



# Grayling's report on how politicians across Europe are using social media

28 April 2021

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# Introduction

The role of social media as a channel for engaging policy-makers has been on the agenda for Public Affairs professionals for a long time – certainly since the power of social media in political campaigning became clear, which has been obvious at least since Barack Obama's first presidential campaign in 2008.

But how are politicians in Europe actually using social media?

To shine light on this, Grayling has partnered with social media intelligence firm Linkfluence to publish the first pan-European study on the ways in which politicians across the continent are using social media, revealing the impact of geography, gender, age and political alignment on social media communications.

The study analysed almost 3 million pieces of content posted by members of Parliament across 17 European countries, as well as the European Parliament, on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram.

The study reveals a host of insights, including:

1. MPs are not focusing on the same platforms as their constituents
2. MPs are genuine influencers online
3. Male and female MPs are not using social media in identical ways
4. The very youngest MPs are not the most active group on social media
5. The extreme ends of the political spectrum are disproportionately active across all three platforms, and have larger follower counts

Further details on all of these points, and many more, are included below.



# The countries covered by the analysis




# There are regional discrepancies in the volume of activity on social media

## Social media users as a % of the total population\*

1		82.1%
2		80.0%
3		79.9%
4		78.7%
5		77.9%
6		75.9%
7		73.8%
8		73.5%
9		71.2%
10		69.8%
11		69.0%
12		68.5%
13		68.4%
14		67.9%
15		67.8%
16		62.1%
17		52.8%

## Average number of posts per MP (including MEPs)

1		690
2		607
3		598
4		517
5		485
6		441
7		421
8		414
9		365
10		296
11		286
12		204
13		200
14		178
15		77
16		70
17		45
18		24



# Regional discrepancies in the volume of posts: some thoughts

The results are, to say the least, fascinating but it's not easy to pick out clear explanations for the geographical discrepancies we see in how much MPs/MEPs are posting on social media.

As CEO of Grayling Brussels, I wasn't surprised to see how active European Parliamentarians are on social media (both in Brussels and in their constituencies), coming third out of the 17 countries, but overall, it's much easier to refute theories than to suggest explanations which fit the data.

Some people, for example, might assume that social media is just a bigger thing in some countries than others. It's true that countries do have different percentages of social media users, but there's no clear correlation between that and our list of where MPs are most active.

There also isn't a neat Western vs Central & Eastern European split, because Poland bucks the trend, coming second overall.

It doesn't seem to be elections driving activity on social media either. There was a Polish Presidential election last year, but then lots of other countries had big elections in 2020, including Croatia, Greece, Slovakia and Serbia.

It's true that the top of the table is dominated by large countries (although the largest country of all, Russia, is near the bottom), but why? We so know that it isn't to do with the size of the Parliament – so what else could it be?

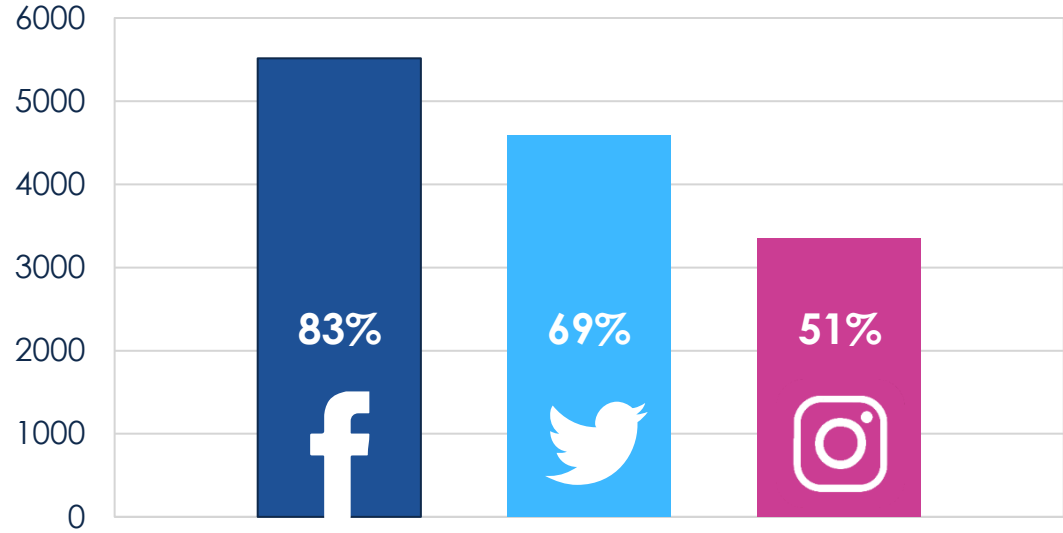
Could it be something to do with politicians having access to bigger teams of assistants in some countries? It's possible, but we can't say purely based on this analysis.

There are no doubt multiple factors, and that's ok with us. We love data but, like all good Public Affairs professionals, we like speculation and a good debate even more.

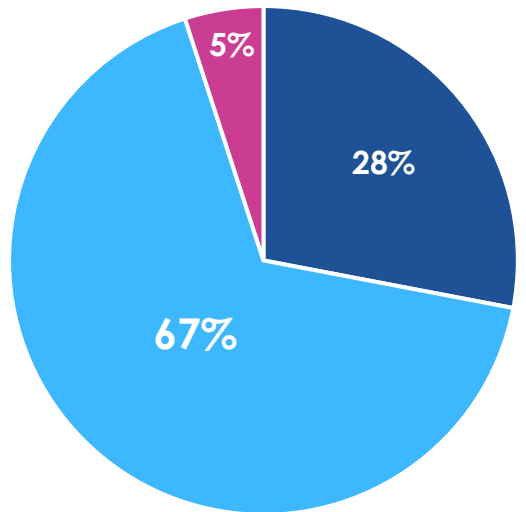
**Russell Patten, CEO of Grayling Brussels & Grayling's  
Chairman of European Public Affairs**

