

<u>**Technologies**</u>
Whilst the fact that online technologies (bots, trolls, micro-targeting) could be used in relation to UK election campaigns was not something that participants had been previously aware of, it emerged as a concern where the use of these was:
• To promote fake news or mislead/ misinform the public.
• Funded via hidden money or foreign influence.

The use of personal data for micro-targeting also emerged as a concern. This focused on how personal data had been gathered and whether collection and use of this was ethical.

> *"They should do it [use personal data] in an ethical way and not be sneaky about it."*
> *Birmingham, 17-24 years, lower engagement*

Overall concerns regarding technologies were:
➔ How are tools used to shape the content the public consumes during UK elections?
➔ Who is funding use of tools that shape the content the public consumes during UK elections?
➔ How is personal data gathered and used and is this done in an ethical way?

7   Regulation of election campaigns

7.1 Responses to current system of regulation of political campaigns

Many participants had not previously considered that there might be rules regarding political campaigns.

> *"Are there rules? There don't seem to be any rules."*
> *Belfast, 17-24 years, higher engagement*

Some anticipated that there must be some rules, but only a few had specifically heard about rules in the media.

> *"We don't actively hear about it but we have just got a vague idea that there would be rules in place."*
> *London, 25-44 years, higher engagement*

Participants were provided with information during the research sessions giving a summary of current rules for campaigns. Feedback from participants tended to focus on the following areas:

Diagram 6: key areas of feedback regarding the current rules for campaign regulation

Spending

Funding

Content

Reporting

Fines

7.1.1 Spending

At a spontaneous level participant assumed that there would be a cap for campaign spending.

> *"There should be like a cap or whose money it is that is being used."*
> *Birmingham, 17-24 years, lower engagement*

The rules around spending caps were therefore as expected although there was some surprise at the amount of money that could be spent on a campaign. This led some to consider that within the capped amount for spend there was probably great diversity in what each party actually spent. With this in mind, some suggested that all parties be given a set budget to ensure fairness.

> *"They should all be able to spend the exact same amount so that it is more of a fair campaign."*
> *Birmingham, 45-59 years, higher engagement*

7.1.2 Funding

Participants were often unclear about how campaigns were funded with many expressing concern that public funds may be used.
Once aware of the rules participants noted that they agreed that there should not be any foreign influence in UK elections. There was also discussion more broadly about the motivations behind major donations, and a degree of cynicism regarding what donors might expect in return for their support.

> *"There should be some rules because most of them are supporting these parties so they can get their own view through…industries…you hear about it in the news that so many parties have taken money from people that they shouldn't have."*
> *Birmingham, English as a second language*

"It is not about the donation. It is about the agenda. If someone gives a donation that is fine but actually it is what they are getting back for it, that is the bit that is more concerning like whether it is policy direction or whatever."
London, 25-44 years, higher engagement

"I would imagine a lot of those who do donate are the people who are going to benefit in the long run."
Sheffield, 60+ years, higher engagement

7.1.3 Content

There was some surprise amongst participants that the current rules did not cover anything relating to the content of campaigns. This was particularly top of mind as participants across the research had spontaneously discussed the importance of believable content during election campaigns.
With this in mind, some participants felt that the rules should cover campaign content.

"I think there should be more regulations on content so they can't be giving out false information or false numbers."
Birmingham, 17-24 years, lower engagement

7.1.4 Fines

Participants felt that the fines for breach of regulations was too lenient especially considering the amount of money that could be spend on a campaign. They did not feel that the fine would be a deterrent.

"It's peanuts, isn't it? It's not going to deterrent anybody, is it? They're not going to stop doing it for a £20,000 fine."
Sheffield, 60+ years, higher engagement

There were also some concerns that fines could be considerably less than the maximum £20,000 which further led participant to query whether this strength of sanction was appropriate.

"I hate the words 'up to', it's a get out…up to could be £300…it would be better to say a minimum…minimum should be £20k and there should be no upwards."
London, English as a second language

Some suggested stronger sanctions which is further discussed in section 7.4.1.

"They should be pulled off the campaign. The penalty is not severe enough."
London, 25-44 years, higher engagement

"It is a waste of time even though they fine them £20K. They don't disqualify the candidate."
London, 45-59 years, lower engagement

7.1.5 Reporting

Only a few participants spontaneously noted that they expected reporting and publication of campaign funding and spend.

"I imagine there should be transparency kind of stuff…not a lot of cash being given to people…I imagine big companies sponsor the parties so there must be rules around tax and stuff."
London, English as a second language

Whilst participants were positive towards this they raised some queries and concerns. Some queried why reporting was carried out at the end of a campaign, feeling that it would be too late for the Electoral Commission, or the public to take any action once voting had been carried out.

"But by the time you have reported it the election is over!"
Birmingham, 45-59 years, higher engagement

This is further discussed in section 7.4.1.

There were also queries raised regarding how accessible information around spending was to the public. Some noted that they simply had never heard that this type of information was available.

"I didn't know that I could look and see how much is being spent on what like it says there."
Belfast, 17-24 years, higher engagement

Others queried how accessible this information would be to the public both in terms of finding the information and understanding it.

