Impartiality on Platforms: The Politics of BBC Journalists' Twitter Networks

Abstract

Research shows the prominence afforded to political actors in BBC journalism strongly reflects the balance of power in Westminster, with major political parties, and the ruling party in particular, tending to predominate. This article examines the extent to which these patterns of news access and exposure are also evident in BBC journalists' following of and interactions with MPs on Twitter, using data from 90 BBC journalists' Twitter accounts (extracted in February 2019). We find that MPs from centrist parties have the highest average number of BBC journalist followers, and are interacted with and mentioned more by BBC journalists than other MPs. MPs in parties exclusively representing constituencies outside of England are the least followed, mentioned or interacted with. Of the two main political parties, Conservative MPs have the highest average BBC following, and are mentioned more often. Current and former Cabinet members have a higher BBC following and more interactions and mentions than their Shadow Cabinet counterparts. Our findings confirm that elite patterns of news access and exposure have been reproduced on new platforms. Though lending support to claims that the BBC is orientated towards the political centre, they suggest more of an orientation towards the Right than the Left.

Keywords: BBC, bias, impartiality, MPs, Twitter, political journalism.

Introduction

Despite operating in an increasingly fractured news environment, the BBC remains by far the single most important news source in the UK, and has the highest cross-platform audience reach of any 'wholesale' news provider (Ofcom 2019). Because of this status, and its close association with journalistic impartiality, the BBC has faced persistent allegations of bias from across the political spectrum, with criticisms directed at programme tone and content, as

well as the access and exposure granted to politicians from different parties. The most forceful claims have emanated from the Right (Mills 2016, Seaton 2015), with the BBC accused of exhibiting a liberal-left 'groupthink' reflecting the progressive views of its staff (Aitken 2013, Humphrys 2019, Mosey 2015), but recent years have seen growing criticisms of the BBC from the Left, particularly from news websites aligned with the Labour Left (Cushion 2019, Moore and Ramsay 2017). This has put the BBC, Moore and Ramsay (2017) note, 'in the unenviable position of being accused of political bias both by old and new media on the right and by new media on the left'. Moreover, in a more novel development, the BBC faced considerable criticism from liberals and centrists over its reporting on Brexit.[1] Criticism of political reporting became particularly acute during the 2019 General Election,[2] in response to which the then BBC Director General, Tony Hall, wrote: 'the fact criticism came from all sides of the political divide shows to me that we were doing our job without fear or favour.'[3]

Is there any evidence to support the various claims of political 'bias' that have been levelled against the BBC? On the narrow question of party political balance – which is distinct from the operative principle of 'due impartiality' (for discussions see Bridcut 2007, Marsh 2012, Wahl-Jorgensen et al. 2016) – the airtime given by BBC TV News to the main political parties during elections has been fairly even, with the incumbent party tending to enjoy an advantage (Cushion et al. 2016, Cushion and Thomas 2017, Deacon et al. 2005, Deacon et al. 2017a, Deacon et al. 2017b, Wring, Deacon and Smith 2020); a finding consistent with other European countries (Cushion and Thomas 2018). BBC election reporting tends to focus heavily on the major parties and the party leaders, even in 'second order' elections (Cushion, Thomas and Ellis 2015), while a notable feature of coverage is the near absence of minor and nationally-based parties (Thorsen 2009). These findings partly reflect the policy of affording broadcasting time during election campaigns in accordance with previous electoral support.

However, Wahl-Jorgensen, *et al*'s (2016) large-scale content analysis of BBC output suggests these patterns hold beyond elections, with representatives of minor parties and nationally-based parties barely featuring, and the two main parties dominating output. Again, the incumbent party was in that study found to enjoy a quantitative advantage. The hierarchy of political access in TV news is a particular focus of Wayne and Murray's (2009) content analysis, which covered the tail end of local elections. They note the extent to which reporting generally displays 'a bias toward whomever occupies the formal positions of political power':

> the television news media have constructed a graduated hierarchy of access and focus… [T]he prime minister dominates over the cabinet, the cabinet dominates over ordinary MPs, the governing party dominates over the opposition, the three main parties dominate overwhelmingly over smaller parties, and the political elites dominate over ordinary members of the public. (Wayne and Murray 2009:430)

Given the striking dominance of the then Labour Government (led by Tony Blair), it is, however, worth noting Wahl-Jorgensen, *et al*'s (2016) finding that the Conservative lead over Labour in 2012 in terms of news access was much more pronounced than Labour's respective lead in 2007. Significantly, that study also found a general 'pro-Conservative bias in BBC coverage' of the EU and immigration (*Ibid*.), while Berry's (2016, 2019) research on the BBC's financial reporting, similarly notes that Conservative politicians (by then the leading party of the Coalition Government) appear more frequently than Labour.

In short, and without getting into the broader and more substantive question of how particular policy issues are treated, existing empirical research shows that the prominence afforded to different political actors in BBC journalism strongly reflects the balance of power in

Westminster, a paradigm which the BBC attempted to move away from in favour of a more pluralistic approach, but apparently without much success (Bridcut 2007, Wahl-Jorgensen et al. 2016). This is consistent with studies that have noted the orientation of the BBC towards officialdom and elites (Born 2011, Burns 1977, Glasgow University Media Group 1980, Mills 2016, Mills 2017, Schlesinger 1987) and those that have pointed to the role of primary definers in shaping news output (Hall et al. 2013, Manning 2000, Miller 1993, Schlesinger and Tumber 1994).

In this article, we examine the extent to which these patterns of news access and exposure are also evident in BBC journalists' following of and interactions with MPs on Twitter. There is now a very large body of work examining the influence of social media on journalism. This cuts across several disciplines, including sociology, political science, behavioural economics, computer science and media and communications. Research in journalism studies has described how over the last decade social media use has become a routine aspect of journalists' work (Hermida 2013, Lawrence et al. 2014, Molyneux and Mourão 2019). Of the various social media platforms that have emerged, Twitter and Facebook are by far the most popular amongst journalists (Fincham 2019) and are widely used for a range of professional purposes including monitoring news, gauging opinion, identifying and fostering contacts and sources, publishing live reports and commentary, and promoting content (Broersma and Graham 2015, Johnson, Paulussen and Van Aelst 2018, Lasorsa, Lewis and Holton 2012). In British journalism, Twitter is by some way the most popular platform (Cision 2015). At the BBC, journalists were strongly encouraged to integrate social media into their work particularly from 2010, with staff reputedly told to 'Tweet or be sacked' (Belair-Gagnon 2015). Ten years later, the BBC has thoroughly integrated Twitter into its journalism, and significantly for our purposes journalists' use of the platform and other social media falls under its editorial guidelines and oversight in the same way as BBC content (BBC 2020a).