Twitter is dominating almost everywhere

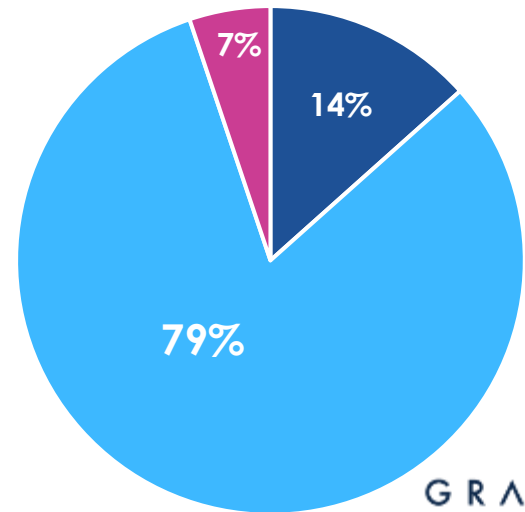
No. of MPs' social media accounts



Total volume of posts



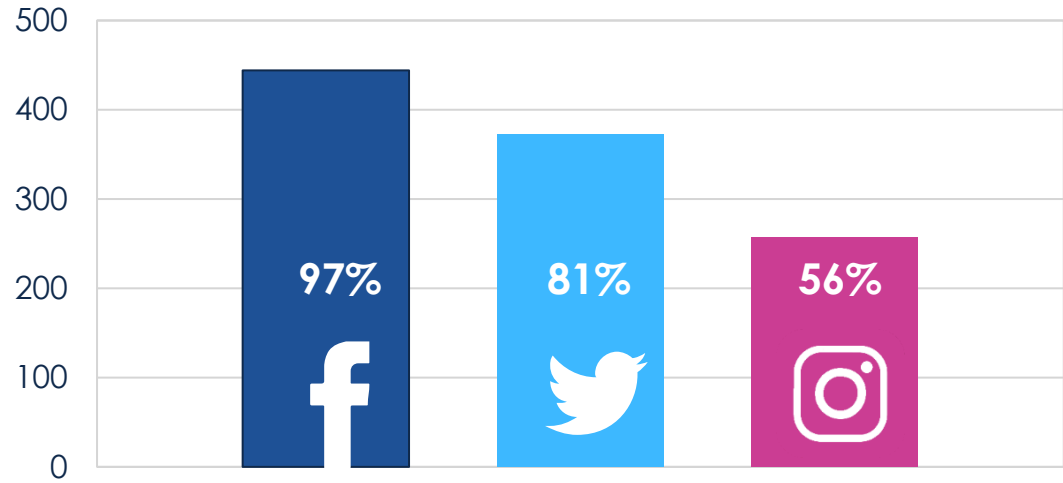
Total follower count



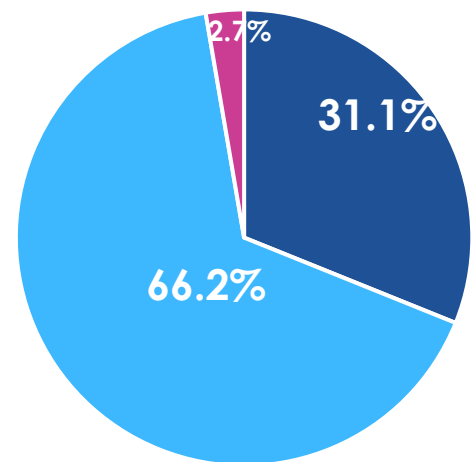
# Volume of posts among Polish MPs






### No. of MPs' social media accounts in Poland



### Total volume of posts among Polish MPs



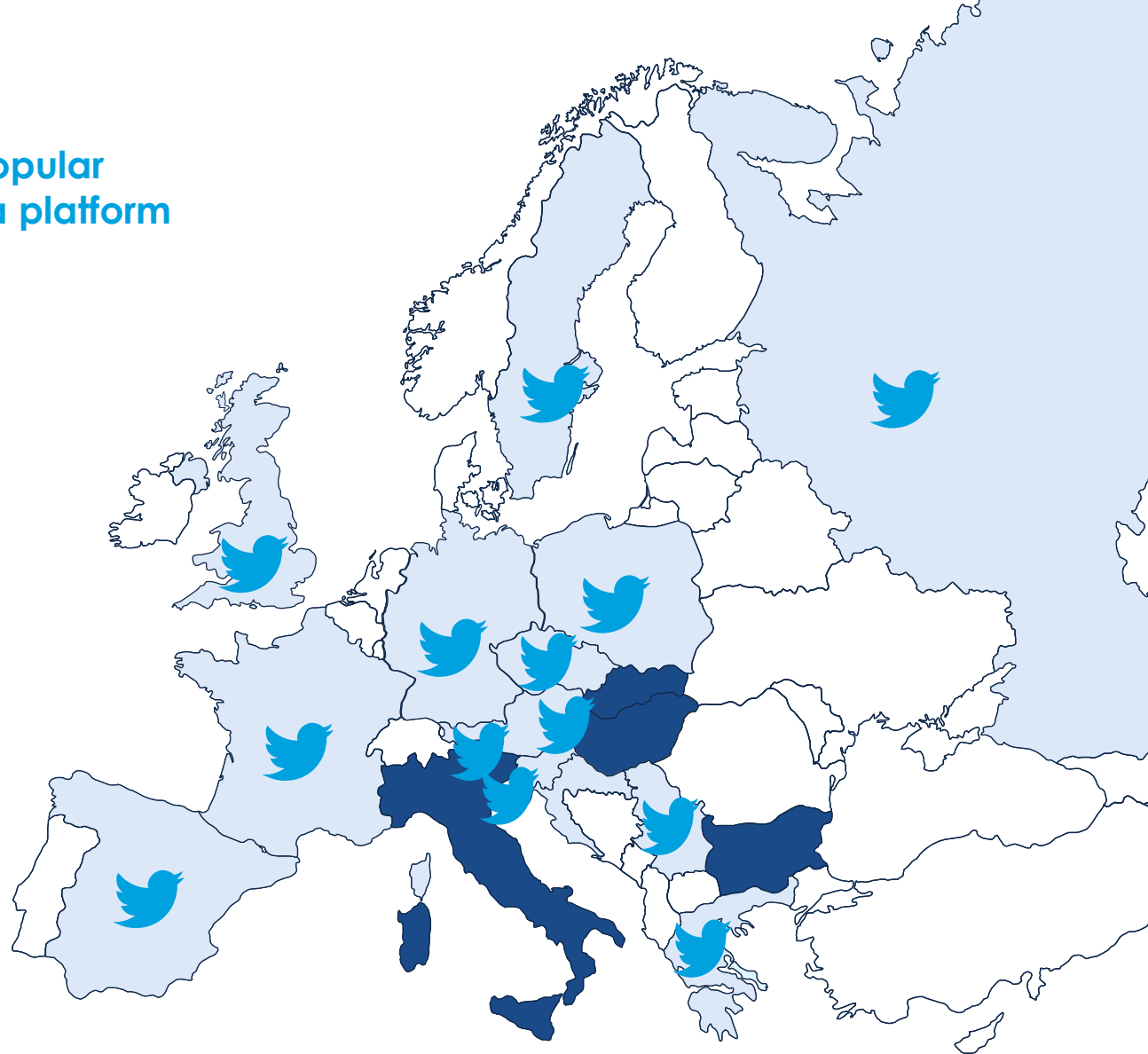
# Twitter is dominating almost everywhere

- 1 = 
- 2 = 
- 3 = 

Amongst the general public, only one country in our list doesn't rank these three SM platforms like this in terms of popularity\*:

[gpol@grayling.com](mailto:gpol@grayling.com)

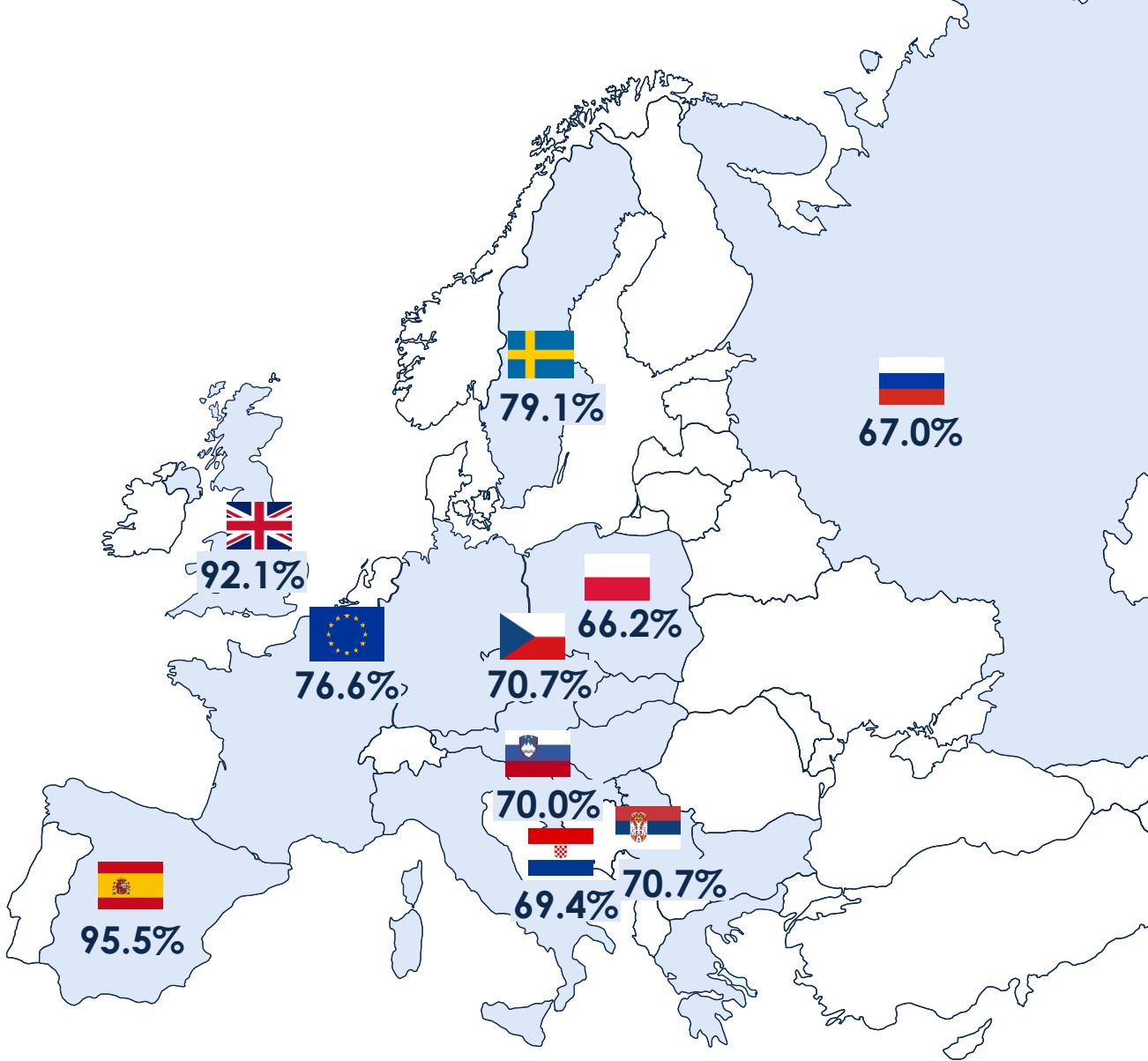
## MPs' most popular social media platform



\* We are Social and Hootsuite's 'Digital 2021' Global Overview Report



# Where Twitter is most dominant amongst MPs



# The dominance of Twitter: some thoughts

Since European MPs and MEPs were the target group of our survey, the fact that Twitter is the most popular social media platform probably won't surprise many people. However, when we look closely at some of the data, we find some interesting insights.

