

The Pivot to Video: How European Parties and Leaders Changed What They Posted on Facebook, and What It Got Them, 2010 to 2020

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October 2026

Preprint, not peer reviewed

Abstract

In the mid-2010s Facebook promoted native and live video, and news organisations famously “pivoted to video”. Did political parties follow, and did it pay? Using 856,220 posts by 112 party pages and 74 party leaders’ pages in 20 European countries from January 2010 to September 2020, collected through CrowdTangle, I trace the formats parties used and the engagement each drew. Parties moved away from links: links fell from about two thirds of posts in 2010 to 2014 to a quarter in 2020, while video uploaded to Facebook rose from 4% of posts in 2014 to 29% in 2019, and live video to about 5%. YouTube links all but disappeared. Part of the shift from links to photos in 2015 coincides with an abrupt change in how posts were classified in May 2015, which I document. Comparing posts by the same page, and with other posts in the same country and month, video drew about 47% more interactions than photos in 2016 and live video about 94% more, but these premiums faded: in 2019 and 2020 video drew about 19% and 13% fewer interactions than photos, and live video no more. Links drew fewer interactions than photos from 2018. Within pages, years with a larger share of video went with more engagement per post. But pages that posted more video in 2016 did not see larger gains in engagement from 2015 to 2019. Parties took up video while it drew extra engagement, and kept posting it after the premium had gone.

Keywords: video; live video; post formats; platform change; Facebook; political parties; party leaders; Europe; CrowdTangle

1 Introduction

Platforms shape what political actors post. Facebook’s design and ranking choices, its *digital architecture* (Bossetta 2018), determine which kinds of post are shown to users and so which are worth producing. From 2014 Facebook promoted video uploaded directly to the platform. It launched live video for verified public figures in August 2015 and opened it to all users and Pages in 2016. News organisations responded with a widely discussed “pivot to video” (Tandoc and Maitra 2018). Political parties, which also depend on Facebook to reach supporters (Larsson 2016), faced the same incentives.

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This paper asks three questions about European parties and leaders from 2010 to 2020. **RQ1.** How did the formats they posted change? **RQ2.** When did they adopt video, and live video? **RQ3.** Did video draw more engagement than other formats, and did the advantage last?

2 Data and method

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 data run from January 2010 to 30 September 2020, so 2020 is a partial year. It also falls in the COVID-19 pandemic, when campaigning moved online and engagement patterns may have changed. The data contain 856,220 posts from 112 party pages and 74 leader pages in 20 countries. The number of active pages grows over time, from 90 in 2010 to 186 in 2019.

CrowdTangle classifies each post by type. I group them into links, photos, text-only posts, YouTube links, video (native video uploaded to Facebook, and older Facebook video) and live video (completed live broadcasts). I drop 449 posts that announce a scheduled live broadcast, because they are announcements rather than video, and a handful of rare formats (Vine, albums).

Engagement is the total of reactions, comments and shares. Facebook added reactions beyond the like in February 2016, so the outcome changes from that point: before then it counts likes, comments and shares. To compare formats, I regress the log of a post's interactions (plus one) on its format, with photos as the reference, separately for each year, with page fixed effects and country-month fixed effects. Each post is thus compared with posts by the same page, and with other posts in the same country and month. Standard errors are clustered by page. Coefficients are in log points; a coefficient b corresponds to a difference of $100(e^b - 1)$ per cent.

2.1 A classification break in May 2015

The format data contain an abrupt break. The monthly share of posts classified as photos was 14% in April 2015 and 40% in May 2015, and stayed at about 35% for the rest of the year. Over the same month the share of links fell from 57% to 40%, and the share of video from 15% to 10%. The change was not gradual and happened on most pages at once. Of 129 pages with at least five posts in both April and May 2015, 78 (60%) gained more than 15 percentage points of photos in one month, and the median page gained 22 points. A change in party behaviour this sudden and this widespread is unlikely. The more plausible explanation is a change in how Facebook or CrowdTangle classified posts, with some posts that had been counted as links or video counted as photos from May 2015. I cannot confirm the cause.

The break matters for two things. First, part of the fall in links and the rise in photos between 2014 and 2015 is likely an artefact. Second, photos are the reference category, so comparisons of engagement that span the break mix two definitions of a photo. Table 1 compares February to April 2015 with June to August 2015. Before the break, video drew about 19% more interactions than photos and links about 5% more; after it, video drew about 15% fewer and links about 12% fewer. The photo category after May 2015 therefore performs better relative to other formats than before. I treat format shares and premiums before mid-2015 with caution. All the main results from 2016 onwards fall after the break. Re-estimating the 2015 premiums from June to December only, and the pooled premiums from June 2015 to September 2020, gives results close to those reported below.

Table 1. Format shares and engagement compared with photos, before and after the May 2015 break. Premiums in log points (standard errors clustered by page), page and country-month fixed effects. Live video is omitted: there was almost none in either window.

