

LENA KARAMANIDOU

Glasgow Caledonian University, Cowcaddens Road,
Glasgow, G4 0BA Scotland, UK



OSMAN SAHIN

Glasgow Caledonian University, Cowcaddens Road, Glasgow, G4 0BA Scotland, UK

Information Sources Shared on Facebook and Networking by Nigel Farage and the UKIP Party in the UK

This article explores how *UKIP* and Nigel Farage used social media to amplify their message. Mainly digital sources, such as websites and social media, were the preferred source type of both profiles, but more for *UKIP* than for N. Farage. The most shared digital content of both profiles was websites and social media accounts of their political parties. The second most used source type was print media – mainly national newspapers. Radio stations were the least used source by *UKIP*, while TV channels the least used source by N. Farage. The higher use of radio sources concerns links to *LBC Radio*, where he presented a show between 2019 and 2020. TV channels and radio were largely ignored by both profiles as sources. In terms of ownership, sources used by either profile were in their vast majority private due to prevailing type of ownership in the UK. Both profiles relied more on quality newspapers and magazines rather than tabloids but this was often accompanied by a critical approach to the content of such sources. The analysis found that Farage's profile has only four reciprocal connections. In contrast, *UKIP* had a much larger reciprocal network of 25 different pages. While in terms of reciprocity the two profiles maintained different networks, the analysis of centrality showed a significant number of 63 pages shared the profiles of both *UKIP* and Nigel Farage. Although the profile of N. Farage had a much smaller reciprocal network and the number of shares of the two profiles by the central groups disseminating their messages was roughly equal, yet, the *Brexit Party* and N. Farage were the more successful political actors in the period of interest to this study – in the 2019 European Parliamentary elections.

Keywords: Facebook, populism, UKIP, Nigel Farage, network analysis, media, Brexit Party, UK

Introduction

The study is focused on information sources shared on Facebook (FB) and their networking by selected populist leaders and populist parties in the UK in three periods in 2019 and 2020. The methodology and theoretical underpinning are described in a separate (common)

chapter, therefore this article discusses only specific aspects of the methodology applied to this national case study. The two politically relevant selected populist actors were the United Kingdom Independence Party (*UKIP*) and Nigel Farage, leader of the party from 2006 to 2009 and 2010 and 2016.

N. Farage was selected as a case because of his significance as a quintessential populist leader both of the *UKIP* and the *Brexit Party* (Kelsey 2016; Tournier Sol 2020). In addition to being the leader of both these parties, he was also a Member of the European Parliament and has had a prominent presence in British media, both as a commentator in radio and television programmes as well as because of being the focus of media coverage (Chicon 2020; Kelsey 2016). Soon after he left *UKIP*, he established the *Brexit Party* in November 2018. The *Brexit Party* was renamed into *Reform UK* in early 2021, but N. Farage quit its leadership soon after (Walker 2021). In summer 2021, he became a presenter in the *GB News*, a TV channel that has been described as the UK version of *Fox News* (Waterson 2021).

UKIP was selected as a case study because of its representativeness as a radical right, populist party which has had a significant influence in British politics in the last decade. Initially a single-issue party supporting withdrawal from the EU, it performed well in the 2013 local elections and the 2014 European Parliament elections (Cutts, Godwin and Milazzo 2017; Tournier-Sol 2015; Vassilopoulou 2019). Its success has been attributed to several reasons, including tapping into social and economic inequalities and disaffection with mainstream politics (Goodwin 2014), mobilising Eurosceptic tendencies and debates around national sovereignty (Boriello and Brack 2019; Tournier Sol 2015), focusing on immigration as a high-salience issue and (Evans and Mellon 2019; Tournier-Sol 2015), effectively using a populist rhetoric combining hostility to elites with representations of the people as ‘victims’ as well as racist and anti-immigration rhetoric (Breeze 2019; Tournier-Sol 2015), and receiving considerable media coverage (Kelsey 2016; Murphy and Devine 2020). Although its success in national elections has been limited – it only elected one MP in the 2015 elections, and none in subsequent ones – the party has had a significant impact in UK politics. In particular, *UKIP*’s threat to the *Conservative Party* shaped the latter’s agendas on immigration, the European Union and Brexit (Bale et al 2018; Tournier-Sol 2015; 2020; Usherwood 2019). In the case of *UKIP*, the party’s FB page rather than that of the leader was selected as the key social media profile, as following the departure of Nigel Farage and in the period of data collection there were continuous leadership crises in the party (Klein and Pirro 2020; Tournier-Sol 2020).

Data was gathered for three different periods. The selected electoral period for this research is the European Parliament elections of May 2019. This was dominated by the process of Brexit, and in particular issues around the negotiation of the withdrawal agreement with the European Union and its impact on the domestic political landscape, divided at the time over the potential of a ‘no-deal’ Brexit (Vasilopoulou 2020). The regular period selected for this research included the snap national elections of December 2019, triggered by the governing *Conservative Party* in order to address difficulties, due to its lack of Parliamentary majority, in managing the Brexit process (Prosser 2021). The *Brexit Party* opted not to contest seats likely to be won by the *Conservative Party*, due to its waning support since the strengthened *Conservative Party* was in a stronger position to pursue Brexit – the key issue for both parties – to its completion (Prosser

2019). During the ‘COVID’ period, media coverage in the UK was dominated by issues related to the pandemic, and preoccupation with the pandemic led to increased consumption of TV news and online media (Ofcom 2020a; 2020c).