You said about the donations and loans must be reported and published. When I read that I thought I wouldn't even know where to go to look for that.
Sheffield, 60+ years, higher engagement

"What would be interested to know is how easy it is for us as lay people to access that report [spending and funding information]."
Birmingham, 45-59 years, higher engagement

Finally, there were some concerns raised regarding the reliability of asking parties or campaigners to self-report spend and funding. This view was driven by a general cynicism towards politicians.

"It just depends on how transparent it actually is. I know you are saying it is supposed to be reported but politicians lie through their teeth anyway don't they."
Birmingham, 45-59 years, higher engagement

7.2 Awareness of the Electoral Commission

Overall, there was a low awareness of the Electoral Commission at the spontaneous level, however there was an expectation that it was likely that there would be a body responsible for overseeing regulation of political campaigns.

"There is some Commission you can report things to."
Birmingham, 45-59 years, higher engagement

At the prompted level, participants sought reassurance that the Electoral Commission was truly independent from government, and was not aligned to any particular party. They also wanted to be reassured that the Electoral Commission would act in the interests of ordinary voters.

> *"If it was made known to everybody who the Electoral Commission was made up of and it was made up of a broad band of people including some working class people."*
> *Birmingham, 45-59 years, higher engagement*

Also at the prompted level, participants thought that there should be greater publicity around campaign spending and funding, and increasing public awareness of this was thought to be an important element of future regulation (see section 7.4.2). Greater publicity around the role of the Electoral Commission would also help the public to feel reassured that there was a body acting on their behalf to address the issues raised.

7.3   Views on social impact

In general, participants took an individualistic perspective on the concerns around the technologies, rather than considering their overall impact on society. To this extent, people were concerned about their own ability to negotiate the potential implications, and how any future regulation would support this, rather than considering the overall impact on society. A few participants did consider some potential negative effects on society as a whole, but these were generally not fully articulated or detailed.

> *"It wouldn't affect me because I don't have Facebook. If you are on the internet you shouldn't have to worry about things like that."*
> *Birmingham, 45-59 years, higher engagement*

> *"All these things are false hope and false this. Dark ads, dark money, everything all goes into inequality and I see society getting worse."*
> *Belfast, 17-24 years, higher engagement*

> *"I have got more scared as we have been through the pages because I was not bad with the early stuff and then when the dark stuff came in, this is way beyond anybody's....."*
> *Glasgow, 60+ years, lower engagement*

7.4   Ideas for future regulation in the context of digital campaigning

Participants identified a range of actions they felt could be taken to help tackle concerns around digital campaigns. Four key themes emerged.
Diagram 7: four themes of ways to tackle concerns regarding digital campaigns

| Regulation with strong sanctions | Transparency of campaign activity, spend and funding |
| Ways to verify information | Education |
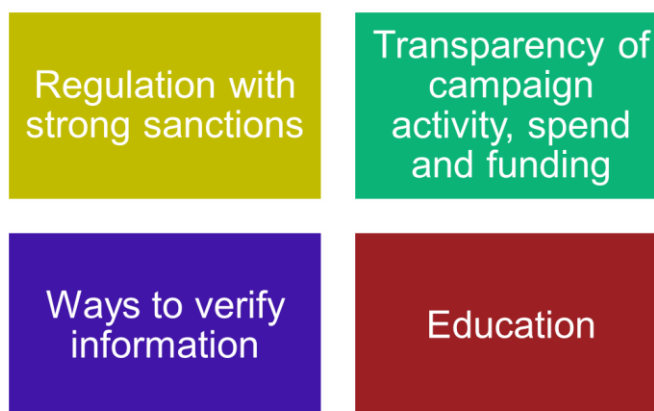
7.4.1 Regulation with strong sanctions

Regulations

Whilst participants were positive towards the rules currently in place around election campaigns in the UK, many suggested that increased regulation, with strong sanctions could help mitigate concerns regarding digital campaigns.

> *"That is why we have a really bad political system at the moment. The way that Brexit happened and the way that Trump won, it was because there isn't enough regulation. Could the law and these people being doing more? I do think that they could do more."*
> *Belfast, 17-24 years, higher engagement*

Many comments from participants focused on a desire for online campaign content to be regulated. This was particularly in reference to detection and action against fake news and the use of technology to promote this.

> *"There should be a governing thing on social media on what is allowed to go on there."*
> *Birmingham, 45-59 years, higher engagement*

> *"I think there should be more control…there should be someone who is overlooking everything."*
> *London, English as a second language*

> *"I think there should be more regulations on content so they can't be giving out false information or false numbers."*
> *Birmingham, 17-24 years, lower engagement*

> *"If something is fake then it should get taken straight off the internet. There should be something. There has got to be a way around it."*
> *Birmingham, 45-59 years, higher engagement*

Participants struggled to identify an existing organisation who would be responsible for this – although they anticipated that the Electoral Commission would have some involvement on the basis that they currently regulate campaigns. There was agreement that any organisation responsible should be politically neutral.

