DEMOS

THE OUTRAGE ELECTION

A CASM INVESTIGATION CONDUCTED WITH BBC CLICK

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SOCIAL MEDIA PRESENTS A CONUNDRUM FOR POLITICIANS...

On one hand, it offers parliamentarians and their supporters to get the party line out, talk to voters and reply to opponents in real time, at scale, and cheaply. The true price of climbing onto the internet's great soapbox, however, is measured not in resources saved by campaigns, but in the human cost of an endless stream of personal attacks, from scoffing insults to outright threats of violence.

Being abused online has long been a recognised part of public life on social media. In 2017, the Committee of Standards in Public Life commissioned a report, to which Demos contributed, which concluded that "the widespread use of social media has been the most significant factor accelerating and enabling intimidatory behaviour in recent years."[1] All of this ramps up during election campaigns which provide the perfect conditions for abuse to flourish.

In part, this is because the stakes are higher. We still don't know what effect, if any, social media campaigning has on vote share. It's difficult, however, to shake the suspicion that if you can convince a wavering constituent that your opponent is dishonest or incompetent, it might just make all the difference. This rise is also to do with exposure. Social media, and particularly Twitter, is a reactive medium, and in the last few weeks, politicians have been in the public eye to an unusual degree - making announcements, taking stands, often courting controversy.

Working with BBC Click, CASM wanted to study how abuse, insults and personal attacks broke down over the 2019 general election campaign. You can watch the results of this here.

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1   See "Intimidation in Public Life: A Review by the Committee on Standards in Public Life" - available from https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/intimidation-in-public-life-a-review-by-the-committee-on-standards-in-public-life

METHODOLOGY

We used Twitter's public API to collect just over 5 million Tweets, sent between 7th and 29th November, which mention the username of 541 candidates who had been an MP in the recently dissolved parliament. This is a staggering number of messages - 222,000 tweets mentioning a candidate per day, or, on average, just over two and a half every single second.[2] Under standard settings for the Twitter app, each one of these Tweets would have sent a little red notification to wherever that candidate, or their team, were monitoring their accounts.

We wanted to find out how much of this discussion involved personal attacks on candidates - tweets which attacked people, rather than policies or events. In doing so, we also wanted to keep an open mind as to the types of abuse being flung at candidates; we wanted to capture not only the most extreme threats, but also to get a wide view of the negative messages which politicians regularly receive.

To this end, a random sample of Tweets was first coded up to establish whether they could be considered personally insulting or abusive. 17% of the Tweets in this sample were judged to be abusive or insulting, and the Tweets labelled as such were used to generate nine sets of keywords related to the following categories of abuse. These were expanded and refined as the analysis progressed.

'Appearance'

Tweets attacking the way a candidate looks, or their age

'Brexit'

Insults using a derogatory term related to a candidate's position on Brexit - e.g. the imaginative 'Brexshitter'

'Gendered'

Insults using a derogatory term related to a candidate's gender

'Generic'

Insults using terms or emoji commonly used to attack someone's character, such as 'rat', 'crook' or 'nasty'.

'Honesty'

Tweets claiming that candidates themselves were intrinsically dishonest, or incapable of telling the truth.

'Intelligence'

Messages insulting a candidate's intelligence; suggesting they aren't fit for the job.

'Profanity'

Insults containing profanity - either uncensored or censored with stars (e.g. 'f**cker')

'Silence'

Tweets aiming to silence candidates, telling them to 'be quiet', 'shut up' etc.

'Treachery'

Tweets calling MPs 'traitors', or accusing them of betraying their country, party or ideology.

This approach naturally returned a lot of irrelevant material. It is clearly possible to use terms like 'ugly' or 'fat' without abusing anyone. To tackle this, we used Method52, a piece of software developed by CASM with Sussex University, to train an NLP classifier designed to determine whether relevant

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2   In total, 5,094,978 Tweets were collected during the 23 day period between 7th and 29th November, using Twitter's search API. Note that we don't think this was every Tweet sent during this period - issues implementing the collection, as well as the fact that we will be missing deleted Tweets, as outlined above, mean this will be a lower bound.

terms were being used as a form of insult ('you fat cow') or otherwise ('fat lot of good,' etc).[3] In particular, we were keen to divide attacks levelled at a candidate's character from those which talked about a recent action; the difference between saying that a recent announcement was a lie, which we weren't classing as a personal attack, and calling someone a conman, which we were. The classifier trained to for this purpose was eventually able to identify insulting and abusive Tweets with an accuracy of 71%.