The Media Landscape

The UK media landscape is considered pluralistic and with a high level of commercialisation, with both public and private TV broadcasters, a range of national and local print newspapers (Binderkrantz et al 2017; Craufurd Smith and Stolte 2012). According to the Reuters International report, adults rely increasingly on online media for news consumption, while the use of television as source of news has declined from 75% in 2019 to 55% in 2020 although the Reuters report notes a subsequent rise in consumption of TV news in following months due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Reuters 2020; Ofcom 2020a). The use of print media for news has similarly declined steeply from between 2013 and 2020, from 59% to 22% in January 2020 (Reuters 2020). News consumption differs among age groups, with younger people (16-24) more likely to use internet sources while older groups remaining attached to TV, radio and print media as news sources (Ofcom 2020a).

Social media penetration in the UK was estimated at 72% in 2020, with 50.89 million users spending on average 102 minutes a day on social media (Statista 2020). Almost three quarters of all UK adults have at least one social media profile. Usage is higher in the 16-24 and 25-34 age groups, with 95% and 93% having at least one social media profile but remains above average in the 35-44 (88%) and 45-54 (82%) age groups (Ofcom 2020b). Almost half of adults use social media for news consumption (Ofcom 2020a). As table 1 shows, FB is the most used for this purpose.

Table 1: Social Media Consumption in the UK

Rank Brand	For News	For All
1 Facebook	24% (-4)	65%
2 Twitter	14% (-)	29%
3 YouTube	7% (-3)	51%
4 WhatsApp	7% (-2)	56%
5 Facebook Messenger	5% (-1)	46%
6 Instagram	3% (-1)	30%

Source: Reuters 2020

Trust in media has declined since 2015 by 20 percentage points (Reuters 2020), possibly reflecting the dynamics of Brexit and broader polarisation on controversial issues. Nevertheless, some established media score relatively high for brand trust (Reuters 2020), with the *BBC* being

the most trusted source. UK media have been characterised as Eurosceptic and many established newspapers and other media sources supported Brexit (Reuters 2020). While social media are used for news consumption, trust in them as news sources is low – 6% according to the Reuters International report (2020). Yet, in 2019 26% of users reported that they do not fact-check news content accessed through social media (Ofcom 2020b).

Populist actors and the media

While the selected populist actors (*UKIP* and Nigel Farage) have been critical of some established media – in particular the *BBC*, their views and agendas have been supported by many UK media, in particular national newspapers *Daily Express*, *Daily Mail*, *Daily Telegraph*, *The Sun* and *Daily Star* while *Daily Mirror*, *Guardian* and *Financial Times* were pro-Remain, with *The Times* being pro-Remain during the campaign, but then supporting the government during the withdrawal negotiations (Levy, Aslan, Bironzo 2016; Cushion, Thomas, & Ellis 2015; Hughes 2019; Kelsey 2016; Murphy and Devine 2020; Waterson et al 2019). Hughes (2019) and Murphy and Devine (2020) argued that UK media have given *UKIP* coverage disproportionate to their electoral support, especially on EU-related issues and in advance of the Brexit referendum. While the electoral success of *UKIP* has been limited – for example Nigel Farage, even as the leader of the party, never succeeded in getting elected locally (only to the European Parliament) – they attracted significant attention from the media and had an influence on shaping political agendas in the UK, in particular on immigration and Brexit (Bale et al 2018; Tournier-Sol 2020; Usherwood 2019). Conversely, *UKIP* and the *Brexit Party* has also been regarded as effective in using traditional media to promote their messages (Reed 2016; Hughes 2019). Media interest in *UKIP* appears to have declined after Nigel Farage stood down as a leader after the referendum in 2016 and left the party in 2018 (Tournier-Sol 2020; Usherwood 2019).

UKIP and the *Brexit party* (since January 2021 *Reform UK*) have also been adept at using both traditional and social media to disseminate their political agendas and messages (Davidson & Berezin, 2018; Gonawela et al 2018; Loucaides 2019; Savage 2019; Tournier-Sol 2020). Social media platforms have been instrumental in the manner both parties communicate with supporters, disseminate party messages within supportive communities while avoiding direct challenges from political opponents, but also for attracting supporters from other political groups and maintaining links to cognate political parties and groups (Davidson & Berezin, 2018; Loucaides 2020; Klein and Pirro 2020; Reed 2016; Ridge-Newman 2020). Nigel Farage, both as the leader of *UKIP* and later *The Brexit Party* has been adept at using both conventional – not limited to news formats but also for example entertainment shows – and social media for reaching out to his followers and disseminating his agenda (Gonawela et al 2018; Chicon 2020; Savage 2019). Further, he controversially had a slot in London Radio Station LBC, allowing him a further venue to disseminate his political message and populist rhetoric (Chichon 2020). Preference for social media usage is also linked to avoidance of fact-checking requirements of the more conventional media, resulting in the possible dissemination of ‘fake news’ (Kramer 2017).