Even though more than 80% of MPs across Europe have Facebook accounts, less than a third of activity across these three channels happens there. Twitter is crushingly dominant, with two thirds of posts submitted via this platform.




Also, when we break down the list of top 10 countries where Twitter is most popular, it is interesting to see quite a few Central & Eastern European countries there – despite Twitter's penetration rate amongst the general public in the region being low compared with much of Western Europe.

The results also highlight the diversity that exists across Europe, as there are some very local exceptions to regional trends, even between neighbouring countries. For example, given that the Czech Republic and Slovakia were one country for many decades before 1993, you would expect Czech and Slovak MPs to behave in a very similar manner on social media. But the opposite is true. Czech MPs use Twitter as their main social network, with more than 70% of posts there. In Slovakia, on the other hand, more than 80% of posts are on Facebook – with Twitter playing a negligible role.

There are many factors that might explain this, but without understanding these local dynamics, it is impossible for businesses to run effective multi-country digital advocacy campaigns.

**Jakub Hudec, Head of Public Affairs, Grayling Czech Republic**

# MPs are genuine influencers online

			
Average engagement rates for MPs' posts on the three social media platforms:	<b>2.9%</b>	<b>1.2%</b>	<b>0.4%</b>
Rival IQ Social Media Industry Benchmark - Influencers:	<b>1.42%</b>	<b>0.19%</b>	<b>0.036%</b>
Rival IQ Social Media Industry Benchmark - Brands:	<b>0.98%</b>	<b>0.08%</b>	<b>0.045%</b>

# MPs in Poland are genuine influencers online



gpol@grayling.com

Average engagement rates for  
Polish MPs' posts on the three  
social media platforms:



6.3%



1.4%



0.3%

# MPs are genuine influencers online: some thoughts

In the world of social media, an influencer is someone whose online activity has the power to affect the decisions of others because of their authority and position, and the online relationship they have established with their audience.

This means the 'size of following' of a particular Member of Parliament does not matter as much as his or her 'engagement rate' – defined as the number of likes, comments, shares and clicks his or her posts are getting.

Looking at the average engagement rate for Members of Parliament across Europe, they engage their audiences via Instagram, Facebook and Twitter much more effectively than the average social media industry benchmarks for brands, and even 'influencers'.

There could be several reasons for this successful engagement. First, while Twitter, Facebook or Instagram users may choose to follow lifestyles accounts in a more 'passive' capacity, the action of following a politician will usually translate in 'active' political engagement and followers voicing their opinions on the posts.

Second, politicians rapidly understood that social media platforms constitute a unique opportunity to transform the way they communicate to citizens. This means moving away from broadcasting to stimulating an actual debate which allows politicians to 'survey' their voters' positions in real time, ahead of electoral milestones.

