Where Parties Send People: The Destinations of Links Posted by European Parties and Leaders on Facebook, 2010 to 2020

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Abstract

A party that posts a link on Facebook chooses where to send its followers. I classify the destinations of 410,308 link posts made by 112 party pages and 74 party leaders' pages in 20 European countries from 2010 to 2020 by the domain of each link. Hand-built lists, with every domain linked 63 times or more reviewed by hand, cover 95% of link posts, and a page-by-page mapping identifies each party's and leader's own sites. The mix shifted from own sites to news media. Own sites took 58% of link posts in 2010 and 35% to 39% from 2016, while news media rose from 17% to between 36% and 43% each year from 2017. Video platforms, mostly YouTube, peaked at 14% in 2014 and then fell to about 2%. Leaders' pages linked much more to news and much less to own sites than party pages. Comparing posts by the same page in the same country and month, links to news drew the most engagement: links to own sites drew about 18% fewer interactions, video links 24% fewer, links to other social platforms 47% fewer and links to events, petitions and other campaign tools 86% fewer. From 2018 news links were the only link destination that matched photos. Populist parties did not link detectably more to their own sites or less to news than other parties. I could not build a defensible cross-national list of alternative news outlets, so that comparison is not made.

Keywords: hyperlinks; news media; party websites; Facebook; engagement; political parties; party leaders; populism; Europe; CrowdTangle

1 Introduction

Parties also use Facebook to send people elsewhere. A link post points followers to a destination the party has chosen: its own website, where it controls the message and can ask for an email address or a donation; a news story, which borrows the authority of journalists; a video; an event or a petition; or another platform. These choices reflect parties' place in a hybrid media system in which they can publish directly but still depend on news organisations (Chadwick 2013). Research has shown how parties and candidates use Facebook and how audiences respond (Larsson 2016; Stier et al. 2018), and how news is shared across platforms (Kalsnes and Larsson 2018), but less is known about where parties' links lead, how that changed, and what it gets them.

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This paper classifies the destinations of every link posted by 186 European party and leader pages over eleven years. It asks three questions. **RQ1.** How did the mix of link destinations change from 2010 to 2020, and how did it differ by country, party family and between leaders and parties? **RQ2.** Which destinations drew more engagement, comparing posts by the same page in the same country and month, and how did link posts compare with other formats? **RQ3.** Did populist parties link more to their own sites, and less to mainstream news, than other parties?

2 Data and method

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). Of 856,699 posts from January 2010 to September 2020, 410,463 are link posts: CrowdTangle types Link (379,001 with a usable link), YouTube (31,279) and Vine (28). I exclude 155 link posts with no recorded link. The remaining 410,308 link posts come from all 186 pages (112 party, 74 leader) in 20 countries. For the comparison with other formats I also use photo, native and live video, and text-only posts, excluding 449 scheduled live videos and 2 albums. CrowdTangle's coverage of photo posts changes in May 2015: the number of photo posts jumps from 826 in April 2015 to 3,181 in May, while link posts stay flat (3,833 and 3,680), so photos before May 2015 are undercounted. This affects comparisons between formats, not the mix of destinations within link posts. Only domain-level aggregates are reported; no individual link is listed.

Domains. I reduce each link to its registrable domain (for example bbc.co.uk) with the public suffix list. For blog platforms such as blog.hu I keep the full host. There are 13,450 distinct destinations. Links through generic URL shorteners such as bit.ly, ow.ly or t.co cannot be resolved offline and form their own category.

Categories. I assign each destination to one of eight categories: the party's or leader's *own* sites; *news* and commentary media; *video* platforms (YouTube, Vimeo and similar); *other social platforms* (posts and pages on Facebook itself, Twitter, Instagram, Flickr, audio platforms); *shortened* links; *campaign tools* (Facebook events, petitions, crowdfunding, ticketing, mailing lists, surveys); *government* and parliament sites (including EU institutions); and *other*. Classification uses lists I built by reviewing the most-linked domains by hand: every destination with 63 or more links, and 2,987 destinations in all, is classified by hand or by rule, covering 94.9% of link posts. The other 5.1% are a long tail of 10,462 rarely linked domains, left in *other*. The news category includes national, regional and international outlets, broadcasters and news portals, and also partisan and alternative news sites such as breitbart.com, westmonster.com or nyheteridag.se, which I could not separate consistently.