> *"It would be illegal. There is no social media rule. You can do what you want. You can seem to put what you want on and say what you want on there. So there*

should be some kind of social media governing body about what is being said and who is saying it."
Birmingham, 45-59 years, higher engagement

"We know that media is biased, has bias…so I think someone like the Electoral Commission, a media ombudsman [should be responsible for taking action]."
London, English as a second language

A couple of participants suggested that given the potential spend on campaigns, funding should be made available for this type of regulatory role for online campaigns.

"On that £20 million budget that they have for elections, I think £1 million could be spent on people overseeing everything."
London, 25-44 years, higher engagement

There was also some suggestion that the public could play a role in identifying fake news. Some reflected that they could currently report spam on social media sites, and wondered whether a similar function for reporting fake news could be possible.

"There isn't an option to report fake news but you have like spam."
Birmingham, 17-24 years, lower engagement

Considering regulation of online campaigns led to some debates across the research sessions.
One debate focused on the degree of effectiveness that could be expected from regulation. This was particularly questioned when participants considered the speed at which that online content could spread and gain momentum.

"Obviously if it [fake news] was caught at the source it wouldn't really matter because it wouldn't get out but once it is already out…you can take it down whenever you want but people can still have it."
Birmingham, 17-24 years, lower engagement

"I think regardless everyone has got to be a bit more savvy. In these times there is so much technology and it changes so quickly. What people were doing last week, what governments and what companies were doing last week, they are not doing it this week. They are doing it differently.
Cardiff, 25 – 44 years, higher engagement

This led some participants to query whether simply detecting cases of fake news and removing this would be valuable. Some concluded that regulation could only go so far, and that other actions (e.g. education – see section 7.4.4) would also need to play a role.

"It is so hard to police the online stuff. Although we are gullible, we take a lot of stuff with a pinch of salt. So we could be reading these on phones or tablets and do these messages sink in?"
Glasgow, 60+ years, lower engagement

Another debate focused on the balance between regulation and freedom of speech. Participants agreed that it was important to strike this balance.

"You can't start censoring as to who can be allowed to have a voice."
London, 45-59 years, lower engagement

Some cited examples of foreign countries using national online censorship to manage online regulation.

"In North Korea they completely regulate the Internet and it is not right and they can invade privacy of people. Could we not get stricter rules when it comes to things like this?"
Belfast, 17-24 years, higher engagement

Whilst none felt that this approach would be desirable or appropriate, it did raise the question of whether greater regulation could be achieved.

Sanctions

Participants agreed that strong sanctions were needed as a punitive measure and deterrent for areas of concern around online campaigns.
This viewpoint was reinforced by the perception that current sanctions were not strong enough and some scepticism about whether these would actually be implemented.

"You only get fined £20k okay you say it goes to the police but do they actually investigate it?"
Birmingham, 45-59 years, higher engagement

"And then what happens when they find out? Yes, it is true that Russia has been influencing the UK elections, what happens? Is somebody going to fine them £20K?"
London, 45-59 years, lower engagement

"That is ridiculous. If they can spend up to £20 million on the campaign that fine should be a percentage of that. If you have got £20 million to spend on your campaign, we are going to take £10 million of that back."
Cardiff, 25 – 44 years, higher engagement

Participants felt that action should be taken with suggestions ranging from tougher financial fines, to criminal convictions.

"I think if it can be proven that they are being paid [trolls] to spread lies…then they should be reprimanded at least."
Birmingham, 17-24 years, lower engagement

"Greater punishment as well. There has got to be a consequence hasn't there?"
Birmingham, 45-59 years, higher engagement

"I think it [fake news] should be a crime that they should face prison time for."
Birmingham, 17-24 years, lower engagement

"I'd say a percentage of the budget they started with. Like if they did something wrong, broke the rules, then within that period, whatever budget they had for the period that they broke the rules in, that's what I'd say for the percentage they take off."

Aberdeen, 17-24 years, higher engagement

Some suggested that a 'naming and shaming' approach would not only give sanctions a greater public facing role, but would act as a strong deterrent. This would also potentially have an electoral impact, as people wanted to have access to information about infringements to help them to formulate their views.

"Maybe more fines or repercussions that actually mean something and just public naming and shaming."
London, 25-44 years, higher engagement

"[On alternatives to a financial fine] you're disqualified if you do anything wrong. You're out of the election, that's it, end of."
Aberdeen, 45-59 years, lower engagement

"Either you stop campaigning now or the next time a general election comes across you cannot advertise that at all. You cannot campaign. You can do nothing."
Cardiff, 25-44 years, higher engagement

"If it was to happen would it then get spread that they are doing it? Would everyone know that they have done it?"
Colwyn Bay, 25-44 years, lower engagement

7.4.2 Transparency of campaign activity, spend and funding

Whilst participants were positive towards the current requirement for spending and funding to be published in line with existing rules, there was frequent suggestion across the research that requirements around transparency be extended and improved.
In general, increased transparency was seen as a way to improve the public's trust in campaigns.