**Delphine Millot, Managing Director, Grayling Brussels**

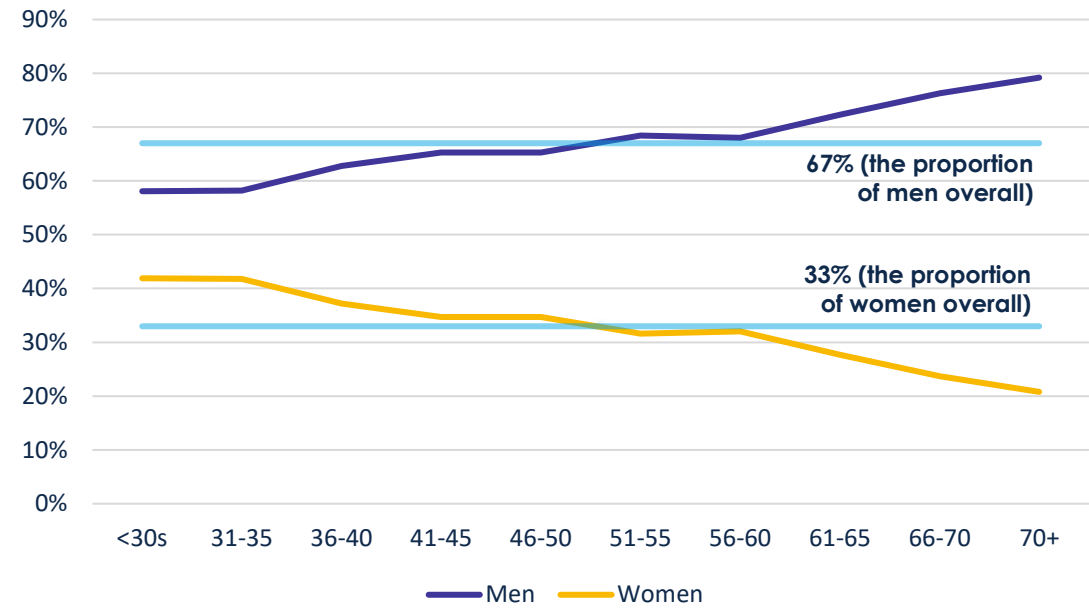


# Differences between male and female MPs

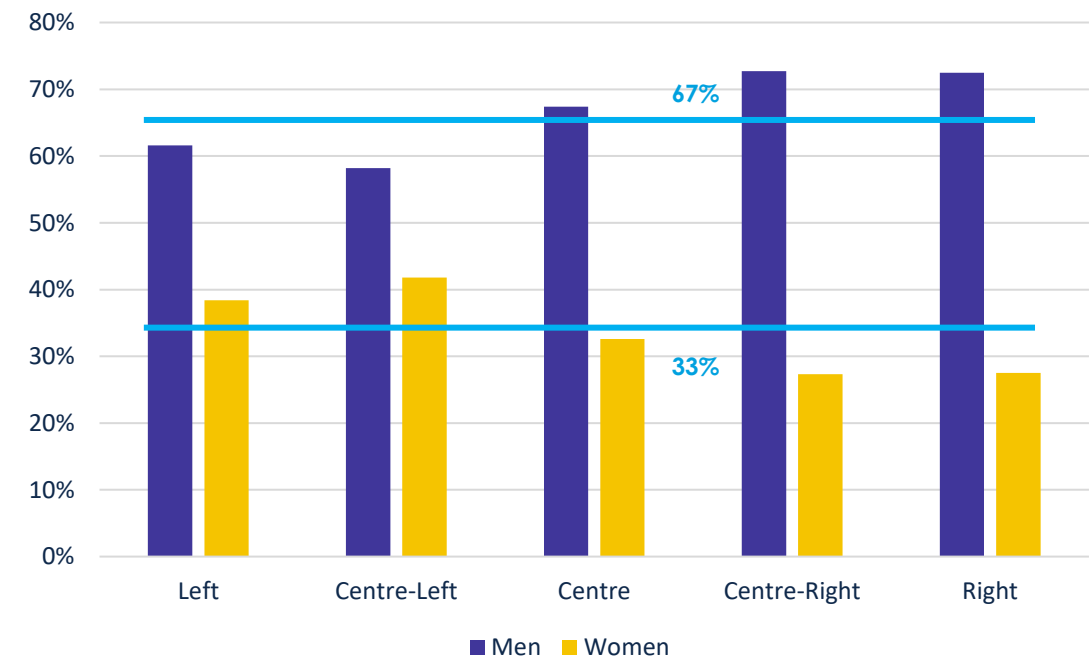
## Europe as a whole



## Central & Eastern Europe



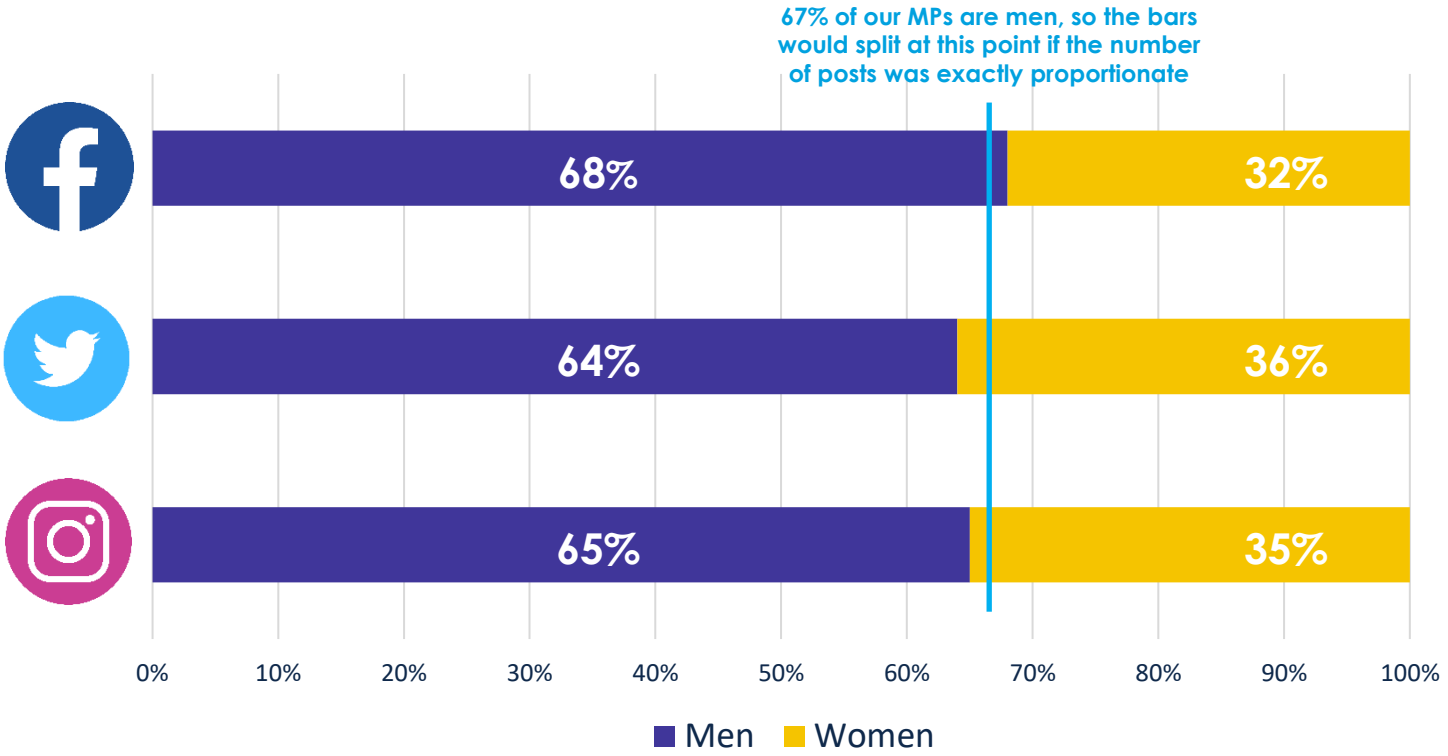
How the male / female split breaks down by age



