

A Pause in the Mockery: Government, Party and Politician Pages on Facebook in Britain’s First Covid-19 Wave

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Abstract

When a crisis strikes, does political attention turn from parties to government? I test this on Facebook in Britain using 274,047 posts from 437 political pages tracked by CrowdTangle between June 2018 and October 2020: government and Parliament pages, party pages and politicians’ pages. Before the pandemic, government pages drew 5% of the interactions on government, party and politicians’ pages combined. In the first wave of Covid-19, from mid-March to the end of May 2020, they drew 29%. Weekly interactions with government pages rose about twelvefold, from a threefold rise in posting and a three- to fourfold rise in engagement per post. Engagement with party pages showed no clear jump, and the typical party or politician’s post drew less engagement than before. The attention faded at about 5% a week. The tone changed too, but not as one might expect. The government’s main Facebook page was normally a target of mockery and anger: in 2018 and 2019, laughing and angry reactions were more common on it than love. During the “stay home” weeks both almost disappeared. They returned from the week of 11 May 2020, when the government’s advice changed to “stay alert”, before the Dominic Cummings story. By the summer laughter was back near its usual level, though anger stayed below its 2018–19 level. On Facebook the rally round the government showed up as a surge of attention to the state and a two-month pause in the usual mockery of it.

Keywords: Covid-19; rally round the flag; government communication; Facebook; political parties; United Kingdom; reactions

1 Introduction

In the first weeks of the Covid-19 pandemic, governments across Europe enjoyed a surge of public trust and support. Surveys found rising trust in government and satisfaction with democracy around the introduction of lockdowns (Bol et al. 2021; Baekgaard et al. 2020; Kritzinger et al. 2021), a modern case of the “rally round the flag” first described for American presidents (Mueller 1970). In Britain the government began daily televised press conferences on 16 March 2020, and a national lockdown followed on 23 March.

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Most evidence on the rally comes from surveys, which tell us what people say they think. They tell us less about where people directed their attention and how they responded to what the government said. Social media offers a different view. When people followed the crisis online, did they turn to the government, or to the parties and politicians who usually compete for their attention? And how did they react to the government's own messages?

I use posts from 437 British political Facebook pages between June 2018 and October 2020 to compare where engagement went before, during and after the first wave of the pandemic, with the December 2019 general election as a benchmark. I ask three questions. Did engagement shift from parties and politicians to government pages? How large and lasting was the shift? And how did the reactions to the government's pages change?

The paper extends my earlier work on how British parties and leaders used Facebook ([Hotham 2021, 2026](#)) to the period in which government, rather than parties, became the centre of political attention.

2 Background

2.1 Rallies and their end

The rally effect describes a short-term rise in support for leaders during crises ([Mueller 1970](#)). The pandemic produced rallies across democracies. [Bol et al. \(2021\)](#) found that lockdowns increased support for incumbents, trust in government and satisfaction with democracy in Western Europe, and [Baekgaard et al. \(2020\)](#) found the same in Denmark. [Schraff \(2021\)](#) argues instead that trust tracked the spread of infections rather than lockdowns as such. Rallies fade. In Britain, the trip to Durham by the Prime Minister's adviser Dominic Cummings during lockdown, reported from 22 May 2020, is widely associated with a fall in confidence in the government ([Fancourt et al. 2020](#)). Two weeks earlier, on 10 May, the government had changed its main message from "stay home" to "stay alert", a change that drew wide criticism.

2.2 Attention and reactions on Facebook

Political communication on Facebook is usually studied through parties and candidates in election campaigns ([Stier et al. 2018](#); [Kalsnes et al. 2017](#)). Government accounts, which speak for the state rather than a party, have been studied less, although leaders' use of social media in the pandemic attracted early attention ([Rufai and Bunce 2020](#)). In a crisis the two kinds of page compete for the same users, and a rally would show up as a shift of engagement towards government pages. Facebook's reactions let users respond with love, laughter, sadness, surprise or anger, and the mix of reactions has been used to measure the emotional response to political posts ([Eberl et al. 2020](#); [Muraoka et al. 2021](#)).

