

## **MPs on Facebook**

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## Introduction

It is no surprise that politicians and political strategists in the UK are so interested in social networks. Public perceptions of politicians and confidence in the political system have fallen to new lows, the main parties are losing members and activists are disillusioned. Anything which offers the chance to 'reconnect' to 'ordinary people' will prove attractive. Meanwhile, across the Atlantic, the success of Barack Obama in encouraging mass participation is seen as an example of how the internet and allied technologies can be harnessed for political purposes.

But most of the discussion so far about social networks and political campaigning has focused on their potential, rather than current practice. In fact, a large proportion of Members of Parliament already use social network sites and there is therefore a sufficient sample to study and draw some initial conclusions.

This survey therefore sets out to establish some basic data: how many Members of Parliament use the leading social networking site Facebook; how often they access their accounts; what information they choose to publish on their profile pages; and what levels of access they give to different groups. (The methodology is set out in Annex A.)

The survey then identifies some good practice and common failings for individual sites and considers the implications for the way in which social networks may be incorporated into political communications in the UK.

## Summary of Key Findings

### How many MPs use Facebook?

- One quarter (26%) of all Members of Parliament have a Facebook profile page.
- The Labour Party have the most MPs on Facebook with 87: a quarter (25%) of all Labour MPs
- The Liberal Democrats, however, have the highest proportion of MPs of Facebook across the three main political parties with two thirds (65%) of Liberal Democrat MPs having a profile page. One in five (21%) Conservative MPs have a profile page.

### How often do MPs use Facebook?

- Two thirds (65%) of MPs on Facebook access/update their account at least monthly.
- Three in ten (30%) of MPs on Facebook access/update their account at least once a week.

### What information do MPs publish on their Facebook profile?

- Seven in ten (69%) have their personal website link on their profile page.
- Six in ten (59%) have their job description published.
- Over half (54%) place contact information on their page.
- MPs are more likely to display their relationship status (43%) than any other form of personal information, such as interests and favourite activities.

### Popularity and Access

- MPs on Facebook are more likely to allow you access to their profile page on Facebook if you are a member of the UK Parliament network (70% of MPs allow access if you are a member) than allow you universal access to their profile (only 9% of MPs allow this free access).
- George Galloway MP is the most popular MP of Facebook with over 15,000 friends.
- A third (34%) of MPs on Facebook have over 500 friends.

### Conclusions

Most MPs do not use Facebook primarily as a social network, but more as a way of making information or messages available one-way. Only a handful of MPs are making use of its full potential.

Most MPs do not allow the public (including constituents) to view their profiles without first applying to become a 'friend'. This minimises the workload of monitoring but also minimises the usefulness of their presence on Facebook.

The only group that most MPs do allow automatic access are those on the Parliament network (that is those with 'parliament.uk' email addresses). In other words, the main way in which Facebook is used by MPs is to connect to others within Parliament.

