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# Seth Warner

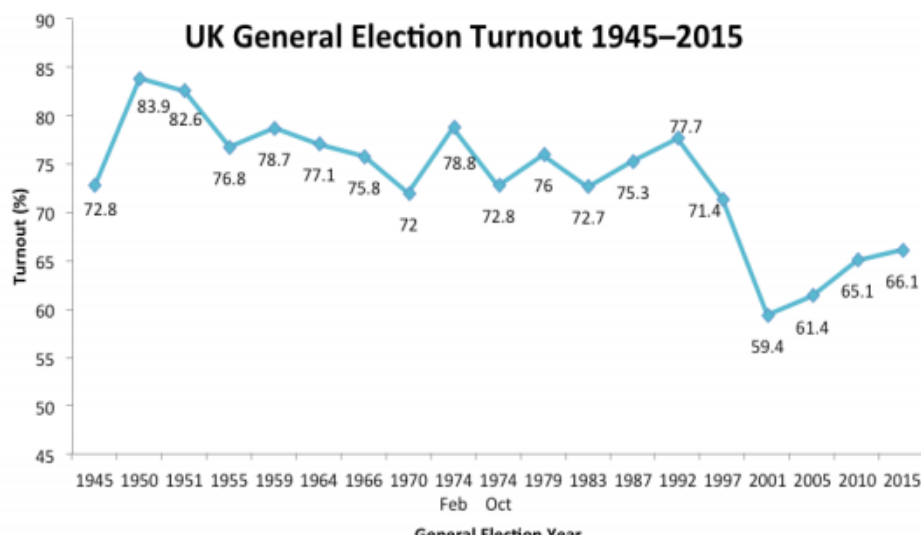
## Snapchat, the Platform to Re-Engage UK Youth Voters?

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### INTRODUCTION

Although young voter numbers have increased in 2015, (see figure 1) 18-24 year olds voting turnout rates have fallen to an average of 40% over the previous three general elections (Sloam 2015). Even with turnout numbers on the rise in 2015, a large proportion of the youth electorate are disengaged and unaware of political issues that could have a significant impact on them. Could growing social media channels help "re-engage disillusioned voters and bring the digital youth vote into the election process?" (Byrne 2015). Analysing why the UK youth electorate is disengaged and where politicians and parties are going wrong will aid in providing an insight into creating increasingly effective communications for the future. Will discovering Snapchat's full potential inspire the youth of Britain, to mobilise and engage ultimately driving higher numbers, to the polling stations?

**Figure 1: *Getting Engaged? The Relationship between Traditional, New Media, and the Electorate during the 2015 UK General Election. Reuters Institute for the study of journalism (Byrne 2015)***

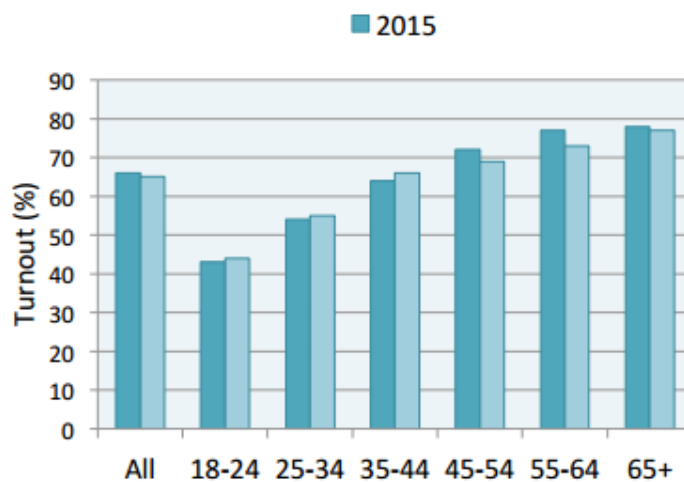


WHY IS THE YOUTH DEMOGRAPHIC DISENGAGED?

One of the most prominent features of recent general elections has been low turnout rates amongst young voters (Sloam 2015). As seen in (figure 2), voters aged 18 – 24 had the lowest turnout at the 2015 general election. There is a positive generational gradient that highlights the fact that the older the voter, the likelihood of casting their vote rises. This has created a significant increase in the generational divide amongst the UK's political sphere explaining why there is such an emphasis placed on appealing to older voters (IF 2015).

**Figure 2: How did young people vote at the 2015 general election (Intergenerational Foundation 2015)**

**How many young people actually voted?**



Politicians are often forced to engage demographics that will increase their chances of winning votes. With an aging population in the UK, it is unlikely that the amount of time and funds devoted to older demographics will shift towards the youth vote anytime in the near future. Brexit would have been the perfect time to try and engage with millennials, as they are strong supporters of the vote to stay. However, the propagandist “Pro EU” leaflets thrust through every letter box in the UK was simply not the way to approach the millennial demographic.

