

The Conversation

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It was a word salad of mind-numbing banality, replete with boilerplate platitudes (“national renewal for a new national purpose”), management-speak gibberish (“delivery-focused cross-cutting mission boards”) and meaningless drivel (a more “empowering, catalytic” government). These are not the words of an Opposition leader connecting cleverly with the British people and on his way to a landslide.¹

I don’t often find myself in agreement with former Murdoch hack Andrew Neil, but the above paragraph is hard to disagree with. The message the Labour Party leader wishes to disseminate is that ‘Labour is open for business’ and *is* the party of business. To this end Keir Starmer might earn for himself an honorary MBA, having landed in the world of corporate-speak. At the same time as Starmer was trotting out his five ‘mission statements’ in February, I was engaged in a discussion with a friend about the latest artificial intelligence (AI) innovation, ChatGPT. ChatGPT goes far beyond the now familiar ‘virtual assistants’ and chatbots one finds on many corporate websites, which rarely if ever answer your

¹ <<https://tinyurl.com/ycxaphw2>> or <www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-11790831/ANDREW-NEIL-youre-expecting-Labour-landslide-missed-Keir-Starmers-word-salad.html>

Starmer’s gobbledegook management speak finds an echo chamber in the party’s general secretary, David Evans, who after announcing a slimmed down head office and redundancies told staff ‘Labour would be “voter-centric”, i.e. ‘serving the needs of voters first’, as opposed to engaging in ‘transactional behaviours’, i.e. “telling voters what they should think or do, or asking questions on our terms. The general secretary specified that this would involve developing ‘winning, voter-centric policies’. He also stressed that Labour needs to be ‘lean and agile’, which it will achieve using a ‘hub-and-spoke’ model to ‘meet the needs’ of voters. On the model, the presentation states: ‘This helps to aggregate and specialise core functions in the “hub”. The “spokes” – which cover the regions and nations – enable our vital citizen-facing activities to be delivered as close to voters as possible.’ It goes on to say Labour will work ‘collaboratively’ in ‘multidisciplinary teams’, which will ‘adopt a product-mindset using agile ceremonies, be empowered to make decisions and encouraged to focus on rapid prototyping, deployment and iteration.’ <<https://tinyurl.com/mr2a66wk>> or <labourlist.org/2021/08/exclusive-labour-general-secretary-unveils-new-party-structure-to-staff/>.

One consequence of not asking voters questions ‘on our terms’ is that it has developed an even longer list of questions for doorstep canvassers to ask.

queries, being programmed only to answer frequently asked questions and certainly nothing that deals with complexity or customer dissatisfaction.

We have heard a great deal about AI replacing humans in the workplace. Given Starmer's display of 'mind-numbing banality' I can see how in politics, too, the humans-to-be-replaced-by-AI phenomenon will play out. In its first stages, it will build on (and indeed *has* been built on) the techniques employed by e.g. Cambridge Analytica (CA) to identify target audiences and voter types. I should say at this point that these technologies (if not CA's services) have been used by all major parties, not just Labour. In the competition for votes, anything new often trumps qualms about propriety. The *New York Times* technology columnist Kevin Roose wrote:

I worry that the technology will learn how to *influence* human users, sometimes *persuading* them to act in destructive and harmful ways, and perhaps eventually grow capable of carrying out its own dangerous acts. ² (emphases added)

It is the words 'influence' and 'persuade' that will particularly appeal to political campaign organisers – going well beyond the simple function of aggregating data.

Let's briefly remind ourselves of the activities of Cambridge Analytica. They were for a time a subsidiary of SCL – Strategic Communications Laboratories – which harvested data on a grand scale, much of it from Facebook, and from that developed profiles of voters in depth. From this they would develop strategies designed to propel people to vote – or indeed suppress their desire to vote. Much of the data, it turned out, was garnered illicitly and broke Facebook's rules (not that Facebook were very strict in their application). CA were also embroiled in dubious practices during the Brexit referendum, through their opaque relationship with Aaron Banks' Leave.EU campaign. As detailed in *Targeted*, the book by former CA Director of Business Development, Brittany Kaiser, the company engaged in many more dubious practices.³ Following various scandals it went out of business in 2018.