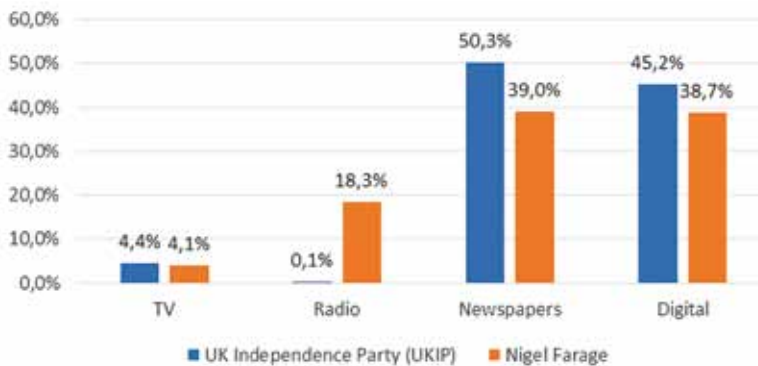
Analytical Part 1: Sources Shared by Populist Leader and UKIP

This part explores the types of media sources that seem to be by and large preferred by populists. We focused on the source type, whether it is registered or not, whether it is public or commercial, and the level of transparency in its ownership. We attempted to figure out what type of media sources seemed to be preferred as well as ignored by populists. The analyses were carried out on FB data (Mancuso et al., 2020; Marincea, 2020), downloaded with the CrowdTangle app developed by FB.

Findings: Classification of sources

Digital sources such as websites and social media are by far the preferred source type of both profiles (Figure 1). More than a third of all coded sources used by Nigel Farage are digital, with in the case of *UKIP* the percentage is even higher, almost half of all sources. The second most used source type is print media – mainly national newspapers, which account for about half and 40% of all sources used by the two profiles respectively. Radio stations were the least used source by *UKIP*, while TV channels the least used source by N. Farage. The higher use of radio sources by N. Farage (18%) concerns links to *LBC Radio*, where he presented a show between 2019 and 2020. Nevertheless, one observation we can draw from the findings is that TV channels and radio were largely ignored by both profiles as sources, while the also low presence of links to print media reflects the broader decline of consumption of print news in the UK (Reuters 2020; Ofcom 2020a).

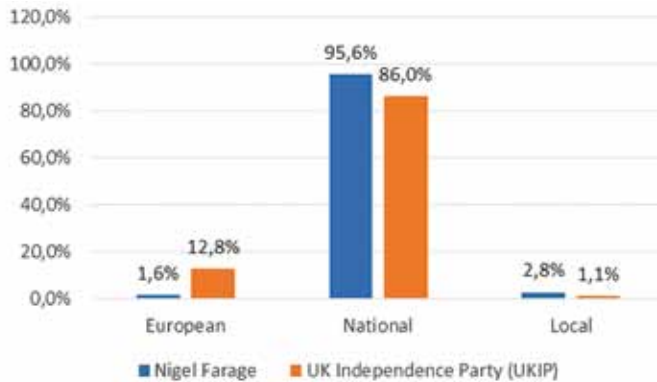
Figure 1: Types of sources



Source: Own compilation

Further, clear majority of all sources shared by N. Farage and by *UKIP* have a national focus in terms of coverage, with European and regional sources being shared considerably less – more so for *UKIP* (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Coverage of sources



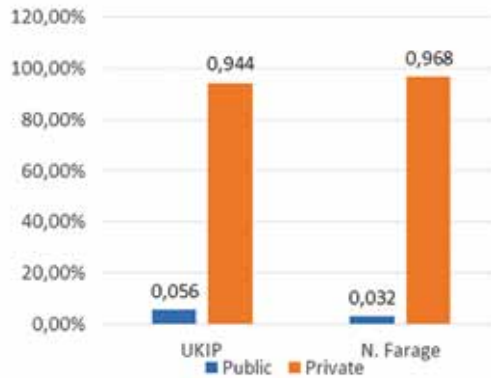
Source: Own compilation

In terms of ownership, sources used by either profile were in their vast majority private (Figure 3). One reason for the extremely high percentage of sources coded as private is the predominantly private and commercial character of media in the two national contexts of most sources used by the two profiles, the UK and the US (Binderkrantz et al 2017; Craufurd Smith and Stolte 2012). In the UK, for example, only two broadcasters, the *BBC* and *Channel4* can be characterised as public, while most print and online media are privately owned. A further reason is the presence of mainly FB and YouTube social media accounts of individuals or groups, and in particular of their own profiles and the *UKIP* party. The high use of social media sources also accounts for a relatively high proportion of sources that are not registered as media or news sources, constituting 32.2% of all sources used by *UKIP* and 33.9% by N. Farage.

Nevertheless, this has little bearing on the transparency of ownership of shared sources (Figure 4). Most UK-based news sources such as print newspapers and online news are registered as companies or are owned by media groups. This information is stated as rule in their webpages and can be further confirmed through a government website¹. US and European media sources also contain similar information on ownership and editorial personnel. Further, other websites and social media sources shared by both profiles are on the whole clear in terms of ownership, either belonging to named individuals or groups such as, for example, various *UKIP* branches in the UK. Less transparent sources – especially in terms of funding – tend to be associated with conservative and alternative right websites and social media accounts such as the website *Brexit Central*, the YouTube channels of *Prager U* and *Brexbox* (a news site associated with the *Brexit party* but with no information on funding sources or key personnel), the webpages of political commentator Guido Fawkes and the *Conservative Woman* blog.

