

Shared More, Liked Less?

Facebook's 2018 News Feed Change and the Pages of European Parties and Leaders

Tristan Hotham*

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Abstract

On 11 January 2018 Facebook announced that its News Feed would favour “meaningful social interactions” between people and show less public content from pages, which it warned might see their reach fall. Internal documents later suggested that European parties felt the change pushed them towards more negative content. What happened to the engagement that party and leader pages received? I use 418,477 posts from 105 party pages and 71 party leaders’ pages in 20 European countries, collected through CrowdTangle and covering March 2016 to December 2019. I compare each page with itself before and after the change, allowing for trends and election campaigns, and compare the break in January 2018 with breaks estimated in every other month. Around the change, I find no detectable break in engagement per post, total engagement or the number of posts: the median post drew about the same in 2018 as in 2017. What changed was the kind of engagement. The number of shares a page received rose by about 29%, while likes, comments and emoji reactions did not change, so shares rose from 14.2% to about 17% of all interactions. This break of 2.7 points is larger than the break estimated at any of 33 other months and absent in January 2017 and January 2019. The rise in sharing was found in 17 of 19 countries and was larger on the pages of populist parties. It lasted about a year and had faded by mid-2019. Larger pages lost engagement per post relative to smaller ones, and link and video posts lost ground relative to photos within the same page. The change did not reduce the engagement parties received, but for about a year their audiences shared their posts more.

Keywords: Facebook; News Feed; algorithms; meaningful social interactions; political parties; party leaders; social media engagement; sharing; Europe; CrowdTangle

1 Introduction

Political parties publish on platforms whose rules they do not set. What a page’s followers see, and therefore how they respond, depends on ranking systems that change without notice and are rarely studied from the outside (Bucher 2012; Bossetta 2018). One of the largest such changes came on 11 January 2018, when Facebook announced that its News Feed would prioritise posts that “spark conversations

*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.

and meaningful interactions between people”, rank posts from friends and family above public content, and show fewer posts from businesses, brands and media. Facebook warned that pages “may see their reach, video watch time and referral traffic decrease” (Mosseri 2018). Three weeks earlier it had begun to demote “engagement bait”, posts that ask people to like, comment or share (Facebook 2017).

The change has since become a reference point in debates about platforms and politics. Reporting based on internal documents described how the new ranking formula gave heavy weight to comments, reshares and emoji reactions, and how Facebook’s own researchers came to worry that it rewarded outrage (Hagey and Horwitz 2021; Merrill and Oremus 2021). In April 2019, according to those documents, political parties in Europe told Facebook that the change had pushed them towards more negative content, and one Polish party’s social media team said its posts had moved from a roughly even mix of positive and negative to 80% negative (Morris 2021). These accounts concern the content parties chose to post. Less is known about a prior question: what happened to the engagement that party and leader pages received?

This paper answers that question for 176 pages of parties and party leaders in 20 European countries. I use posts collected through CrowdTangle, Facebook’s tool for tracking public pages, from March 2016 to December 2019, and compare each page with itself in the months before and after the change. Because the change reached every page at once, there is no untreated group. Instead I compare the break in January 2018 with the breaks estimated, in the same way, at every other month, and at the same point in 2017 and 2019. I ask three questions. **RQ1.** Did party and leader pages receive less engagement per post, or less in total, after the change? **RQ2.** Did the kind of engagement change, between likes, comments, shares and emoji reactions? **RQ3.** Did some pages and kinds of post lose more than others?

The answers are as follows. Around the change, engagement per post, total engagement and the number of posts did not change in any detectable way. The kind of engagement did. Pages received more shares, by about 29%, and no more likes, comments or reactions, so shares rose by about 2.7 points as a share of all interactions, from 14.2%. This break stands out against every other month in the period, appears in most countries and lasted about a year. Larger pages lost engagement per post relative to smaller pages, and within pages, link and video posts lost ground relative to photos.

2 Background

Platform rules and political pages. Platforms shape political communication through their design and their ranking, which together decide what is visible (Bucher 2012; Bossetta 2018). Professional communicators adapt to these rules, often by trial and error (Cotter 2019). Ranking can favour some political actors over others: on Twitter, algorithmic ranking amplified the content of some parties more than others (Huszár et al. 2022). A large experiment during the 2020 United States election found that replacing Facebook’s ranking with a chronological feed changed what people saw and how much they engaged, but not their political attitudes (Guess et al. 2023). Research on European parties’ pages has documented what kinds of content draw engagement (Bene et al. 2022; Larsson 2016), but has rarely asked how changes in the platform itself altered that engagement.