3   The process followed here has been employed in numerous Demos papers - for a detailed explanation of how it all works, see, for example, the first appendix of our 2018 paper on Russian misinformation - https://demosuk.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Russian-Influence-Operations-on-Twitter.pdf#.

FINDINGS

Once we had trained an algorithm, we were able to use it at scale - to find abusive Tweets within the 5 million strong dataset. These tweets were then labelled according to the candidate mentioned, to show who was being insulted, and how.

Our first finding was unsurprising - the people who are insulted most are the people who are talked about most, particularly if they are making the political weather: our top three candidates by overall mentions were Johnson, Corbyn and Hancock. To take a candidates' online notoriety into account, we looked not at the sheer number of insults received by a candidate (or group of candidates) but by the number of insults they received as a proportion of their total mentions - what proportion of their timeline was likely to be abusive.

We found the following:

The type of abuse received by a candidate changes with their background

As a percentage of all mentions received on Twitter by a candidate:

British South Asian candidates are more likely than any other group to be accused of being dishonest.

This type of insult represented 2.5% of all mentions received by candidates, compared to 2.1% for white candidates, the next highest group. British South Asian candidates are also four times more likely to be told to 'be quiet' or 'shut up' than White candidates (0.46% of mentions against 0.11%)

Black British candidates are most likely to be insulted for their intelligence

1% of all mentions of Black British candidates accused them of being unintelligent - 25% higher than the equivalent figure for White candidates of 0.8%. This corresponds with a long-standing racist

stereotype of black people lacking intellectual capacity.[4]

White candidates are most likely to be sworn at, and called 'traitors'

As a proportion of their mentions, white candidates were four times more likely to be accused of treachery than minority candidates, and slightly more likely to be mentioned in tweets including some kind of profanity.

Insults tend to be widely dispersed across the political spectrum

We built a network map to show the connections between candidates and the people insulting them on Twitter.[5] In the graph in Figure 1, labelled dots represent candidates,coloured by party. The larger a candidate's blob is, the more abuse they have received. Grey dots represent Twitter accounts which have insulted a candidate. It's difficult to make out, but every abusive tweet is represented by a small grey line connecting users and candidates. The more people you insult, the more people you will be connected to. These lines want to be as short as possible, meaning that users will end up closer to the candidates they abuse, and those candidates will tend to group together.

To reduce the complexity of this graph, we have filtered it in three ways:

- The graph in Figure 1 only shows those tweets classified as abusive by our algorithm

- It only shows tweets which @mention no more than one candidate

- It only shows Tweets from accounts which sent more than 3 insults during our three week collection period.

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4   See e.g. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stereotypes_of_African_Americans#Unintelligent
5   This graph was constructed using the excellent, open source software Gephi: https://gephi.org/

FIGURE 1.