Own sites. A destination counts as a page's own when it belongs to the page's party: the national party, its leader, its branches, youth wings, campaign sites, politicians' personal sites and party-branded link shorteners. Party publications count as own only when the party or its foundation published or owned them (including as largest shareholder) at the time; outlets that were merely aligned with or funded by a party count as news. Under this rule papers such as *An Phoblacht*, *Avante!*, *Bayernkurier* and *KD-lehti* are own, while alfahir.hu, humanite.fr and nationspresse.info are news. *Demokracija* counts as own for the Slovenian Democratic Party until September 2018, while the party was its publisher's largest shareholder, and *La Gaceta* as news throughout, since the Vox foundation relaunched it only after the data end. The joint website of the Swedish Alliance counts as own for its four member parties. I hand-reviewed domains linked mainly by one party for whether they were that party's. A link counts as

own only when the posting page belongs to that party, so a leader linking to the party's site counts, but a party linking to a rival's site does not (0.07% of links). In the long tail, a destination also counts as own if at least 80% of its links come from one party and its name, including internationalised names, contains a token of that party's or leader's name. Hand-listed party, leader and campaign sites account for 94.5% of own links, hand-listed party publications 4.3%, branded shorteners 0.9% and the name rule 0.4%. Own sites were found for 181 of the 186 pages; I checked the most-linked destinations of every page by hand. One Greek site linked only by Greek Solution and its leader (2,640 links) could not be verified as the party's and is coded *other*; coding it as own changes no conclusion.

Method. I describe shares by year, country, party family and type of page. Engagement is the log of one plus total interactions (reactions, comments and shares). I regress it on destination category with page and country-month fixed effects, so that each link is compared with other links posted by the same page and with posts from the same country and month. Coefficients are in log points; I convert them to per cent as $100(e^b - 1)$. The results hold with page-by-year and country-month fixed effects, and with page-by-month fixed effects (own sites -20% and -19% against news; campaign tools -85% and -84%). Differences in the mix between kinds of page are estimated as linear probability models with country-month fixed effects. Standard errors are clustered by page; clustering by country gives the same conclusions.

3 Results

3.1 From own sites to news media

Across the whole period, 42% of link posts went to the page's own sites and 30% to news media; video platforms took 7.5%, shortened links 5.7%, other social platforms 3.4%, campaign tools 3.0% (most of them Facebook events, 2.5% of all links) and government sites 1.0%. The mix changed substantially (Figure 1, left). Own sites took 58% of link posts in 2010, about half in 2011 to 2013, and between 35% and 39% from 2016. News media rose from 17% in 2010 to 35% in 2016 and 43% in 2018. Video platforms, mostly YouTube, rose to 14% in 2014 and then fell to about 2%, as parties shifted to native video (Hotham 2026b). Campaign tools rose from almost nothing in 2010 to 5% in 2017 to 2019. Link posts themselves became less common: they fell from 49% of posts in the second half of 2015 to 26% in 2020. Earlier shares, near 80%, are inflated by the May 2015 coverage break.

Part of the shift reflects which pages were active. Among 104 pages with at least 20 link posts in both 2012 and 2019, own sites fell from 59% of link posts in 2010 to between 42% and 47% from 2015, and stayed flat from then on, while news rose from 17% to between 33% and 38% from 2017. The fall in own sites in this fixed panel is about two thirds of the fall in all posts, so about a third of the overall decline comes from changes in which pages posted links. Averaging over pages rather than posts gives a similar fall in own sites (47% in 2010 to 27% in 2020) and a larger rise in news (20% to 45%).

Shortened links hide destinations. Five pages account for 42% of them, and the shortened share swings from 11.6% in 2011 to 0.8% in 2013 and 8.3% in 2016. If each page-year's shortened links are assumed to go to the same destinations as its other links, own sites fall from 62% in 2010 to between 37% and 41% in 2018 to 2020, and news rises from 17% to between 38% and 44%: the same pattern.