Two questions interest me here. Firstly, has the CA general approach

² <<https://tinyurl.com/bdzn9ut6>> or <<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/16/technology/bing-chatbot-microsoft-chatgpt.html>>

³ Brittany Kaiser, *Targeted: The Cambridge Analytica Whistleblower's Inside Story of How Big Data, Trump, and Facebook Broke Democracy and How It Can Happen Again*, (London: Harper Collins, 2019)

to data harvesting, analysis and targeting (where in parts it was legitimate) been abandoned? Secondly, since in general new technology advances ever faster – and faster than legislators can keep up – what influence will that have on political campaign strategising? In this latter regard, AI will play an increasingly important role. In answer to the first question, the answer is a resounding ‘no’. Following the CA debacle, the UK Information Commissioner’s Office (ICO) produced a report in November 2020 *Audit of data compliance by UK political parties*. The report said:

All political parties must be clear and transparent with people about how their personal data is used and there should be improved governance and accountability. Political parties have always wanted to use data to understand voters’ interests and priorities, and respond by explaining the right policies to the right people. Technology now makes that possible on a much more granular level. This can be positive: engaging people on topics that interest them contributes to greater turnout at elections. But engagement must be lawful, especially where there are risks of significant privacy intrusion – for instance around invisible profiling activities, use of sensitive categories of data and unwanted and intrusive marketing. The risk to democracy if elections are driven by unfair or opaque digital targeting is too great for us to shift our focus from this area.⁴

In other words, carry on gathering data and profiling, but just do it more transparently and lawfully. In practice parties will have to sign clear contracts, monitor them and be open about them. But what will that mean? Little more, I suspect than individuals being asked to accept ‘cookies’ which most people do regardless to get to the content they want. Who reads terms and conditions? The *architecture* of profiling and from it strategising is unlikely to be affected.⁵

⁴ <<https://tinyurl.com/5n868vnm>> or <<https://ico.org.uk/media/action-weve-taken/2618567/audits-of-data-protection-compliance-by-uk-political-parties-summary-report.pdf>>

⁵ When it comes to the ICO’s performance I had an encounter with them when I objected to the proliferation of private CCTV cameras in my street. The ICO said that their guidelines meant that any use of a CCTV camera should be signalled at street level with a notice warning the public of its existence and what to do if they wanted to see images (the data) from it. Barely any CCTV cameras in my experience are accompanied by such notices. Cheaply available, the technology has outpaced the guidance and the ICO appears toothless in the face of this proliferation of CCTV cameras.

Part of the answer to my second question may be answered by a passing reference in Kaiser's book to another CA employee:

Kieran [Ward], the director of communications, whom I had met during my interview, did everything from political party branding to global messaging strategy. His list of advertising awards was impressive and his work in corporate branding was better than most I had seen. After Alexander [Nix, CA's Chief Executive] he'd been with the company the longest, and he showed me a *thirty-strong shelf of political party manifestos and platforms SCL had written and he'd designed*.⁶ (emphasis added)

Kaiser does not reveal for which parties SCL had written their manifestos, although given their deep involvement in US politics at the time I imagine many of these might have been for American candidates. SCL/CA also worked in many developing countries, where such expertise may have been welcome. In the UK, the process of writing party manifestos *appears* more robust and free of outside influence. On the surface, with the Labour Party having a complex, yet to its members, largely ignored policy-making process, there is still a sentimental belief that members have an effective say in a democratic policy making process. However, so far as the Labour Party goes, it has reverted to a leadership model which is dismissive of its members, except perhaps when they are needed as extras waving placards in the leader's photo-ops.