2.3 Expectations

I expected government pages to draw a larger share of political engagement in the first weeks of the pandemic and the shift to fade over the following months. I expected reactions to government posts to be more positive during the rally and to become less positive as it faded. I had no firm expectation about when the change in tone would occur.

3 Data and methods

3.1 Pages and posts

The data are all posts from CrowdTangle’s list of UK political Facebook pages, exported on 28 October 2020 (CrowdTangle Team 2020). The list was curated by CrowdTangle and the export covers posts from May 2018. I use posts from 4 June 2018 to 25 October 2020, the last complete week, after removing three pages that were not political (a cricket page and two pages promoting Britain to tourists and students). That leaves 437 pages and 274,047 posts.

I classified each page into one of four groups. *Government and Parliament* pages (21) are official accounts of the UK government, the Prime Minister’s office, government departments and agencies including HM Armed Forces, the Scottish Government, the Mayor of London’s office and the two Houses of Parliament. *Party* pages (18) are the official pages of parties in Great Britain and Northern Ireland. *Politicians’* pages (394) belong to individuals, mostly MPs, including the party leaders and ministers. Boris Johnson’s personal page is a politician’s page; the “UK Prime Minister” page is a government page. *Campaign* pages (4) are Leave.EU, Democracy Unleashed, Scientists for EU and the Tony Blair Institute. Leave.EU alone drew a large share of all interactions before the pandemic, so I leave the campaign pages out of the main comparison and report shares of the interactions on government, party and politicians’ pages combined. The classification and the results including campaign pages are deposited with the paper.

3.2 Measures and periods

Engagement is the total of likes, comments, shares and reactions on a post, recorded at the time of export. I compare six periods: a baseline from June 2018 to October 2019; the 2019 general election campaign (4 November to 15 December 2019); the period after the election (16 December 2019 to 1 March 2020); the first wave of the pandemic (16 March to 31 May 2020); summer 2020 (June to August); and autumn 2020 (September to 25 October).

I estimate interrupted time series models of weekly engagement for each group of pages, with a level change and a change in trend from the week of 16 March 2020, controlling for a linear trend and the election weeks, with Newey–West standard errors. Because total engagement can rise either because pages post more or because each post draws more, I estimate the same model for the number of posts and for mean and median engagement per post. These are single-series models without a control group, and I treat them as descriptive.

For tone, I examine the three most prominent government pages: the UK government page, the official Prime Minister page and Boris Johnson’s personal page. I measure the share of likes and reactions that were love, haha and angry in six windows, from a 2018–19 baseline to autumn 2020. To locate the change, I compare the weeks either side of 11 May 2020 (the first week of “stay alert”) and of 22 May (the Cummings story), and compare the change at 11 May with the same comparison at each of 57 weekly dates from September 2019 to September 2020.