There are 5.9 million voters aged between 18-24 in the UK according to the ONS (Arnett et al 2015). As a sole demographic, 18-24 year olds are not large enough to sway a vote one way or another on their own during a general election. However, voters aged over 65, who number at 11.1 million, have the capacity to determine the outcome of an election as a demographic and are also the most likely to cast their vote. This explains why so much importance is placed on the aging population. The over 65’s have leverage due to the fact that they can significantly affect the outcome of an election, resulting in politicians having to address issues that most concern that demographic. These messages are unlikely align with the youth demographic, contributing to high disengagement levels.

## IS IT EVEN WORTH THE EFFORT?

Voters who register for a party are highly likely to continue casting ballots for that party years after. Furthermore, Fisman found that there is a strong relationship between votes cast by the electorate in their youth and their votes cast today. For example voters who turned 18 during the Kennedy era are more likely to vote for Democrats and vice versa for those who came of age during the (Republican) Eisenhower's presidency. Therefore, increased amounts of time and money should be spent on grassroots appeals to engage and garner support from the youth electorate as it has potential to pay future dividends as they age. If parties can generate support from the youth vote as early as possible, they are more likely to be actively engaged with the same party later down the line (Fisman 2010).

## WHAT ROLE CAN SOCIAL MEDIA PLAY?

Social media has the potential to disrupt the decline of interest and engagement in politics according to politics correspondent John Pienaar in a television interview (Byrne 2015). Before social media publics had to make an effort to seek out political coverage and information. Social media could play a pivotal role in re-engaging young voters in the UK by generating real time coverage straight to users' smartphones maximising accessibility on a platform popular with young voters.

Traditional platforms will only continue to become obsolete, youth demographics want to access information on demand. Televised news programming is quickly becoming outdated when stories are breaking on social media feeds in real time. Although it is still an influential platform for "Generation X or Baby Boomers", it is not the future. If the rate of growth in social media users continues and television's influence on youth voters continues to decline, "2020 could very well be the UK social media election we were expecting in 2015" (Byrne 2015).

Byrne (2015) states that "Despite the millions of tweets, retweets, posts, likes, shares, and views, there is no evidence that social media played a decisive role in boosting engagement and turnout". Furthermore, he suggests there is evidence that traditional media, and particularly broadcast media with their debates and events, remained much more influential on voters. This may explain why the UK government has been slow to adapt to social media. However, if you analyse the most effective platforms for demographics, it shows that traditional media is deemed the most effective media platform to influence voters. Nevertheless, demographics who are most likely to vote are 65+, therefore these statistics only apply to older generations who have higher voter numbers. It would be misguided to apply this data set to the UK youth electorate who have the lowest voting turnout of any demographic due to the fact that the most effective platforms can only apply to people who are actually voting.

Head of content at Snapchat, Nick Bell, recently stated that millennial usage of TV is clearly in decline (Corasaniti 2016). It is therefore difficult to assume television is the most influential media platform for UK youth voters if a large portion of them aren't

currently voting. 18-24 year olds who are voting may be influenced most by social media platforms however these stats are likely to be overshadowed due to low turnout numbers.

## WHY SNAPCHAT?

Snapchat is most popular among 18-24 year olds (see appendix 4) and is currently the fastest growing social media platform, with video views per day matching Facebook in 2015 (see appendix 5). The majority of its users are millennials, the demographic least engaged in UK politics. There is a global total of 100 million daily active Snapchat users, 45% of whom are aged 18-24. Engagement with young voters worked best when media brands met them on their own 'turf' particularly on Facebook. However, 18-24 year olds are the most likely to be found on Snapchat (Byrne 2015). Alignment between Snapchat's top user age range suggests this is the platform best suited to appeal to the millennial demographic.

## IMPORTANCE OF SMARTPHONE APPS

The mass adoption of smartphones combined with the "younger skew" has made Snapchat the most popular application of the 2016 US Presidential election cycle. Snapchat data consumption has seen a surge of 260% and is projected to grow rapidly over the coming years. Smart traffic was responsible for 88% of global mobile data traffic in 2014 and is projected to rise to 97% in 2019. Mobile video will make up 72% of global mobile data traffic in 2019 (75% in the UK 2015), combined with Snapchat's predicted growth will make it an invaluable platform for politicians and broadcasters (Freier 2015).