Deborah Mattison is a focus group guru who spent years working for the party. In 2010 she set up her own opinion research company, the modestly named Britain Thinks. In 2021 she was appointed Keir Starmer's director of strategy. Her appointment caused some consternation in the Conservative Party:

A powerful new aide to Sir Keir Starmer has been accused by Ministers of being a 'sleeper agent' who used her Government contracts to gain access to sensitive information about the Tories. They fear polling expert Deborah Mattison, who worked for Whitehall before being appointed last month as the Labour leader's director of strategy, will be able to pass on inside knowledge to Sir Keir's team. One Tory Minister said last night: 'Mattinson's lot have been involved in *road-testing all sorts of policies*, so she is in a good position to know exactly what we are up to.'⁷ (emphasis added)

⁶ *Targeted* (see note 3) p. 39

⁷ <<https://tinyurl.com/mrw33h2m>> or <www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-9729123/Sir-Keir-Starmers-powerful-new-aide-Deborah-Mattinson-accused-sleeper-agent.html>

It will surely not come as shock to *Lobster* readers that policies are tested in focus groups. It has been a common accusation that today's savvy politician rarely says anything which hasn't first been 'road tested.' A test which may indeed be applied to the politician him or herself, as Mattison makes clear in frustrated tones in her book *Talking to a Brick Wall: How New Labour stopped listening to the voter and why we need a new politics*. Her frustration then centred on, to put it bluntly, Gordon Brown's unroadworthiness. She wanted to present a 'real' Gordon Brown, but the real Gordon Brown brushed her advice aside.⁸ Has her appointment by Starmer signalled the 'new politics' or merely a rejuvenation of old methods, perhaps coupled with the latest technology? New Labour did win two landslide elections before Facebook was founded in 2004 but the tech world has moved on in bounds and leaps in the last 20 years just at a time when centrist, technocratic leadership models seem to be coming back into fashion.

With the permissions granted to parties by the ICO the post-CA world of political campaigning may include a new range of tick boxes, but the demands of winning a general election campaign won't have evaporated. In this world, pushing at boundaries is based on the old *Hill Street Blues* principle of 'Let's do it to them before they do it to us.'⁹ AI presents new challenges and opportunities in this field. What are these?

Perhaps the best place to start is by asking ChatGPT itself, with the question 'what will artificial intelligence bring to political campaigning?' The answer is unsurprisingly positive but comes with a small *de rigueur* caveat:

Artificial intelligence (AI) can bring several benefits to political campaigning. Here are some possible ways AI could impact political campaigning:

Targeted messaging: AI algorithms can analyze large amounts of data and identify patterns that can help campaigns identify which messages are resonating with specific groups of voters. This can help campaigns create targeted messaging that is more likely to persuade voters.

Predictive analytics: AI algorithms can also use data to make predictions about which voters are likely to support a particular

⁸ *Talking to a Brick Wall: How New Labour stopped listening to the voter and why we need a new politics* (London: Biteback, 2010) especially chapter 'Project 3D'.

⁹ These were the words Sgt Stan Jablonski sent his officers off with after their morning briefing.

candidate or issue. This can help campaigns focus their resources on the voters who are most likely to be receptive to their message.

Improved efficiency: AI can help campaigns automate certain tasks, such as data analysis and outreach, freeing up staff to focus on other important tasks.

Real-time monitoring: AI can monitor social media and news sources in real-time, alerting campaigns to breaking news or emerging issues that they need to respond to.

Personalization: AI can help campaigns create personalized experiences for individual voters based on their interests and preferences, making it more likely that they will engage with the campaign.

