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Social media monster could devour Corbyn;
Online activism is a powerful weapon for Labour's leader but too often it's a hate-filled echo chamber for the like-minded

Rosa Prince

At 8pm on Monday, a few thousand Jeremy Corbyn supporters sat at their computers or took to their phones to share personal, often moving, accounts of care they had received from junior doctors.

By midnight, the Twitter hashtag #theyarethedoctorswho had been used more than 20,000 times and was "trending" and at one point it threatened to overtake the loudest mouth in pop, Kanye West (followers 18.9 million).

It may seem an esoteric calling, but the blossoming world of the online activist is potentially the most powerful political development of recent years.

Rather than make a banner or go on a march, these highly motivated leftwingers were taking part in a "Twitter storm", bombarding the internet with 140-character soundbites in a form of megaphone diplomacy. Sometimes, as with junior doctors, the causes the activists shout about will resonate with the wider public, their voices forming part of the national choir of online debate. Other times, less so.

For an old-fashioned lefty a few months shy of his 67th birthday, Jeremy Corbyn is surprisingly adept at this internet thing - and so far it has served him very well.

He stood for the leadership last summer after being inspired by an online petition, and only just got on to the ballot when Labour MPs found themselves besieged with tweets and Facebook messages urging them to allow a "full debate" of the issues by including a candidate of the left.

In the leadership campaign that followed, his social media accounts picked up tens of thousands of followers, far outstripping mainstream rivals such as Andy Burnham and Liz Kendall. During those extraordinary three months, when all anyone seemed to be talking about was Jeremy Corbyn, online activism became a means to an end, rather than an end in itself.

Those who interacted with Corbyn online gave money to fund his campaign, signed up to attend his revivalist-style meetings and rallies, and enlisted as volunteers at his phone banks. They turned away from their screens and entered the real world.

But once Corbyn had achieved his landslide victory on September 12, these social media activists went back to their devices to prepare for . . . what exactly?

Bernie Sanders, the socialist running for the Democratic presidential nomination in the United States, is often compared to Corbyn. He has lambasted Barack Obama for failing to translate the extraordinary following he built up during the 2008 campaign into a more tangible political force once he was in office.

All the people who turned out for him, bought "Yes We Can" bumper stickers, and persuaded their neighbours to vote for the first time in their lives - what happened when they were given nothing to do once the job of electing Obama was done? Some helped to re-elect him in 2012 and will do their best for either Sanders or Hillary Clinton this year. Many more slumped back into political apathy. And, to the horror of many Democrats, some are now heeding the siren call of the populist Donald Trump.

As his leadership matures, Corbyn's grasp of social media resembles a microcosm of the wider struggle he faces. There is so much potential there, the rewards are so great, and yet so hard to control. Failure to harness that nascent power would not only be a waste but leave a vacuum into which self-destruction could creep.

A few hours before this week's Twitter storm in support of junior doctors, one of social media's most enthusiastic celebrity cheerleaders for the NHS and its staff, Stephen Fry, announced that he was quitting the site.

The immediate cause of his departure - the snippy online response to a smart-alec remark he made while hosting the Baftas - may appear to have little to do with Jeremy Corbyn or the Labour party. But Fry's basic complaint - that social media has become a "stalking ground for the sanctimoniously self-righteous" - holds lessons for the leader and those around him.

In his first speech to Labour's annual conference after his election, Corbyn identified the problem when he called for more civility online. Although they would hotly deny it, some Corbynistas have shown what an ugly place the internet can be for those who challenge the leader and find themselves trolled. The result is all too often an echo chamber for the like-minded.

To be successful, a political movement needs to marry some of its army of young, online followers with the idea of winning over even bigger numbers - of voters.

For 40 years, it was enough for Corbyn to attend the meetings, to shout the slogans and to wave the placards. Even his greatest achievement to date, as one of the convenors of the Stop the War movement, to mobilise millions of people from all corners of the world in opposition to the war in Iraq, was ultimately a failure.

When it came to it, the only people who mattered were the two sitting in 10 Downing Street and the White House. To get there, it's not enough to tweet to the converted - you must persuade people to get out of their armchairs and go and vote for you.

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