"If they have got nothing to hide then they should get it out in the open."
Birmingham, 17-24 years, lower engagement

"I think the more transparent it is, the more people will trust but if it is not very transparent you don't trust things."
Birmingham, 45-59 years, higher engagement

Participants agreed that campaign spend and funding should be transparent and published. However, they felt that this should be done in 'real time' as the campaign progressed, rather than at the end of the process. They felt that this would provide greater opportunity to not only identify any potential areas of concern, but also to give the public greater knowledge of who was funding campaigns – something that they might then consider when voting.

"If they were doing it [reporting spend and funding] during the election you could be a bit more well why is so much going onto this and not this but once it is all gone there is no real point because you can't do anything about it."
Birmingham, 17-24 years, lower engagement

"If you find out at the end of the campaign and someone has won and you have spent too much there is nothing you can do unless you have a rule where you do

something about it. But actually if you were in the six weeks of the campaign every week or two weeks you had to submit how much are your donations and how much you have spent then get a better sense beforehand."
London, 25-44 years, higher engagement

Some suggested that to strengthen this transparency, parties/ campaigners could publish their planned spending budget prior to the campaign period, again allowing the public to see this, and for any regulatory organisation to check actual spend against what was planned.

"You know when they come up with an election spending budget? That should be open to the public to see as well."
London, 25-44 years, higher engagement

A few participants felt that other organisations could play a role in monitoring and investigating the financial spend and funding of campaigns. This included a suggestion that banks could take a role investigating dark money sources, and social media companies could be transparent in reporting campaign spend.

"I think the social media companies should also post how much they have received beneficial –wise and also helping these companies and parties advertising."
Birmingham, 17-24 years, lower engagement

Beyond spend and funding, there was also a desire for greater transparency regarding campaign activity. This was suggested as a way to help the public in identifying fake news, and where technologies were being used.

"I think they [campaigners] should have to disclose what stuff they are doing online. The Electoral Commission should have a social media or a media team that covers that grey area."
Birmingham, 17-24 years, lower engagement

Some suggested that parties be required to publish a clear manifesto of their campaign messages to support identification of instances where campaigns may promote contradictory or distorted news.

"Parties publish manifestos so that you can get the manifesto and you can read it so you can understand it. Should I vote Labour, Conservative or LibDem and your manifesto should have one message about something and you shouldn't be able to send contradictory messages from the same party."
London, 25-44 years, higher engagement

7.4.3 Ways to verify information

Participants felt that some concerns about online campaigns could be mitigated by providing some way in which people could check if the information came from a legitimate source.

"A trusted and verified source on any sort of information."
Birmingham, 45-59 years, higher engagement

Whilst earlier during discussions participants had suggested that the individual was responsible for assessing the trustworthiness of sources and messages, when reflecting on the topic in more detail, they agreed that organisations or campaigners could support individuals in making this assessment. Some suggested that a kite mark could be used, enabling the public to see the symbol, and have confidence in the information provided. An equivalent to the blue tick on Twitter would reassure people about bona fide sources. Others noted that one option would be to ensure that links to the source website be provided for online content, enabling the individual to check the veracity of the source.

> *"If it is online then you can at least put a link to their page or you could even add them in the advert or something so you can just click on there and have a scroll through to check this out. It is not extremely difficult."*
> *Birmingham, 17-24 years, lower engagement*

During this discussion, participants were briefed about campaign imprints and their use in traditional campaigns. They felt that extending imprints to cover online campaigns would be a logical step to address concerns, and that this would support people to check the trustworthiness of their source.

> *"At least that (imprint) means you know it is coming from the party and there name is on it, and if it's a lie then you've got them."*
> *Sheffield, 25-44 years, lower engagement*

> *"There should be like a citation or something on there, or a reference."*
> *Colwyn Bay, 25-44 years, lower engagement*

Some participants suggested that a trusted body such as the Electoral Commission could host factual information on their website allowing the public to check any news or information they came across against what parties/ campaigners had set out in their manifesto.

> *For me it would be to have a section on the Electoral Commission where everything is factual from each party. Even if you are not interested in politics but you are willing to vote there is a one stop that you can actually see the facts rather than fake news or whatever else you find elsewhere.*
> *London, 25-44 years, higher engagement*

> *I would like to have a website or something where we are aware that we can actually go and check for ourselves and for everyone and not just one party and nobody hiding anything. It is just everything to be transparent, every single party that is out there.*
> *London, 25-44 years, higher engagement*

> *"I think there is an easy solution to it. If there was a trusted site with a trusted business like if they had a neutral party that was above all the political parties..."*
> *Colwyn Bay, 25-44 years, lower engagement*

7.4.4 Education

By the end of the research sessions, participants reflected that most of the information that they had been presented during the research was new information. With this in mind, they felt that there was a clear role for education on the topic amongst the general public.

"I have never really thought about any of this before today. It is eye opening but you wouldn't walk past a billboard and wonder who pays for that. I think a lot more educating needs to be done about it."
Birmingham, 17-24 years, lower engagement

A few participants felt that the public themselves needed to be more proactive in educating themselves about these issues.