Overall, AI has the potential to help political campaigns more effectively reach voters and communicate their message. However, there are also concerns about the potential for AI to be used to spread misinformation or manipulate voters, *so it's important to use these technologies in a responsible and ethical manner.*¹⁰ (emphasis added)

No wonder Labour's general secretary David Evans felt safe making staff redundant. But on a more worrying note, having read Brittany Kaiser's account of CA's sales pitch, the AI answer above is straight out of Alexander Nix's sales promo for CA. What this particular AI answer does not say, however, is that AI will be much more of a two-way street. Whilst previously the biggest strength of AI might have been analysing large amounts of data, the bulk sources of that data were culled from existing platforms, and one might ask if those platforms will always be the most reliable? How many Facebook accounts are dead? (Mine's been dead for 10 years but that won't be admitted by a company which convinces advertisers it has billions of subscribers.) AI will facilitate new interactions with voters whom dwindling physical doorstep canvassers cannot reach and which current social media platforms may not reach either. These interactions won't necessarily be 'political'. Indeed, they wouldn't want to be identified as such. A CA technique was to disguise a message so that it wasn't explicitly political but contained enough content (from an allegedly trusted third party source) to nudge a voter in a desired direction (where have we heard about 'nudge' before?). They also designed their own data gathering 'games'. AI will have the capacity to converse with voters in their own language on an individual basis on a scale hitherto unknown.

¹⁰ ChatGPT accessed 5 March 2023.

Kier Starmer could be talking to you personally!

That previous sentence was (hopefully) science fiction, but AI will become a personalised platform of political interaction. This may sound like I'm overestimating AI's abilities, but it *will* be pushed in new and subtle ways by political parties which will invest ever greater resources into it so long as they don't transgress the ICO's worthy but limp rules. Parties already spend more on social media than other avenues of communication, premised on the notion that it is more individually personalised and therefore effective. The great leap forward with this technology is that it will provide instant feedback to party strategists and its algorithms will inform politicians how to adjust their messages without pausing for breath *and do this for individual voters*. It will spell the end of old fashioned focus groups and stereotypical voter demographics like 'Worcester Woman' or 'Mondeo Man'.

I referred earlier to how the director of communications at SCL/CA had allegedly written 30-odd party manifestos. As greater reliance is placed on AI to tell 'the truth' which the electorate supposedly wants to hear in our carefully calibrated society, AI will help generate 'big picture' answers for inclusion in manifestos. These of course may not be the correct answers – e.g. about how to tackle climate change – since they will err on the side of received wisdom, which itself bends to the middle path. AI relentlessly seeks out middle ground. It is, after all, very much a computer model, and like such models will always emphasise the central case where data accumulates. This is demonstrated when ChatGTP is asked what policies the two main UK parties should adopt to gain support in 'Middle England' – where they hope to convince swing voters to swing their way. ChatGTP's responses were:

As an AI language model, I do not have personal political views, but I can suggest a general framework that the UK Labour Party could consider to make itself more appealing to 'middle' England voters:

1. Economic Opportunity: Labour should promote policies that foster economic opportunity and growth for all, including small businesses and entrepreneurs. It should emphasize its commitment to creating good-paying jobs and helping people to develop the skills they need to succeed in the 21st-century economy.
2. Education: Labour should make education a key priority, emphasizing the importance of investing in schools, teachers, and

students. The party should advocate for measures that improve education outcomes and promote lifelong learning opportunities.

3. Health Care: Labour should focus on improving access to healthcare and mental health services. It should emphasize its commitment to a fully-funded, publicly-run National Health Service (NHS), and work to ensure that everyone has access to quality healthcare, regardless of their income or social status.

4. Housing: Labour should prioritize policies that make housing more affordable and accessible, particularly for younger people and families. This could include measures to encourage the construction of more affordable housing, the expansion of social housing, and the provision of rent controls.

5. Environment: Labour should emphasize its commitment to tackling climate change and promoting sustainable development. It should advocate for policies that promote renewable energy, reduce carbon emissions, and protect natural habitats.

6. Immigration: Labour should adopt a nuanced approach to immigration, acknowledging both its benefits and challenges. It should work to promote a fair and humane immigration system, while addressing concerns around issues such as job displacement and cultural integration.

6. National Security: Labour should emphasize its commitment to keeping the country safe, while promoting respect for human rights and civil liberties. It should work to ensure that the UK remains a strong and respected member of the international community, while promoting peace and stability around the world.