How the split breaks down by party alignment

# Differences between male and female MPs

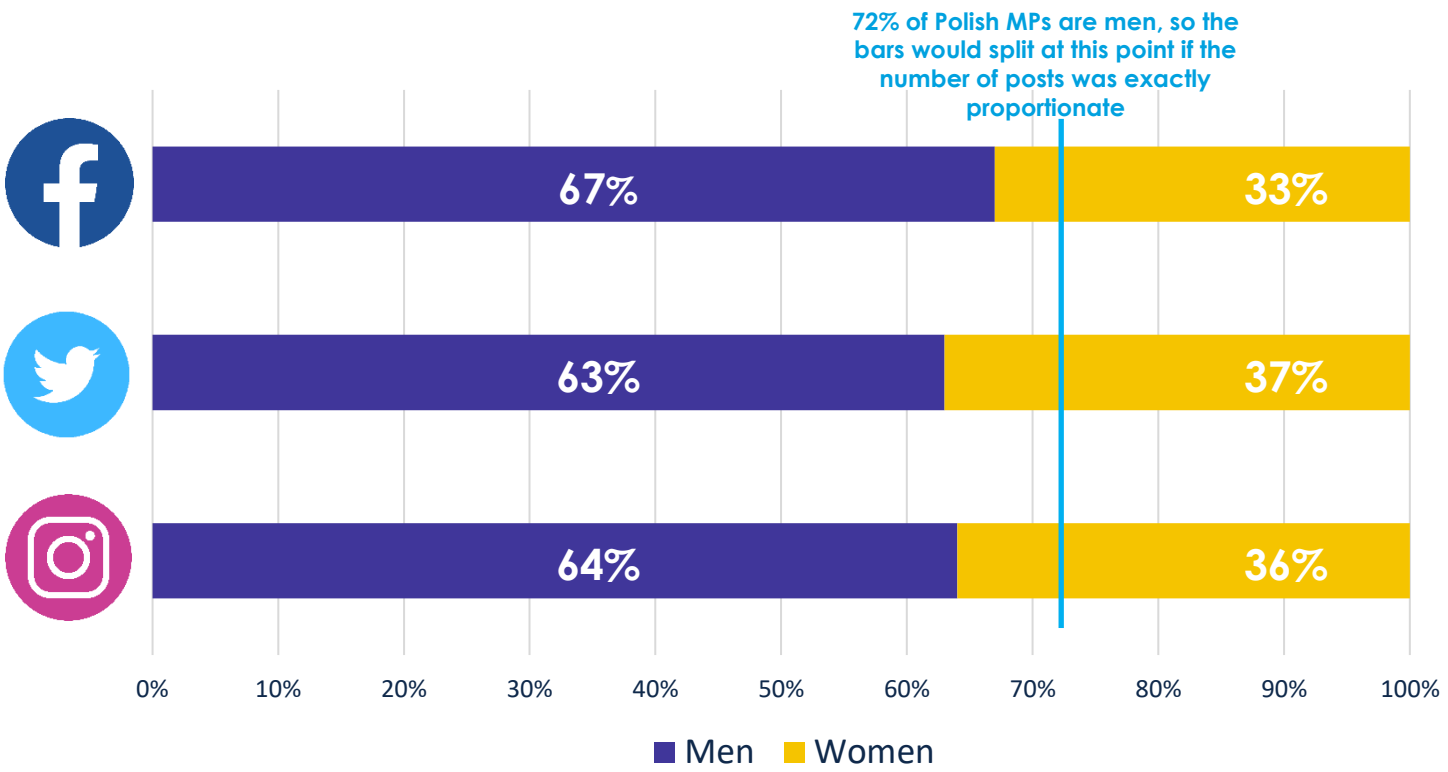
### Proportion of posts



# Differences between male and female MPs in Poland

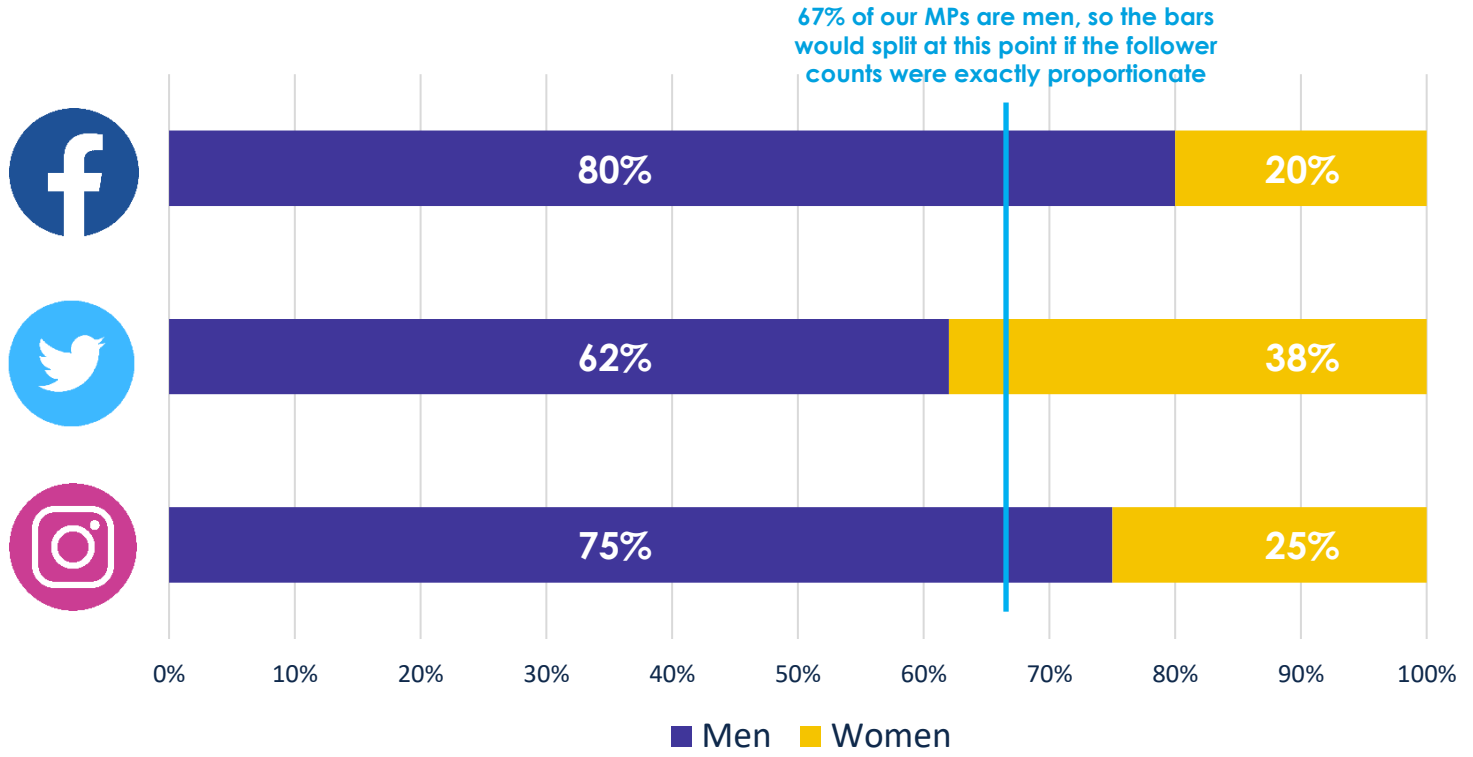


### Proportion of posts among Polish MPs

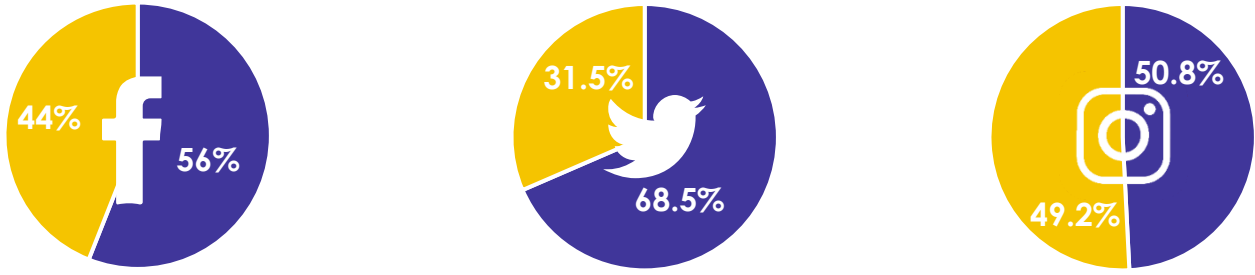


# Differences between male and female MPs

## Followers count



## Gender split of users of the three platforms amongst the general public\*



\* We are Social and Hootsuite's 'Digital 2021' Global Overview Report

# Differences between male and female MPs

## Average engagement rates



Male MPs:

0.4%

1.6%

4.8%

Female MPs:

0.5%




2.1%

4.8%



# Differences between male and female MPs in Poland

## Average engagement rates in Poland

			
Male MPs:	0.3%	1.2%	6.4%
Female MPs:	0.4%	1.8%	6%



# Differences between male and female MPs: some thoughts

The differences between the social media communications of male and female MPs are hard to unpick because there are so many factors at play.

On the one hand, the fact that female MPs slightly favour Twitter (and, to a slightly lesser extent, Instagram) is a surprise given that Twitter is the most male-dominated of the three platforms amongst the general public. There's also, let's face it, the abuse that politicians receive on social media, particularly on Twitter – and which afflicts female MPs even more seriously than it does men.

But our analysis provides a couple of clues:

Female MPs are, on average, younger – and we know from other parts of the analysis that age has an impact on social media use, with younger MPs favouring Twitter and Instagram over Facebook.

Female MPs are also more likely to be on the Left, where Twitter is the favoured platform (particularly the Centre Left, where the highest proportion of female MPs are found). This could also be part of the explanation.

Perhaps the most interesting finding is the fact that female MPs are seeing higher engagement rates for their posts on both Twitter and Facebook. How much of this is 'good engagement', though? We can't quantify that, but we have run a couple of micro analyses on social media content which has been particularly widely shared – and found that they tend to be posts which find the right tone for the moment, are constructive and avoid trying to score cheap political points.

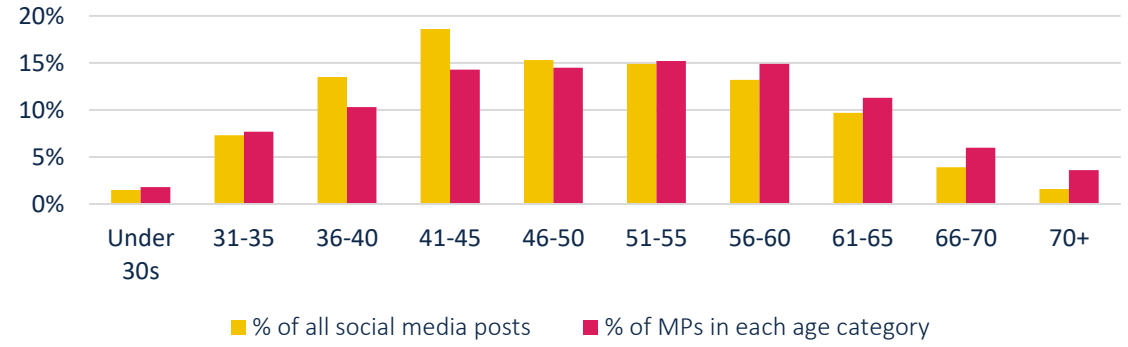
Maybe this is where female politicians have an edge over some of their male counterparts?

**Geraldine Schroeder, Managing Director, Grayling  
Germany**

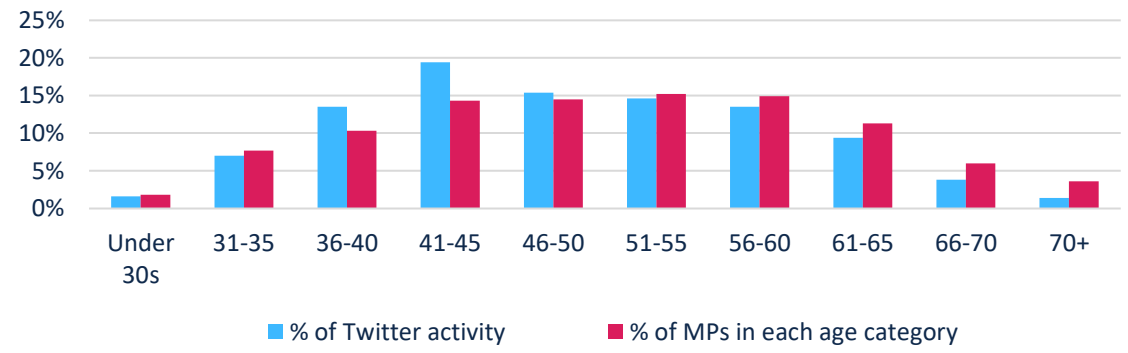
# The impact of age on social media use



Does activity on all three social media channels match the proportion of MPs in each age category?



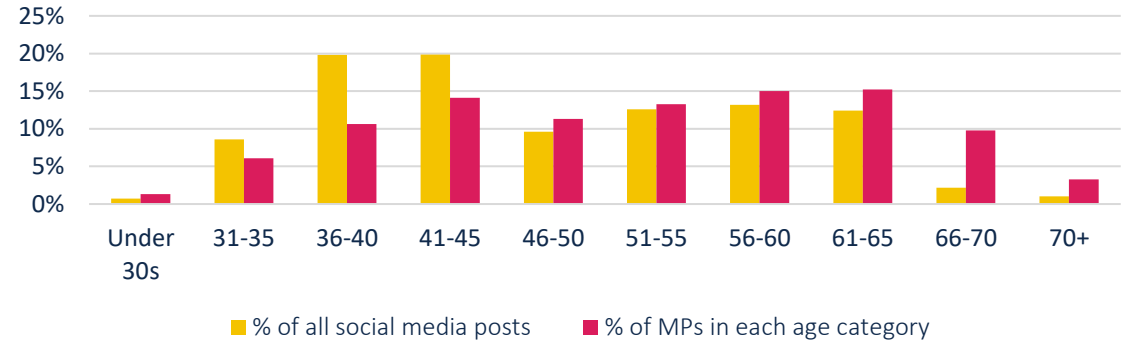
How activity on Twitter matches the proportion of MPs in each age category?



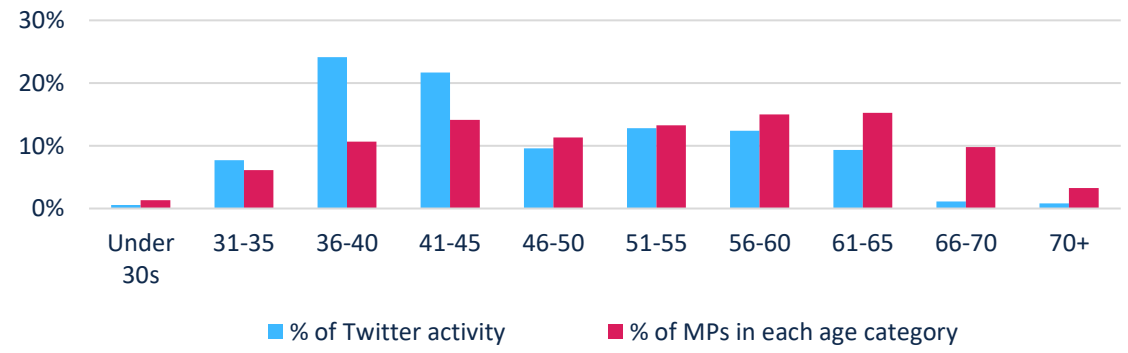
# The impact of age on social media use in Poland



Does activity on all three social media channels match the proportion of Polish MPs in each age category?