ABUSE TOWARDS CANDIDATES
ON TWITTER
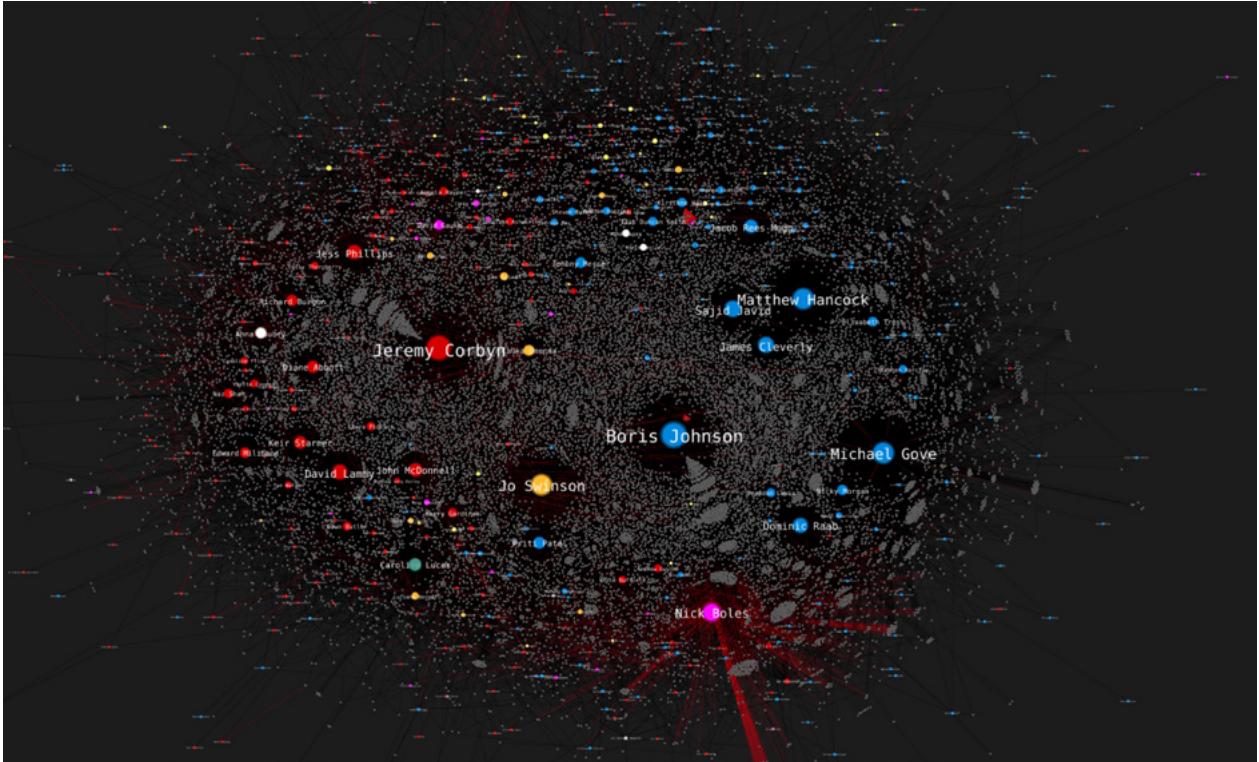
Perhaps unsurprisingly, Figure 1 shows a clear split between the parties - people who dislike the Conservatives on the right, those who dislike Labour on the left. Other parties, and independents, tend to end up squeezed between these two spheres.

Notably, the graph is also highly centralised; the vast majority of users sit in the middle of parties of all stripes. This is partly to do with the dominance of, and connections between, Corbyn, Swinson and Johnson.

**Politicians are widely insulted for being dishonest**

As edges represent Tweets, we can colour them according to the type of insult they fall into. Figure 2 shows tweets which discuss a lack of honesty in candidates. This lights the whole graph up - almost no candidate is spared this accusation.

This even distribution isn't seen with other types of abuse. Figure 3 shows tweets, in red, which accuse politicians of being 'traitors' - to their country, for example, or Brexit. Clearly this is much more sparse, and tends to centre on the lower and leftmost sides of the graph, picking up independent, Lib Dem and Labour candidates.[6]