In summary, the UK Labour Party should focus on policies that promote economic growth, education, healthcare, housing affordability, sustainable development, immigration, and national security. By emphasizing these key areas, the party can appeal to 'middle' England voters and establish a positive vision for the future of the UK.

ChatGTP's response for the Conservatives had an eerie resemblance to the above:

The Conservative Party in the UK could consider implementing policies that appeal to middle England voters, who are typically seen as moderate, centrist, and focused on issues such as the

economy, education, and healthcare. Here are some policy suggestions:

1. Economic policies: Middle England voters are likely to be concerned about the economy and job security. The Conservative Party could focus on policies that stimulate economic growth and create jobs, such as investing in infrastructure projects and reducing taxes for small businesses.
 2. Education policies: Middle England voters may be concerned about the quality of education for their children. The Conservative Party could focus on policies that improve the quality of education, such as increasing teacher training and introducing more school choice for parents.
 3. Healthcare policies: Middle England voters may be concerned about access to healthcare and the quality of healthcare services. The Conservative Party could focus on policies that improve healthcare access and quality, such as increasing funding for the National Health Service and investing in new medical technologies.
 4. Housing policies: Middle England voters may be concerned about the affordability of housing. The Conservative Party could focus on policies that make housing more affordable, such as increasing the availability of affordable housing, reforming the planning system, and incentivizing the construction of new homes.
 5. Environment policies: Middle England voters may be increasingly concerned about the environment and climate change. The Conservative Party could focus on policies that promote environmental sustainability, such as investing in renewable energy and promoting green technologies.
 6. Immigration policies: Middle England voters may be concerned about immigration and its impact on the economy and social cohesion. The Conservative Party could focus on policies that control immigration while also attracting high-skilled workers, such as introducing a points-based immigration system.
 7. Crime policies: Middle England voters may be concerned about crime and public safety. The Conservative Party could focus on policies that improve public safety, such as increasing funding for police forces and introducing tougher sentences for criminals.
- These are just a few policy suggestions that the Conservative

Party could consider to appeal to middle England voters. Ultimately, the party will need to engage with voters, listen to their concerns, and develop policies that address their needs and priorities.¹¹

ChatGPT has produced virtually identical policies, or more accurately themes, which are for all intents and purposes identical for the areas listed in one to six. Item seven perhaps provides a glimpse of the bot's bias: reading between the lines, Labour must stick with NATO, for the Conservatives playing on law and order is a natural focus. Despite the almost exact similarity between the suggested policies, it is only in the introduction to Labour's version that the bot seeks to distance itself: 'I do not have personal political views.' And, perhaps unlike Labour voters, Conservatives are 'moderate.'

We have what Stephen Eisenman suggested is something

By design . . . verbally replete but intellectually vacant; promiscuous but prudish; encyclopedic but crimped. The danger it poses to a democratic order on the brink of something else – fascism, illiberalism, or a failed-state – is considerably greater than that of a re-born HAL 9000 or any other malevolent bot. The latter has a moral core – however flawed – that can be recognized and challenged; the former, Bing's Open AI Chatbot and similar thinking machines by other corporations, are nothing more than reflections of our own current failure, incapacity and lack of imagination.¹²

AI's 'road testing' functions will ensure that politicians' public personas and pronouncements stay within safe limits, but that constraining role in the public sphere could well be significantly modified in the individual messaging space. Different individual voters could receive various and even contradictory messages. I am reminded of an anecdote, perhaps apocryphal, of a party fighting local elections in a town where some residents wanted a new road by-pass and others living in a different part of town didn't. From the same party these opposing camps received different leaflets agreeing with them – in the expectation that no-one would notice the inconsistency. AI makes such differential targeting more likely, not less. From the broad banalities will spring forth a fountain of scented personalised droplets.

¹¹ Both responses generated on 6 March 2023.

¹² <www.counterpunch.org/2023/03/03/ai-chatbots-are-even-scarier-than-you-think/>

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