Format	Share of posts (%)		Log interactions vs photo	
	Feb to Apr 2015	Jun to Aug 2015	Feb to Apr 2015	Jun to Aug 2015
Link	60.7	47.7	0.05 (0.06)	−0.12 (0.05)
Photo	13.1	35.4	ref.	ref.
Video	11.3	7.9	0.18 (0.06)	−0.17 (0.04)
YouTube link	8.5	4.3	−0.26 (0.08)	−0.40 (0.06)
Text only	6.4	4.7	−0.02 (0.14)	−0.21 (0.08)

3 Results

3.1 From links to photos and video

Parties changed what they posted (Figure 1, left). Until 2014 about two thirds of posts were links, mostly to party websites and news articles. The share of links then fell steadily, to a quarter in 2020. Photos rose from about a tenth of posts in 2014 to over a third in 2016, although much of the jump in 2015 coincides with the classification break described above. Video uploaded to Facebook rose from 4% of posts in 2014 to 16% in 2016 and 29% in 2019. Live video reached about 4% to 6% of posts from 2017 (3.6% in 2017, 5.5% in 2020). YouTube links, a tenth of posts in 2012 to 2014, almost vanished, and text-only posts fell from about a sixth to 2%. In 2019 and 2020, video and live video made up about a third of posts on both party and leader pages.

These trends are not driven by new pages joining the panel. Among the 139 pages with at least 20 posts in both 2014 and 2019, links fell from 66% of posts in 2014 to 23% in 2020, photos rose from 11% to 41%, and video rose from 4% in 2014 to 28% in 2019. Weighting each page equally rather than each post gives the same picture: the average page’s share of links fell from 61% in 2014 to 26% in 2020, and its share of video rose from 4% to 26% in 2019.

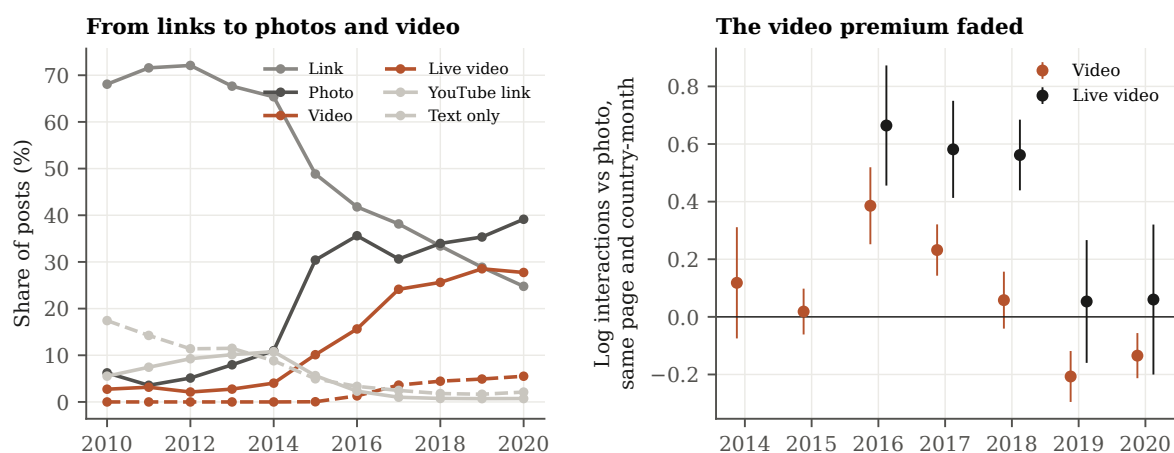


Figure 1. Left: share of posts by format and year, 186 party and leader pages. Part of the change between 2014 and 2015 reflects a classification break in May 2015 (see text). Right: interactions on video and live video posts compared with photos, by year, in log points, with page and country-month fixed effects; 95% confidence intervals clustered by page. The 2015 live video estimate is omitted because it rests on 34 posts from 8 pages. 2020 covers January to September only.

3.2 Adoption

Of 153 pages active before 2015, all posted video at some point and 145 posted live video. Live video spread fast. Half of the 145 pages that broadcast live had done so by September 2016, and three quarters by May 2017, within about a year of live video opening to all Pages. The first live broadcasts in the data date from 17 August 2015: 34 posts from 8 pages in 2015, when live video was open only to verified public figures. Video took over more gradually. Of the 146 pages that ever had a month in which at least 30% of their posts were video, the median page first did so in April 2016, and a quarter not until June 2017 or later.