Snapchat now promotes itself as the prime avenue for political advertising and content designed to sway the "elusive and coveted demographic, millennials" (Viebeck 2015). Snapchat's mission is to utilise mobile storytelling, using the US Presidential election as its maiden step to becoming the "go to" social media source for political coverage. They are already finding an audience, with more than one million viewers on every political story that they have produced (Corasaniti 2016). Why is this important for engaging young UK voters? Snapchat argues that it can play a big role in galvanising millennial voters (Viebeck 2015) which could be a stepping stone for re-engaging the youth electorate in the UK with the aim of increasing voter turnout between the ages of 18-24.

## US APPLICATION

Snapchat made quick headway at the start of the presidential campaign in 2015 and nearly every 2016 team is using the app in some form according to (Viebeck 2015), whether running advertisements targeted by state (the app can't hone in closer, for now) or posting "snaps" from behind the scenes. Hillary Clinton and Jeb Bush used Snapchat to document their campaign kick-offs. Scott Walker is an active user, aided by his sons, both

under 25. John Kasich might not post much original content, but he's advertised on the platform, as has Walker.

## UK APPLICATION

UK politicians can utilise Snapchat to send specific advertisements to smartphone users with the app. They can use the app to broadcast original content, for example: behind the scenes action at debates/key events, opinions on current events and what they do on a daily basis. Jeremy Corbyn was the first UK politician to create a Snapchat channel to maintain his appeal among young voters. Creating a direct channel of communication with the electorate that is unhindered and unfiltered will create a sense of authenticity that will go a long way with youth voters who believe politics is too staged and fake. This is supported by (Byrne 2015) who states that millennials are attracted to authenticity, "You can't bullshit them". Therefore, allowing politicians to reach youth voters on their level to raise issues, debate and promote ideas about the future could be an effective method to boost engagement. More specifically addressing youth demographics about issues that matter most to them, such as tuition fees and job prospects (Henn & Foard 2011).

Snapchat's 'live story' adds another dimension to their political communication potential. The 'live story' provides viewers with a first person experience of being at a rally or debate in real time which other platforms are unable to do. There are still initial kinks to work out, due to the fact that content can often lack "hard news" and audio can often be of poor quality. However, in another context the live story could be utilised to hold debates in which politicians provide insight into an issue and viewers can add responses to the story for everyone to see. This has the potential to reinvigorate the youth demographic because discussions will be taking place on platforms they are active on. Snapchat's use of "geofilters," allows users to overlay graphics on a video or picture. These filters allow users to annotate a clip with an analysis or outline a candidate's position on an issue. During the Iowa caucuses, filters were used to show live results that were seen by more than six million users.

More professional explanatory journalism can be found in the "Discover" tab with Snapchat's political show called "Good luck America". This contains professionally produced original content by Snapchat's political team. Snapchat lets people experience what the event is like which traditional media are unable to do. This channel in the US has previously covered an interview with Jeb Bush and helps bring viewers to the candidates which would be popular if adapted for the UK.

## CRITICISMS

Snapchat is unable to provide all the information users need, the main aim is to spark interest and generate a level of understanding and knowledge to then follow up and learn more elsewhere. Moreover, Snapchat is unable to drive leads, generate traffic via clickable links or collect data other than initial views. This limits its value for politicians because it doesn't help them analyse how engaged viewers are and the effectiveness of

their communications. When advocating for larger budgets, the fact that Facebook can lead to increased website traffic and donations makes the justification versus Snapchat clear. If platforms are unable to push publics to vote, volunteer, persuade others or raise money then perceived value may be lacking in the eyes of campaign managers (Lapowsky 2016).

## CONCLUSION

In the future, Snapchat predicts a combination of both the live story and increase in professionally produced elements that will provide a better-rounded broadcast (Corasaniti 2016). There are three avenues of information available to Snapchat users, professional reporting on Snapchat's political channel, user generated content on "live story" and politician's dedicated channel. This could be the future of political broadcasting; incorporating three viewpoints around a uniform topic will give viewers professional, authentic and entertaining first person coverage. It is highly likely that if a combination of the three can be incorporated this will be the future of political communication and will boost millennial engagement in the UK. Driving political interest, engagement and numbers to the polls. The fact that politicians can have an authentic broadcasting channel directly to their publics is invaluable and could be just what is needed to boost engagement of disillusioned UK youth voters.