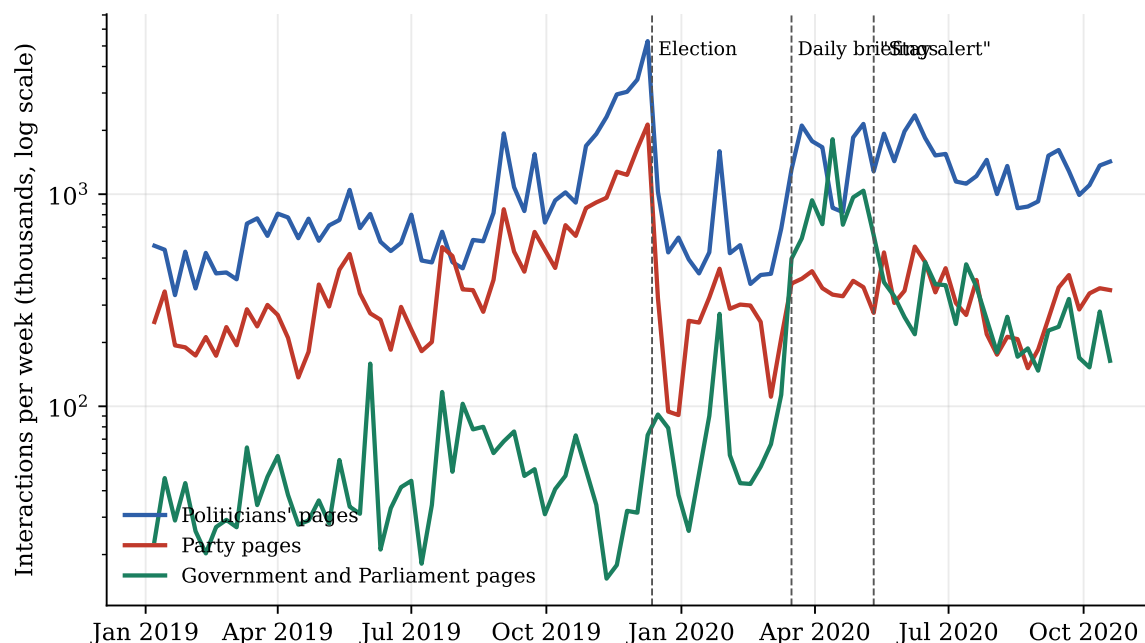


Figure 1. Weekly interactions on government and Parliament pages, party pages and politicians’ pages, January 2019 to October 2020 (log scale). Dashed lines mark the 2019 general election, the start of daily government press conferences and the change from “stay home” to “stay alert”.

4 Findings

4.1 Government pages took the attention

Figure 1 and Table 1 show the shift. Before the 2019 election, government pages drew about 42,000 interactions a week, 5% of the engagement on government, party and politicians’ pages. During the election campaign, engagement with party and politicians’ pages rose about fivefold, while government pages posted less, as government communication is restricted during election campaigns, and drew under 1% of the total.

The pandemic reversed the pattern. In the first wave, government pages drew about 788,000 interactions a week, 29% of the total: about 19 times their pre-election average. In the interrupted time series, weekly engagement with government pages rose by a factor of 12 in the week of 16 March (95% interval 8 to 19). Both posting and engagement per post rose. Government pages posted about three times as often (418 posts a week against 148 before the election), and each post drew about three to four times as much engagement (median 244 interactions against 59). The rise was concentrated in some posts. The single most-engaged government post of the first wave, HM Armed Forces’ post about the guard of honour for Captain Tom Moore as he completed his 100 laps, drew 958,000 interactions, 11% of all first-wave engagement with government pages, and the ten most-engaged posts drew 26%. Capping each post at the 99th percentile of engagement reduces the jump to a factor of 8. The jump remains large when the UK government and Prime Minister pages are excluded (a factor of 7) and when HM Armed Forces is excluded (12; Appendix Table 2).

Table 1. Weekly interactions (thousands), share of interactions on government, party and politicians' pages combined, posts per week and median interactions per post, by period.

Period	Interactions per week (share)			Posts per week			Median per post		
	Govt	Parties	Politicians	Govt	Parties	Pol.	Govt	Parties	Pol.
Jun 2018 to Oct 2019	42 (4.7%)	278 (31.0%)	578 (64.3%)	148	258	1428	59	328	40
2019 election campaign	34 (0.7%)	1,360 (29.8%)	3,162 (69.4%)	92	592	3174	65	873	88
16 Dec 2019 to 1 Mar 2020	77 (7.7%)	265 (26.8%)	647 (65.4%)	131	159	1264	101	452	55
16 Mar to 31 May 2020	788 (28.9%)	373 (13.7%)	1,562 (57.4%)	418	261	2490	244	257	33
Jun to Aug 2020	296 (14.7%)	317 (15.7%)	1,406 (69.6%)	268	221	1693	233	361	38
Sep to 25 Oct 2020	212 (11.7%)	320 (17.7%)	1,279 (70.6%)	240	244	1832	198	376	37

4.2 Parties and politicians

Engagement with party pages did not jump. In the time series the level change was a factor of 1.0 (95% interval 0.6 to 1.6), although weekly engagement in the first wave was about a third higher than the pre-election average. The pages differed. Engagement with the Labour Party page rose about 2.4 times ($p = 0.01$), around Keir Starmer's election as leader on 4 April, while the Conservative page showed no clear change.