This predominance of discussion of candidates as mendacious reflects also on the state of our political system, and public trust in our representatives. It also paints a grim picture of the current political debate. Throughout the 2019 election campaign, we have seen extreme cases of those at the very top of our political establishments sharing verifiable mistruths, or cynically misleading those who follow them on social media. In this light, many of the tweets which attack politicians, and not their behaviour, could be understood as howls of protest; people going for the representatives of a system they do not trust to tell them the truth.
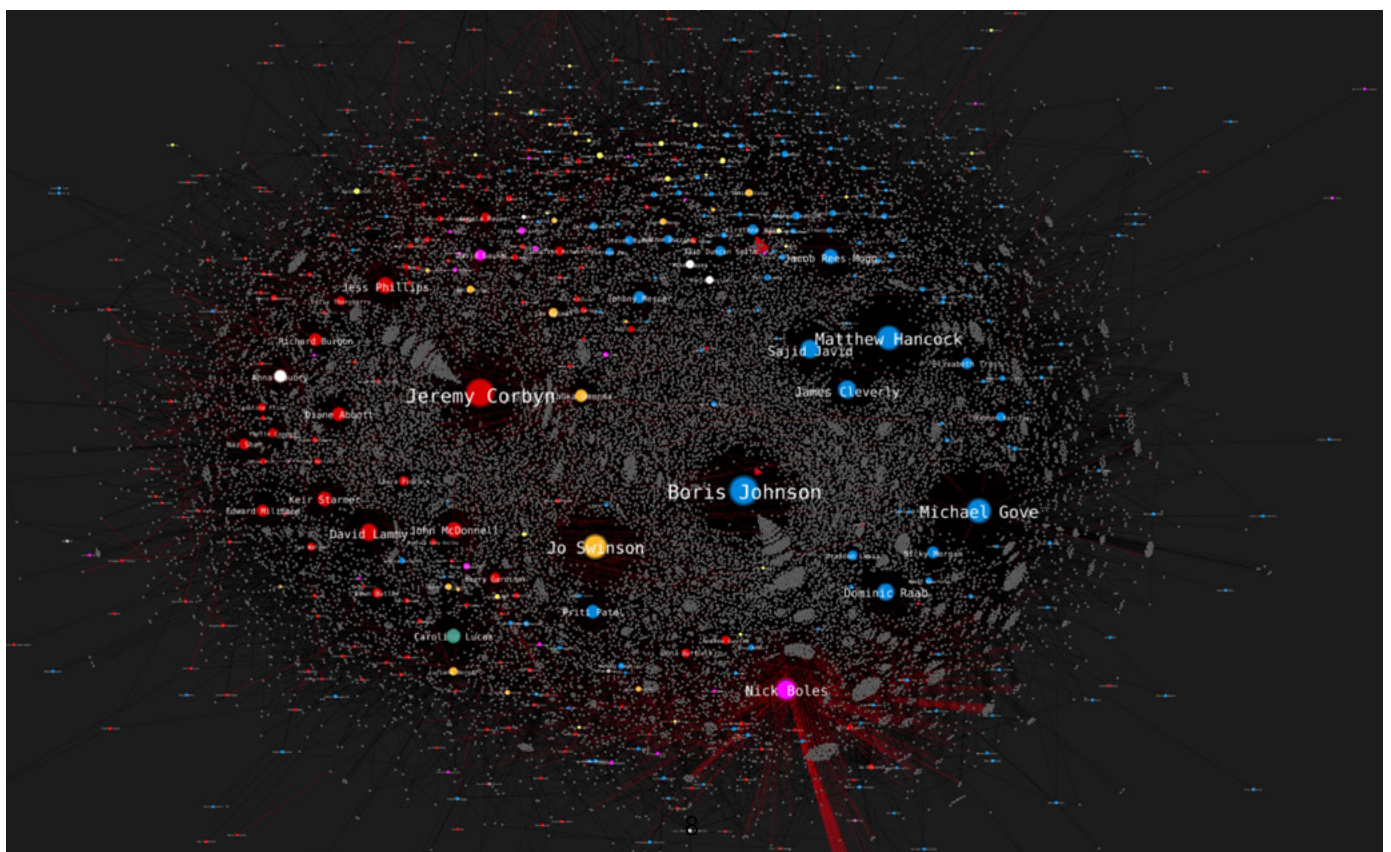
FIGURE 2.