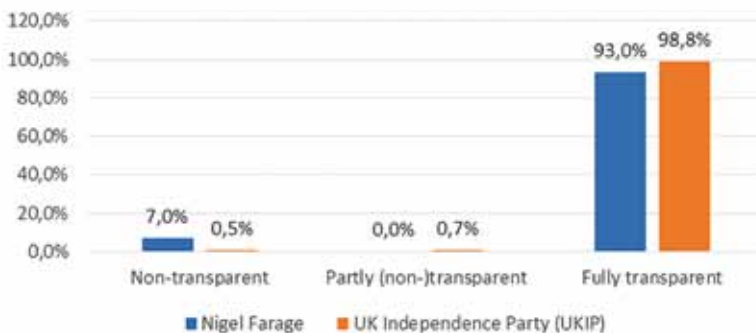
¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/companies-house>

Figure 3: Ownership of sources



Source: Own compilation

Figure 4: Transparency of Ownership



Source: Own compilation

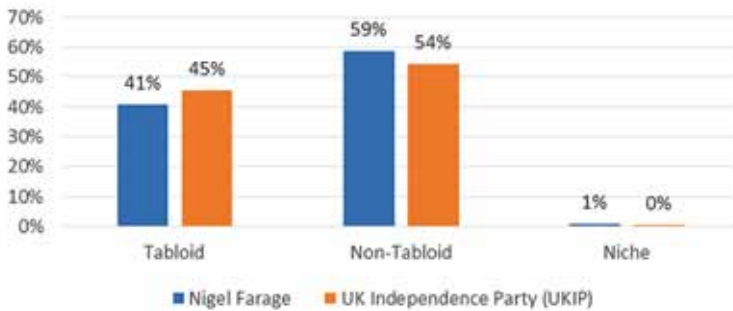
Further analysis of the print and digital sources also reveals some interesting patterns. Both profiles rely more on quality newspapers and magazines (54% for *UKIP* and 59% for N. Farage) rather than tabloid² ones (Figure 5). While this could be interpreted as an effort to rely on respected mainstream media not identified as populist, it should also be noted that in some cases links to such newspapers are accompanied by posts critical of the news contained in the linked source³.

The analysis of types of digital sources shared also revealed some interesting patterns (Figure 6). None of the profiles shared citizen journalism sources, and only *UKIP* shared a relatively

² The distinction between 'quality' and 'tabloid' newspapers here relies on the content and journalistic style of the newspapers used by the two profiles.

³ For example, <https://www.facebook.com/UKIP/posts/2659403670748173>

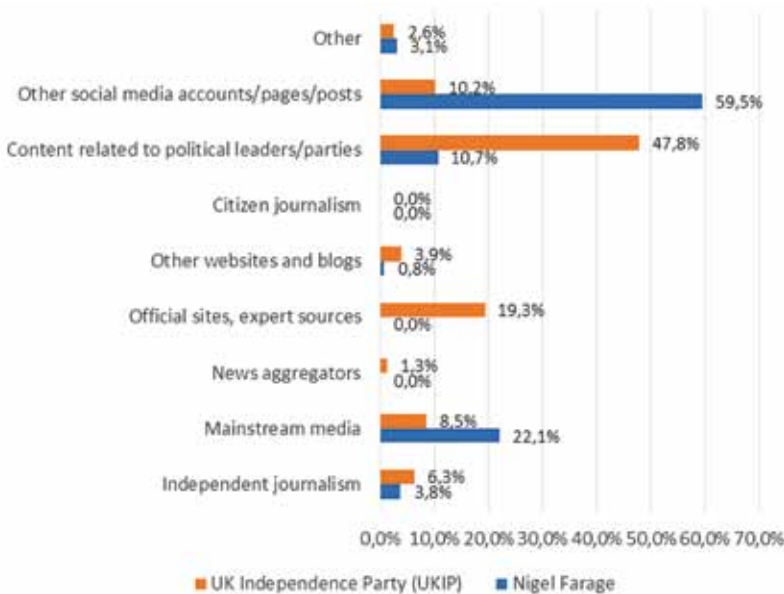
Figure 5: Types of Print Sources



Source: Own compilation

high number of official or expert sources (20%). Shares of news aggregators were extremely limited. Farage shared rather relatively high level of mainstream media sources. The most shared digital content of UKIP profile was websites and social media accounts of political parties. However, Farage was more diverse, with majority of shared posts classifies as “others”. In the case of the profile of N. Farage, all sources shared correspond to his own YouTube channel and FB page as well as FB posts by other *Brexit* party candidates and the official *Brexit* party account. Similarly, nearly all sources – with the exception of two *Labour* party sites – shared through the

Figure 6: Types of digital media



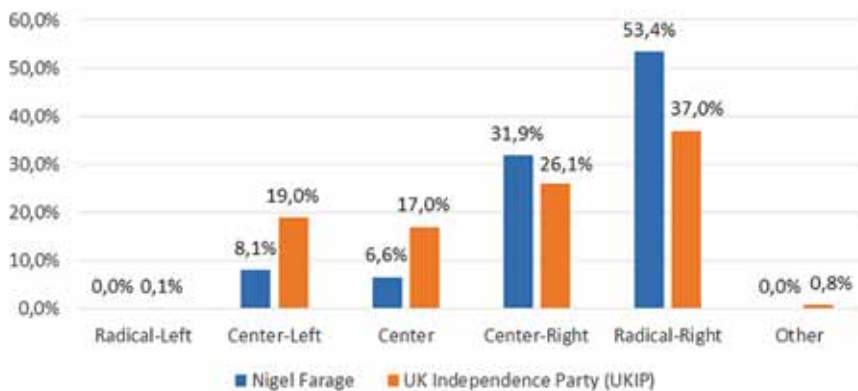
Source: Own compilation

UKIP account correspond to web pages and social media accounts linked to the party and its election candidates.

