

# Slacktivism or Critical Citizens? An Experimental Study of Political Engagement on Facebook

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James Dennis (@jameswilldennis)  
University of Portsmouth

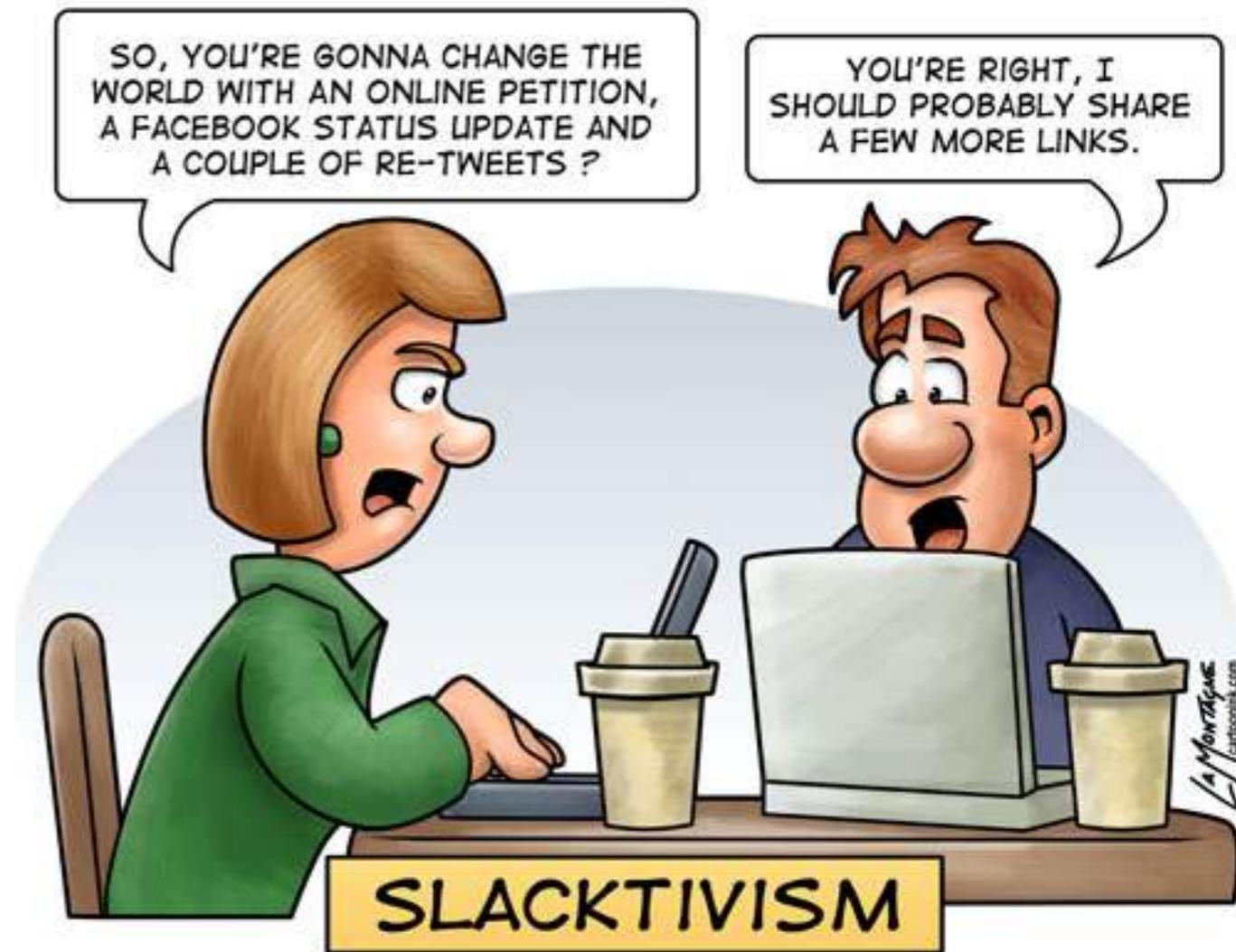
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# The problem:

## Slacktivism

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- Slacktivism = low-threshold forms of political engagement online
- Easy form of political gratification
- Self-interested + based on reputation management
- **Informational cascades** can lead to emotive and inconsistent information becoming viral on social networking sites (e.g. #Kony2012)
- **Reputational cascades:** audiences are susceptible to trends or the sway of popular opinion



# The rationale

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- Laboratory experiments designed to replicate environments in which slacktivism is said to occur
- Investigate what type of sources trigger **attention** and **engagement** among **young** social media users (those who share similar characteristics with so-called slacktivists)
- Digital micro-activism: a result of social media cascades, or a contemporary form of political engagement?



# The methods:

## Laboratory experiments

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- Experimental research is valuable, but often ignored in internet politics (with good reason...)
- Built within Facebook — private group with identical newsfeed, bar the treatment

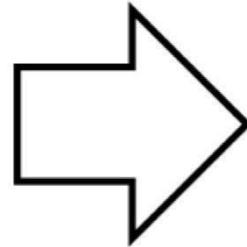


October 22, 2014  
40 participants

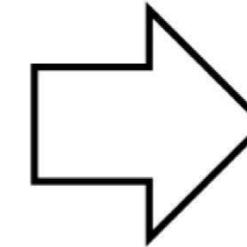
### Pre-test survey

Measure the following:

- Media habits
- Awareness of a range of information providers, including those on news feed
- Level of interest in subject matter on news feed
- Awareness of subject matter on news feed