TWEETS ATTACKING THE
HONESTY OF CANDIDATES
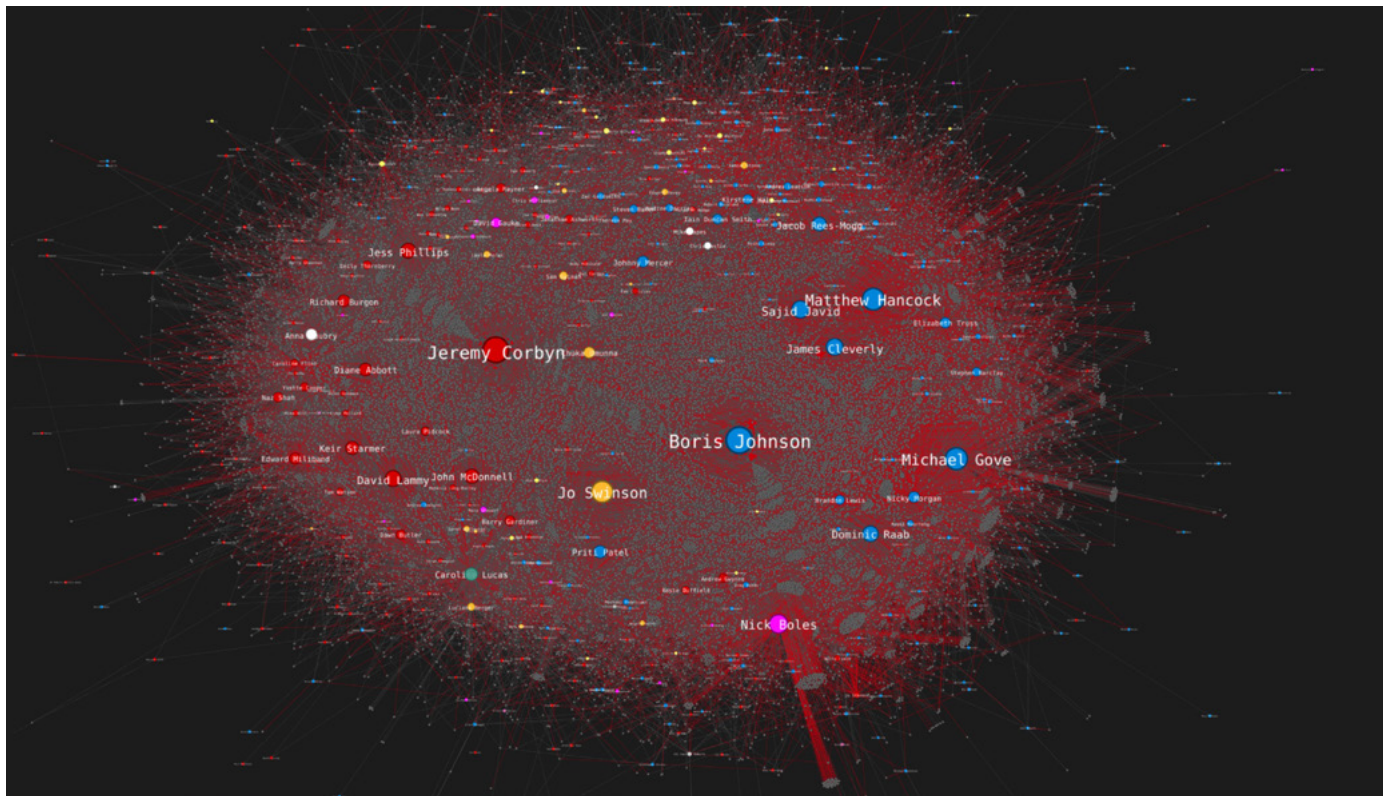
FIGURE 3.

INSULTS MENTIONING
'TREACHERY' ON TWITTER

FIGURE 4.

ACCOUNTS COLOURED BY
MODULARITY CLASS

Grouping people by those they abuse shows that insults cross party lines

Figure 4 shows a version of the original network with nodes coloured into 'modularity classes.' In brief, coloured nodes are more likely to be connected to other nodes of that colour than they are to be connected to nodes of any other colour. A green node will be more likely to insult candidates coloured green than any other.

Two things stand out about this graph. Firstly, the coloured clusters in Figure 4 do not stand alone, but tend to be highly intermixed; many accounts primarily insulting a cluster of one colour will also be connected to candidates of another. This suggests that abuse is generally widespread rather than focused. However, several high profile candidates - Johnson, Corbyn, Gove and Hancock, for example, are also surrounded by visible 'plumes' of focussed abuse, rising from their nodes like smoke signals. These represent users who have only attacked that candidate, often multiple times.

Some of this abuse splits along party lines, and tend to centre around a few notable candidates. For example, the two largest groups, as expected, do so around Johnson and Corbyn. On the right, the green cluster contains members of the Conservative ex-front bench. On the left, Corbyn and major players in the Labour party sit in the centre of a large purple cluster. Candidates here have been coloured by party.