Not only are journalists expected to exercise due impartiality in their use of Twitter, the BBC's social media guidance explicitly states that where 'official accounts follow others, we should ensure that we reflect due impartiality in our choice of accounts to follow' (BBC 2020b). A number of BBC figures have an extremely high number of Twitter followers and the BBC as a whole enjoys a significant reach on the platform (Bakamo 2019, Majó-Vázquez et al. 2017, Ofcom 2019). Twitter also appears to play an important role in newsgathering. The BBC's Senior World Affairs Producer, Stuart Hughes, has described Twitter as an 'indispensable tool' for BBC journalists 'to monitor breaking news, spot potential story ideas and make new contacts', even suggesting that it has displaced the traditional wires services, while more recently the BBC's Editor, Live Political Programmes, Rob Burley, has stated that he gets most of his news via the site.[4] In short, Twitter plays an important role in journalism at the BBC, which is in turn significant because of the central role that the BBC plays in political and cultural life in the UK.

As Twitter has become 'normalised' in routine newsgathering processes, research has examined the extent to which its use by journalists has adapted to or reshaped professional norms (Lasorsa, Lewis and Holton 2012, Molyneux and Mourão 2019). Much early commentary and scholarship on journalism and social media focused on the potential for greater dialogue and synthesis between journalists and their audiences. In the context of the effective use of new platforms by social movements, the horizontal nature of social media was often contrasted with hierarchical states *and* traditional media. Hermida (2014: 366), for example, contrasts the 'open, distributed, and collective' nature of Twitter with 'traditional models of the newsrooms as enclosed, concentrated, and exclusive spaces.' Social media sites like Twitter hold out the potential to democratise traditional 'backroom' channels of communication between professional journalists and politicians (e.g. Davis 2000, Gans 2004,

Örebro 2002, Van Aelst and Aalberg 2011), potentially allowing for a greater diversity of voices, even within formal politics.

Existing research, however, suggests that though the platform has influenced traditional sourcing practices (Johnson, Paulussen and Van Aelst 2018), journalists continue to gravitate toward elite sources (Lecheler and Kruikemeier 2016, Lewis and Molyneux 2018), while recent work examining journalists' Twitter use has noted the striking insularity of their online networks (Fincham 2019, Hanusch and Nölleke 2018, Molyneux and Mourão 2019, Nuernbergk 2016, Usher and Ng 2020). However, we still know relatively little about the extent to which established patterns of news access and exposure have been disrupted or reproduced on Twitter. Addressing this question in this article, we analyse patterns of following and interactions between BBC journalists and UK MPs using data extracted from the platform. This allows us not only to assess the impact of new media on contemporary journalistic practice, but also to investigative the effect of BBC political culture in a way that was not previously possible.

In analysing BBC journalists' orientation towards different MPs, we examine a number of variables which we detail below. In broad analytical terms, though, we are interested in distinct though crosscutting dimensions of the political sphere. The first is where MPs or groups of MPs fall on a conventional (elite) left-centre-right political spectrum. Based on existing research, and the BBC's editorial standards, we would expect to find little difference in patterns of following of, and interaction with, left, centre and right-wing MPs. The second dimension relates to MPs' power within the Westminster political system. Based on existing research on news content, we would expect Government Ministers to attract more attention from BBC journalists in terms of Twitter following and interaction than their Shadow Cabinet counterparts; both to attract more attention than backbench MPs; and the parties with the most seats to attract more attention compared to the smaller parties. There is, moreover,

another relatively under researched aspect, which is that the smaller parties can be differentiated based on their location, since several exclusively represent constituencies outside of England. This is an important facet of political power in the UK, where parties with core constituencies in England dominate over those based in the other countries. In practice these various political dimensions will of course overlap, with, for example, a right-wing party of government, based largely in England, potentially dominating over smaller, more left-wing parties with constituencies elsewhere in the UK.

Alongside these aspects, we also consider the potentially confounding influence of an MPs' profile on Twitter. The profile of different MPs, as indicated most clearly by the total number of Twitter followers, varies widely. We examine the extent to which this has a positive association with the number of BBC journalists who also follow and interact with MPs, and the relationship between this and their political alignment and power.

Methods

Data and measures

The data used for our analysis covers the Twitter accounts of 576 MPs from the 2017-2019 House of Commons. This information, however, is not sourced directly from these accounts, but rather via the accounts of BBC journalists. The BBC provides an official list of news presenters, correspondents and reporters who tweet in their official capacity. Using the latest version of the software package *Chorus* (Version 2) – developed to extract data from Twitter accounts (Brooker, Barnett and Cribbin 2016) – we obtained data on 90 BBC journalists from that list,[5] including, crucially, the Twitter accounts each of them follow.[6] Having collated this data, we used a list of Twitter handles published on the website *MPs On Twitter*[7] to identify the MPs followed by these 90 journalists. In total, 571 MPs were followed by at least one of

the BBC journalists. Five MPs listed on *MPs On Twitter*, but who have no BBC journalist followers, were also added,[8] resulting in a total of 576 MPs (close to 90% of all sitting MPs).

These data allowed us to construct a number of measures relating to MPs' Twitter accounts. In the first part of our analysis we focus on two key measures for each MP: their total number of BBC journalist followers and their total number of Twitter followers. The former measure is our key outcome of interest, but as noted above MPs' Twitter profile (indicated here with reference to their total number of Twitter followers) may have a positive influence on the number of BBC journalist followers. For the second part of our analysis, we construct measures corresponding to interactions between BBC journalists and MPs using information contained in the Tweets or 'status updates' of BBC journalists. The Twitter Application Program Interface (API) limits the number of 'status updates' we can examine to around 3,000 prior to the time of extraction. These data cover a longer period, ranging over the whole dataset from 21 January 2009 up to 17 May 2019 (the date the interaction data was extracted). We identified any tweets, retweets or replies that included an MP's Twitter handle, identifying 3,843 individual tweets and retweets.[9] These included retweets of, and replies to, MPs' tweets, as well as tweets mentioning an MP or MPs. Aggregating this data to the level of the MP, we created measures of the total number of replies, retweets, and mentions by BBC journalists corresponding to each MP with a Twitter account.

The key explanatory variables in our analysis are MPs' political party affiliation, and whether an MP is, or ever has been, a member of the Cabinet or Shadow Cabinet. Party affiliation broadly captures MPs' position on the left-centre-right political spectrum, allowing us to gauge the extent to which BBC journalist follow patterns cluster at certain points on this spectrum. Of course, within parties, especially the larger parties, there can be a range of political tendencies such that it is typical to refer to MPs as being to the 'Left' or to the 'Right' of their party. These relative positions are more fluid and more subjective than

overarching party affiliation, but using publicly available sources of information concerning political differentiations within the two largest parties at Westminster (more details are provided below) we explore potential 'left-right' differences in BBC journalist follow patterns among MPs within the two largest political parties (Conservative and Labour).