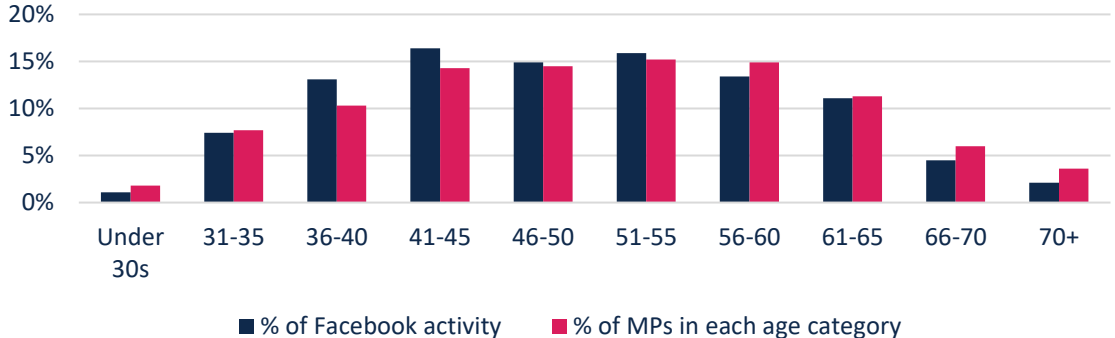
How activity on Twitter matches the proportion of Polish MPs in each age category?



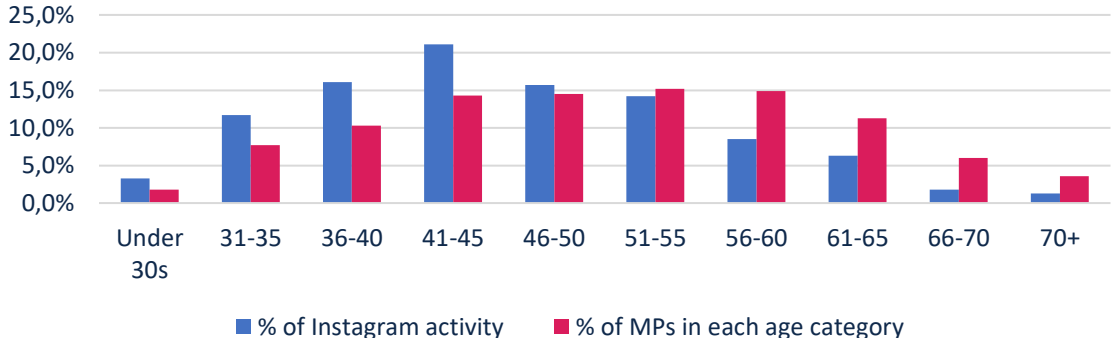
# The impact of age on social media use in Poland



How activity on Facebook matches the proportion of MPs in each age category?



How activity on Instagram matches the proportion of MPs in each age category?

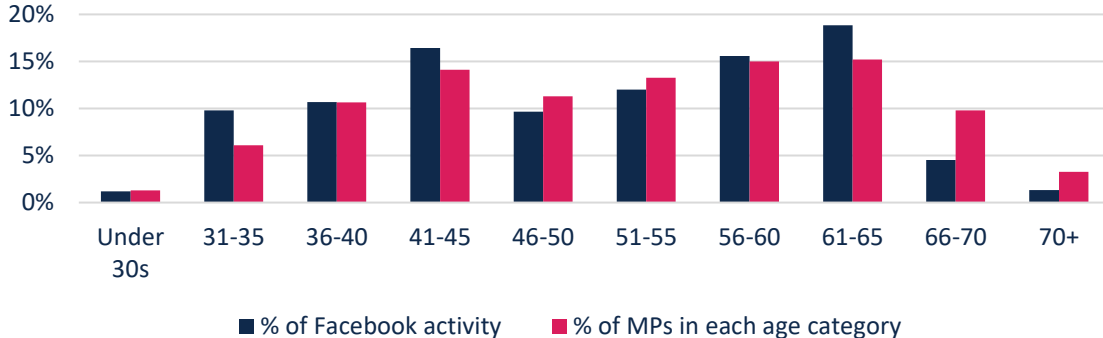




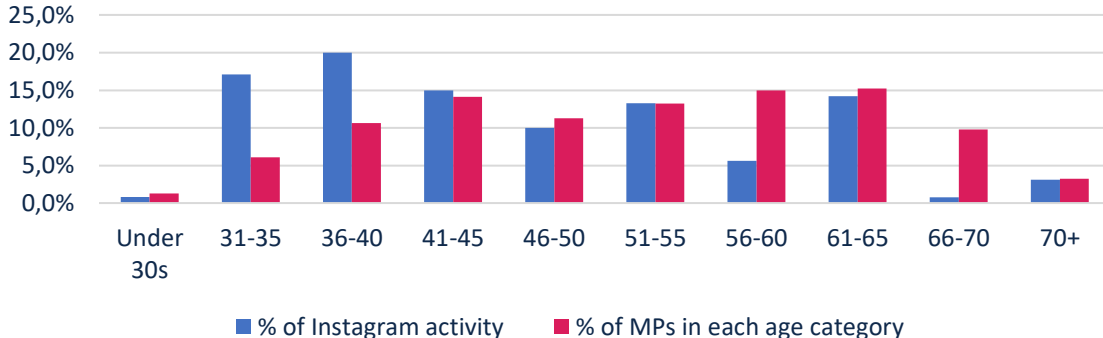
# The impact of age on social media use in Poland



### How activity on Facebook matches the proportion of Polish MPs in each age category?



### How activity on Instagram matches the proportion of Polish MPs in each age category?



# How age affects social media use : some thoughts

The fact that age affects social media use isn't exactly a bombshell – most of us know that from our own families.

What *is* surprising is that the very youngest MPs (the under 35s, which account for approximately 10% of the total) are not the most active group on social media. They are, though, the most active on Instagram and their content generates the highest engagement rates across all three platforms. This suggests that it's quality rather than quantity for the youngest MPs: they understand how to use social media and prioritise generating comments, likes, shares and retweets over a high volume of posts.

The most disproportionately active cohort are actually the 36-45 years olds, and this is even more true in Central & Eastern Europe than it is in Western Europe.

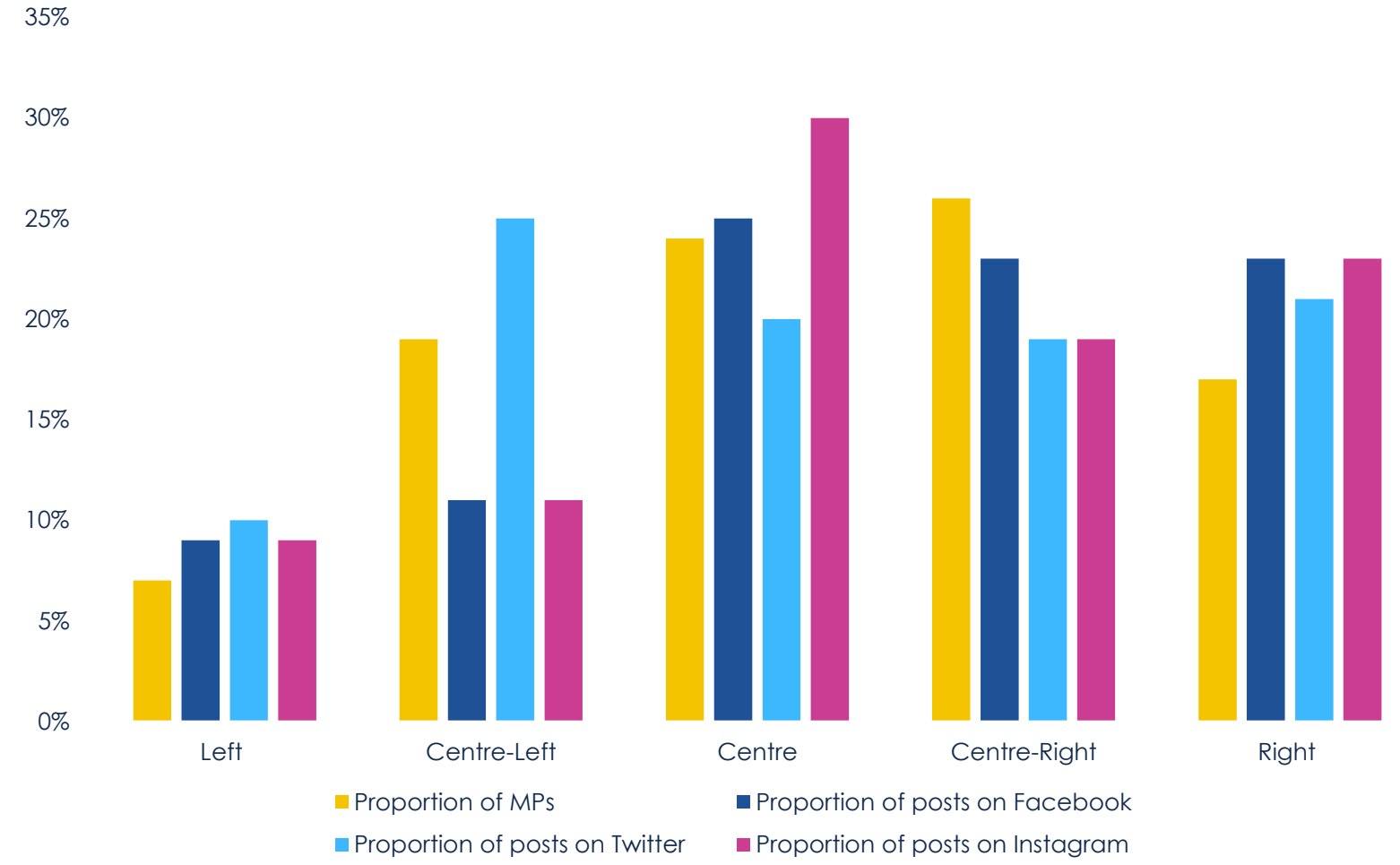
After the mid-50s, activity on social media declines quickly, although the oldest MPs (60+) are holding their own on Facebook – unlike Twitter and, in particular, Instagram. This fits broader trends amongst the general public, as users over the age of 65 have been Facebook's fastest growing audience over the past 12 months.