Therefore, the use of digital sources confirms existing research findings that *UKIP* and Farage use social media to amplify their message (Gonawela et al 2018; Klein and Pirro 2020; Reed 2016; Ridge-Newman 2020). The relatively high use of other, non-party, social media accounts and other websites by *UKIP* also appears to amplify populist messages: among such sources are several right wing commentators, some associated with alternative right views, such as UK commentators Katie Hopkins, who was banned from Twitter for promoting hate speech and YouTube commentator Sargon of Akkad (real name Carl Benjamin), an unsuccessful *UKIP* candidate and far-right activist eventually banned from YouTube for advocating the rape of a MP⁴ (Klein and Pirro 2020).

The political orientation of the shared sources (Figure 7) also suggests a similar pattern of amplification of centre-right and right-wing ideologies and discourses. Sources with a radical right orientation were the most frequently shared by both *UKIP* and N. Farage (over a third and over a half respectively). The second most often source type was actually centre-right for both actors. It is difficult to draw strong conclusions on the basis of this finding, but the use of more centrist and even centre-left sources by both profiles suggests an effort to appear moderate. N. Farage, in particular, is thought to have distanced himself from *UKIP* over the latter's increasingly extreme political agendas (Klein and Pirro 2020; Tournier-Sol 2020), although his social media communications have often adopted tropes that are racist and hostile to migration (Stone 2020) *UKIP* has tried to attract *Conservative* voters, although under the G. Batten leadership it increasingly associated itself with the far-right political spectrum (Klein and Pirro 2020; Ridge-Newman 2020; Weaver et al 2018).

Figure 7: Political orientation of sources



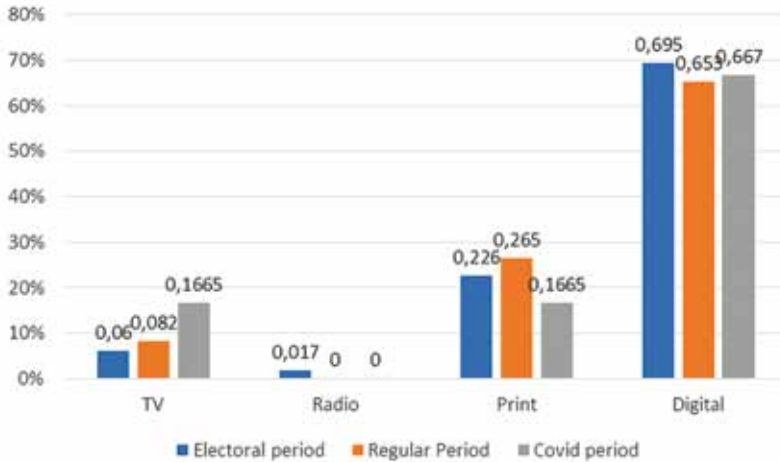
Source: Own compilation

⁴ <https://www.buzzfeed.com/markdistefano/youtube-says-sargon-of-akkad-has-been-suspended-from-being>

Electoral v. non electoral coverage

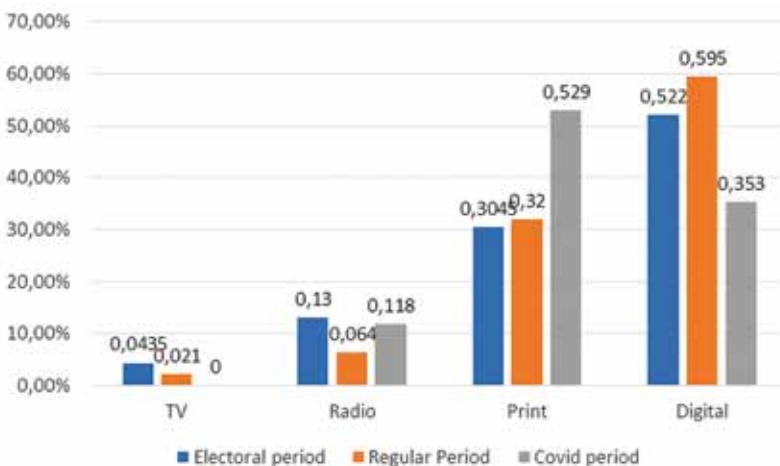
Some differences in the way sources were used by the two profiles can be observed during the three selected periods. Unlike *UKIP*, which used a similar number of sources during the election and regular periods, N. Farage shared approximately half the number of sources during the election period than in the regular one (Figures 8 and 9). In the case of *UKIP*, digital sources remain

Figure 8: Use of Sources during selected periods – UKIP



Source: Own compilation

Figure 9: Use of Sources during selected periods – N. Farage



Source: Own compilation

the most shared type among all three periods, with a slightly higher use of print sources during the regular period (Figure 8). Similarly, digital sources were the most shared by the profile of N. Farage in the electoral and regular periods, but print sources were the most shared during the COVID-19 pandemic period (Figure 9). Two conservative daily newspapers, the *Daily Mail* and the *Telegraph*, had the highest number of shares (six each) during this period, suggesting again the positioning of N. Farage in the right of the political spectrum. A further difference from the profile of UKIP is again that shares of radio sources are the 3rd highest in the profile of Nigel Farage, again due to sharing content exclusively by *LBC radio*. A limitation, however, is that both profiles share considerably fewer sources during the COVID-19 period (Table 2).