Party affiliation also signals a divide in relative power between groups of MPs. We consider this by comparing the larger and the minor political parties respectively – examining the extent to which relative political power in Westminster is reflected in BBC journalist follow patterns – but also by comparing the parties exclusively representing constituencies in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, with those overwhelmingly representing English constituencies. Our key measure of political power, however, is Cabinet or Shadow Cabinet membership. While the latter, of course, do not wield power as directly as the former, being a member of the Shadow Cabinet reflects a relatively high standing within the Westminster system, and the Shadow Cabinet plays an important role in scrutinising Government policy and publicising political alternatives. In our analysis we compare Cabinet and Shadow Cabinet membership and consider the extent to which being a member of either (and thus closer to power in Westminster) overrides party affiliation with respect to BBC journalist following and interaction. Given that they are the parties of Government and Opposition respectively, as well as the two largest parties, our analysis of Cabinet/Shadow Cabinet membership is restricted to Conservative and Labour MPs. To account for the potential confounding influence of MPs' overall Twitter profile, our analysis is stratified according to total Twitter followers, with MPs grouped into Twitter follower quintiles.

Analysis plan

The first part of our analysis considers the relationship between the average number of BBC journalist followers (hereafter BBC followers) and MPs' position on the political spectrum

(left-centre-right) as indicated by party affiliation. Alongside this we analyse the relationship between the average number of BBC followers and MPs' total Twitter following (profile). Further examining the left-right political divide, our analysis then moves on to look closely at MPs in the two major parties (Conservative and Labour). The size of the larger parties allows us to further unpack differences in BBC following between Conservative and Labour MPs, differentiating between MPs across the distribution of total Twitter followers (split into quintiles). Turning then to the influence of political power, and focusing still on the major political parties, we analyse the relationship between average BBC followers and Cabinet/Shadow Cabinet membership, among Conservative and Labour MPs. Bringing these dimensions together, we estimate a simple multivariate regression model to test the comparative influence of party affiliation, controlling for total Twitter follower quintiles and Cabinet/Shadow Cabinet membership. Lastly in this first part of our analysis, we explore differences in average BBC followers between different political factions in each of the two major parties.

In the second part of our analysis we move from examining MPs' Twitter following to the number of interactions with, and mentions of, MPs by BBC journalists. Adopting a similar framework to our analysis of Twitter following, in this section we focus on party affiliation and, for MPs in the two major parties, membership of the Cabinet/Shadow Cabinet.

Our analysis comprises the whole population of MPs on Twitter when our data were extracted. It is important to bear in mind, however, that the composition of Parliament changes at regular intervals and that Twitter is a dynamic platform. We therefore, alongside averages, report the standard error which is an estimate of variation in the mean under conditions of repeated sampling. Also, in our simple multivariate analysis we indicate where results reach conventional levels of statistical significance. Although we are not making an inference to a wider population of MPs, this gives some indication of the relative strength of

differences we observe and provides an indication of the likelihood that any differences would persist in repeated samples.

Results and Discussion

We present our results and analysis in two parts. In the first more detailed section, we show the results of our analysis of the relationship between MPs' BBC followers and party affiliation, total twitter following, membership of Cabinet/Shadow Cabinet, and finally examining intra-party factions. The second section considers MPs' total retweets, replies and mentions by BBC journalists, presenting the results of our analysis of the relationship between this and party affiliation and membership of Cabinet/Shadow Cabinet.

BBC Journalist Followers

Table 1 shows the average number of BBC followers for MPs in all political parties represented at Westminster, alongside data on their average total Twitter following. Overall, MPs are followed by an average of five BBC journalists each (and have 31.5K Twitter followers on average). Almost all MPs have at least one BBC follower, with only five having none. Looking at differences across political parties, we find considerable variation. The Green Party has the highest number of BBC followers on average, as well as the highest average total followers on Twitter. However, this is based on a single MP (Caroline Lucas). Among all parties in Westminster with multiple MPs, the eleven MPs who in February 2019 made up what was then The Independent Group (TIG) (which later became Change UK and was dissolved after returning no MPs in the 2019 General Election) have the highest average number of BBC followers (11.5) and also the highest average Twitter following (close to 80K). The Liberal Democrats have around seven BBC followers on average, as well as fewer total Twitter followers than TIG MPs (just under 60K on average). The average number of BBC followers drops significantly for MPs in parties from Scotland, Wales, and Northern

Ireland, who also have the lowest average Twitter following. The two main parties, meanwhile, sit in the middle in terms of average BBC followers and average total Twitter following. Conservative and Labour MPs have a relatively similar number of BBC followers on average (5.5 and 5 respectively), although Labour MPs have substantially more total Twitter followers on average.

[Table 1 about here]

In terms of the BBC's orientation towards the left-centre-right political spectrum, it is notable that TIG and Liberal Democrat MPs are by some way the most followed MPs on average, lending some support to claims that the BBC is orientated towards the 'political centre'. While centrist parties have substantial BBC followings, parties with bases outside of England are significantly underfollowed by comparison; and it is notable that with the exception of Alistair Carmichael MP, all the centrist parties' MPs had seats in England. It is important to note in this respect that there are devolved political administrations, as well as BBC operations, in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and that our data does not capture those nationally-based politicians and journalists. Nevertheless, the 90 journalists we examine represent the UK-level list of presenters, correspondents and reporters, and so the relative underrepresentation of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland remains highly significant. Indeed, it is also worth noting that the BBC's editorial guidelines state that it should 'take account of the different political cultures and structures in different parts of the UK' and 'ensure that differing main strands of argument in nations, regions and communities receive due weight and prominence' (BBC 2020a).

At first glance there appears to be little difference in BBC followers between Conservative and Labour MPs, suggesting no distinct following pattern to the right or left of the political spectrum respectively. However, Conservative MPs do average slightly more BBC followers

than Labour MPs, despite having fewer Twitter followers. Overall, the results in Table 1 suggest there is a positive relationship between the total number of MPs' Twitter followers and BBC followers. Broadly, MPs in parties with a higher average total Twitter following tend to have a higher average number of BBC followers. Confirming this, the correlation between MPs total Twitter following and BBC followers is positive and large (Pearson's rho = .63; Spearman's rho = .75). Exploring this further, Figure 1 shows the average number of BBC followers across the distribution of total followers divided into quintiles (line graph) from the lowest follower quintile (MPs in the bottom 20% of Twitter follower numbers) to the highest follower quintile (MPs in the top 20% of Twitter follower numbers). Also shown in Figure 1 (in the bar graph) is the average number of total Twitter followers in each quintile. MPs in the lowest quintile have an average of 4,204 followers, whilst those in the top quintile have around 26 times more (an average of 110,557 followers). MPs in the bottom 20% have on average two BBC followers. This rises steadily across the first four quintiles, with five BBC followers on average in the fourth. The average number then increases sharply in the top 20%, where MPs have 12 BBC followers on average.

