Paid and Earned on Facebook

Do British Parties Pay for the Pages that People Engage With?

Tristan Hotham*

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Abstract

Parties and their leaders run Facebook pages that attract audiences without payment, and they also pay Meta to put ads in front of people. Do they pay for the pages that people already engage with? I join two sources for 25 British party and leader pages: monthly counts of reactions, shares and comments from CrowdTangle, from March 2016 to September 2020, and lifetime advertising spend on political and issue ads in Meta's Ad Library Report, from October 2019 to October 2026. Among the 12 party pages, advertising spend follows organic engagement closely (Spearman rank correlation 0.76). A tenfold difference in monthly engagement goes with roughly an eightfold difference in spend (log-log slope 0.90, 11 pages with spend). Leaders are different. Their pages earn most of the engagement but get little of the money. Using leaders who were active in 2019 and 2020, the leader's page took 75% of Labour's leader-plus-party engagement but 36% of its spend; for the Conservatives the figures are 68% and 7%, for the Liberal Democrats 16% and 1%, and for the SNP 51% and 2%. Nigel Farage's page comes closest to being paid for in line with its engagement. Parties thus pay for their own brand pages and rely on leaders' pages to attract the audience without payment. The two datasets only partly overlap in time, so the paper describes a pattern across pages, not the effect of spending on engagement.

Keywords: Facebook; political advertising; organic engagement; party leaders; CrowdTangle; Ad Library

1 Introduction

A party's Facebook presence has two parts. The first is the audience that comes without payment: people who follow a page, react to its posts, comment and share. The second is what the party pays for: ads that reach people who do not follow the page. Political communication research tends to study one or the other. Studies of organic engagement ask what content attracts reactions and shares, while studies of advertising ask what parties spend and who they target (Dommett and Power 2019; Votta et al. 2024). This paper asks how the two relate. Do parties spend most on the pages that already attract the most engagement, or do they use ads to make up for pages that do not?

There are reasons to expect either. Parties may put money behind pages that already perform, following their own sense of what works. But advertising can also be used to compensate for weakness, to reach groups the organic audience does not. The question is also about leaders. In earlier work I asked who carries the party on Facebook, the leader or the party page (Hotham 2026b). Here I ask the same question of money.

I join page-level engagement data that I exported from CrowdTangle for my doctoral research (Hotham 2021) to the page-level spending in Meta's Ad Library Report, which I analysed in a companion paper (Hotham 2026c). That paper describes how party advertising is organised across pages. This one links the pages to the engagement they earned. The link is limited by the dates of the two sources, and I return to this limit throughout.

2 Data and method

2.1 Organic engagement

The engagement data are monthly sums, by page, of posts and of reactions, shares and comments, taken from the official pages of British parties and their leaders in my CrowdTangle lists, exported in October 2020 (CrowdTangle 2020; Hotham 2021). They cover March 2016 (the first full month of emoji reactions) to September 2020. There are 25 UK pages: 12 party pages and 13 leader pages. Some series are short, because a page did not exist, or a leader left office, within the period (the Brexit Party from April 2019, Jo Swinson from May 2017 to December 2019, David Cameron to April 2020, Theresa May from July 2016 to July 2019, Vince Cable to November 2019). For each page I measure organic engagement as mean monthly interactions (reactions plus shares plus comments) over the months the page is in the data. Interaction counts are those at the time of export, not at the time of posting.

2.2 Advertising spend

Advertising comes from the Ad Library Report for the United Kingdom, all dates (12 October 2019 to 11 October 2026), described in Hotham (2026c). It gives each advertiser's lifetime spending on ads about social issues, elections or politics. I matched pages by Page ID, confirmed against the page name in the report. The Reform UK page (ID 230416667843105) is the former Brexit Party page: the report lists "The Brexit Party" among its names. Five pages are not in the report under their names or have no recorded spending: UKIP, Caroline Lucas, Natalie Bennett, David Cameron and Vince Cable. I treat them as having no spending. Theresa May's page appears with six ads and spending of £100 or less, which is recorded as zero. For this reason the results below can be read as "pages with recorded spending versus pages without", and I report both.

2.3 Time mismatch

The two sources overlap in one year only, October 2019 to September 2020. Engagement is for 2016 to 2020; spending is lifetime, from 2019 to 2026, and so includes later periods, including leaders (Rishi Sunak, Kemi Badenoch, Anas Sarwar and others) who do not appear in my engagement data. The comparison is therefore between how large a page was in 2016 to 2020 and how much it has spent since 2019. It is sensible only to the extent that pages keep their relative size over time. As a check, I repeat the main comparison using engagement in the overlap year alone, and restricting to pages with at least 30 months of data.