The pattern of ownership of sources in the three periods, by both profiles, remains the same as in the overall results: the overwhelming majority of shared sources are privately owned (Charts 8 & 9).

Table 2: Shares of sources in the selected periods

	UKIP			N. Farage		
	Electoral period	Regular period	Covid period	Electoral period	Regular period	Covid period
TV	7	8	1	1	1	0
Radio	2	0	0	3	3	2
Print	26	26	1	7	15	9
Digital	80	64	4	12	28	6
Total	115	98	6	23	47	17

Source: Own calculations based on Facebook data

Analytical Part 2: Network analysis of sources that share UKIP and populist leaders' posts

We examined here several aspects. First, whether there were disproportions between the two networks (ex. one much bigger than the other). Second, network reciprocity – the degree of inter-connection between different pages. Third, the degree of centrality, meaning of overlap between the two networks. Finally, we were interested to learn what pages were the connectors between the two, and if there was reciprocal sharing.

Network reciprocity

One striking difference between the two networks concerns the number of reciprocal connections with other profiles. The analysis found that profile of N. Farage had only four reciprocal connections: with *The Brexit Party*, which he was leading, the newspaper the *Daily Telegraph*,

Table 3: Reciprocal connections

Reciprocity	Page
The Brexit Party	Nigel Farage
Michael Heaver	Nigel Farage
LBC	Nigel Farage
The Telegraph	Nigel Farage
UKIP Oldham Branch	UKIP
UKIP Wales	UKIP
Richard Braine, Brexit Now	UKIP
David Kurten AM	UKIP
Elizabeth Jones for Brexit.	UKIP
Gareth Bennett	UKIP
Leave.EU	UKIP
Mike Hookem	UKIP
Neil Hamilton MS/AS	UKIP
Raheem Kassam	UKIP
Robert Hill UKIP	UKIP
UKIP Rotherham	UKIP
RT UK	UKIP
Sargon of Akkad	UKIP
Ernie Warrender UKIP	UKIP
UKIP Gravesham	UKIP
UKIP Scotland	UKIP
I'm voting UKIP in the next election	UKIP
UKIP Northern Ireland	UKIP
UKIP Oldham Branch	UKIP
UKIP Veterans	UKIP
UKIP Wales	UKIP
War Plan Purple	UKIP
UKIPEastMidlands	UKIP
Young Independence	UKIP

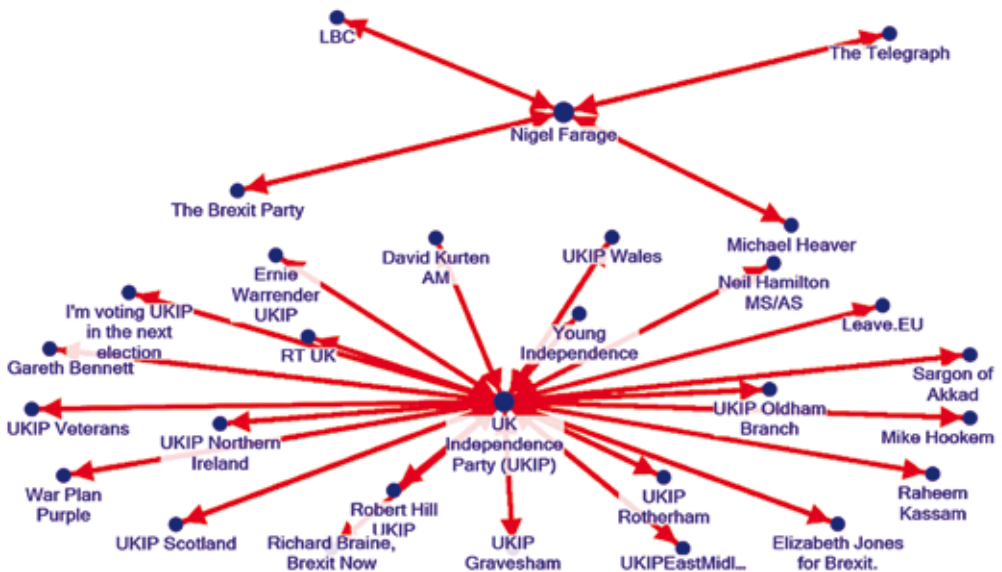
Source: Own calculations based on Facebook data

the radio station *LBC*, where he presented a programme, and the MEP candidate Michael Heaver (Table 3, Figure 10). The latter also run a website – *Westmonster.com* – that features among the sources shared by N. Farage. All other three reciprocal profiles were also among the sources shared a significant number of times by N. Farage: *the Brexit Party* 66 times, *LBC Radio* 54, and *The Telegraph* 47.