[Figure 1 about here]

One possible reason for this is that having BBC journalists as followers leads to an increase in a user's overall Twitter following. However, such an effect is likely negligible since retweets of MPs by BBC journalists are rare (see below), meaning MPs followed by a BBC journalist are unlikely to appear frequently on the latter's followers' timelines. Conversely, an MP's overall Twitter following may lead to a greater number of BBC followers due to the greater probability of appearing on a BBC journalist's timeline (again due to retweets or other interactions). A more likely reason though is that an MP's public prominence, including on the BBC, leads to an increase in both. In any case, the main interest for our analysis is the extent to which total twitter following moderates the relationship between party affiliation (a

key indicator of left-right political position) and BBC followers, which we examine in the next section with reference to MPs in the two largest parties.

Conservative and Labour MPs

Broadly, the results in Table 1 echo the positive relationship between BBC followers and total Twitter following shown in Figure 1. However, this relationship breaks down among MPs in the two main parties. Despite having fewer followers, Conservative MPs have slightly more average BBC followers than Labour MPs. Taking a closer look at this, Figure 2 shows the average BBC followers across the distribution of total follower numbers for just Conservative and Labour MPs.

[Figure 2]

The average number of BBC followers for Conservative and Labour MPs is very similar in the lower total follower quintiles, though it is consistently higher for Conservative MPs than for Labour MPs. In the upper total follower quintiles (4th and 5th quintiles), though, there emerges a large difference in the average number of BBC followers, with Conservative MPs having more BBC followers than their counterparts in Labour. In short, Conservative MPs with the largest Twitter following have more BBC followers compared with Labour MPs with the largest Twitter following. This is despite the fact that the most followed Labour MPs have substantially more total Twitter followers on average than the most followed Conservative MPs, perhaps reflecting the demographics of Twitter users who since they are younger on average are more likely to be Labour than Conservative supporters (McDonnell and Curtis 2019, Ofcom 2019). There is therefore no evidence here suggestive of a left-wing 'bias' in BBC follow patterns as far as the two major parties are concerned – if anything the reverse would appear to be the case.

These differences, however, may have little to do with MPs' position on the left-centre-right political spectrum, and are more due to the fact that BBC journalists tend to follow MPs with more political power and the Conservatives are the party of government. Table 2 shows the average number of BBC followers and total Twitter followers for MPs who are or have been Cabinet Ministers or members of the Shadow Cabinet (among Conservative and Labour MPs). It shows, as we would expect, that Cabinet members (current and former) on average have significantly more BBC followers than MPs who have never been in Cabinet. The former have nearly three times as many BBC followers on average than the latter (11.8 vs. 3.9). MPs who have served in the Shadow Cabinet, meanwhile, have on average 7.1 BBC followers. Table 2 also shows, as we would expect, that Cabinet and Shadow Cabinet members also have more total Twitter followers compared with MP who have served in neither.

[Table 2 about here]

To analyse the combined influence of political affiliation, Twitter profile (total following), and political power on the number of BBC followers, we estimated two simple linear regression models restricted to MPs in the two major parties. Given the pronounced nonlinearity observed in the relationship between total follower numbers and BBC followers (see Figure 1), we enter total follower quintiles into the models rather than total followers as a continuous (quantitative) variable. Model 1 is a fully saturated model containing two independent variables (party affiliation and total follower quintiles), along with interactions between these two variables. Model 2 adds a further control variable indicating whether MPs have ever been a member of Cabinet or Shadow Cabinet (where MPs who have never been in Cabinet or Shadow Cabinet is the reference category). The results for these two models are reported in Table 3.

The interactions between party affiliation (Labour) and follower quintiles in Model 1 inform us about the extent to which the increases in BBC followers associated with Twitter follower quintiles are the same for Labour and Conservative MPs. All interactions are negative, though significant only in the fourth and fifth quintile. This tells us that the increase in BBC followers associated with follower quintiles is less for Labour MPs than for Conservative MPs, and markedly so in the top two quintiles. In other words, if we compare MPs with large Twitter followings in each of the two major political parties, we find significant differences in their average number of BBC followers. We can also see this in Figure 2 which shows that differences in BBC followers between MPs in the fourth and fifth total follower quintiles, compared with the first, are lower for Labour MPs than for Conservative MPs.

Model 2 adds a control variable indicating whether MPs are or have been a member of the Cabinet or Shadow Cabinet. The results show that Cabinet members (current/former) have significantly more BBC followers (around 3.4) than MPs who have never served in either Cabinet or Shadow Cabinet. This is less than the difference reported in Table 2, highlighting the confounding influence of total Twitter following on the association between Cabinet membership and BBC followers. In contrast, there is no significant difference in the number of BBC followers between Shadow Cabinet members and those MPs who have never served in Cabinet or Shadow Cabinet independent of total Twitter following. A subsequent post-regression test revealed, moreover, that Shadow Cabinet members have significantly less BBC followers than Cabinet members (-2.7; $p < .001$).

[Table 3 about here]

Table 4 shows the adjusted average number of BBC followers predicted by Model 2. It shows that controlling for Cabinet membership modestly attenuates the results associated with party affiliation. The adjusted averages are very similar to those shown in Figure 2 above, with the

largest differences restricted to the top follower quintile. Adjusted for Cabinet membership, Conservative MPs in the top quintile have on average 12.1 BBC followers (reduced from around 13.7) and their Labour counterparts have an average of 10.55 BBC followers (reduced to a lesser extent from around 10.9). These results suggest that party differences in BBC followers among Conservative and Labour MPs with the highest Twitter profiles can be partly accounted for by the major differences in BBC following associated with Cabinet membership compared with Shadow Cabinet membership. In other words, the higher BBC following of high profile right-wing MPs in the Conservative Party compared to their left-wing counterparts in the Labour Party can be partly, though by no means entirely, explained by an apparent tendency of BBC journalists to follow more powerful MPs, including Cabinet compared to Shadow Cabinet members.

[Table 4 about here]

This confirms that BBC journalists' follow patterns are strongly oriented towards MPs holding (or having held) positions of power in Westminster; in that respect mirroring the patterns of prominence observable in content studies. This finding is also in line with research showing that real world contact between journalists and MPs correlate closely with the latter's political standing in Parliament (Aelst, Sehata and Dalen 2010). Nonetheless, our findings raise two particular issues potentially relevant to impartial and pluralistic reporting. The first is that Shadow Ministers are followed by BBC journalists significantly less than their counterparts in government. While Aelst, Sehata and Dalen's (2010) survey of real world contacts between journalists and politicians found the latter's political standing (judged by time in Parliament and committee membership) to be a strong predictor of frequent contact, they found journalists interacted slightly more frequently with opposition than government MPs. By contrast, our data not only demonstrate a higher BBC Twitter following amongst MPs of the ruling party compared to all other parties (averages of 5.5 and 4.9

respectively), but more significantly reveal a marked imbalance between the most prominent MPs in the party of government and those in the official opposition. This uneven focus could be justified in terms of journalists' efforts to hold those in positions of political power to account. However, the weight of evidence suggests a tendency in BBC reporting to amplify, rather than challenge official claims (e.g. Berry 2013, 2016, 2019, Cushion and Lewis 2017, Cushion, Lewis and Callaghan 2017, Lewis et al. 2006, McQueen 2010, Miller 1993, Mills 2016). Moreover, there is a strong case to argue that the obligation to hold the executive to account is consistent with following opposition MPs – who after all are constitutionally expected to perform this function – at least as much, if not more than MPs from the ruling party, who can additionally rely on the communicative resources and capacities of the state.