As well as being an advocacy channel, social media has a huge role in shaping strategy – by helping identify areas of aligned interest as well as the right topics and messages with which to engage stakeholders. Age has always been a consideration in the stakeholder analysis process, and this research is a reminder of how important a factor it can be.

**Ben Petter, Chief Operating Officer, Europe at Grayling**

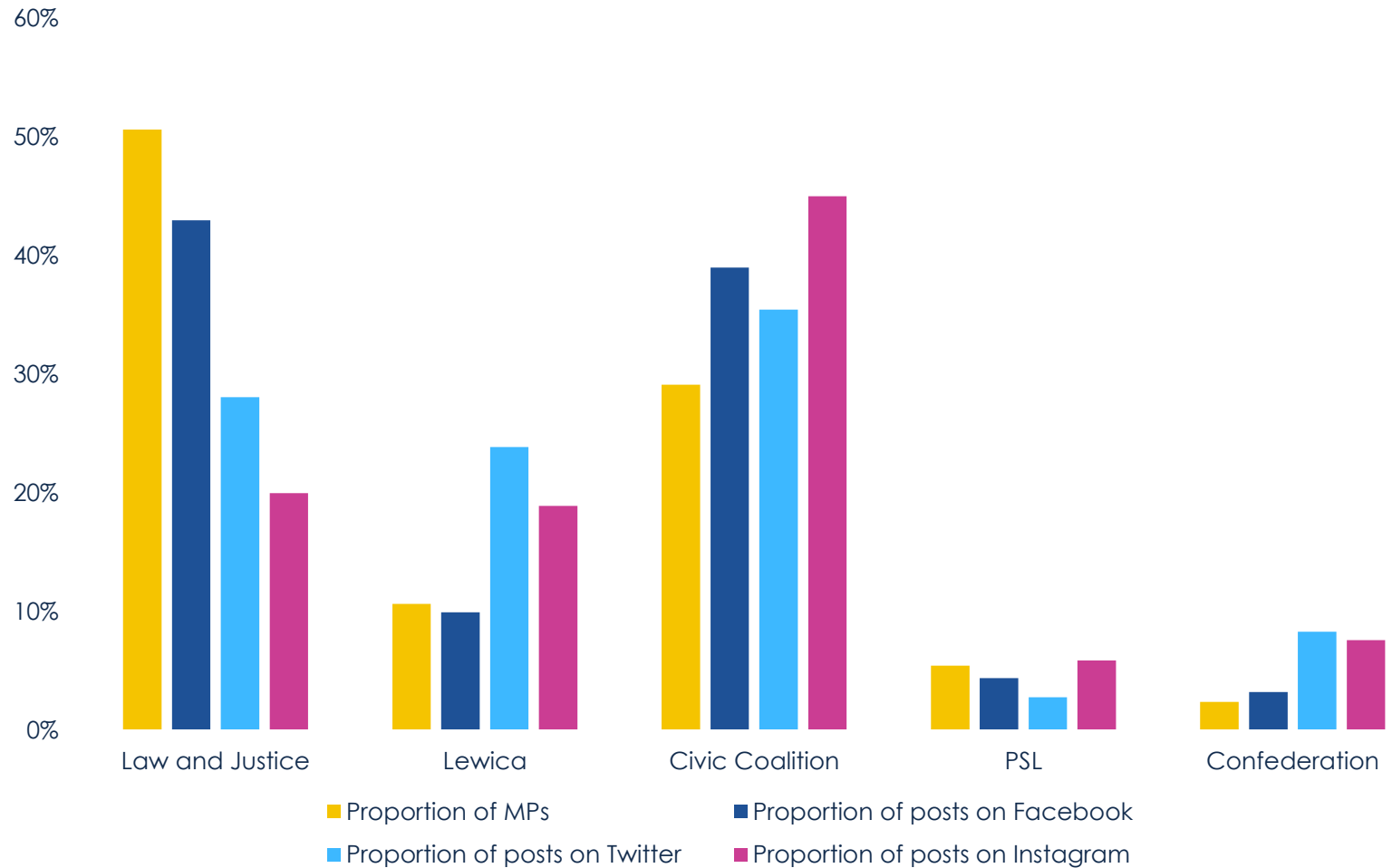
# Party alignment and social media use

## How party alignment affects social media use



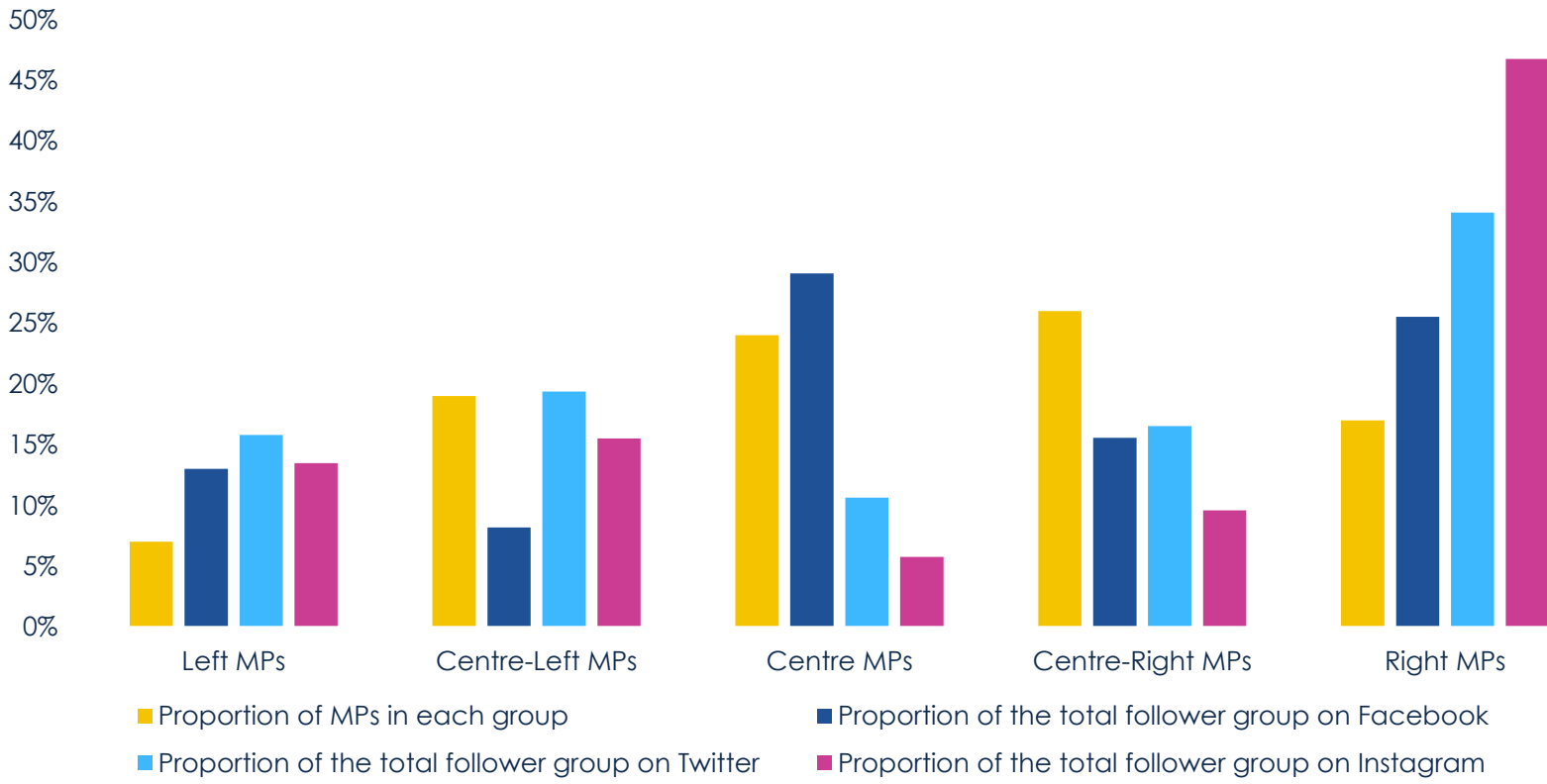
# Party alignment and social media use in Poland