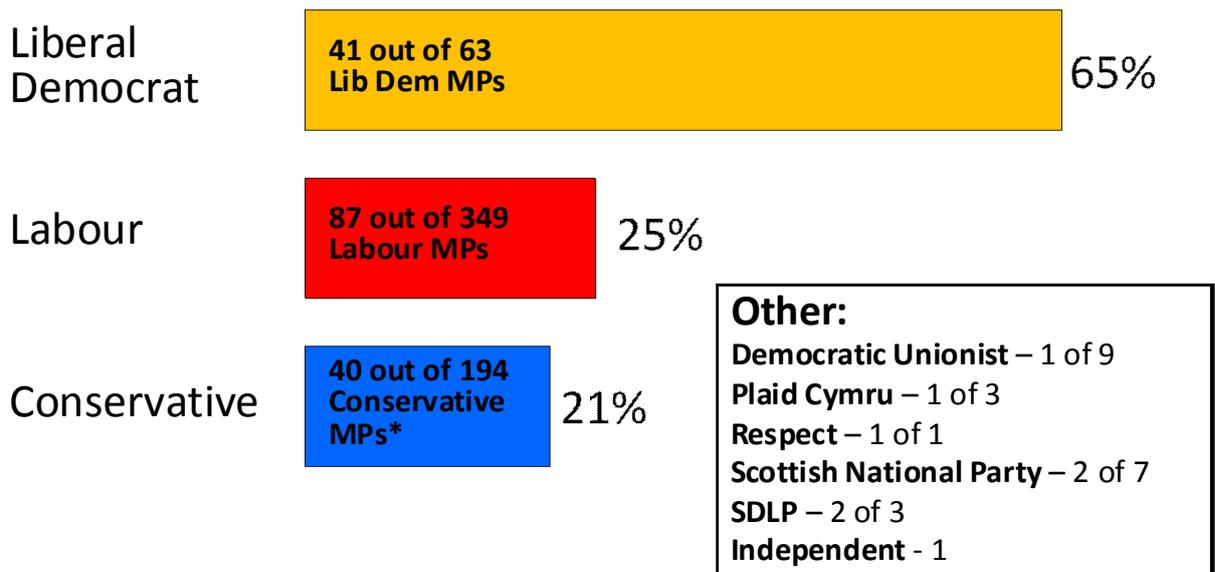
## Number of MPs on Facebook

The chart below shows that Liberal Democrat MPs have the highest proportion of MPs on Facebook than any other of the main political parties represented in Westminster. Two thirds of Liberal Democrat MPs (65%) have official Facebook profiles – a much higher proportion than the Labour Party and Conservative Party. One in four (25%) of Labour MPs have a profile page and one in five (21%) Conservative MPs choosing to use the social networking website.

Four current members of the Cabinet have a Facebook account: Leader of the House of Commons and Equalities Minister, Harriet Harman MP; the new Home Secretary, Alan Johnson MP; the Olympics Minister, Tessa Jowell MP and Minister for Wales, Peter Hain MP. Former Communities Minister, Hazel Blears MP also has a Facebook profile.

### MPs on Facebook: by Party

Q *Proportion of Westminster MPs with profile pages on Facebook - by party*



Base: 176 MPs' profile pages on Facebook. Fieldwork = 7<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> May 2009

\*Figures for number of MPs and composition across the parties is accurate as of 7<sup>th</sup> May 2009

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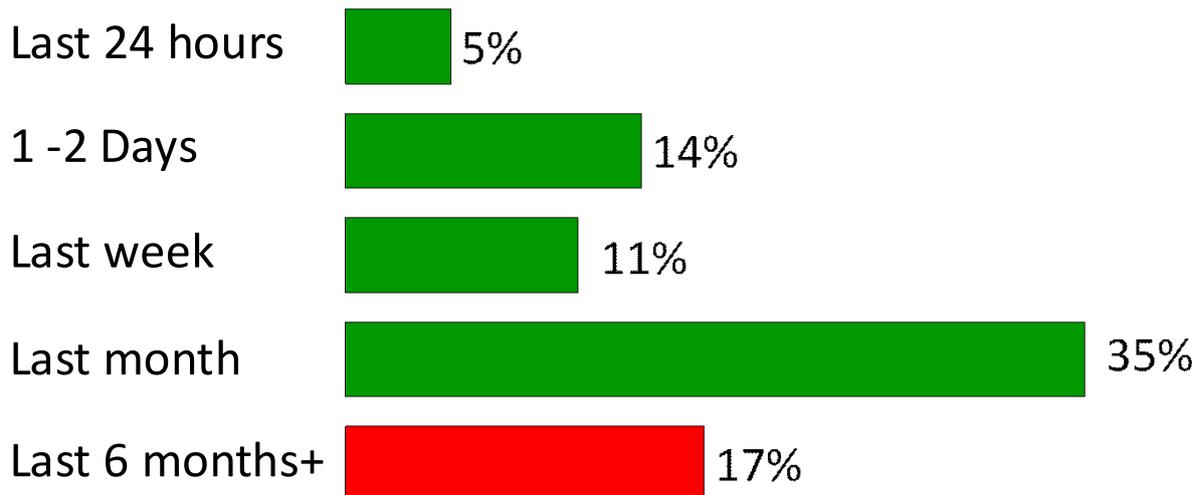
## Frequency of access and update

The frequency in which an MP/MP's assistant accesses and updates their Facebook profile page is highlighted in the chart below. At the time of the study, three in ten MPs (30%) had updated their profile page within the last week with three quarters (75%) of MPs accessing their accounts within the last month.

A quarter of Labour MPs on Facebook (26%) had updated their profile within the last week of fieldwork being carried out. One third of Conservative MPs (33%) had also accessed or updated within the last week and four in ten (39%) of Liberal Democrats MPs accessing within a week making them the most active users over the fieldwork period.

## MPs on Facebook: Refresh ratio

Q When was the last time the profile page was updated?