Intra-party factions

In this section we build on our analysis of the major left- and right-wing political parties in Westminster to examine differences in following patterns *within* these two parties. Though party factions clearly play an important role in Westminster politics, they are not always clear cut, and are of course contested by political actors and analysts. With this in mind, we nevertheless make use of the best publicly available contemporary data to identify political factions and examine the BBC following associated with each of them. In the case of Labour, we make use of a leaked document, reportedly drafted in January 2016, that identifies five groups of Labour MPs according to their degree of 'hostility' to the then party leader Jeremy Corbyn. Ranked in order of most to least hostile, they were labelled 'hostile', 'core group negative', 'neutral but not hostile', 'core group plus' and 'core group'. Not all 2019 Labour MPs feature in the list, so 59 Labour MPs in our dataset are not included.

Table 5 reports the average total number of followers on Twitter and the average BBC followers for Labour MPs in each of these five groups. MPs in the 'hostile' group have on average 8.9 BBC followers, whereas MPs in the 'core group' (excluding Corbyn) have 6.4

BBC followers. If we include Corbyn in the latter group, however, the average number of BBC followers increases to 8.1. This imbalance in favour of hostility to Corbyn's leadership is underlined by the BBC following of 'core group negative' (6.7) relative to 'neutral but not hostile' (4.2) and 'core group plus' (4.9).

[Table 5 about here]

As was noted above, it has been claimed that the BBC has exhibited a 'bias' against the left of the Labour party, and there is some empirical research suggesting imbalanced coverage of the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn in BBC reporting (Schlosberg 2016). While in February 2019 Corbyn supporting MPs appeared to have attained nearly as much prominence among BBC journalists as Corbyn's strongest critics in the Parliamentary party, opposition to the then Labour leadership was still associated with a higher BBC following and the most hostile group was still the most followed faction.

For the Conservative Party we examined differences in BBC followers between the 21 'moderate' Conservative MPs who broke with the Government to vote for an extension to Brexit in October 2019 (resulting in the party whip being removed), and all remaining Conservative MPs. We also explored differences between Conservative MPs associated with the European Research Group (ERG) and non-ERG Conservative MPs, though no notable differences emerged (results available from the authors on request). Table 6 shows that Conservative MPs who lost the whip (after voting against Johnson's Government) have more Twitter followers in total and more BBC followers than Conservative MPs who voted with the Government to prevent an extension to the Brexit deadline. This finding potentially highlights a skew towards the political centre, echoing those above with respect to the centrist political parties (in England), a tendency that may also account for the distribution of following amongst the different Labour party factions. Another possible explanation is that

these smaller groups of MPs (TIG, Labour MPs hostile to Jeremy Corbyn and the Tory rebels) attracted greater attention because of their potential to disrupt the exercise of power by dominant political players, and thereby generate news stories.

[Table 6 about here]

Mentions/interactions

In this section we turn to BBC journalists' mentions of, or interactions with, MPs. BBC journalists may interact publicly with MPs on Twitter by retweeting or replying to a tweet sent by an MP. They might also use an MP's Twitter handle (i.e. mention them) in a tweet, or retweet or reply to a tweet that does so. In this section, we analyse differences in the levels of interactions and mentions by BBC journalists (rather than the content of tweets).

Direct interactions between BBC journalists and MPs are rare, with an overall average of 0.8 retweets and 1.1 replies per MP (for all our journalists). Nonetheless, there is considerable variation across political parties. Figure 3 shows the average interactions and mentions across different parties. BBC journalists average 2.2 interactions with Conservative MPs and 1.7 interactions with Labour MPs. They interact most with the sole Green Party MP (9) and with TIG MPs (5.3). Interactions are lowest for MPs from the SNP, Plaid Cymru, and parties from Northern Ireland.

Most mentions of an MP by BBC journalists occur in tweets, followed by mentions in retweets. There are very similar cross-party differences. As with interactions, the average number of mentions by BBC journalists of Conservative MPs exceeds that for Labour MPs (6.5 vs. 3.7). Average mentions are highest for the Green Party (13) followed by MPs in TIG (8.5), and they are lowest for MPs in the Scottish National Party (0.6), Plaid Cymru (0.8), and for parties in Northern Ireland.

[Figure 3 about here]

[Figure 4 about here]

Current and former Cabinet members feature more in retweets and replies from BBC journalists than other MPs, explaining in part some differences between the two major parties. Figure 4 shows that Cabinet members (current and former) average 7.4 interactions with BBC journalists (2.5 retweets and 4.9 replies), compared with an average of 0.9 interactions for MPs who have never served in Cabinet or Shadow Cabinet. MPs in the Shadow Cabinet average 3.1 interactions (0.9 retweet, 2.2 replies). This is higher than MPs never in Cabinet, but considerably lower than MPs in Cabinet. Cabinet members (current and former) also featured more regularly in tweets, retweets and replies (particularly tweets and retweets) compared with MPs who have never been in Cabinet and MPs in the Shadow Cabinet. Cabinet members (current and former) on average have 25.9 such mentions compared with 8.5 for MPs in the Shadow Cabinet (current and former), and compared with 1.3 for MPs that have never served in either. In general, what we find if we examine BBC journalists' mentions of, or interactions with, MPs are very similar to the patterns detailed above with respect to following.

Conclusion

This study adds to a small emerging literature examining journalists' follow networks on Twitter (see also Johnson, Paulussen and Van Aelst 2018, Verweij 2012, Verweij and Van Noort 2014) and is the first to examine connections between BBC journalists and MPs on the platform. It builds on prior research on news content, examining if the different levels of access and exposure among political actors are also evident on Twitter. The most striking finding is the extent to which, despite the potential for social media to equalise access, traditional sourcing practices have been maintained. Not only are BBC journalists on Twitter strongly oriented towards MPs holding (or having held) positions of power in Westminster,

more of them follow and interact with government MPs than members of the official opposition. In connection with the conventional left-centre-right political spectrum, our analysis reveals a strong concentration of BBC followers among MPs at the centre of the political spectrum, in England at least. MPs from parties in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were, furthermore, strikingly marginal in comparison with English MPs. We find little evidence, though, to support common claims of a left-wing editorial culture. With respect to the two major political parties of the Left and Right we find, if anything, an orientation towards the latter, particularly among more high profile MPs. Meanwhile, our findings on Labour party factions reveal that otherwise marginal figures on the Right of the Labour party, notable primarily for their strong opposition to the Corbyn leadership, were given similar (indeed greater and arguably disproportionate) attention compared to MPs then at the centre of power within the party. Given that BBC journalists are required to reflect due impartiality in which accounts they follow on social media (BBC 2020b), all these findings will raise concerns about the culture of BBC journalism.

