

Youth, social media and the Election #GE2015

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Dr Bex Lewis

Dr Bex Lewis examines the role played by social media in the election and considers its influence on younger voters.

Russell Brand's interview with Ed Miliband on *The Trews* has been viewed by over 1 million people. Many of the commentators have applauded Miliband for being prepared to engage with the tough questions – and the disillusioned voters. Brand said of the encounter, "I think it shows a lot about Ed Miliband that he was prepared to come around here."

Russell Brand, famously, has never voted, and had urged his followers not to bother on Election Day, as he doesn't believe that voting makes a difference. He has now amended this position, and is actively encouraging his followers to vote - but for those who didn't register to vote, it's already too late.

Statistics show that 18-24 year olds do have some of the lowest turnouts at elections, and that a large number of those believe that they do not have a real say, as politicians break promises, don't listen, are inauthentic, and 'all the same'.

Last month, an Ipsos MORI survey indicated that 34% of 18-24 year olds believe that their sympathies will be influenced by something they've encountered on social media, compared to 13% of the general population. The New Statesman indicated that they believed that "the party that can best adapt to this arena could be the one that tips the balance in a tight election." So far, however, the political parties appear largely to be using an old fashioned broadcast style, preaching to the converted, and not really using the opportunities to listen, or engage in conversation with disillusioned or floating voters. Even the Green Party's "viral video" Change the Tune largely 'preached', rather than encouraged engagement.

Isabel Hardman of The Spectator described this as "broadcast-only pretty-picture-focused strategy", encouraging politicians to "fake it", and seeking a level of control that doesn't sit well within social media. She states: "If a party leader is worried that a chance encounter with a voter reveals what he or she really thinks, then perhaps he or she needs to have a think about what he or she thinks"

Young people are incredibly active on social media, including in relation to politics. Some see social media as making the debate more divisive and superficial than it needs to be, whilst others see it as breaking down the barriers between voters and parties: I received a tweet indicating that one potential voter had "been tweeting my two fave candidates. It helped me make my decision".

In true pop-worship style, 'Abby', a seventeen year old, currently revising for AS Levels, started the #milifandom campaign. Social media has been used to encourage sign up for voting, and Sky hosts a 'Stand Up Be Counted' space for 16-25 year olds to debate the issues that matter to them. Knowing that others are voting for minority parties has also encouraged greater engagement, with users using tools such as Vote for Policies, and Vote Swap, sites such as COADEC, which look at manifestos from a particular perspective, whilst apps such as Digital Mysteries seek to get young people interested and engaged in the issues of the election.

As indicated in my book, Raising Children in a Digital Age, although children aren't 'digital natives' who are 'fundamentally different from us', they *have* grown up in a time when the digital is an embedded part of their everyday life.

Most politicians are clearly not using social media in an embedded way, but as a digital marketing tool, and this is seen as inauthentic. We need to look at the underlying culture and assess whether traits such as collaboration, innovation, transparency, and openness belong solely to the younger generation. Reports such as the Ipsos MORI Who is Generation Next? have indicated what the concerns of the younger generation are, and what they might expect from their politicians.

Young people want to know that they are being listened to, that their voices count, and that they are not being patronised.

We are not necessarily hearing from politicians in bitesize chunks, Ed Miliband's recent encounter excepted, and they are not really engaging in difficult conversations outside of television interviews.

Digital users want solid content that they can get behind and share, and want opportunities to feed into policies, with real-time modification of responses. The Greens as a fringe party, are only 70,000 likes behind the Labour Party on Facebook, and only 20,000 followers behind the Conservatives on Twitter. Young people, however, are typically more likely to be found on peer-to-peer networks, and visual spaces such as Instagram and Pinterest, where there is even less political engagement.

It's also worth considering whether the whole ballot-box system is anachronistic – I won't be the only one who voted via post a week ago, so for me the election is over.

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