The January 2018 change. Facebook described the change as a shift from “helping you find relevant content” to “helping you have more meaningful social interactions” (Mosseri 2018). Later reporting described how this was implemented: the ranking system predicted how likely each user was to interact with a post and weighted those predictions, with comments and reshares, and emoji reactions, counting for more than likes (Hagey and Horwitz 2021; Merrill and Oremus 2021). According to the same reporting, the weight on emoji reactions had been raised to five times a like in 2017, the Angry reaction

was cut to four times a like in 2018, all reactions to 1.5 times in 2020, and Angry to zero in September 2020 (Merrill and Oremus 2021). The engagement-bait demotion of December 2017 was aimed at posts that explicitly asked for interactions (Facebook 2017). Evidence on the effects is mostly about publishers. Nonprofit news organisations generally saw less referral traffic from Facebook after the change, though the declines were uneven (Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy 2018).

Expectations. Facebook’s own announcement implies that pages’ reach would fall. Since engagement depends on reach, pages should have received less engagement per post, unless their audiences engaged more with what they still saw. The new weights imply a change in kind as well as amount. If the ranking rewarded posts that drew comments and reshares, posts that drew them would have been shown more widely, and comments and shares should have risen as a share of what pages received. The demotion of engagement bait points the other way for posts that asked for shares. My earlier work found no change in the engagement premium of populist parties after January 2018 (Hotham 2026b), and only a modest rise in anger on European party pages over the period, mostly explained by the wider use of emoji (Hotham 2026a). This paper looks at all pages together and at the composition of engagement.

3 Data

Pages and posts. The posts come from CrowdTangle lists of official party and party leader pages that I built for my doctoral research and exported in October 2020 (CrowdTangle Team 2020; Hotham 2021). The European data cover the national parties that had Facebook pages and won seats or a meaningful share of the vote, and the leaders of many of them, in 20 countries. I use posts from 1 March 2016, shortly after Facebook introduced emoji reactions, to 31 December 2019, before the Covid-19 pandemic changed political communication. I keep pages that posted both in the six months before and the six months after the change, which leaves 418,477 posts from 105 party pages and 71 leader pages (Table 1). Together they received 503 million interactions.

Measures. For each post CrowdTangle records likes, comments, shares and emoji reactions (Love, Wow, Haha, Sad and Angry). I call their sum interactions. I group posts into links (including YouTube links), photos, videos (native, live and other video) and text-only status updates. I aggregate posts into page-months, recording the number of posts, total interactions, the median interactions per post and the share of interactions made up by likes, comments, shares and emoji reactions. A month with no posts within a page’s active period counts as zero posts. Page likes at the time of posting are recorded for most posts and are used in robustness checks.

Elections. Election campaigns raise engagement and differ in timing between countries. I mark the 30 days before each national parliamentary election in the period, using dates from ParlGov, and the month before the European Parliament election of May 2019.

Table 1. Pages and posts by country, March 2016 to December 2019. Pages with posts both in the six months before and the six months after the change.

Country	Party pages	Leader pages	Posts	Interactions (m)
Belgium	0	5	8,911	10.1
Denmark	0	8	9,328	11.8
Finland	7	0	17,462	3.7
France	12	0	32,290	16.8
Germany	4	0	9,348	10.3
Greece	3	4	17,212	11.8
Hungary	7	6	46,383	48.3
Ireland	1	4	6,432	3.3
Latvia	0	1	741	0.1
Lithuania	4	1	6,783	1.9
Luxembourg	7	1	9,590	0.7
Norway	8	7	21,415	23.3
Portugal	5	0	20,283	5.6
Romania	3	1	14,824	19.1
Slovakia	4	3	17,813	12.8
Slovenia	5	0	16,234	1.6
Spain	13	7	79,274	143.5
Sweden	8	7	24,620	32.5
Switzerland	3	3	6,382	1.0
United Kingdom	11	13	53,152	145.0
Total	105	71	418,477	503.0

4 Method

The change reached every page at once, so the design compares each page with itself over time. For page p in month m ,

$$y_{pm} = \alpha_p + \beta \text{After}_m + \gamma_1 t_m + \gamma_2 \text{After}_m t_m + \delta \text{Campaign}_{pm} + \varepsilon_{pm}, \quad (1)$$

where t_m counts months from January 2018, After_m marks the months from February 2018, and α_p is a page fixed effect. January 2018 itself is dropped, because the change was announced on 11 January. The coefficient β is the break in level at the change, allowing for separate linear trends before and after. In the main analysis I use six months either side. Standard errors are clustered by page.