Some of the smaller clusters in this graph, however, focus their abuse on candidates across parties. This is shown in Figure 6. The cluster in gold, on the left of the graph, centres around two high-profile black British Labour candidates - Diane Abbott and David Lammy. Alongside them sit Green Party candidate Caroline Lucas, Anna Soubry, Rory Stewart and Dr Rosena Allin-Khan. Many of the candidates in this cluster have taken some kind of public stance; against racism, misogyny and homophobia - for the environment or their personal political beliefs. The fact that there is a group of people who target these candidates more often than others is not proof of a concerted effort to target those who speak up, but it is striking that such outspoken candidates are connected in this way.
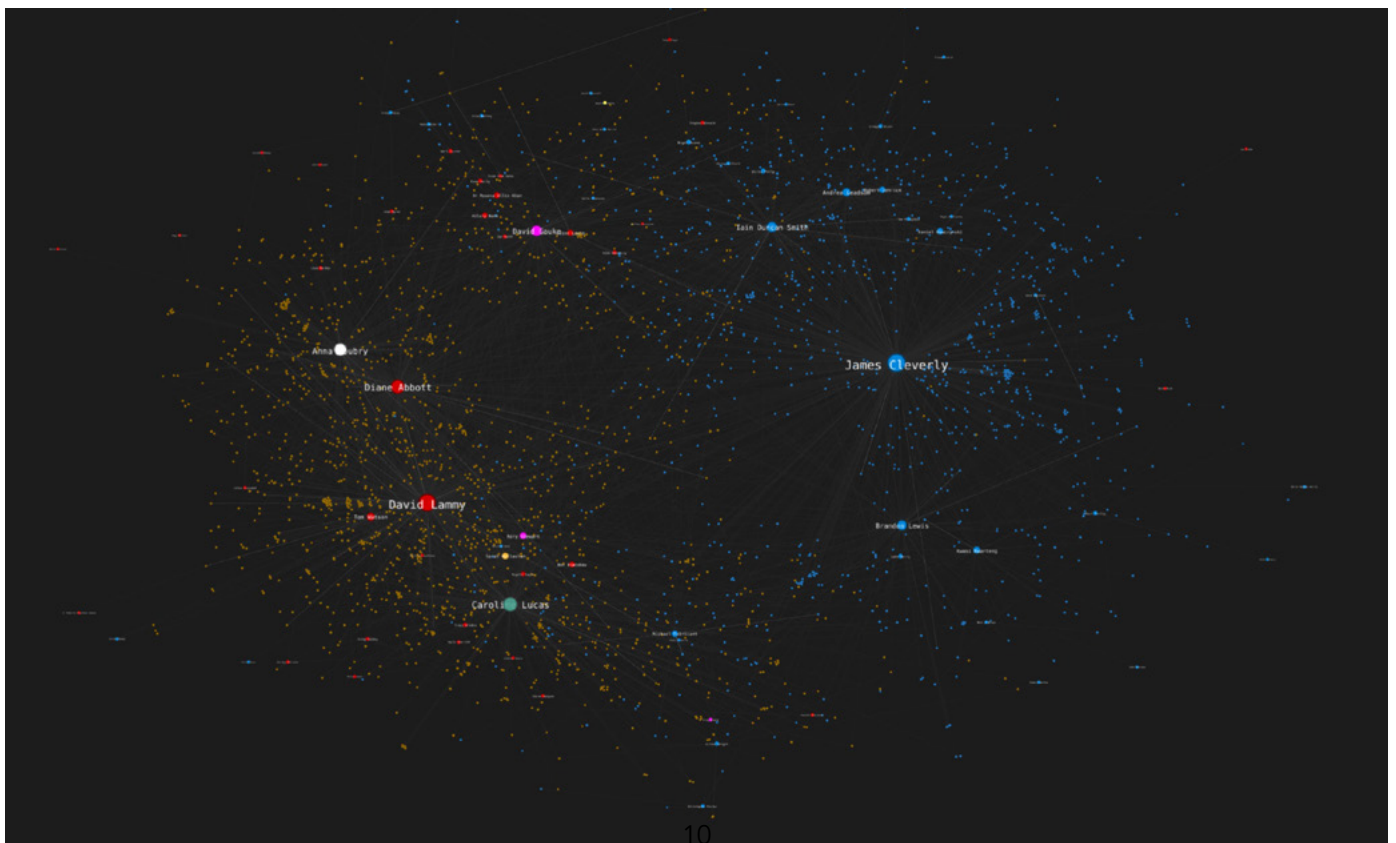
FIGURE 5.