Engagement with politicians' pages roughly doubled ($p = 0.002$), but entirely because politicians posted more: engagement per post did not change. Boris Johnson's page accounted for much of the increase; without it, the rise was a factor of 1.5. Johnson's page drew 2.1 million interactions in April 2020 and 2.2 million in May, close to its peak of 2.6 million during the election campaign (Figure 2). If Johnson's page is counted with the government pages, the government's share of engagement rose from 11% before the election to 49% in the first wave.

For both parties and politicians, the typical post drew less engagement during the first wave: median engagement per post fell to about half its earlier level for politicians and less than half for parties. As government pages posted more and drew more engagement per post, the typical party or politician's post drew less.

The opposition's pages also drew more engagement in the spring of 2020, but much less than the government's. Jeremy Corbyn's page drew 400,000 interactions in January and 1.3 million in May, after he had stepped down. Keir Starmer's page drew less engagement than Corbyn's in every month of 2020, 380,000 in May. In May his page had about 74,000 likes against Corbyn's 1.6 million, so this largely reflects audience size.

4.3 The attention faded

After the initial jump, engagement with government pages fell by about 5% a week. By summer they drew 15% of the engagement on government, party and politicians' pages, and by autumn 12%: still well above their pre-pandemic share, but less than half their share in spring.

4.4 A pause in the mockery

The reactions to the government's pages followed a different pattern from the one I expected (Figure 3, Table 3). Before the pandemic, the UK government page was a target of mockery and anger. From June 2018 to June 2019, 13% of its likes and reactions were haha and 15% angry, against 2% love; from July