"You have to go and learn about this yourself and you do become influenced by your peers and by your parents and how they vote because you haven't an actual understanding of politics. That is where the dark money and stuff is able to gain a hold because there will be many people who are actually disenfranchised and may well look at these things and not question it. They would assume the worst of politicians."
Belfast, 17-24 years, higher engagement

"I think educating people on how to spot what's real and what's fake, and helping them figure it out themselves."
Aberdeen, 17-24 years, higher engagement

However, most felt that educational tools such as providing information to children in schools, greater coverage of these types of issues on television programmes (e.g. Panorama) and clear information during election debates or coverage would be needed.

"I think it is important to have it around the election debates. To have a segment on BBC or something to be visible and to have it mentioned like a figure who is a bit more of a personality and that everybody knows he is the neutral man or woman that we can trust in and who is overlooking it. We get a bit washed with information from all parties."
London, 25-44 years, higher engagement

A few participants also suggested that greater internet literacy could help make people more aware of the types of technologies used.

"Education. Protect yourself from some of the darker aspects of the net."
Birmingham, 45-59 years, higher engagement

However, a couple of older participants assumed that anti-malware software and online privacy settings would prevent bots and trolls impacting on the content they accessed suggesting that education may be needed to dispel myths.

"My computer stops trolls I'm sure."
Colwyn Bay, 45-59 years, higher engagement

8   Conclusions

"That's the way of the world I'm sure. I don't like it, but how could they be stopped?"
Colwyn Bay, 45-59 years, higher engagement

There is a tendency for people to question the truthfulness of political content, including statements and pledges made by politicians, campaigning messages, and news reporting. Combined with this is the understanding that digital technologies create the potential for these difficulties to be magnified, due to the speed with which questionable content can be shared. People therefore tend to approach the world of digital campaign content with a sceptical and wary attitude, anticipating that not all information is true, and that not all sources will be credible.

Despite this, the research suggests that people on the whole are unlikely to be aware of the extent to which they may be influenced by digital campaigning material. People tend to see themselves as savvy, and able to make an assessment of the believability of the content, and the veracity of the source. However, the research suggests that people do not necessarily look beyond superficial elements of the communication, to consider the deeper factors of campaign funding or the ethical use of technology. Also, the research highlights the fact that participants often do not see certain digital content as political per se, or as linked to a specific campaign. Research participants themselves noted that they would engage with some material even if they didn't trust the source, if this was entertaining or appeared popular on social media.

People found the concepts described to them in the course of the research difficult to engage with, threatening and overwhelming, and they often struggled to formulate an opinion. All but a very few were totally unfamiliar with the ideas, and were uncertain about the implications. Once better informed, they found certain ideas very concerning, especially those concerning possible collusion between parties or campaigners and sources of dark money, and about the use of technologies to support activities of those seeking to misinform or mislead the public. However, they found it difficult to imagine how regulation or sanctions could work to prevent the activities described, due to the pace of technological change and the potential spread of misinformation.

Although people were generally in favour of maintaining a free media in which individuals should take responsibility for distinguishing between fact and fiction, they felt that current regulation was not adequate to address their concerns around new technologies. Current regulation was thought to be too heavily focused on reporting of past behaviour, as technology is constantly changing, and the timing of reporting of funding and spending does not enable people to take the information into account in their voting choices. They also felt that the current sanctions were not sufficient to deter wrongdoers.

Important elements of future regulation should include stronger sanctions, and public education to empower people to better assess the veracity of content. This would include a greater public profile for the Electoral Commission and public information on how to access information on funding and spending. There was also an expectation that serious infringements such as paid trolling, the use of dark ads to spread misleading or

contradictory information, and the involvement of dark money in campaigning, should result in criminal prosecutions.

9   Appendices

9.1   Discussion guide

Note: please note that this discussion guide is intended to guide the discussion only. Therefore, not all questions will necessarily be asked, or in the exact wording or order shown.

1. Introductions   5 / 10 mins
(Aim: introduce topic, build rapport, understand relationship with information on politics)

- Thank you for agreeing to take part.
- We are here to talk about election campaigns. When talking about election campaigns this evening, we are talking about the advertising and other campaigning activity that takes place around elections and referendums in the UK. You won't need to discuss your views on politics. You won't need to have any special knowledge about election campaigns. We are interested in your genuine experiences, views and opinions.
- Introduce self and GfK, and any Electoral Commission observers. The Electoral Commission is the organisation responsible for overseeing elections that take place in the UK, and this includes being responsible for making sure that the rules around election campaigns are being followed.
- Reassure re confidentiality and MRS code of conduct.
- Explain viewing, audio–recording, transcript, filming the interview.
- Discussion will last 2 hours (groups) / 1- 1½ hours (depths).
- Any questions?

Participant introduction:
- First name.
- How do you spend your time? Work, hobbies etc.?
- Family?
- When and where do you tend to get information about politics?
    o Traditional media / conversations / social media?
    o Enjoy this / seek it out / prefer to avoid?
    o Role of technology?

2. Regulation of parties and campaigns   20 / 25 mins
(Aim: Explore understanding of existing regulation of campaigns)

I'd like to start by thinking about the campaigns that take place before an election. This includes any advertising or other activities intended to influence how people vote.
I'd like you to take a few minutes to think back to the recent elections that have taken place…
- What **advertising** do you remember seeing?
- What about any **other activities** designed to influence the way that you vote?
    o **Where** did you see / hear these things?
    o What **types of materials** do you think of when I mention election campaigns?
If required, show board with examples of 'traditional' campaign materials.
- How **interested** are you in this information? Why / why not?
    ▪ What sort of information is important to you?
    ▪ What is less important to you?