2.4 Measures and tests

I use Spearman rank correlations between mean monthly interactions and lifetime spend, for all pages, for party pages, and for leader pages. For pages with recorded spending I also estimate the slope of log spend on log engagement. For each party with an active leader I compare the leader's share of leader-plus-party engagement in the overlap year with the leader's share of leader-plus-party spending. Leaders included are those with at least six months of data in the overlap year. With 25 pages, all statistics are descriptive, and p-values should be read as rough guides.

3 Results

3.1 Spending follows engagement across party pages

Page	Type	Months	Engagement, k per month	Same, Oct 2019 to Sep 2020	Spend, £k	Ads
The Labour Party	party	55	334.6	591.9	3,181	86,184
Conservatives	party	55	309.0	736.2	3,056	24,631
The Brexit Party	party	18	318.1	218.6	1,664	10,807
Liberal Democrats	party	55	52.1	73.5	1,334	19,246
Keir Starmer	leader	38	54.8	162.4	1,323	14,975
Nigel Farage	leader	55	719.1	1,289.7	1,084	1,371
Green Party of England and Wales	party	55	59.2	35.7	717	1,606
Jeremy Corbyn	leader	55	932.4	1,586.2	409	920
Scottish National Party (SNP)	party	55	161.3	234.3	331	896
Boris Johnson	leader	52	466.6	1,589.2	233	1,270
Plaid Cymru	party	55	11.4	16.9	152	1,932
Alliance Party of Northern Ireland	party	55	4.5	6.5	70	441
Democratic Unionist Party	party	53	4.0	5.5	36	158
Ed Miliband	leader	31	5.6	4.0	29	423
Social Democratic and Labour Party	party	55	2.8	5.3	25	565
Ulster Unionist Party	party	46	1.3	2.4	14	81
Tim Farron	leader	50	6.5	14.0	9	144
Nicola Sturgeon	leader	55	111.4	245.5	7	20
Jo Swinson	leader	24	4.7	–	0	4
Caroline Lucas	leader	54	20.8	10.2	0	0
David Cameron	leader	21	90.3	–	0	0
Natalie Bennett	leader	55	14.7	3.3	0	0
Theresa May	leader	34	122.6	–	0	6
UK Independence Party (UKIP)	party	55	157.6	88.6	0	0
Vince Cable	leader	42	7.1	–	0	0

Table 1. Organic engagement (reactions, shares and comments per month, thousands) and lifetime ad spend for 25 British party and leader pages. Sources: CrowdTangle (exported October 2020); Meta Ad Library Report, UK, all dates.

Table 1 lists the pages. Across all 25 pages the rank correlation between engagement and spending is 0.42 ($p = 0.034$). Among the 12 party pages it is 0.76 ($p = 0.005$), and among the 13 leader pages 0.34 ($p = 0.25$). Figure 1 shows the 19 pages with recorded spending on logarithmic scales. The party pages lie close to a straight line: the slope is 0.90 with an R^2 of 0.91, which means that spending rises almost in proportion to engagement. The Labour Party and the Conservatives, with the most engagement among the established parties (about 330,000 and 310,000 interactions per month), spent about £3.2 million and £3.1 million. The Liberal Democrats and the Greens, with about 50,000 to 60,000, spent £1.3 million and £0.7 million. The Northern Ireland parties, below 5,000, spent £14,000 to £70,000. Plaid Cymru, at about 11,000, spent £152,000.