3.3 A premium that faded

Video drew extra engagement while parties adopted it (Figure 1, right). Compared with photos, video drew no significantly different engagement in 2014 and 2015, although these years span the classification break. It drew about 47% more in 2016 (0.39 log points, SE 0.07) and 26% more in 2017 (0.23, SE 0.05). Live video drew about 94% more in 2016 (0.66, SE 0.11) and about 75% to 79% more in 2017 and 2018. The premiums then disappeared. In 2018 video drew about the same as photos (0.06, SE 0.05). In 2019 it drew about 19% fewer interactions than photos (-0.21 , SE 0.05) and in 2020 about 13% fewer (-0.13 , SE 0.04). In 2019 and 2020 live video drew no more than photos (0.05, SE 0.11; 0.06, SE 0.13). Over 2014 to 2020 as a whole, video drew about 8% more than photos (0.075, SE 0.039), a difference at the margin of statistical significance, and live video about 43% more (0.36, SE 0.08). From June 2015 onwards, after the break, the figures are 7% (0.068, SE 0.041) and 43% (0.36, SE 0.08).

Other formats lost ground too. Links drew about 12% fewer interactions than photos in 2015 (-0.13 , SE 0.04), about as many in 2016 and 2017, and then 13% fewer in 2018, 28% fewer in 2019 and 36% fewer in 2020. The 2015 gap may partly reflect the classification break. YouTube links drew far fewer interactions than photos from 2015 onwards, fewer than half as many in 2019, which fits their disappearance.

Summed across all pages, video made up a larger share of interactions than of posts in every year from 2015: in 2017 video was 24% of posts but 39% of interactions, and in 2020 28% of posts and 35% of interactions. Photos also made up a larger share of interactions than of posts in 2019 and 2020 (39% against 35% in 2019), while links made up a smaller share in every year. These pooled sums are dominated by the largest pages and should not be read as an effect of format.

Within pages, years in which a page posted more video went with more engagement per post: ten percentage points more video went with about 16% more interactions per post (0.149 log points, SE 0.030), holding constant the number of posts and the country-year, across 1,616 page-years. The comparison across pages points the other way. Among 150 pages with at least 50 posts in each of 2015, 2016 and 2019, those with a larger share of video in 2016 saw smaller gains in mean engagement per post from 2015 to 2019: ten percentage points more video in 2016 went with 0.18 log points less growth ($r = -0.23$). This is a simple correlation, but it gives no sign that early adopters of video gained in the longer run.

Finally, I compare video and live video together with all other formats from 2016 to 2020, with an interaction for the type of page. On party pages, video and live video drew about 28% more interactions than all other formats (0.25 log points, SE 0.04). On leaders' pages the difference was 0.24 log points smaller (SE 0.08), so that leaders' video drew about the same as their other posts (0.01, SE 0.06). In separate models the difference between video and other formats was larger on populist parties' pages (by

0.26 log points, SE 0.10) and smaller for parties in government (by 0.14, SE 0.06).

4 Discussion

European parties followed the incentives Facebook created. They moved from links to formats native to the platform, and adopted live video within about a year of it opening to all Pages. They took up video while it drew more engagement than photos, though the data cannot show that the premium caused the adoption, and pages that posted more video early on did not gain more in the long run. The premium was short-lived. Video drew about as much as photos in 2018 and less in 2019 and 2020, and the live video premium was gone by 2019.

The timing is consistent with Facebook’s change to its News Feed ranking in January 2018, which aimed to favour “meaningful interactions” between friends and family over passive viewing of content from Pages. There is a tension here. The same announcement said that live video, which draws more discussion than other video, would be favoured, yet the live video premium for parties disappeared in 2019. Other changes may also have played a part, including the launch of Facebook Watch, a separate tab for video, in August 2017 and changes to how video was ranked during 2017. The data cannot separate these explanations.

The parties did not retreat from video once the premium faded: the share of video stayed close to its peak. Links lost even more ground than video. The decision that mattered may have been less between video and photos than between formats native to Facebook and links that took users elsewhere.

The analysis has limits. Format is CrowdTangle’s classification, which changed abruptly in May 2015 and may not capture changes in the content of posts. The outcome changed when Facebook added reactions in February 2016; this affects comparisons across years more than comparisons of formats within a year, unless users reacted differently to different formats. Comparing formats within pages and country-months controls for the page and for national circumstances, but not for what each post was about: parties may have used video for different topics or occasions. The panel of pages grows over time, although the trends in format hold for a fixed set of pages. 2020 is a partial year that falls in the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis covers engagement, not reach or views; CrowdTangle’s view counts for video cannot be compared with other formats.

5 Conclusion

Between 2014 and 2020, the Facebook pages of European parties and leaders pivoted from links to photos and video, and adopted live video quickly. Some of the apparent shift from links to photos in 2015 reflects a change in classification. Video drew extra engagement in 2016 and 2017 (live video also in 2018), but not in 2019 or 2020. Parties kept posting it. The pivot to video in politics, as in journalism, coincided with a premium that later disappeared.

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 aggregate data by page, year and format 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 by format, page and month. No post content is quoted or reproduced, and no data on individual users are used.

Funding

I received no specific funding for this work. It builds on my doctoral research, which was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

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