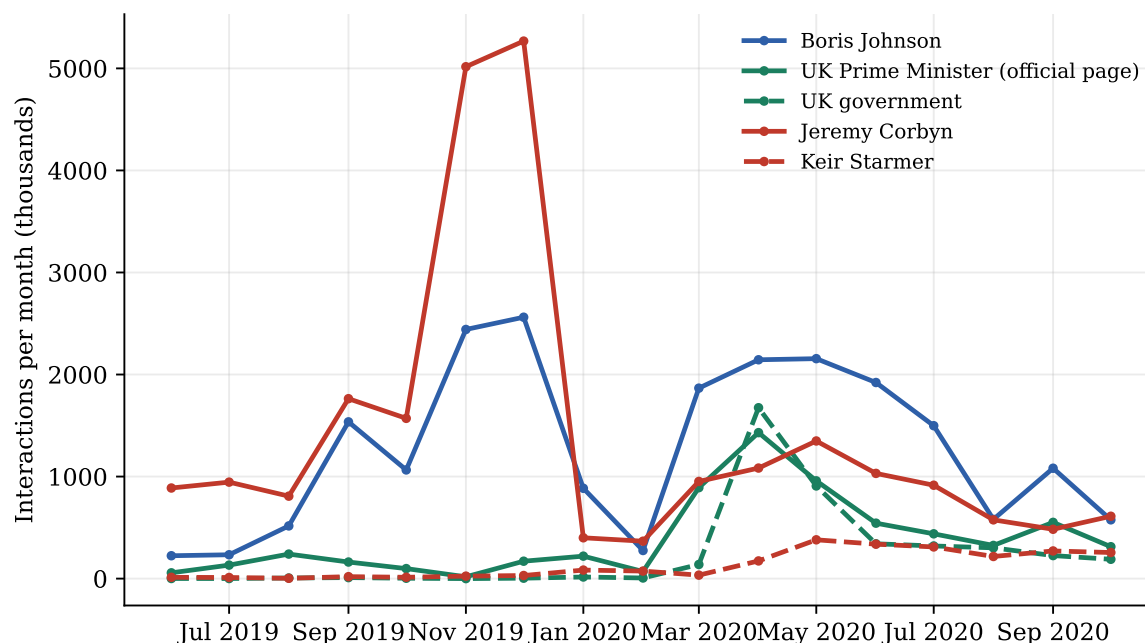


Figure 2. Monthly interactions on the official Prime Minister and UK government pages, Boris Johnson’s personal page, and the pages of the two Labour leaders, June 2019 to October 2020.

to October 2019, 15% were haha and 8% angry. On the Prime Minister’s page, angry reactions were 11% in 2018–19, under Theresa May, and lower under Johnson.

During the “stay home” weeks from 16 March to 10 May 2020, mockery and anger almost disappeared. On the UK government page only 1.1% of reactions were haha and 0.6% angry; on the Prime Minister’s page 0.6% and 1.4%. On Johnson’s personal page love reached 17% and haha and angry 0.3% each. Love on the UK government page was no higher than in early 2020; what changed was the absence of derision.

From 11 May the derision returned. Between 11 May and 30 June, haha rose to 8.7% of reactions on the UK government page and angry to 4.7%; on the Prime Minister’s page to 3.2% and 3.7%. From July to October haha was 10.6% on the UK government page and 6.6% on the Prime Minister’s, and angry about 4% on both. On the UK government page these levels were similar to or below those of 2018 and 2019. On the Prime Minister’s page, haha was higher in autumn 2020 than in 2019, and love lower.

The return began before the Cummings story. On the three pages, comparing 11 to 21 May with the four weeks before, the share of haha reactions rose by 3.0 percentage points and angry by 1.8 (both $p < 0.001$). Among 57 weekly dates from September 2019 to September 2020, the week of 11 May had the third-largest rise in haha and the second-largest in anger. After the Cummings story, from 22 May, haha rose by a further 2.2 points ($p < 0.001$) and angry by 0.8 ($p = 0.07$). Love and the new “care” reaction combined fell slightly at both points, but neither fall was statistically clear, and the fall at 11 May was not unusual among the 57 dates. The “stay home” period also contained events that drew warm reactions, including Johnson’s stay in intensive care in early April, the 100th birthday of Captain Tom Moore and VE Day, and Facebook introduced the care reaction in mid-April. These shape the positive reactions more than the negative ones.