A break in January might reflect the season rather than the platform: engagement and posting often dip over Christmas and recover in the new year. I deal with this in two ways. First, I estimate the same model at January 2017 and January 2019, when no comparable change took place. Second, I estimate it at every month from September 2016 to June 2019, giving 34 estimates, and ask whether the January 2018 break stands out among them. For interactions per post I also estimate post-level models with longer windows, calendar-month effects, controls for page likes and post type, and country-specific trends. To compare kinds of page and post, I interact the break with page and post characteristics within twelve months either side.

5 Results

5.1 No fall in the amount of engagement

Figure 1 shows the three main outcomes month by month, compared with December 2017 within the same pages. The median post drew about the same in 2018 as in 2017: averaged over the eleven months after the change, about 2% less than over 2017. The number of posts per month did not change either. Engagement per post rose sharply during 2019, by about 40% on average compared with December 2017, a rise that began a year after the change and continued through the European Parliament election and beyond.

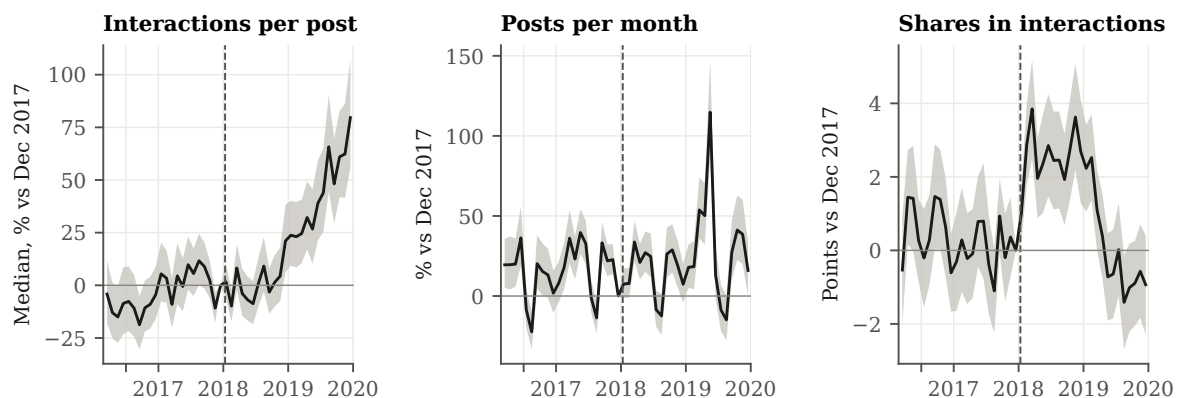


Figure 1. Interactions per post (median), posts per month and shares as a percentage of all interactions, by month, compared with December 2017 within the same pages, with 95% confidence bands. The dashed line marks 11 January 2018.

Table 2 gives the break estimates. At January 2018, the break in median interactions per post was zero (-0.00 , SE 0.05), in total interactions 0.03 (SE 0.07) and in the number of posts 0.03 (SE 0.05). None is distinguishable from zero, and the confidence intervals rule out a drop in median interactions per post of more than about 10%. The left panel of Figure 2 shows that the January 2018 estimate is unremarkable among the breaks estimated at other months.

The post-level estimates in Table 3 tell the same story in short windows: a break of $+8\%$ (95% CI -1% to $+17\%$) with six months either side and -2% (-11% to $+7\%$) with twelve. Over the whole period from March 2016 to December 2019, a model with separate linear trends before and after the change estimates a drop of about a fifth, which survives controls for page likes, post type, country trends and the dates of the engagement-bait demotion. The page-month models over the same long window give similar drops in total and median interactions. These estimates should not be read as effects of the change. It comes from fitting a straight line to the period after January 2018, which was flat for a year and then rose steeply, and projecting that line back to January 2018. Figure 1 shows no such drop in the months around the change.