Base: 93 MPs' profile pages on Facebook. Fieldwork = 7<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> May 2009

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## Information: Personal and Professional

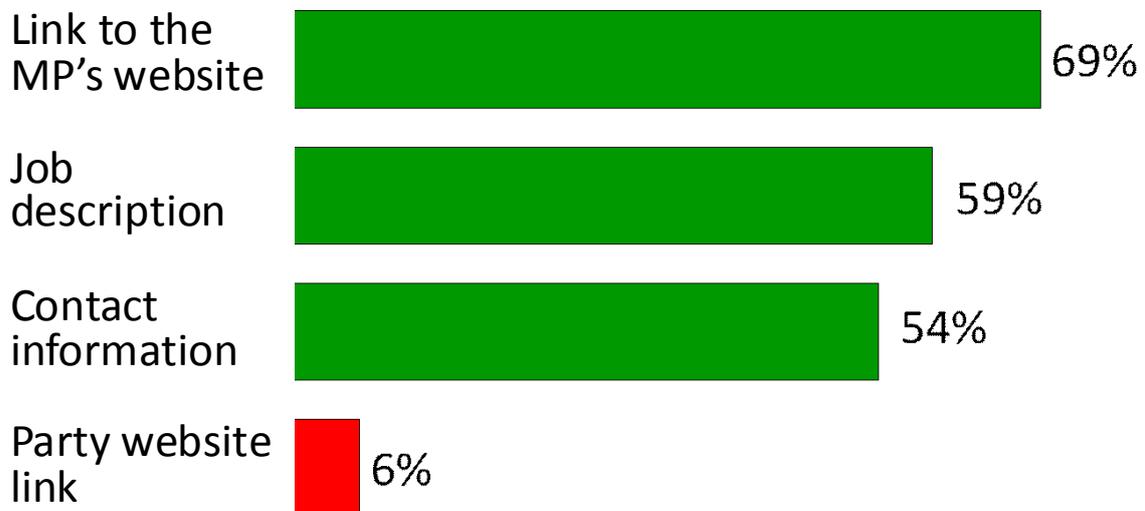
The type of information displayed on the MPs' Facebook profile can help us understand how MPs use the social network site and what information they feel is the most important to display. Our study looked at understanding what *professional* and *personal* information was published

### Professional

The level of professional information relating to the MP's job is highlighted in the chart below, which shows that seven in ten (69%) of MPs display a web link to their personal website on their profile page. Six in ten (59%) have their job description displayed on Facebook – ranging from displaying their job title to full descriptions of their roles and responsibilities and how they are able to help their constituents. Only 6% of MPs profile pages we viewed had a link to their main party website.

## MPs on Facebook: Professional information

Q What professional information is displayed on the MPs' profile page?



Base: 124 MPs' profile pages on Facebook. Fieldwork = 7<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> May 2009

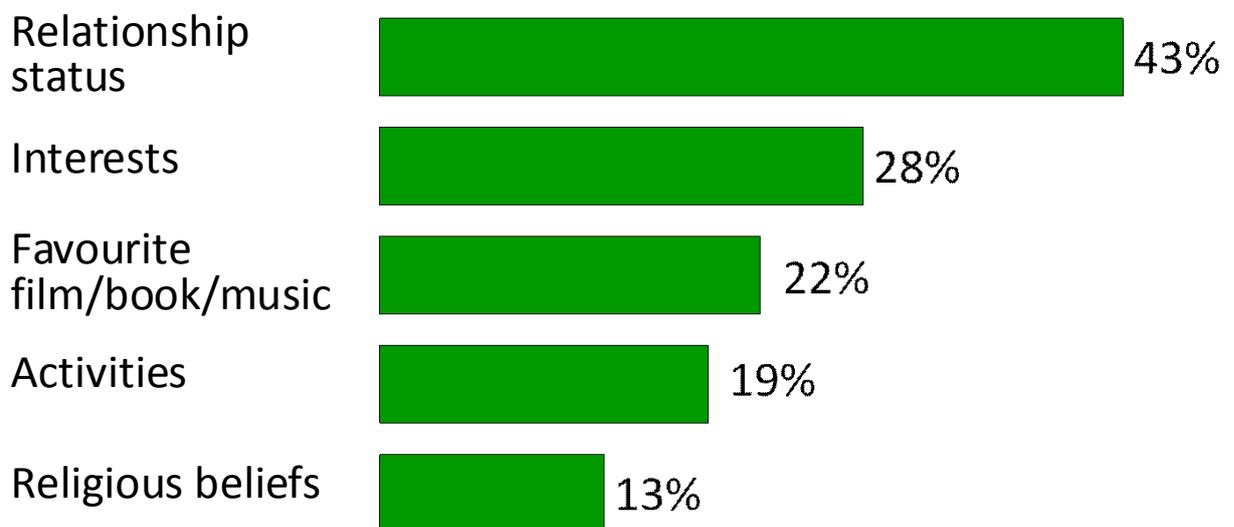
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## Personal

At a glance, it is clear to see that MPs are more forthcoming with putting professional information on their Facebook profiles than personal information. That being said, two in five (43%) have displayed their relationship status and three in ten (28%) MPs on Facebook listing their interests. Seven in ten (72%) are written in the first person.