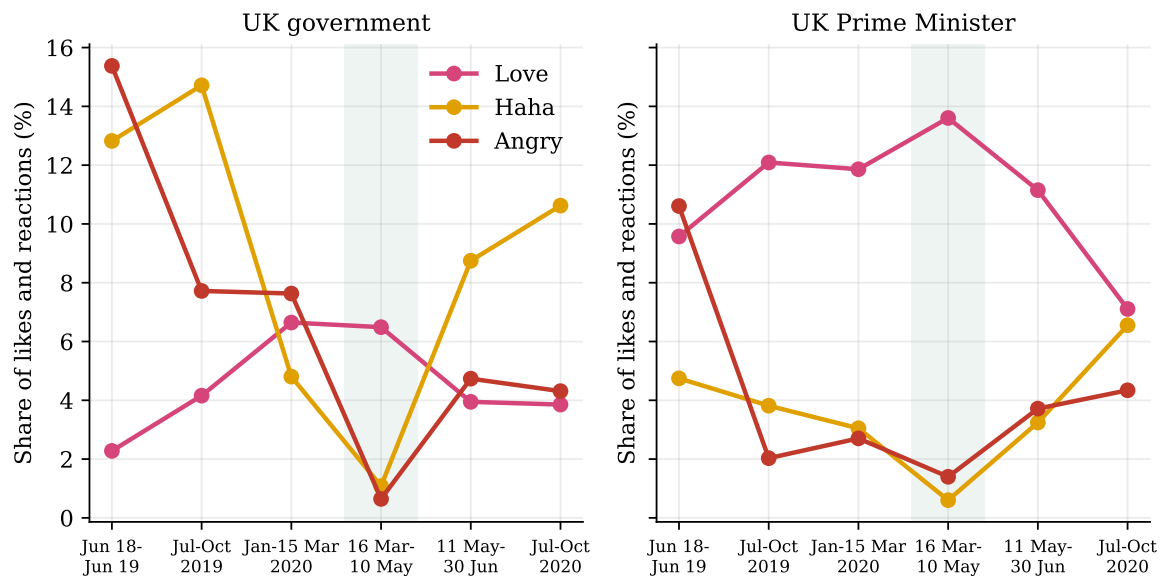


Figure 3. Love, haha and angry reactions as a share of all likes and reactions on the UK government and Prime Minister pages, six periods from June 2018 to October 2020. The shaded period is the “stay home” phase of the first wave.

5 Discussion

5.1 A rally on Facebook

On Facebook, the rally round the government in spring 2020 appeared as a large shift of attention to the state. For about two months government pages, which normally drew about 5% of the engagement on British government, party and politicians’ pages, drew almost 30%. The shift was partly supply, as government pages posted three times as often, and partly demand, as each post drew more engagement, with a few widely shared posts contributing a large part. The attention went to the government and to the Prime Minister personally. Party pages drew about as much engagement as before, and the typical post by a party or a politician drew less. Engagement is not support, and much of it may reflect people seeking information during the crisis. But as a measure of where political attention went, it shows parties losing ground to the state.

5.2 A pause, not a conversion

The reactions add something surveys of trust do not. The government’s main page had long attracted mockery and anger, as many official accounts do. During the “stay home” weeks that response almost stopped. The rally on Facebook was less a wave of new affection for the government than a suspension of the usual derision. It resumed in the week the government’s advice changed to “stay alert”, two weeks before the Cummings story with which the end of the rally is usually associated (Fancourt et al. 2020), and rose further after it. By the summer the government’s pages were attracting about as much mockery as before the pandemic.

I read laughing reactions to official government posts as mockery, because it is hard to see what else they would mean on posts about public health advice. But I have not coded what users were laughing at, and some laughter may be aimed at other commenters or at the content of a post rather than the government

itself.

6 Limitations

The list of pages was curated by CrowdTangle and does not include every relevant page; there is no Welsh Government page, for example, and no Brexit Party page. My classification draws judgement calls: the Scottish Government and the Mayor of London’s office are government pages, while Nicola Sturgeon’s and the metro mayors’ personal pages are politicians’. The main results hold when these pages are dropped (Appendix Table 2). Engagement measures how users responded to what they saw, not how many people saw it, and some government posts were probably promoted with paid advertising, which would raise their reach and engagement. Government communication is restricted during election campaigns, so the low engagement with government pages in the 2019 campaign reflects fewer posts as well as less interest. The time series have no control group, and the comparisons around particular dates cannot separate the effects of events from the gradual fading of the rally. Engagement was recorded when the data were exported, so recent posts had less time to accumulate engagement, although engagement per post in the final weeks was not unusually low.

7 Conclusion

In the first weeks of the Covid-19 pandemic, attention on British political Facebook turned from parties to the government. Government pages drew almost a third of the engagement on government, party and politicians’ pages, and the usual mockery of the government’s own page stopped. Within two months the attention was fading and the mockery was back, beginning with the change from “stay home” to “stay alert”. On Facebook, the rally round the government was large, brief and, in its tone, more a pause than a conversion.

Provenance and AI use

The data were exported from CrowdTangle in October 2020 for my doctoral research. This paper builds on my doctoral thesis (Hotham 2021). The analysis and writing were completed in 2026.

The analysis code and drafts of the text were prepared with the assistance of an AI system (Claude, by Anthropic), which was also used to review drafts. I checked the analysis and the text and take responsibility for both.