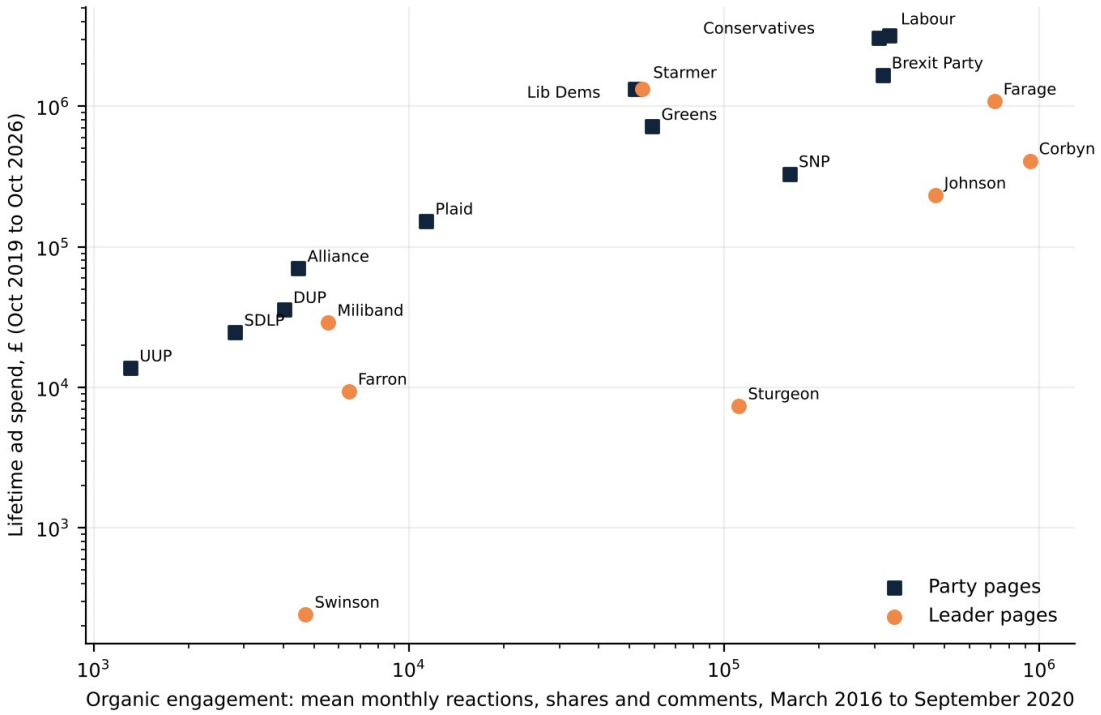


Figure 1. Organic engagement and lifetime ad spend, pages with recorded spending (log scales).

Leader pages show a weaker pattern (slope 0.95, R^2 0.52, 8 leaders with spending), and a larger spread: Jeremy Corbyn's page averaged about 930,000 interactions a month and Boris Johnson's about 470,000, but their lifetime spending is £0.41 million and £0.23 million. Keir Starmer's page, with about 55,000 a month in 2016 to 2020, has spent £1.32 million, but the report does not say when.

3.2 Leaders earn more than they cost

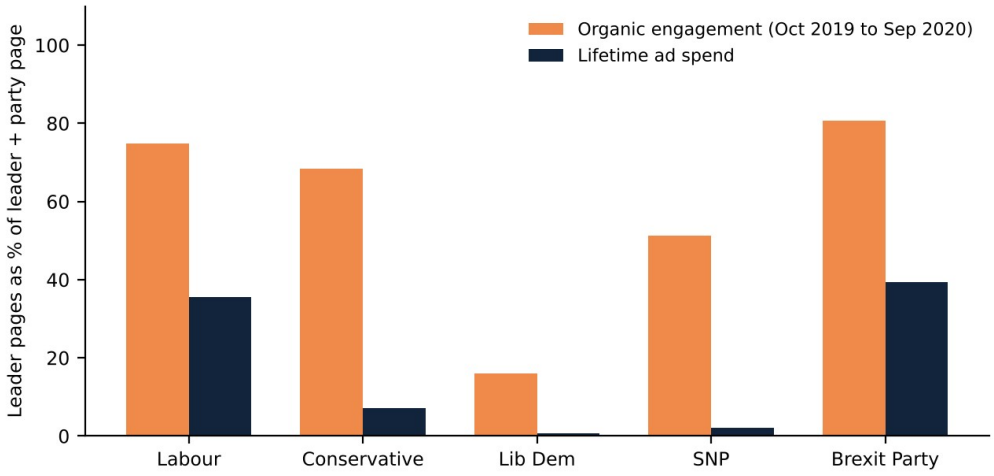


Figure 2. The leader's page as a share of leader-plus-party-page engagement (October 2019 to September 2020) and of lifetime ad spend. Leaders: Labour (Corbyn, Starmer, Miliband), Conservatives (Johnson), Liberal Democrats (Farron), SNP (Sturgeon), Brexit Party (Farage).

The clearest pattern is in Figure 2. In the overlap year, the leaders' pages took 75% of the combined engagement of Labour's leader and party pages, 68% for the Conservatives and 81% for the Brexit Party

and Nigel Farage. But the leaders' pages took only 36%, 7% and 39% of the spending. The gap is largest for the Conservatives and the SNP, where the leader's page earned 68% and 51% of the engagement but took 7% and 2% of the money. Farage's page comes closest to its engagement share, but is still paid for at about half of it.

This comparison is likely to overstate the gap, because spending includes leaders after 2020 who are not in the engagement data. In the companion paper (Hotham 2026c), which counts every leader page I could identify, the leader share of leader-plus-national spending is 41% for Labour, 24% for the Conservatives, 40% for Reform UK, 4% for the SNP and under 1% for the Liberal Democrats. These are higher than the figures in Figure 2 for Labour's and the Conservatives' leaders, as expected, but still below the engagement shares in every case. The result, that leaders earn the engagement and parties get the money, therefore holds under both definitions, but its size does not.