## MPs on Facebook: Personal information

Q What personal information is displayed on the MPs' profile page?



Base: 124 MPs' profile pages on Facebook. Fieldwork = 7<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> May 2009

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## Access

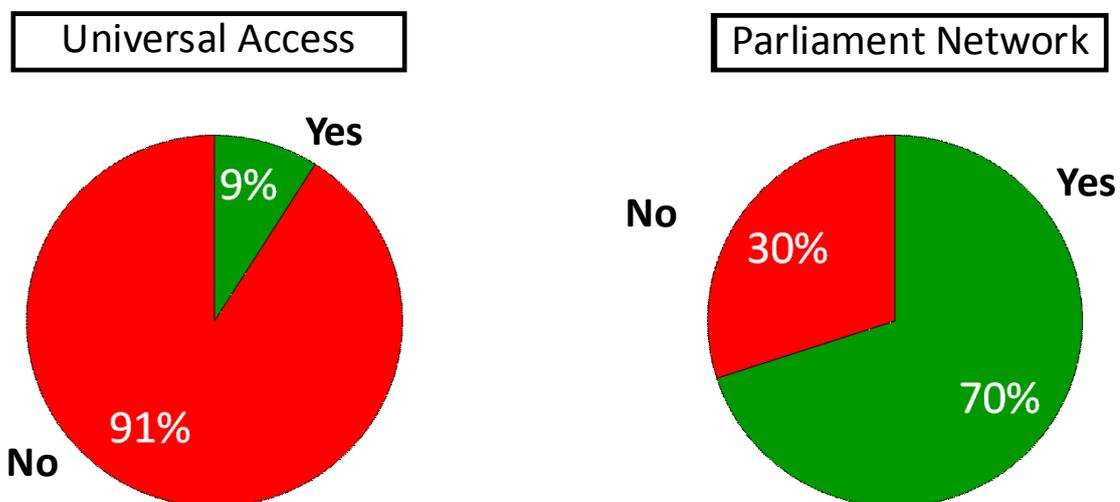
The study also looked at access to MPs Facebook profile pages. It sought to find out how many MPs allow universal access to their profile page – that is, those pages that you are able to view freely without having to be ‘friends’ with the MP or part of their network (you simply type in their name into the search function and then you can view the MPs’ page). Only one in eleven (9%) allow this, with more than nine in ten (91%) of MPs on Facebook opting to have privacy settings applied to ensure that they are able to ‘vet’ who is able to view their page.

On Facebook, you have the opportunity to join ‘networks’. For instance, if you live in London, you can choose to join the ‘London’ network – and then adjust your privacy settings to allow only those in the same network to view your page. Networks are also created for universities, businesses and other organisations. The ‘UK Parliament’ network is open to former and current employees in the Houses of Parliament. The second chart shows that seven in ten MPs allow access to their page for members of the same network.

## MPs on Facebook: Access to MPs profile pages

Q Do Facebook MPs allow universal access\* to their profile page?

Q Do Facebook MPs allow you to view their profile page if you’re on the Facebook ‘Parliament Network’?



Base: 176 MPs’ profile pages on Facebook. Fieldwork = 7<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> May 2009

\*Universal access is defined as those profile pages where you do not need to be a ‘friend’ or member of the network in order to view the profile page

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## Popularity

The chart below shows the number of friends MPs have on Facebook. Just over a third (34%) of MPs have accumulated more than 500 friends on Facebook – seven in ten (69%) have more than 100. The low levels of ‘friends’ for the remainder of MPs may well be down to having a dormant profile page or not checking and updating it regularly.

Only 19 MPs have over 1000 friends with the top five, highlighted in the chart below, having many more contacts on Facebook than their colleagues. The top three most ‘popular’ MPs on Facebook are amongst the most visible in Westminster politics. George Galloway has almost twice as more support than his nearest rival – David Cameron MP, the Leader of the Opposition.