Data used in this study were extracted from Twitter at a single point in time, placing certain limits on our analysis. Twitter is a dynamic platform with people joining and leaving (and re-joining) continuously, and following and unfollowing other accounts. Streams of Twitter data stretching across longer time periods would provide more information about follow patterns, opening up the possibility of understanding more about the potential effects of key events (e.g. the formation of a new government or the promotion of an MP to, or demotion of an MP from, Cabinet).

There are other limitations to our data. They do not include direct messages, which are private to users, and thus we do not capture all the forms of interaction facilitated by Twitter. More broadly, the quantitative approach we take has obvious limitations. Absent of qualitative methods we are not able to offer any insight into the motivations of BBC

journalists in choosing to follow or interact with particular users. Neither are we able to assess the nature of interactions, or to determine how they intersect with other forms of contact (e.g. phone/email/face-to-face communication). Qualitative research could shed light on these and other questions. Our approach does, however, have the advantage of allowing us to analyse our population in aggregate in a relatively objective way, and in doing so to produce data which they themselves would not be aware. In interpreting this data and our results, it is important to note that for the same reason we are not making any claims about the personal politics of individual BBC journalists. We measure and analyse aggregate attention or orientation towards different political actors, rather than individual political attitudes. In that sense, we offer a sociological analysis of news access and exposure, rather than a psychological analysis of 'bias' – an approach more in keeping with the BBC's own conception of due impartiality, which is primarily concerned with the representation of different perspectives and viewpoints (BBC 2020a).

Our particular focus on the BBC here reflects not only its national prominence in the UK, but also its obligation (shared with other UK broadcasters) to maintain due impartiality. How the results we report in this article apply to other groups of journalists remains an open question, and future research could investigate this by extending the analysis to journalists working in other countries, or in other parts of the media landscape. Future research could also broaden the category of users examined. MPs form only a small portion of journalists' follow networks, and comprise only part of the political system. Research could usefully investigate the political character of journalists' follow networks in their totality, providing further insights into how far elite patterns of news access and exposure have been reproduced on new platforms.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of total Twitter following and BBC journalist following for MPs across political parties

	Number of MPs	BBC journalist followers Average (Standard Error)	Total Twitter followers ('000s) Average (Standard Error)
All MPS	576	5.2 (0.2)	31.5 (4.2)
Party affiliation			
Green Party	1	15.0 (.)	349.6 (.)
The Independent Group	11	11.5 (3.0)	78.6 (29.3)
Liberal Democrats	12	6.9 (1.4)	57.4 (24.7)
Labour	239	5.0 (0.3)	39.2 (9.0)
Conservative	259	5.5 (0.3)	23.2 (3.8)
Scottish National Party	35	2.7 (0.2)	19.6 (4.0)
Democratic Union	8	2.1 (0.5)	10.1 (2.2)
Sinn Féin	7	1.0 (0.2)	9.0 (1.8)
Plaid Cymru	4	2.0 (0.4)	7.9 (1.3)

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of Total Twitter following and BBC journalist following for Cabinet/Shadow Cabinet members: Conservative and Labour

	Number of MPs	BBC journalist followers Average (Standard Error)	Total Twitter followers ('000s) Average (Standard Error)
Never in Cabinet/Shadow Cabinet	367	3.9 (0.2)	15.8 (1.5)
Cabinet (current/former)	56	11.8 (1.1)	81.3 (20.3)
Shadow Cabinet (current/former)	75	7.1 (0.7)	66.8 (25.7)

Table 3: Coefficients from linear regression models of the number of BBC journalists following Conservative and Labour MPs

	Model 1	Model 2
Party affiliation (Reference: Conservative)		
Labour	−0.49	−0.42
Follower quintile (Reference: Follower Quintile 1)		
Follower Quintile 2	0.88	0.69
Follower Quintile 3	1.98**	1.72**
Follower Quintile 4	5.28***	4.42***
Follower Quintile 5	11.39***	9.39***
Labour*Follower Quintile 2	−0.34	−0.24
Labour*Follower Quintile 3	−0.27	−0.18
Labour*Follower Quintile 4	−2.80**	−2.19*
Labour*Follower Quintile 5	−2.39*	−1.16
Cabinet (Reference: Not Cabinet/Shadow member)		
Cabinet Member (Current/Former)	-	3.42***
Shadow Cabinet Member (Current/Former)	-	0.70
Intercept	2.35***	2.24***
Adjusted R-Square	0.49	0.52

Notes: N=498; *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

Table 4: Adjusted average number of BBC journalist followers for Conservative and Labour MPs across total follower quintiles

Total follower quintiles	Conservative	Labour	Difference[1] (p)
Follower Quintile 1	2.73	2.32	−0.42 (0.56)
Follower Quintile 2	3.43	2.77	−0.65 (0.38)
Follower Quintile 3	4.45	3.86	−0.59 (0.43)
Follower Quintile 4	7.15	4.55	−2.61 (0.00)
Follower Quintile 5	12.13	10.55	−1.58 (0.06)

Note: 1. Rounding errors may occur

Table 5: Average total Twitter following and BBC journalist following for Labour MPs in different factions

Labour factions	Number of MPs	Average total Twitter following ('000s) (Standard Error)	Average number of BBC journalist followers (Standard Error)
Hostile	28	57.3 (14.1)	8.9 (1.4)
Core Group Negative	38	48.9 (19.3)	6.7 (1.0)
Neutral Not Hostile	57	27.5 (8.1)	4.2 (0.5)
Core Group Plus	50	30.5 (6.4)	4.9 (0.8)
Core Group	14	60.6 (18.4)	6.4 (1.4)

Table 6: Average total Twitter following and BBC journalist following for Conservative MPs in different factions

Conservative factions	Number of MPs	BBC journalist followers Average (Standard Error)	Total Twitter followers ('000s) Average (Standard Error)
Not expelled	240	5.3 (0.3)	22.9 (4.1)
Expelled	19	8.3 (1.4)	27.7 (5.7)