- To what extent do you **trust** the things that you hear / see? Why / not?
    - What makes you trust something more / less?
    - To what extent does it depend **where** you see / hear these things?
    - To what extent does it depend on **who** is behind the information? Why?
        - Probe: campaign vs journalist / commentator
- What other **concerns** do you have about this information? *Note concerns on flip chart. If substantial concerns are voiced around digital campaigns at this stage, note on separate flip chart and park until later in the discussion.*

- What do you know about the rules that exist around election campaigns in the UK?
    - What rules do you think may exist? What **issues/concerns** would they be likely to cover?
    - What about rules around **what parties can spend** on election campaigns?
    - What about rules around **how parties can raise money** to spend on election campaigns?
    - If you had a concern about a campaign, what would you do?
        - Do you think that this issue is covered by UK law? Why / not?

Show stimulus on 'Rules governing election and referendum campaigns.' *Allow spontaneous then probe:*
- What do you think about these rules?
- What **questions** do you have about these?
- Are these the rules that you **expected** might exist? Did anything surprise you?
- Do these rules go **far enough**? Why / not?
    - To what extent do you feel that financial regulation goes far enough? Why?
    - Do you think that a £20,000 fine is an **appropriate deterrent** for offences relating to electoral law?
        - What would be more appropriate? Why?
        - The maximum spending limit for campaigns in a UK general election is almost £20,000,000 for a year's regulated campaign period across the UK. Does this change your view? Why / not?
        - [in a Scottish Parliament election and in the Scottish Independence Referendum it was about £1.5 million for a 4 month regulated campaign period]
        - [in a National Assembly for Wales election, it is £600,000 for a 4 month regulated campaign period]
        - [in a Northern Ireland Assembly election, it is £300,000 for a 4 month regulated campaign period]
    - Are there any other aspects that should be regulated? What, and why?
- What **additional rules** should be in place to address the concerns you have raised?
    - What impact would this have?
    - What about rules governing **who** should be able to influence voters in an election?
    - What about rules to make elections campaigning more **fair**?
    - What about rules to make donations / spending on campaigns more **transparent**?
- Were you aware that the **Electoral Commission** was responsible for this?
- What other organisations should be involved in regulating this?
    - Police?
    - Government?
    - Media outlets?

- o Others?
- What could the Electoral Commission do to raise awareness of these rules/ the fact that campaigns should be transparent? This means that members of the public can easily find out about these if they want to.
  - o If you were not already aware of this, would you like to have been aware? Why?
  - o What should the Electoral Commission do to help people to be aware of these rules?
- At the moment, the Electoral Commission only has powers to enforce the rules that cover political parties and non-party campaigns, it does not have powers to enforce **candidate offences, which are a police matter**. What do you think about this?

Moderator note regarding why these are a police matter - please explain if useful/ needed: The candidate rules predate the Electoral Commission's existence. There have been some high profile breaches, mostly at national elections where referring the breach for criminal prosecution was not considered to be in the public interest. However, it may well have been appropriate to investigate the breach further and issue a civil sanction. The Electoral Commission has recommended that it's investigatory and sanctioning powers be extended to candidate spending and donation offences.

3. Focus on digital campaigns   50 / 55 mins
(Aim: understand how people respond to digitally delivered campaign materials)

Moderator: some of this may have been covered in previous sections, no need to repeat if we have sufficient detail.
I'd now like to focus on campaign materials that are accessed online or received via your digital devices.
Participant examples
- What campaigns do you remember seeing in this way? *Explore in detail:*
  - o Which campaign materials or messages do you remember receiving in this way?
  - o What did you think about this?
Explore examples in detail. Gather examples from each person if possible. For each:
  - o **Where** did you see this?
    - Platform / application?
    - Type of ad / message?
    - Device?
  - o What did you **think about it**?
    - How interesting was it to you?
    - Thoughts / feelings / concerns?
  - o What did you **do** as a result of receiving this?
    - Click through to a Website?
    - Look for more information?
    - Like / share / comment?
  - o Did you know **where** this had come from? How?
    - Were you interested to know this?
    - Did you try to discover this? How?
Ask all:
- **What is it like** to receive this type of material, compared with 'traditional' campaign material?
  - o Is this a different experience? Or similar?

- What are the advantages of online / digital campaigns?
- What are the disadvantages?
- Do you react to traditional and digital campaigns in a similar way? Why / not?
- Do you do anything differently when you receive digital adverts?
- Are these materials more or less influential? Why?
- Do you tend to have any particular concerns about these materials?
  - If so, how do you deal with this?
  - Is this satisfactory?
  - How would you ideally be able to deal with these concerns relating to online/digital campaigns?
  - Do traditional campaign materials deal with/ overcome these concerns? If yes, how?