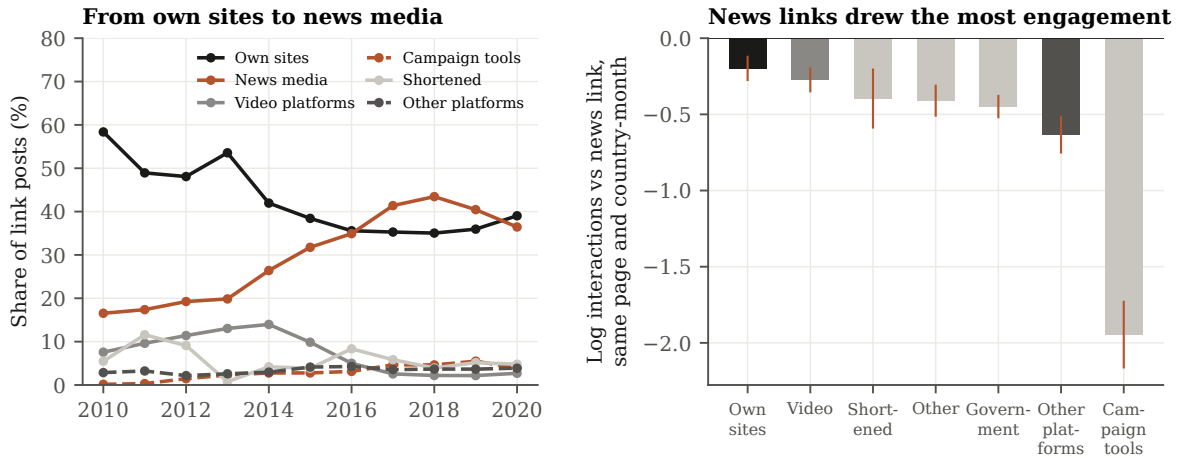


Figure 1. Left: share of link posts by destination, 2010 to 2020 (410,308 link posts). Right: log interactions of link posts to each destination compared with links to news media, by the same page in the same country and month; 95% confidence intervals clustered by page.

3.2 Leaders, countries and party families

Leaders linked very differently from parties. Leaders' pages sent 14% of their links to their own or their party's sites and 53% to news, against 48% and 25% for party pages. Comparing pages in the same country and month, a leader's page was 26 percentage points less likely than a party page to link to its own sites (SE 3.6) and 16 points more likely to link to news (SE 3.8).

Countries differed widely (Figure 2): own sites took 68% to 72% of links in France and Slovenia, and under 13% in Slovakia, Belgium and Denmark, where news took 66% to 72%. These differences partly reflect which pages are in the sample: in Belgium, Denmark and Latvia only leaders' pages are included. Pages also differed: among 181 pages with at least 100 link posts, the median page sent 28% of its links to its own sites and 36% to news, while a quarter sent about half or more to their own sites. News links were concentrated: the 15 most-linked news domains (Table 1) took 25% of the 124,012 news links across 1,016 news domains, and within a country the three most-linked outlets took a median of 48% of news links.

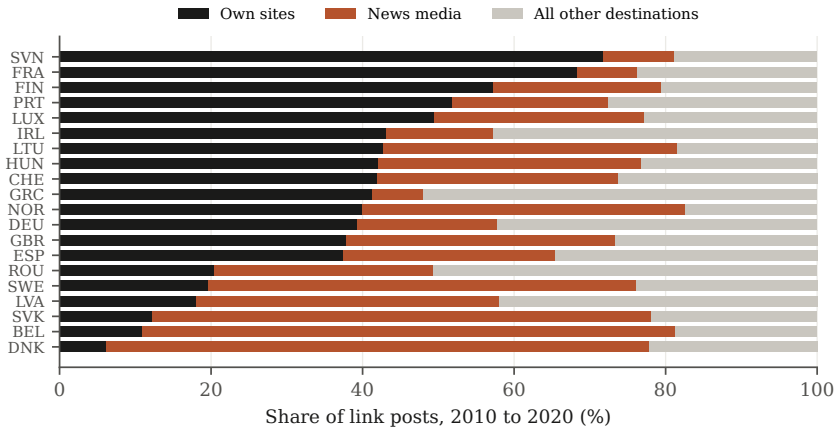


Figure 2. Share of link posts going to own sites, news media and all other destinations, by country, 2010 to 2020. Belgium, Denmark and Latvia are represented only by party leaders' pages.

Table 1. The 15 most-linked news domains, 2010 to 2020. alfahir.hu was funded by Jobbik's foundation, not owned by the party.