5.2 More sharing, fewer likes

The composition of engagement did change. In the six months before the change, shares made up 14.2% of the interactions a page received, likes 65.3%, comments 11.1% and emoji reactions 9.5%. At January 2018 the share of shares rose by 2.7 points (SE 0.53), while likes fell by 1.6 points (SE 0.63) and emoji reactions by 1.0 point (SE 0.27). Comments did not change (-0.2 , SE 0.38). At the same point in 2017

Table 2. Break at the start of January 2018 and at the same point in 2017 and 2019. Page-month panel, six months either side of January (which is dropped), with page fixed effects, separate linear trends before and after, and controls for election campaigns. Standard errors clustered by page in brackets.

	Mean before	January 2017	January 2018	January 2019
Median interactions per post (log)	264	0.04 (0.05)	−0.00 (0.05)	0.02 (0.04)
Total interactions (log)	11,373	0.18 (0.10)	0.03 (0.07)	−0.02 (0.10)
Posts (log)	32	0.13 (0.06)	0.03 (0.05)	0.04 (0.05)
Shares, % of interactions	14.2	−0.11 (0.60)	2.71 (0.53)	−0.51 (0.51)
Likes, % of interactions	65.3	−0.07 (0.72)	−1.55 (0.63)	0.02 (0.68)
Comments, % of interactions	11.1	0.32 (0.40)	−0.20 (0.38)	0.14 (0.48)
Emoji reactions, % of interactions	9.5	−0.15 (0.27)	−0.97 (0.27)	0.35 (0.33)
Link posts, % of posts	36.7	0.87 (1.43)	3.70 (1.40)	2.72 (1.47)
Video posts, % of posts	26.1	−1.15 (1.11)	−1.80 (1.40)	−1.81 (1.32)
Pages		172	176	176

Mean before: average over the six months before the change of the page-month value (for logged outcomes, the geometric mean on the original scale).

Table 3. Interactions per post after 11 January 2018: break in level at the change, in % (post level). All models include separate linear trends before and after the change and controls for national election campaigns and the 2019 European Parliament election. Standard errors clustered by page.

Specification	Break (%)	95% CI	Posts
Six months either side, page fixed effects	+8	−1 to 17	105,017
Twelve months either side, page fixed effects	−2	−11 to 7	210,114
March 2016 to December 2019, page and calendar-month fixed effects	−21	−29 to −13	418,477
Row 3 plus post type fixed effects	−21	−29 to −13	418,476
Row 3 plus control for page likes	−18	−26 to −9	386,009
Row 3, outcome interactions per page like	−18	−26 to −9	386,009
Row 3, dropping 18 December 2017 to 10 January 2018	−21	−29 to −12	413,683
Row 3 plus country-specific trends	−21	−29 to −13	418,477
Row 3, party pages only	−23	−32 to −12	316,539
Row 3, leader pages only	−19	−30 to −6	101,938

and 2019 the break in shares was close to zero (-0.1 and -0.5 points), and so was the break in emoji reactions (-0.2 and $+0.4$).

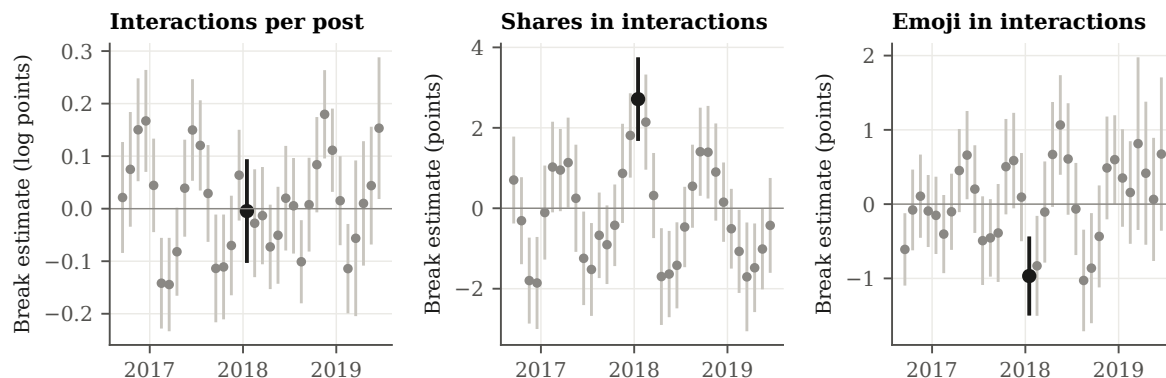


Figure 2. Break estimates at each month from September 2016 to June 2019, with 95% confidence intervals. Each estimate compares the six months after with the six months before, within pages, with separate linear trends and controls for election campaigns. January 2018 in black.