### How party alignment affects social media use in Poland



# Party alignment and social media use

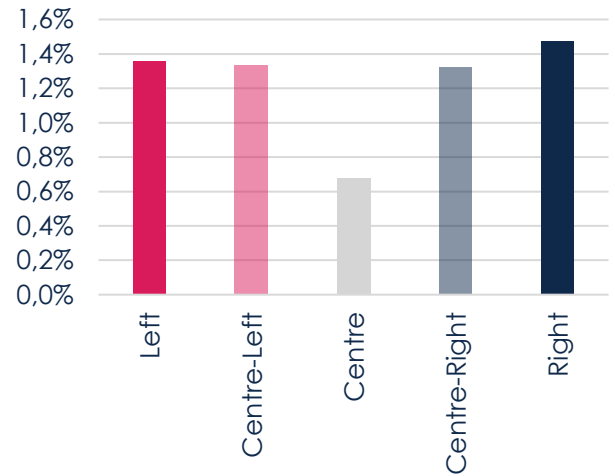
### How the number of followers MPs have varies depending on the political alignment of their party



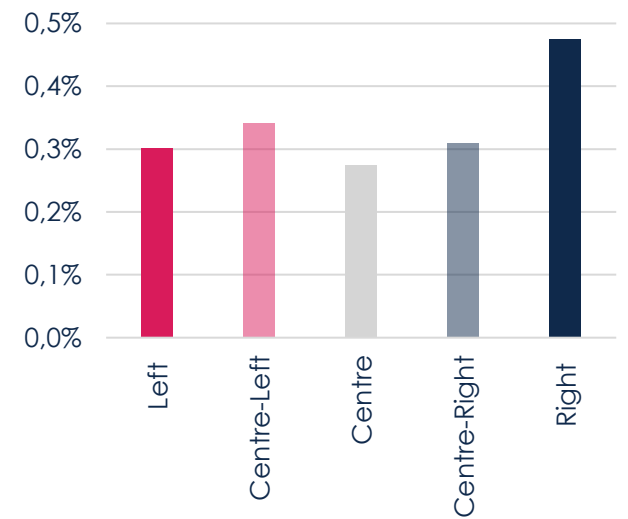
# Party alignment and social media use



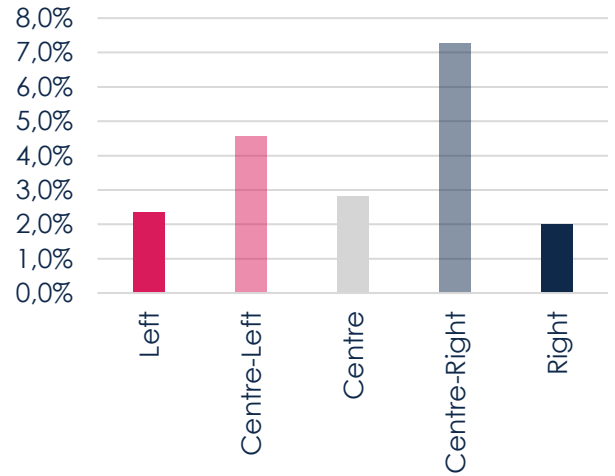
### Engagement rates on Facebook



### Engagement rates on Twitter



### Engagement rates on Instagram

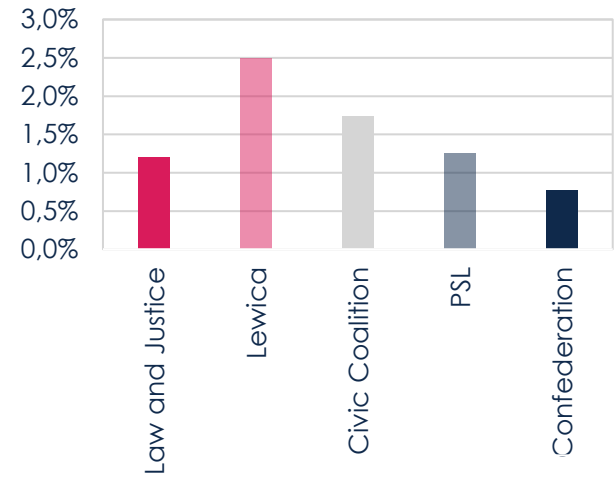




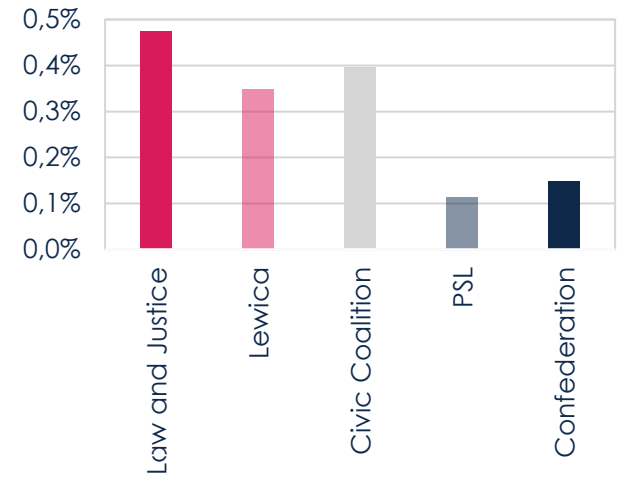
# Party alignment and social media use in Poland



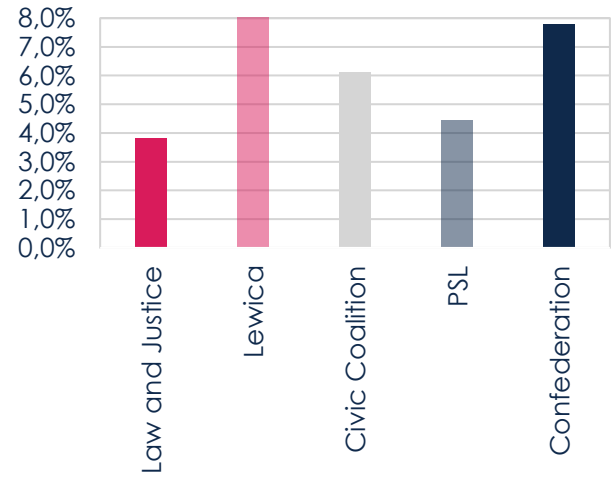
### Engagement rates on Facebook in Poland



### Engagement rates on Twitter in Poland



### Engagement rates on Instagram in Poland



# Party alignment and social media use: some thoughts

This data shows that the Right have been the most effective at building a following on social media. The Right's messaging is also spread more evenly across all three platforms, suggesting they are the most efficient in sharing content and certainly the most consistent in using them.

The Centre-Left favours talking to the public on Twitter. Twitter lends itself more to ideas, information and news whereas Instagram is a more visual media. Although the Centre-Left favours communicating via Twitter the Right has the most followers, nearly twice as many as the Centre-Left. The Right also has the highest level of engagement on Twitter – although this includes opponents engaging to criticise.

The Centre proportionately uses Instagram more than the other parties but the Right are way ahead of the rest in terms of followers, with more followers than the other four political groupings put together.

It is only on Facebook where the Right comes (a close) second to the Centre in terms of followers but the Centre

has less than half the level of engagement than the Right on this platform. This again demonstrates the Right's effectiveness, their posts are frequently designed to raise emotions motivating their supporters and goading their opponents.

The Right are winning on social media at the moment, by a very wide margin on Twitter and Instagram. This has also provided them with a platform to get noticed by traditional media in a way that hasn't been available to similar parties in the past.

It remains to be seen if this is a long-lasting structural benefit for the Right, as a result of social media making it difficult to convey political context, complexity and nuance or whether a combination of platforms moderating content more and other groups improving their messaging on social media mean this trend will change in the future.

**Clare Moody, former MEP and Senior Strategic Director at Grayling**

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