Domain	Country	Links	Pages	Domain	Country	Links	Pages
theguardian.com	UK	3,876	66	sme.sk	Slovakia	1,718	8
alfahir.hu	Hungary	2,927	5	expressen.se	Sweden	1,670	21
bbc.co.uk	UK	2,866	41	nrk.no	Norway	1,655	17
eldiario.es	Spain	2,341	17	svd.se	Sweden	1,626	17
aftonbladet.se	Sweden	2,177	17	hvg.hu	Hungary	1,573	12
yle.fi	Finland	1,808	11	index.hu	Hungary	1,487	13
atv.hu	Hungary	1,761	11	dn.se	Sweden	1,436	19
vg.no	Norway	1,722	16				

3.3 News links drew the most engagement

Within the same page and country-month, links to news drew more interactions than links to any other destination (Figure 1, right). Links to own sites drew about 18% fewer interactions than news links (SE 0.04 log points), video links 24% fewer, shortened links 33%, other destinations 34%, links to government sites 36%, other social platforms 47% and campaign tools 86% fewer. The gap between news and own sites widened from 11% in 2010 to 2014 to 23% in 2018 to 2020. Video links drew as much as news links in 2010 to 2014, but 53% fewer by 2018 to 2020, the years in which parties used native video. Part of the news category is partisan or alternative outlets, which may draw more engagement than mainstream news; moving 32 such domains (9,071 links) out of the news category leaves the own-site gap unchanged (-18%), and their links drew about as much as other news links ($+7\%$, SE 0.12).

Comparisons with other formats are affected by the May 2015 coverage break, so I report them from May 2015. Compared with photos posted by the same page in the same country and month, news links drew about 18% more interactions in May 2015 to 2017 (SE 0.04 log points) and links to own sites about the same ($+1\%$). In 2018 to 2020 news links drew about as much as photos (-2%), while links to own sites drew 24% fewer, video links 53% fewer and links to campaign tools 90% fewer. This decline coincides with Facebook's 2018 change to the News Feed (Hotham 2026c), although the design cannot attribute it to that change.

3.4 Populist parties

Populist parties' pages (40 pages) sent 41% of their links to their own sites and 31% to news, against 42% and 30% for other pages. Comparing pages in the same country and month, the differences are small and uncertain: populist pages were 2 percentage points less likely to link to their own sites (SE 5.6) and 5 points more likely to link to news (SE 4.9). The populist radical right alone is similar. Populists did not pay a detectably different engagement penalty for own-site links (interaction -0.07, SE 0.07). The data do not support the expectation that populists bypass the news media more than other parties when they link (Engesser et al. 2017).

Whether populists link more to alternative news outlets cannot be answered here: alternative media are defined by their self-positioning against mainstream news (Holt et al. 2019), and a consistent list across 20 countries and eleven years would need outside validation that I could not supply.

4 Discussion

Over the 2010s, European parties and leaders sent their Facebook followers less to their own websites and more to news media, partly because the pages that posted many links changed and partly because the same pages changed what they linked to. Own sites remained the largest single destination for party pages, but leaders' pages mostly linked to news. Links to news drew more engagement than links to any other destination, including the parties' own sites, and the gap widened. Parties' links increasingly pointed to news coverage, consistent with a hybrid system in which parties rely on news organisations even when they can publish directly (Chadwick 2013). That populists did not differ is in line with evidence that their engagement advantage does not rest on distinctive content strategies of this kind (Hotham 2026a), though populism takes many forms.

Link posts also lost their place: they fell from about half of posts in 2015 to a quarter in 2020, and by 2018 to 2020 only news links drew as much engagement as a photo. Links to Facebook events became the main campaign tool but drew by far the least engagement, perhaps because responses gather on the event page rather than the post. Petitions and donation pages were rare throughout.

The study has clear limits. Classification is by domain, so it cannot tell what a link was about. About 5% of links fall in an unreviewed long tail, and the 5.7% of shortened links, concentrated on a few pages, could not be resolved, although imputing them does not change the pattern. Own sites were identified by hand and by a rule, and mistakes are possible. News media include partisan outlets. The engagement comparisons hold the page and the moment constant, but parties choose what to link to, and the links that draw engagement may differ in topic or timing within a month. Engagement is not reach or clicks: CrowdTangle does not record whether anyone followed a link. Photo posts are undercounted before May 2015. The sample covers selected parties and leaders, and in some countries only leaders.

5 Conclusion

Across 186 party and leader pages in 20 European countries from 2010 to 2020, parties' links moved from their own websites towards news media, and leaders linked mainly to the news. News links drew more engagement than any other destination, while links to own sites, videos, events, petitions and other platforms drew less. Populist parties did not link differently in any detectable way.

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, the domain classification lists, the page-by-page mapping of own sites and domain-level 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 and the domain classification lists. 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 link destinations aggregated to the level of web domains and as counts of interactions. No post content is quoted or reproduced, no individual link is listed, and no data on individual users are used.

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