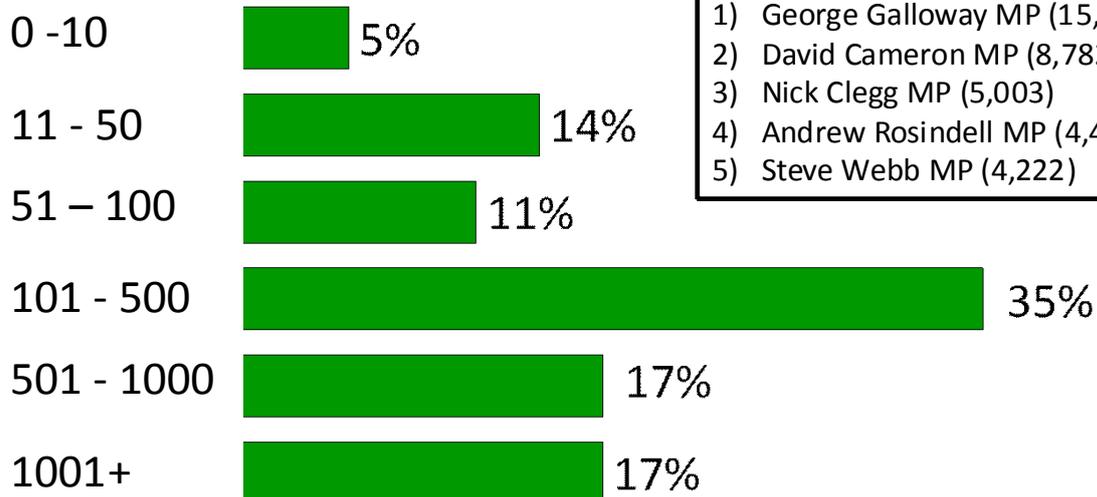
The top twenty most popular MPs on Facebook by party are comprised of:

- 3 Conservative MPs;
- 5 Labour MPs;
- 11 Liberal Democrat MPs; and
- 1 Respect Party MP

## MPs on Facebook: Number of friends

Q How many friends do MPs on Facebook have?

*No. of friends*



### Most popular MPs on Facebook:

- 1) George Galloway MP (15,766)
- 2) David Cameron MP (8,782)
- 3) Nick Clegg MP (5,003)
- 4) Andrew Rosindell MP (4,478)
- 5) Steve Webb MP (4,222)

## Conclusion

With the near universal use of email and personal websites amongst MPs, the use of the internet in politics continues to grow. Examples from the Obama campaign show how the internet can be utilised as a tool for political campaigning and help facilitate political activism.

The reason *why* MP's choose to use Facebook, or any other online social network, is still to be fully understood. Those who decide to participate, as this study suggest, are engaging frequently and providing the public with another communication channel for contact to be made. The study does provide some insight to *how* they are using it. Some use it as another platform where they can replicate information found on their personal website and others are more dynamic in the way in which they use the site. For instance, there are examples of MPs having 'online surgeries' every week where constituents are invited to express their concerns and issues, some post videos and commentary on the issues of the day. Some MPs update their status on an almost hourly basis, providing information on what they are doing, where some have a static page with only basic information published.

The access to the MPs' profile pages shows that they control the terms by which they wish to communicate and publish information to 'friends' or others within their network. The high levels of access to those in the UK Parliament website could be seen as the online 'Westminster bubble'.

The study also shows that MPs are more likely to publish professional information about their job rather than publish information about their private lives - though it is interesting that MPs are unlikely to publish a link to their party's website. There is clearly more emphasis on the person over the party in this instance.

## Appendix A: Methodology

Fieldwork for the study took place between 7– 8 May 2009 and consisted of a preliminary search of the Facebook site of all 646 Members of Parliament to see how many MPs had a Facebook profile page.

To ensure that spoof profile pages were omitted from the study, a number of qualifying criteria were applied to ensure legitimacy, such as if: 1) the MP's parliamentary email address was published on the profile page; 2) they are a member of the 'UK Parliament' network – where access is restricted to those who have a or have had a parliamentary email account and 3) those who have personal contact details (i.e. address or telephone number) published.

After the number of MPs on Facebook was determined – a content analysis, looking at the information published on each of the profile pages was completed. We looked at the following:

1. **Last date of access:** determined by when the last posting of a message/status update or upload of a picture or other data was completed
2. **Public access/UK Parliament network access:** Two separate profiles were used to search how many MPs allowed access to their profile pages – one which had membership to the UK Parliament network and one which did not – if access was restricted to both public and UK Parliament viewing, the analysis for that MP finished.
3. **Number of friends**
4. **Relationship status**
5. **Religious status**
6. **Perspective**
7. **Contact information**
8. **Job description**
9. **Interests**
10. **Activities**
11. **Music/Films/Books**
12. **Group membership**
13. **Personal website link**
14. **Party website link**