Figure 2 puts these estimates in context. Among 34 months, the January 2018 break in the share of shares is the largest, at about five standard errors. The months next to it, December 2017 and February 2018, also show large breaks, but their windows overlap the change. Among the 21 months whose windows do not include January 2018, the largest break is 1.9 points and 3.3 standard errors. The fall in emoji reactions is also larger, relative to its standard error, than at any other month. The standard errors in these placebo models understate the month-to-month variation, so the comparison across months, rather than the standard error of the January 2018 estimate, is the better guide: by rank, January 2018 is the most extreme of 34. The fall in likes is less distinctive: three other months show larger breaks. At the post level, the same pattern appears: the share of each post's interactions that were shares rose by 2.7 points (SE 0.37) and the share that were likes fell by 1.9 points (SE 0.50), with no change in comments; at January 2017 the break in shares was 0.0 points, and at January 2019 a smaller 0.8 points (SE 0.35).

The rise did not last. As the right panel of Figure 1 shows, shares stayed about 2.7 points above their December 2017 level from February 2018 to January 2019, compared with an average of 0.3 points above it from March 2016 to November 2017. They then fell back and were about 0.8 points below that level in the second half of 2019. Emoji reactions, by contrast, rose steadily as a share over the whole period, as users replaced likes with emoji, a trend described in my earlier work (Hotham 2026a); the January 2018 break interrupted that trend rather than reversing it. Angry reactions did not change as a share of interactions at the break.

The rise in the share of shares came from more shares, not fewer likes. Modelling the number of each kind of interaction a page received in a month, shares rose by 0.26 on the log scale at January 2018 (SE 0.08), about 29%, while likes (0.02, SE 0.06), comments (0.00, SE 0.07) and emoji reactions (-0.02 , SE 0.07) did not change. At January 2017 and January 2019 the break in shares was 0.14 (SE 0.10) and 0.04 (SE 0.07).

5.3 Countries, pages and posts

The rise in sharing was not confined to a few countries (Figure 3). Within twelve months either side, the estimate is positive in 17 of the 19 countries with at least three pages. With so few pages in each country, I use critical values from the t distribution with one fewer degrees of freedom than pages; on

that basis the estimate is distinguishable from zero in five countries, Germany, Spain, Finland, Norway and Sweden. The estimates for Luxembourg, Slovakia and Slovenia are close to zero.

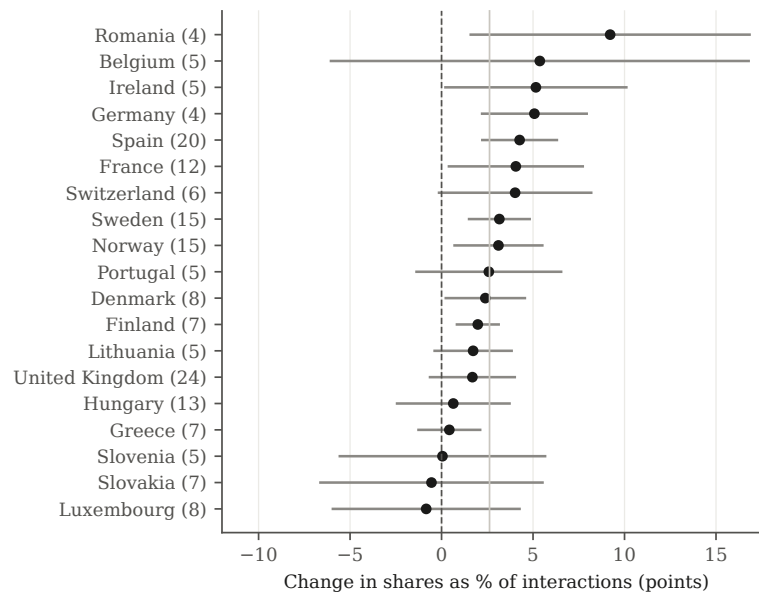


Figure 3. Change in shares as a percentage of interactions at January 2018, by country, with 95% confidence intervals. Twelve months either side, within pages, with separate linear trends. Number of pages in brackets. The grey line marks the pooled estimate for all countries with the same window.