Show stimulus on 'examples of digital campaigns'. *Spread these out on the table.*
- Are these similar to things that you have seen?
- What do you notice about these?
- Have you noticed the wording that says 'paid for content'? What does this mean?
- Have you noticed the wording that says 'sponsored'? what does this mean?

Trust
- To what extent do you trust these types of materials? Why / not?
  - What concerns do you have?
  - Would you be more / less concerned than with a traditional campaign?
- Which factors would make you more / less likely to trust an online / digital campaign materials?
  - Content / wording / source?
- Have you heard about 'fake news'?

Show stimulus on 'fake news'.
- Had you heard about this before?
- What do you think about this?
- Thoughts / feelings / concerns?
- How does this make you feel about digital campaigns for UK elections?
- To **what extent** does this concern you?
- **What** could be done to address these concerns? *Note suggestions on flip chart.*
- **Who** should be responsible for addressing this?
  - Regulators?
  - Police?
  - Campaigners?
  - Technology companies?
  - Government?

Sources
- Thinking about these types of materials, do you tend to know **where they have come from**?
  - Is it **important** to you to know the source of this type of material? Why / not?
    - Is it more or less important to know this for a digital campaign than for a traditional campaign? Why / not?
  - Is there a **difference** between where an ad or message may have come from, and who has sent them to you?

- o Where are **all of the places** that these types of message might have originated from before coming to you?
  - Political party
  - Journalist / blog
  - Your friends / family
  - Private company – what sort of company?
- o Does this concern you? Why?
- To **what extent** does this concern you?
- **What** could be done to address these concerns? *Note suggestions on flip chart.*
- **Who** should be responsible for addressing this?
  - o Regulators?
  - o Police?
  - o Campaigners?
  - o Technology companies?
  - o Government?

- Have you heard about **social media 'bots' and 'trolls'**?
Show stimulus on 'bots' and 'trolls'.
- Had you heard about this before?
- What do you think about this?
- Thoughts / feelings / concerns?
- How does this make you feel about digital campaigns for UK elections?
- To **what extent** does this concern you?
- **What** could be done to address these concerns? *Note suggestions on flip chart.*
- **Who** should be responsible for addressing this?
  - o Regulators?
  - o Police?
  - o Campaigners?
  - o Technology companies?
  - o Government?

Targeting
- What do you know about the way that these types of campaigns can be **targeted to individuals**?
  - o Who is responsible for this targeting?
  - o How does this targeting happen?

- Have you heard about **micro-targeting**?
Show stimulus on 'micro-targeting'.
- Had you heard about this before?
- What do you think about this?
- Thoughts / feelings / concerns?
- How does this make you feel about digital campaigns for UK elections?
  - o Most targeting is done through demographic information and information about peoples' interests. From this information, messages are selected which are likely to influence that individual. This could involve highlighting policies that they are more likely to support or benefit from. For example, free childcare messages could be targeted to single mothers aged 20-35 years old. Or, demographics are used to make assumptions about which messages are likely to influence the individual. For

example, a person aged 18-30 years old living in a major city is likely to be pro-European Union.
  ▪ What do you think about this? To what extent, if at all does this change your view?

Moderator note: This is slightly different from targeting someone based on their personal political views as stated on social media (whether an explicitly stated preference on their Facebook profile, or from the political pages they like or content of their posts). It may be that you can target according to an individual's political views (which may not currently be possible, but targeting capabilities on Facebook are always changing). Please be aware of assumptions participants are making about how targeting happens and explore views regarding targeting based on political view vs. more general demographics.

- To **what extent** does this concern you?
- **What** could be done to address these concerns? *Note suggestions on flip chart.*
- **Who** should be responsible for addressing this?
  o Regulators?
  o Police?
  o Campaigners?
  o Technology companies?
  o Government?

- Have you heard about **dark ads**?
Show stimulus on 'dark ads'.
- Had you heard about this before?
- What do you think about this?
- Thoughts / feelings / concerns?
- How does this make you feel about digital campaigns for UK elections?
- To **what extent** does this concern you?
- **What** could be done to address these concerns? *Note suggestions on flip chart.*
- **Who** should be responsible for addressing this?
  o Regulators?
  o Police?
  o Campaigners?
  o Technology companies?
  o Government?

Funding and spending
- How do these things affect your views on the rules governing funding and spending on election campaigns?

- Have you heard about **dark money**?
Show stimulus on 'dark money'
- Had you heard about this before?
- What do you think about this?
- Thoughts / feelings / concerns?
- How does this make you feel about digital campaigns for UK elections?
- To **what extent** does this concern you?
- **What** could be done to address these concerns? *Note suggestions on flip chart.*
- **Who** should be responsible for addressing this?
  o Regulators?

- o Police?
- o Campaigners?
- o Technology companies?
- o Government?