Figure 1: MPs average total Twitter following and BBC following across total follower quintiles
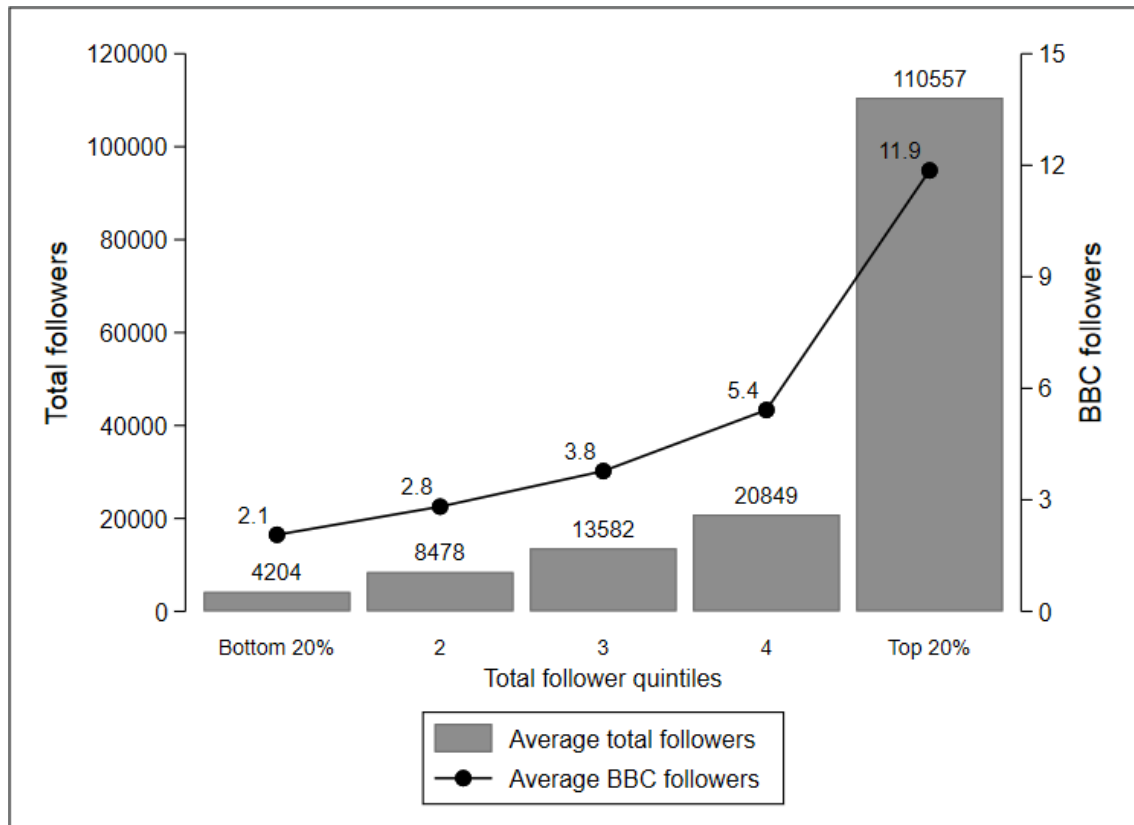
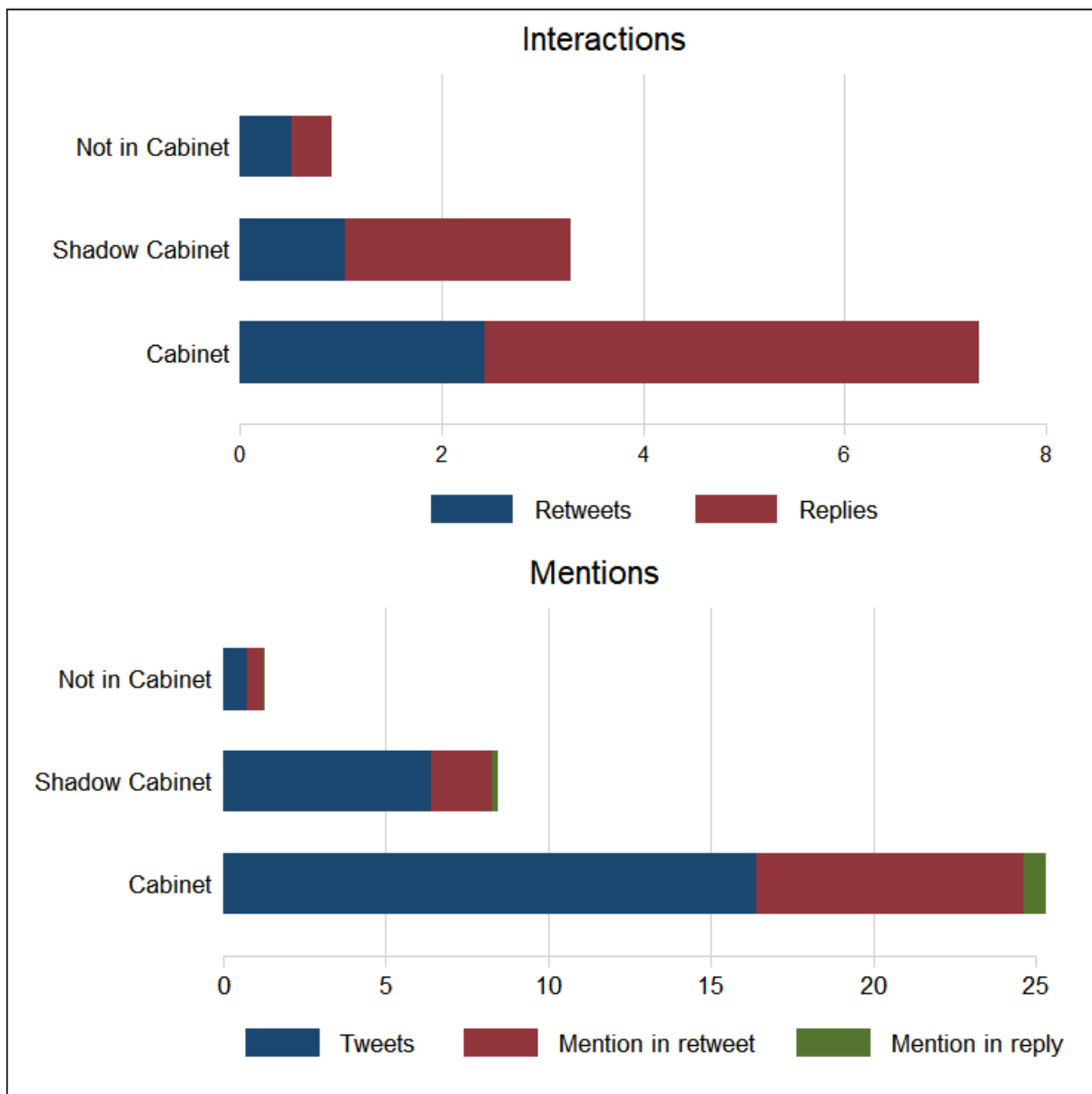**Figure 2:** Average BBC following across total follower quintiles for Conservative and Labour MPs
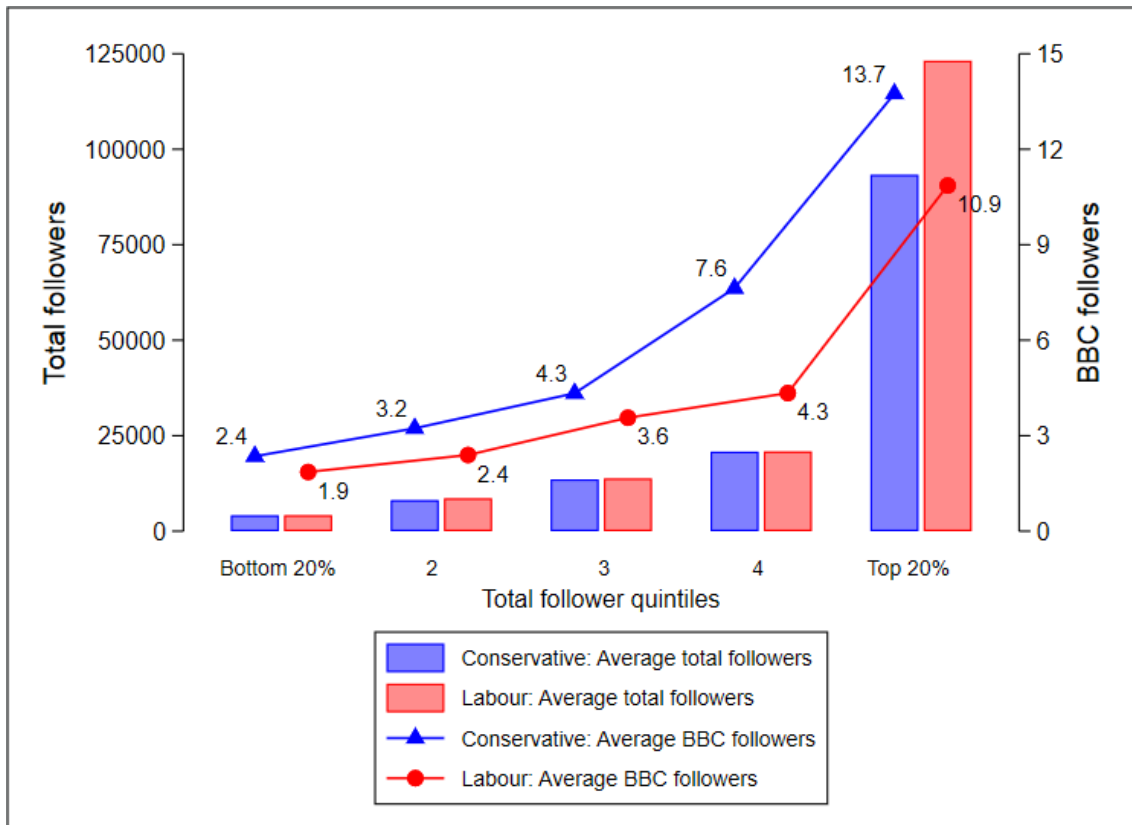
Figure 3: Average Interactions and Mentions between BBC journalists and MPs across different political parties
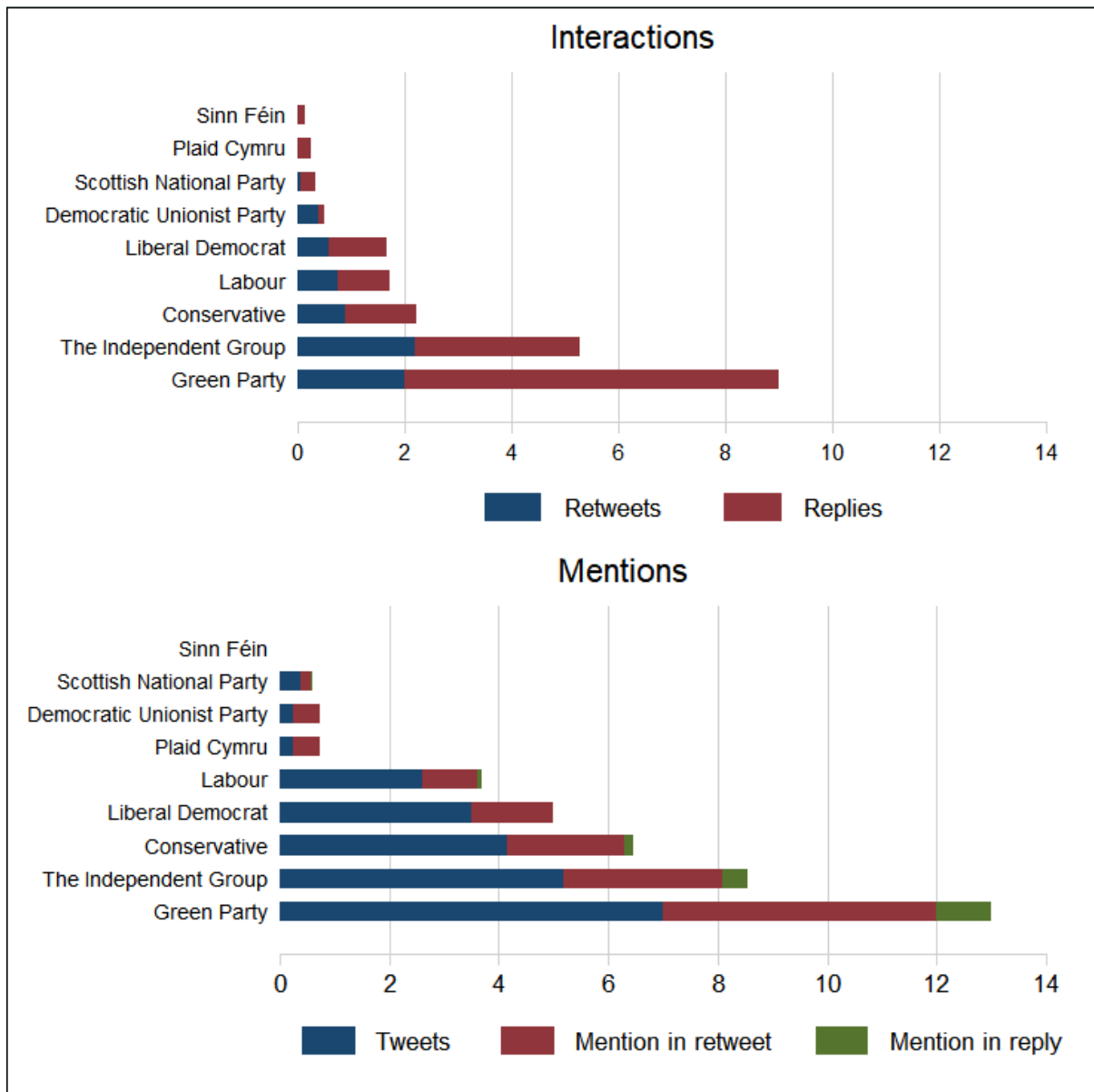
Figure 4: Interactions and mentions by BBC journalists by Cabinet/Shadow Cabinet membership

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Notes

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[5] Three sports journalists on the total list of 93 were excluded (Richard Conway, Dan Roan and Gordon Farquhar).

[6] The date of extraction was 25 February 2019. Due to technical restrictions, the follow networks of six journalists were extracted directly from their accounts on 15 March 2019.

[7] https://www.mpsonTwitter.co.uk/

[8] These were Richard Bacon (Con), Jim Shannon (DUP), Keith Vaz (Labour), Mohammad Yasin (Labour) and Órfhlaith Begley (Sinn Fein). Information on these MPs' number of Twitter followers was taken directly from their Twitter accounts at a later date (8 July 2019).