In contrast, *UKIP* had a much larger reciprocal network of 25 different profiles. The scope of these reciprocal connections is however rather narrow. They include *UKIP* local branches and specific groups – youth, veterans and War Plan Purple, the ‘cultural wing’ of *UKIP* (Klein and Pirro 2020), *UKIP* MPs, MEPs and candidates, a former *UKIP* advisor, and an unofficial campaign group, *I’m voting UKIP in the next elections*⁵. The Brexit campaign website – *Leave.eu* also features among the reciprocal connections, suggesting the affinity of *UKIP* with support for Brexit. Only one news profile, *RT UK*, features among the reciprocal connections. However, the strength of reciprocal connections is variable – for example, the two profiles of Mike Hookem, one of the *UKIP* MEPs, were shared a total of 99 times during the election period, but the profiles of some other candidates just once or twice (Mancuso et al 2020).

One factor explaining the discrepancy in the sizes of the reciprocal networks of the two profiles might be the relatively recent establishment of the *Brexit Party*, which was founded in April 2019, soon before the European Parliament Elections in May 2019. For example, some of the branch FB pages – which in the case of *UKIP* constitute a considerable part of the reciprocal

Figure 10: Reciprocal network



Source: Marincea, 2020

⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/ukipman/>

network – were set up between May and September 2019⁶, some after the election on May 23 2019. However, the limited reciprocal network of the Nigel Farage profile could also suggest a strategy of orienting his campaign towards other resources or keeping a tighter but stronger social media network.

A last observation is that the two reciprocal networks do not overlap. This can be attributed partly to electoral competition, since both parties in the 2019 EP election were competing in attracting the Brexit-supporting, right wing, nationalist electorate, as well as to the distance between N. Farage and *UKIP* from which he resigned (Klein and Pirro 2020; Tournier-Sol 2020).

Centrality

While in terms of reciprocity the two profiles maintain different networks, the analysis of centrality shows that there was a significant number of 63 profiles that have shared both the profiles of *UKIP* and Nigel Farage (Annex 1, Figure 11). This finding in itself suggests strong connections between the two profiles, which become clearer with the closer consideration of the types of central profiles. First, a significant number are groups supporting Brexit. At least 24 (some have closed down since the data collection or are private) out of the 63 profiles are Brexit-supporting groups, and an additional three anti-EU, while a further three groups opposing Brexit. Six profiles are ‘appreciations groups’ for Brexit-supporting, Conservative politicians. A further five are groups not exclusively focused on Brexit but with broader conservative, alt-right and anti-immigration politics, as well as at least one which has content promoting COVID-19 denialist views. While some of these groups tend to share one profile more than the other – for example, the top two sharers, *I’m a Brexiteer* and the *Jacob Rees-Mogg Appreciation Group* shared nearly twice as many posts by N. Farage than *UKIP* – the dynamics of Brexit appear to be a crucial factor in shaping network centrality around the two profiles.

A further noticeable feature of network centrality is the presence of groups that were directly linked to either the two parties, such as *UKIP* local branches or *Brexit Party* supporters’ groups. Some of these parties tended to share one profile – the one they are linked with – more than the other. For example, the *UKIP Sutton Surrey* and *Warrington and Leamington* local FB groups shared mostly posts of the *UKIP* profile, while *The Brexit party: Supporters* and *BREXIT PARTY SUPPORTERS UK* privileged N. Farage posts. Yet, in some cases, such as the Bury, Lancashire *UKIP* group there is a smaller difference between the number of shares. This pattern is significant given the absence of reciprocity from the N. Farage profile. In essence, even though he had left *UKIP*, FB pages linked to the party continued to disseminate his profile.

⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/Jackstreeterbrexitparty/>, <https://www.facebook.com/CoventryWarwickshireBrexitbranch/>, <https://www.facebook.com/TheBrexitPartyMK/>

with controversial or politically extreme content – for example on migration or Brexit. Both *UKIP* and Nigel Farage have made efforts to distance themselves from extreme right views in the past. Hence, their use of reliable, establishment sources can be seen in the context of strategies to present themselves as politically mainstream political actors, different from more extreme ones – for example far-right ultranationalist and Islamophobic groups such as English Defence League (EDL) and *Britain First* – in the UK political environment.

While mainstream and independent media content, as well as social media content not linked directly to the two profiles or their parties was shared by the two profiles, it was digital content produced by the two profiles or their party mechanisms such as local party branches profiles on FB that was most frequently shared by both profiles. This is consistent with the arguments of existing research on the strategies of *UKIP* and N. Farage as well as on other populist parties (Kramer 2017; Reed 2016; Ridge-Newman 2020; Savage 2019; Weaver et al 2018). In the case of N. Farage, his sharing of content linked to *LBC Radio*, where he was a presenter during the selected time periods, illustrates the same tendency. Further, while the reciprocal network of N. Farage is limited, *UKIP*'s reciprocal network consisted almost exclusively of accounts connected to the party, further suggesting a strategy of amplifying the party's political message within a network positively disposed towards *UKIP*.