Data availability

Weekly interactions by group of pages, the period tables and the list of pages and their classification are deposited with this preprint. Post texts are not shared, in line with the terms under which the data were collected.

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A Appendix

Table 2. Interrupted time series: change in weekly engagement in the week of 16 March 2020, as a ratio (95% interval), with sensitivity checks. Log weekly series with linear trend, trend change and election-weeks dummy; Newey–West standard errors (4 lags).

Series	Ratio [95% interval]
Government pages, total	12.1 [7.7, 19.1]
posts per week	3.1 [2.5, 4.0]
mean per post	3.8 [2.6, 5.6]
median per post	2.9 [1.7, 5.0]
total, capped at 99th percentile	8.1 [5.9, 11.0]
excluding UK government and PM pages	7.4 [4.1, 13.3]
UK government and PM pages only	16.4 [8.7, 30.8]
excluding HM Armed Forces	11.9 [7.9, 17.8]
excluding Scottish and London pages	15.5 [9.4, 25.7]
Party pages, total	1.0 [0.6, 1.6]
posts per week	1.2 [0.9, 1.7]
mean per post	0.8 [0.7, 1.0]
median per post	0.4 [0.3, 0.6]
excluding Sinn Féin	1.1 [0.6, 1.8]
Labour Party page only	2.4 [1.2, 4.8]
Conservatives page only	1.4 [0.6, 2.9]
Politicians' pages, total	1.9 [1.3, 2.7]
posts per week	1.8 [1.4, 2.3]
mean per post	1.0 [0.7, 1.5]
median per post	0.5 [0.4, 0.7]
excluding Johnson	1.5 [1.1, 2.2]
excluding Johnson, Corbyn and Farage	1.6 [1.2, 2.0]

Table 3. Reactions on the three main government pages: share of likes and reactions (%). Care was introduced in April 2020.

Page	Period	Posts	Love	Care	Haha	Angry
UK government	Jun 2018 to Jun 2019	121	2.3	0.0	12.8	15.4
	Jul to Oct 2019	47	4.2	0.0	14.7	7.7
	Jan to 15 Mar 2020	49	6.6	0.0	4.8	7.6
	16 Mar to 10 May	382	6.5	0.7	1.1	0.6
	11 May to 30 Jun	377	3.9	0.9	8.7	4.7
	Jul to Oct 2020	595	3.9	0.8	10.6	4.3
UK Prime Minister	Jun 2018 to Jun 2019	561	9.6	0.0	4.7	10.6
	Jul to Oct 2019	218	12.1	0.0	3.8	2.0
	Jan to 15 Mar 2020	114	11.9	0.0	3.0	2.7
	16 Mar to 10 May	616	13.6	0.5	0.6	1.4
	11 May to 30 Jun	413	11.1	1.6	3.2	3.7
	Jul to Oct 2020	532	7.1	0.9	6.6	4.3
Boris Johnson	Jun 2018 to Jun 2019	118	6.1	0.0	2.7	4.6
	Jul to Oct 2019	351	9.6	0.0	2.0	0.8
	Jan to 15 Mar 2020	102	12.8	0.0	4.4	0.8
	16 Mar to 10 May	144	17.1	1.5	0.3	0.3
	11 May to 30 Jun	142	10.4	2.1	1.5	0.9
	Jul to Oct 2020	217	11.0	1.2	2.3	2.1

Table 4. Share of interactions (%) including campaign pages.

Period	Government	Parties	Politicians	Campaigns
Jun 2018 to Oct 2019	2.7	17.8	37.1	42.4
2019 election campaign	0.6	25.3	58.8	15.3
16 Dec 2019 to 1 Mar 2020	4.5	15.6	38.1	41.7
16 Mar to 31 May 2020	23.6	11.2	46.8	18.4
Jun to Aug 2020	10.9	11.7	51.6	25.8
Sep to 25 Oct 2020	8.8	13.2	52.8	25.3