3.3 Who is paid for more, or less, than their engagement

Ranking the 25 pages on each measure shows who departs most from the trend. Pages paid for well above their engagement rank are the Liberal Democrats (14th on engagement, 4th on spending), the four Northern Ireland parties (each nine or ten places higher on spending), Keir Starmer's page (13th on engagement, 5th on spending) and, by a smaller margin, Plaid Cymru and the Greens. Pages paid for well below their engagement rank are Jeremy Corbyn (1st on engagement, 8th on spending), Boris Johnson (3rd, 10th) and Nicola Sturgeon (10th, 18th). UKIP, Theresa May and David Cameron have none or negligible recorded spending although each ranks in the top eleven on engagement. For the last two this reflects the dates: both had left office before the library began. UKIP, though, had an audience (about 158,000 interactions a month) and no political advertising under its name in the library.

3.4 Robustness

Using engagement in the overlap year alone, for pages with at least six months of data, the rank correlation with spending is 0.59 ($n = 21$; $p = 0.005$), and for party pages 0.74. Restricting to pages with at least 30 months of data ($n = 22$) gives 0.43. The party-page result does not depend on any one page: it comes from the ordering of the Labour Party, the Conservatives, the Brexit Party, the Liberal Democrats, the Greens, the SNP and the smaller parties. It is, however, a result for only 12 pages, and the slope for party pages rests on 11.

4 Discussion

Two things follow. First, parties spend roughly in proportion to the audience their pages have earned. This is what one would expect if ads are used to extend pages that work, and not what one would expect if ads were a substitute for organic reach. These data cannot test that explanation: a page can have a large audience because it spends, and spending in 2019 to 2026 may follow size in those years as much as size in 2016 to 2020.

Second, leaders are where the free audience is, and parties are where the money goes. For most parties the leader's page earns well over half of the leader-plus-party engagement, but takes a small share of the spending. This fits the idea that a leader's page is an organic asset, while the party page is the vehicle for paid communication, which may be because party spending is subject to party control and to the rules on party spending, while a leader's personal page is not run in the same way. I cannot show that here. The Farage page is the exception: it combines a large organic audience with substantial advertising.

These results fit with the structure described in the companion paper. The two parties that spend most through leader pages, Labour and Reform UK, are those whose leaders (Corbyn and Farage) have the two largest organic audiences in the data. But the SNP and the Liberal Democrats have leaders with sizable audiences and spend almost nothing through them. Audiences and money are only loosely tied at the level of the leader, and closely tied at the level of the party.

5 Limitations

The main limitation is time. Organic engagement is for 2016 to 2020 and spending is lifetime to 2026, so the paper describes an association across pages, not the effect of one on the other, and it cannot say whether engagement preceded spending. Only 12 months overlap. The ad data have no dates, and the Ad Library API, which provides dated ads, would allow a direct comparison for the 2019 election and the following year. With 25 pages the estimates are imprecise. The engagement data are those in my CrowdTangle lists (Hotham 2021), which are not a census of British pages: for example, the pages of Rachel Reeves, Angela Rayner and other prominent politicians are not in them. Interaction counts are as of October 2020 and include reactions from anyone. Reactions, shares and comments are weighted equally. Spending is as recorded by Meta for ads it classifies as political or issue ads; other ads are not included, and organic engagement may be affected by paid reach that I cannot observe.

6 Conclusion

British parties pay for the pages that people already engage with. Spending across party pages rises almost in proportion to engagement. Leaders' pages earn more of the engagement than they receive in money, which suggests that parties rely on leaders to attract audiences and put their own money behind the party page. The data allow only a one-year overlap, so the next step is to use the Ad Library API to compare dated spending with weekly engagement at the 2019 election.

Data availability

The engagement figures in Table 1 are monthly aggregates; in line with CrowdTangle's terms I do not publish post-level data. The advertising data are Meta's public Ad Library Report for the United Kingdom (all dates, report dated 11 October 2026). The page-level table behind Table 1 is available as a supplementary CSV file.

Provenance and AI use

The engagement data were exported from CrowdTangle in October 2020 for my doctoral research (Hotham 2021). The advertising data were downloaded from Meta's Ad Library Report in October 2026, when the analysis and writing were completed. I designed the study and am responsible for the analysis and conclusions. I wrote the text, with drafting and editing assistance from Claude (Anthropic), which also helped prepare the analysis code and classify the pages. I reviewed and checked all text and results.

Ethics

Not applicable: the study involves no human participants. The data are public, page-level totals of advertising spending published by Meta and aggregate counts of interactions with the official pages of political parties and party leaders. No post or ad content is quoted, and no data on individual users are used.

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** Independent researcher. ORCID 0000-0003-4931-9349. Correspondence: contact@tristanhotham.com. The views expressed are the author's own and do not represent those of any employer.*