The political orientation of the sources shared by the two profiles also provides some insights into their political communication strategies and agendas. While both profiles share content from websites that can be classified as centre left and centrist, most of the shared sources are within the ideological spectrum of the right. In particular, sources with a radical right orientation are the most frequently shared by N. Farage. Whereas this classification covers their party-generated content, other prominent alt right sources feature among those shared by either or both profiles, such as news outlets like *Breitbart*, *Guido Fawkes*, *Fox News*, YouTube channels such as *Prager U* and commentators such as Katie Hopkins. In short, both profiles disseminate predominantly centre-right and far right alt-right views (Klein and Pirro 2020) and appear to support the view that *UKIP* has 'filled a discursive gap after the *BNP* (*British National Party*), *Britain First*, and *EDL* were censored from social media platforms' (Klein and Pirro 2020: 1395; also Hern 2019). The findings support Klein and Pirro's (2020) argument that after the Brexit referendum, *UKIP*'s political communication strategies tried to target alt-right audiences active in particular online, insofar that the sources shared by the party's profile reflect this ideological space.

Nevertheless, the analysis of reciprocity suggests that this effort was not reciprocated by influential alt-right or right-wing media as none feature among the party's reciprocal network. Rather, the main disseminators of the two profiles' messages in the selected periods were other profiles supporting the 2016 referendum vote for leaving the EU, including FB groups with Brexit as their key focus, as well as appreciation groups of politicians who supported Brexit, and secondarily groups representing party branches or supporting either *UKIP* or the *Brexit Party*.

However, more research would be required to explore the relation between the findings of this research on social media networks and electoral success. The profile of N. Farage has a much smaller reciprocal network and the number of shares of the two profiles by the central groups disseminating their messages was roughly equal – 3406 for N. Farage compared to 3347 for *UKIP*. Yet, the *Brexit Party* and N. Farage were the more successful political actors in the period

of interest to this study – in the 2019 European Parliamentary elections, it elected 29 MEs, while *UKIP* failed to elect any (Fella, Uberoi and Cracknell 2019). Hence, while online networks and strategies are important in understanding the impact of populist parties, other factors need to be taken into account when considering their electoral impact.

Annex 1

Centrality	Shared N. Farage	Shared UKIP	TOTAL
I'M A BREXITEER	431	288	719
Jacob Rees-Mogg Appreciation Group	441	274	715
UKIP – Sutton Surrey	13	390	403
UKIP Warwick and Leamington	44	334	378
Brexit Newsgroup	207	115	322
THE SILENT MAJORITY (UK)	174	114	288
Ex-UKIP Supporters	53	122	175
Reunite EU – British European Rejoiners	31	139	170
Forever Europeans (Remain in the European Union)	12	141	153
UKIP Brent and Camden Branch	19	132	151
The Bruges Group	86	50	136
UKIP Bury, Lancashire	56	64	120
BRITAIN BEYOND BREXIT	76	35	111
THE EU IS A FAILED 'STATE'.	77	29	106
The (unofficial) Jacob Rees-Mogg Appreciation Society	71	32	103
We are the British People	67	34	101
Police Alerts UK & News reports	78	20	98
The Brexit party: Supporters	85	13	98
Brexit, Great Britain & Beyond: The Right Way Forward	67	27	94
BREXIT PARTY SUPPORTERS UK	79	12	91
Sir Iain Duncan Smith appreciation group	53	38	91
Fishing For Leave	76	14	90
Sack Remain Rebels From Parliament	61	24	85
UKIP Central Suffolk and Ipswich	14	71	85
Boris Johnson Appreciation Group	46	38	84
The People's Voice UK	45	34	79
Anti EU – Pro British	51	27	78
Campaign for bringing Tony Blair to Justice	40	36	76
Jacob Rees-Mogg Back-up Group	48	28	76
Brexit Christchurch	18	57	75

Centrality	Shared N. Farage	Shared UKIP	TOTAL
Concerned of the United Kingdom & our freedom from the EU.	57	17	74
The Brexit Central HQ: Public	44	24	68
We Love Our Country, Vote Leave	56	11	67
Brexit: The future of Britain – Daily Express group	39	24	63
We Support Jacob Rees-Mogg!	39	22	61
The Very Brexit Problems club	13	46	59
The List – An Active Voice	37	20	57
THE 17.4 MILLION WANT NO DEAL The Nick Simon Group	34	20	54
National English Unity	28	25	53
The Brexit Party Yorkshire & North Lincolnshire	34	19	53
Pro United Kingdom-Anti E.U.	27	25	52
Cannock Chase Open Discussion Group	15	34	49
YELLOW VEST HULL	17	31	48
The List	35	11	46
I hate the BBC	14	30	44
UK Brexit.	21	19	40
OFFICIAL BREXIT PEACEFUL BUT LOUD AND PROUD RALLIES	11	28	39
Bassetlaw Coronavirus Covid-19 Support Group	26	12	38
BREXIT NEWS	26	12	38
BREXIT PARTY North West Supporters	26	12	38
Britain's Got Brexiteers	27	11	38
UKIP West Hertfordshire	12	25	37
The independent britain north east group	17	18	35
All Politicians Are Self Serving Bastards	12	20	32
Why leave the EU?	14	18	32
Brexit – Daily Mail group	17	14	31
Operation Overlord	15	14	29
Battle for Britain	18	10	28
Leavers of Yorkshire	14	12	26
Politics & Beyond. The Fightback!	15	10	25
PROUD TO BE BRITISH	14	10	24
Bin the BBC	12	11	23
Total Shares	3405	3347	6752

Source: Own calculations based on Facebook data

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