4. Summary and close   15 / 20 mins
(Aim: roundup of key changes required to regulation)

I'd like to sum up all of your suggestions for how the concerns about digital campaigns could be addressed.
- What are the main concerns that you have that are specific to online / digital campaigns? Why? *Allow all spontaneous then prompt:*
  - o Do you think that election digital campaigns are **fair** at the moment? Why / not?
  - o Do you think that digital campaigns are **transparent** at the moment? Why / not?
- What are the most urgent concerns in your view?
  - o Why are these important?
  - o What impact do these issues have on our society?
- Looking at the list of improvements that you have suggested during the previous section, what are the priorities? *Revisit flip chart list.*
  - o I'd like you to work together as a group, to decide which proportion of £100 you would spend on implementing these improvements.
  - o Which have the highest priority? Why?
  - o Which are lesser priorities? Why?
- Who should be involved in regulating this?
  - ▪ Regulators?
  - ▪ Police?
  - ▪ Government?
  - ▪ Media outlets?
  - ▪ Social media platforms?
  - ▪ Others (who)?
- Currently, the Electoral Commission requires all printed campaign materials to have an 'imprint' of small text at the bottom of a leaflet which shows the name and address of the campaigner who has created the materials.
  - o Do you think that a similar system should be in place for online /digital campaigns?
  - o What would be the benefits / disadvantages of this?
- Do you think that social media companies or campaigners themselves should be legally required to publish details of campaigns and adverts, including spending and targeting information? Why / not?
  - o What would be the benefits / disadvantages of this?
- Thinking of all that we have discussed today, how concerned do you feel about this issue?
  - o What are the main impacts on society of the activities we have discussed?
- What is the main message that should be taken from today's/ this evening's discussion?

Thank and close

9.2   Stimulus materials

Rules governing election and referendum campaigns

- There are rules that govern **funding** and **spending** by candidates, political parties and non-party campaigners at elections and referendums in the UK.

- However, the rules don't govern the **content** of election or referendum campaigns.

- The **Electoral Commission** monitors whether campaigners are following the rules on funding and spending at elections and referendums. It also publishes information about it.

- The Electoral Commission can investigate breaches of the rules and issue fines of **up to £20,000**. These powers do not cover breaches of the rules by **candidates**, and these are investigated by the police.

Rules governing campaign funding

- Political campaigns are partly funded by **donations or loans** to a political party, a candidate, or a non-party campaigner.

- Donations or loans that are used towards the costs of campaigning must come from voters on a **UK electoral register** and **UK-based organisations** (like companies and trade unions). This is because Parliament has decided that there should be no foreign influence in UK elections.

- Significant donations and loans must be **reported and published**. This is so the public know where parties, candidates and non-party campaigners get their funding from. Political parties must report them every quarter, even outside of election periods.

Rules governing campaign spending

- **Campaign spending** is what political parties, candidates and other campaigners spend on certain activities to promote themselves, or criticise other parties or candidates.

- The UK has rules that **limit the amount of money** that can be spent on activities that are intended to influence how people vote in elections and referendums. The spending limits apply for a specified **period of time** before elections and referendums, and are meant to create a more level contest between campaigners.

- Campaigners must submit a **report** of their campaign spending after elections and referendums which is published. This is so that **voters can see** how much money is being spent, and on what, during these campaigns.

Fake news

- This refers to **false information** deliberately used to misinform the public and influence voters.

- Fake news can appear in search results, or on social media, and can be shared by users.

- There have been allegations that 'fake news' spread before the US presidential election, and during the UK's referendum on membership of the European Union, had an effect on voters in those elections.

Bots and trolls

- Social media 'bots' and 'trolls' are **fake social media accounts** which look to others like a real person.

- These are social media accounts that put out messages or materials on social media to support particular campaigns or ideas.

- By having several accounts working together, they can create a trend on social media, which is misleading, as they are not real accounts.

- Bots generate messages automatically.

- Troll accounts are managed by real people who are paid to put out messages and ideas that might not reflect their own views.

- There have been allegations about the use of bots and trolls originating in Russia to influence voters during the EU Referendum.

Micro-targeting
- Micro-targeting refers to use of marketing techniques to **segment people into groups**, and to use this information to target them with specific messages.

- By **analysing data,** including personal data, campaigners can learn more about their target groups, and this enables them to create adverts that are tailored specifically to each audience.

- Each group can then be **targeted** using direct mail, phone calls, home visits, television, radio, web and social media advertising, emails and text messages. These will contain messages that are **tailored** to each person's interests.

- This can used for many kinds of advertising, including for elections.

"Dark ads"

- "Dark ads" is a term used in the media to refer to ads displayed **online**. These ads are only seen by the recipient, unless they share them with someone else.

- Using targeting techniques, campaigners can learn which messages work better with different people and **adjust** their campaign messages accordingly.

- In theory, a campaigner could send **different or contradictory messages** to different people and this would be hidden from view .

"Dark money"

- "Dark money" is a term used in the media to refer to money that is spent or used during campaigns to influence voters where the source of the money is unclear or unknown .

- The money is spent on a campaign by a person or organisation that **may not** be the party or candidate.

- UK law says that voters should be able to see the sources of election and referendum funding and spending. This doesn't happen with "dark money" where the sources are hidden from view.

Imprints

The law says that printed election or referendum campaign material must contain identifying information. It must tell you *who* is behind the campaign and who has created the materials. This is known as an "imprint".

The law does not say that non-printed campaign material (like digital adverts) must carry an imprint.