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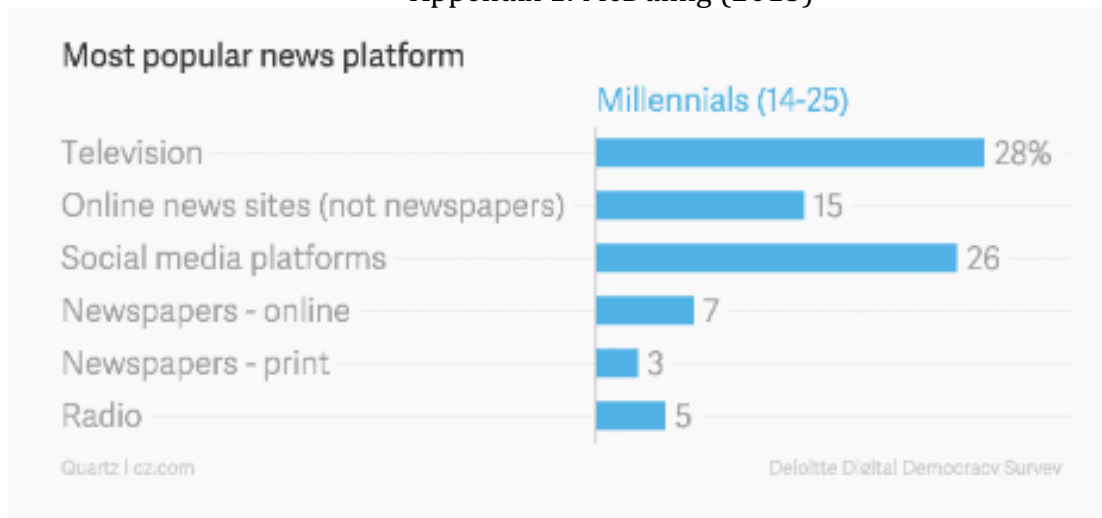
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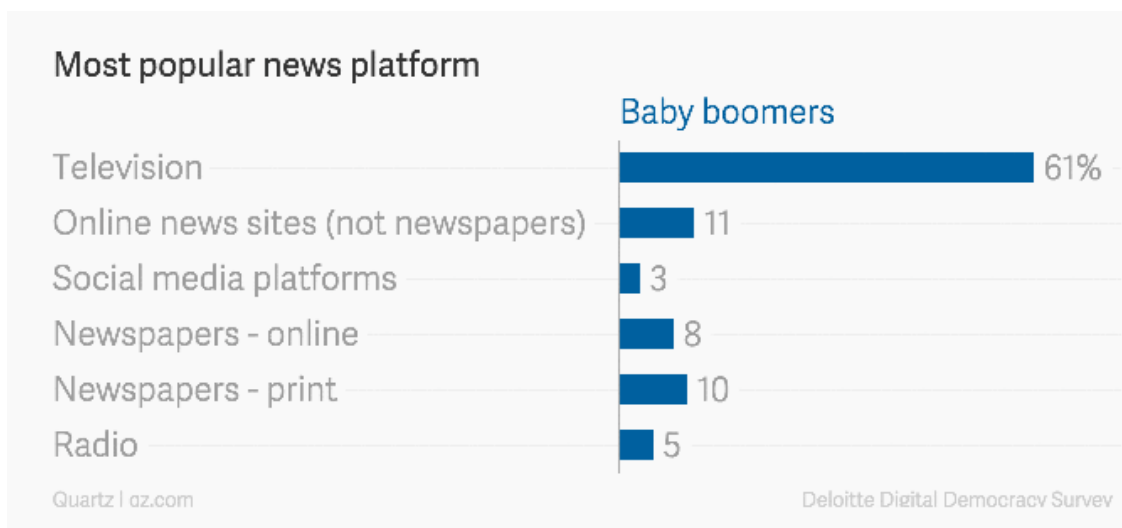
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Appendices:

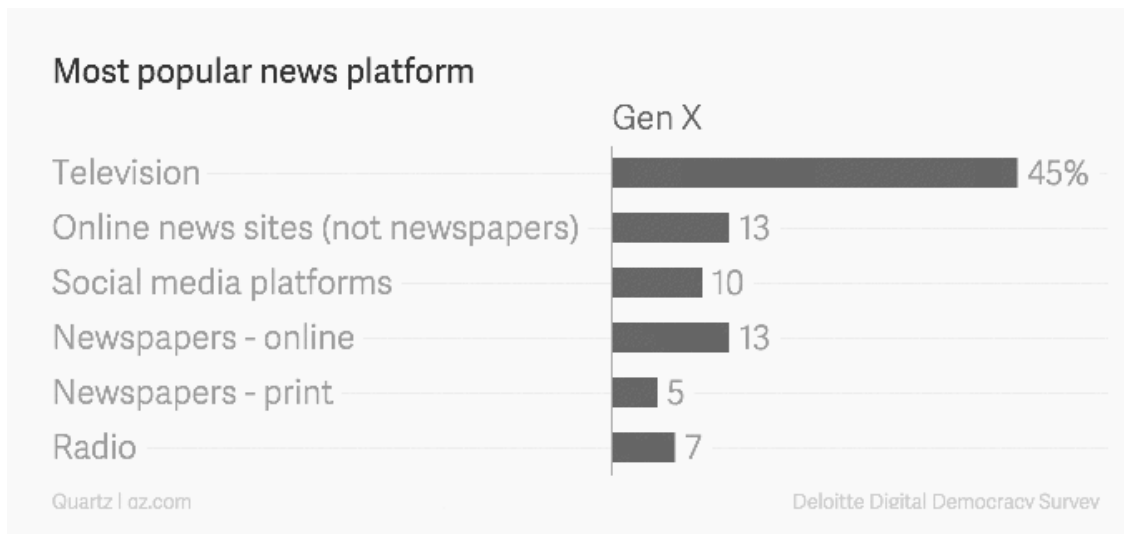
Appendix 1: McDuling (2015)



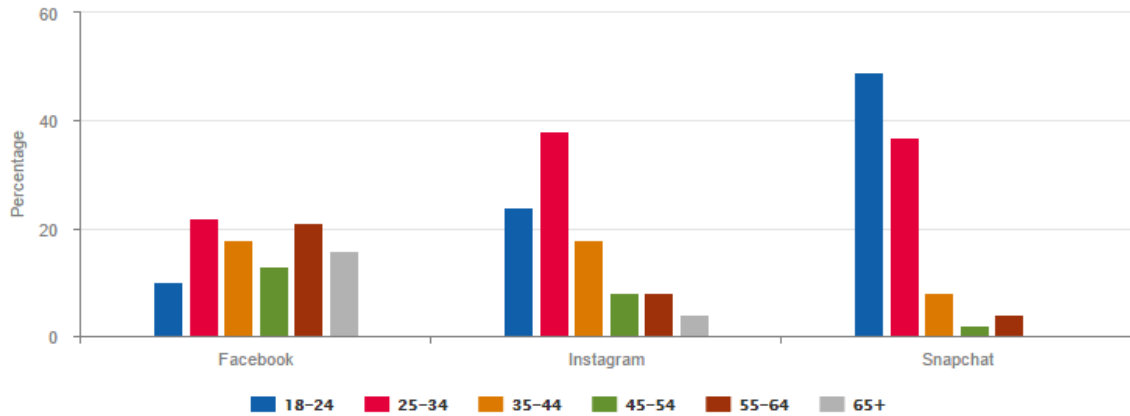
Appendix 2: McDuling (2015)



Appendix 3: McDuling (2015)



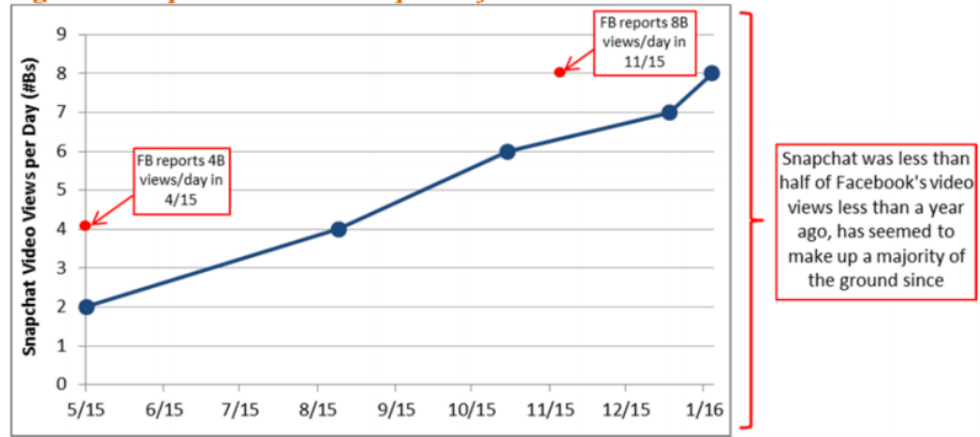
Appendix 4: Reuters Institute (2015)



Appendix 5: Facebook vs Snapchat (Carson 2016)

Now, in less than a year, Snapchat has already caught up to Facebook.

**Figure 1: Snapchat Video Views per Day in Billions**



Source: Company Reports, STRH

Appendix 6: Henn & Foard (2011)

**Figure 1: Issues of Most Concern**