The rise was larger on the pages of populist parties, by 2.6 points (SE 1.0) more than on other pages, which fits the account that the change rewarded the kind of content populist parties are thought to supply (Engesser et al. 2017; Gerbaudo 2018). Leaders' pages and the pages of governing parties did not differ detectably from others. In the amount of engagement, larger pages fared worse. Pages whose median post in 2017 was above the median for all pages lost about 21% in interactions per post relative to smaller pages (SE 0.10 on the log scale); the smaller pages' own break was positive but not distinguishable from zero. Because large pages in 2017 may simply have been having a good year, I also define size using March to December 2016, outside the window, with the same result (-0.23 , SE 0.10). Populist, governing and leader pages did not differ.

Within pages, kinds of post changed places. Before the change, video posts drew about 32% more interactions than other posts on the same page and links about the same as others. After it, the video premium fell to about 14% and links drew about 10% less than before relative to other posts, both differences distinguishable from zero. Photos and text posts, the comparison group, gained relative to both. Parties did not visibly respond by changing what they posted: the share of link posts rose at January 2018, but by a similar amount at January 2019, and the share of video posts did not change.

6 Discussion

Facebook told pages to expect less reach. For the pages of European parties and leaders, that did not translate into a detectable fall in engagement around the change. Per post, in total and in the number of posts, the year after the change looks like the year before. This does not mean reach was unchanged: CrowdTangle does not record how many people saw a post, and a page could have reached fewer people while those it reached engaged more. But for parties, whose use of Facebook rests on the responses their

posts draw, the change was not the collapse some publishers experienced ([Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy 2018](#)).

The clearest effect was on what kind of engagement parties received. For about a year, their audiences shared their posts more, while liking, commenting and reacting no more than before. This fits the logic of a ranking system that favoured posts likely to be reshared: such posts would have been shown more widely and drawn more shares, while posts that drew only passive likes lost ground. It fits less well with the engagement-bait demotion, which targeted posts asking for shares. The rise was larger on populist pages, which fits the reported view that the change rewarded conflictual content ([Hagey and Horwitz 2021](#); [Morris 2021](#)), although I do not observe the content of posts. At the same time, my earlier work found that the populist premium in engagement per post did not change ([Hotham 2026b](#)). Taken together, the change seems to have altered how audiences engaged with populist pages more than how much.

Sharing matters for parties because it carries a post beyond the people who already follow a page, and because shared content travels through networks of friends. More sharing may therefore have extended the reach parties obtained through their supporters, though the data do not record reach. That the effect faded during 2019 is consistent with the reported changes to ranking weights after 2018 ([Merrill and Oremus 2021](#)), but the data cannot show why.

The design has clear limits. The change reached every page at once, so the comparison is with the same pages before the change and with other months, not with untreated pages. Other changes on Facebook around the same time, including the engagement-bait demotion, cannot be separated from the January announcement. The data record engagement, not reach or exposure, and not the content of posts, so I cannot say whether parties became more negative, as the Polish party reported. The pages are those on my CrowdTangle lists, not a census; every page active before the change also posted after it, so the sample is not shaped by pages that stopped posting. Finally, CrowdTangle's counts are those Facebook reported in October 2020; if Facebook changed how shares were counted in early 2018, the composition results would reflect that. I know of no such change.

7 Conclusion

Across 20 European countries, Facebook's January 2018 News Feed change did not reduce the engagement that party and leader pages received, but it changed its kind. For about a year, shares made up a larger part of what audiences did with parties' posts, and likes and emoji reactions a smaller part. The shift was widespread, larger for populist parties, and faded during 2019. Larger pages and link and video posts lost ground relative to smaller pages and photos. A useful next step would be to link these data to the content of posts, to see whether parties changed what they said in response, as some later told Facebook they had.

Data and code

The posts were exported from CrowdTangle in October 2020. CrowdTangle's terms do not permit sharing the raw posts. The analysis code, the list of pages and page-month aggregate data are available from the author.

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.

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. I reviewed and checked all text and results.

Ethics

Not applicable: the study involves no human participants. The data are public posts by the official Facebook pages of political parties and party leaders, analysed only as counts of interactions aggregated by post, page and month. No post content is quoted or reproduced, and no data on individual users are used.

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