LABOUR / CONSERVATIVE
PRIMARY CLUSTERS
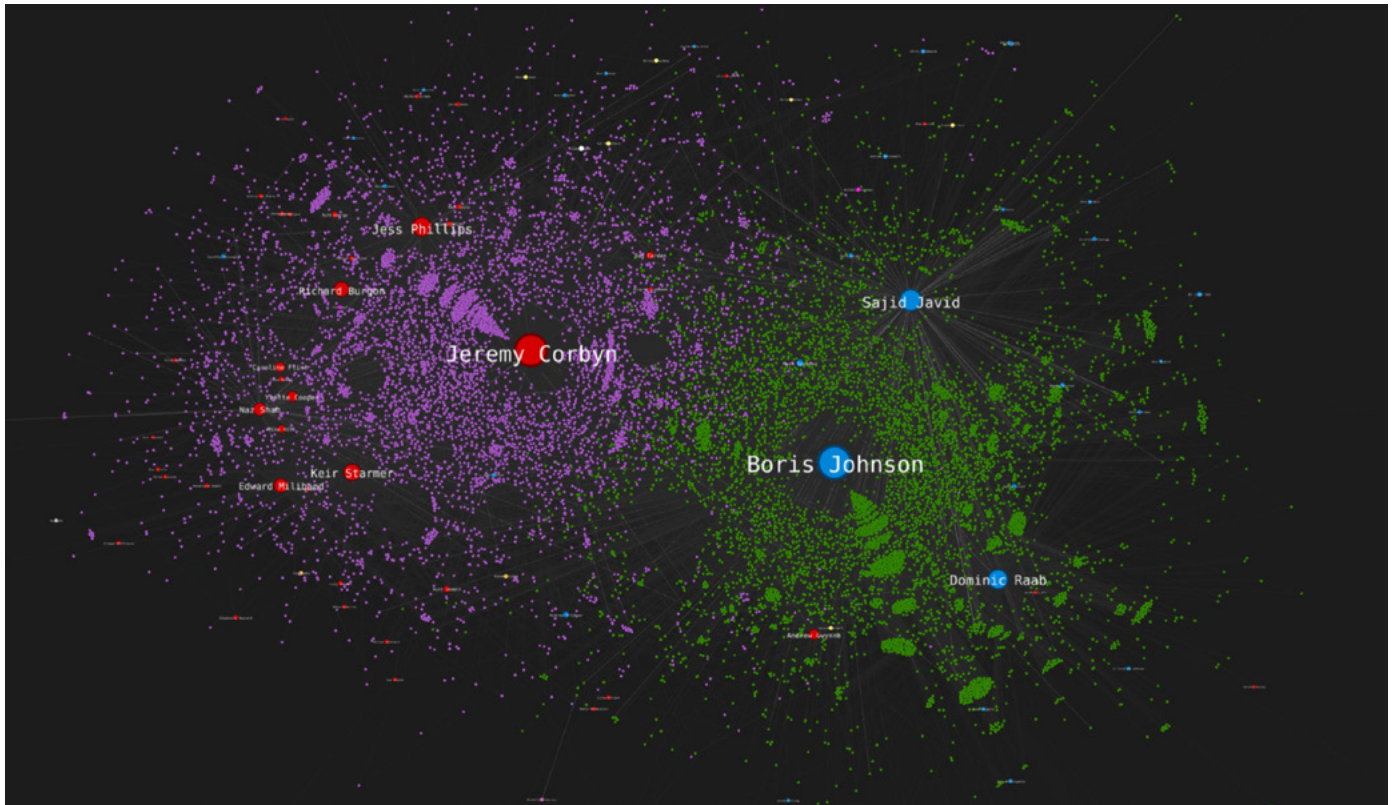
FIGURE 6.

CROSS-PARTY CLUSTER (LEFT)

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