Information type				
BBC News Online	BuzzFeed	Change.org	Upworthy	Control group



### Post-test survey

- Future intention to participate on subject matter on news feed
- Level of interest in content providers on news feed
- Demographic questions
- Full debrief on the experiment

### Measures:

#### Attention

- Clickthrough rate
- Time spent on all pages included on news feed
- Post-test survey: level of interest in content providers (treatment)

#### Engagement

- Post-test survey: future intention to participate on treatment issue

## Experiment 1: Testing for the effect of information type

Presents participants with varying types of information on the same issue to measure if exposure affects the likelihood of future political mobilisation



**change.org**



October 29, 2014  
38 participants

**Measures:**

*Attention*

- Clickthrough rate
- Time spent on all pages included on news feed
- History: order of engagement with items on news feed

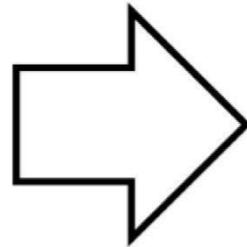
*Engagement*

- Petition signatories
- Post-test survey: future intention to participate on treatment issue

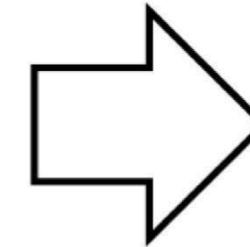
**Pre-test survey**

Measure the following:

- Media habits
- Awareness of a range of information providers, including those on news feed



Threshold of likes on treatment					
High likes)	(16	Low likes)	(3	No likes	Control group



**Post-test survey**

- Level of interest in subject matter on news feed
- Future intention to participate on subject matter on news feed
- Demographic questions
- Full debrief on the experiment

# Experiment 2: Testing for the effect of Facebook likes

Investigates the willingness of participants to sign an e-petition on the basis of its popularity (Facebook likes)



**Remember when we paid £2,115 to clean an MP's moat?** In 2009, many MPs were found to have abused taxpayers' money by claiming outrageous expenses [1]. Trust in our politicians crumbled...further. But despite this, you'll never guess what they're planning to do now.

**An idea is being floated to hide the names of MPs whose expenses are being looked into** [2]. And make details of expenses less thorough. But our MPs work for us, so what they spend our money on is our business.

IPSA, the watchdog which sets the rules for MPs expenses, is asking for the public's opinion before anything is set in stone [3]. The consultation closes on 3 November 2014. **A huge people-powered petition demanding that politicians expenses are kept public could force the plans to be dropped.**

IPSA says that this new level of secrecy aims to protect MPs from the "reputational damage" they would suffer because of "public scrutiny". But reputation is built on trust, which comes with honesty and transparency, so this argument doesn't add up.

And critics say that lack of transparency is what led to the 2009 expenses scandal. New secrecy rules would be a backwards step.

**Will you sign the petition now to keep all MPs' expenses public?**

Sourced from the 38 Degrees blog post, "MPs' Expenses: Keep them public": <http://goo.gl/rso1lr>

#### THE PETITION TEXT:

To IPSA - the MP watchdog.

Please don't hide the names of MPs whose expenses are being looked at. MPs work for us, so what they spend our money on shouldn't be kept secret.

It's crucial that MPs' expenses are kept public. It's a matter of public interest and should be kept in the public domain.

Name \*

Persons that don't use real names get seen less seriously. Using your real name adds power to the petition and makes it more effective.

First Name

Last Name

Email Address \*

Post code \*

SUBMIT

#### NOTES:

[1] The Telegraph: MPs' Expenses

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstoppers/mps-expenses/>

[2] Daily Mail: MPs' expenses: A new cover-up as watchdog wants names of suspected cheats kept secret to save them from 'reputational damage'

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2773899/Parliamentary-probes-MPs-suspected-fiddling-expenses-held-SECRET-controversial-new-plans.html>

[3] Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority: Consultations

<http://parliamentarystandards.org.uk/transparency/Pages/Consultations.aspx>

Your personal information will be kept private and held securely.

My petition puts the power to run campaigns in your hands. We are a new petition platform and are only hosting a limited number of campaigns at the moment.

Sourced from the 38 Degrees petition page, "IPSA: Don't hide MPs' expenses":  
<https://goo.gl/94LmgE>

# Outcome variables

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- **Attention**, operationalised by each subject's interaction with the news feed
- e.g. clickthrough rate; time spent browsing
- **Engagement:** post-test survey to measure behavioural intention measures
- 11-point likert scale was used to measure the likelihood that subjects would participate on a political issue in the future
- **Focus group\* discussion**

Table 4.5. List of indicators for political engagement

<b>Forms of political engagement</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Discuss the issue with family, friends or acquaintances</li><li>• Take part in a protest/rally/demonstration</li><li>• Write, call or email a newspaper, magazine, or television news organization</li><li>• Contact an official</li><li>• Donate money to a charity or campaigning organisation</li><li>• Write or sign a digital or written petition</li><li>• Distribute or share information over social media</li></ul>

*Source:* Adapted from the Hansard Society (2011: 90)

# **Experiment 1: Testing for the effect of information type**

Table 7.1. Clickthrough rate on the treatment

<b>Treatment: Information Type</b>	<b>Page views</b>	<b>Group size</b>	<b>Clickthrough %</b>
BBC News	7	10	70.0
BuzzFeed	7	8	87.5
Change.org	4	7	57.1
Upworthy	7	8	87.5

**Attention:** Clickthrough rate on the treatment

BuzzFeed + Upworthy = attention

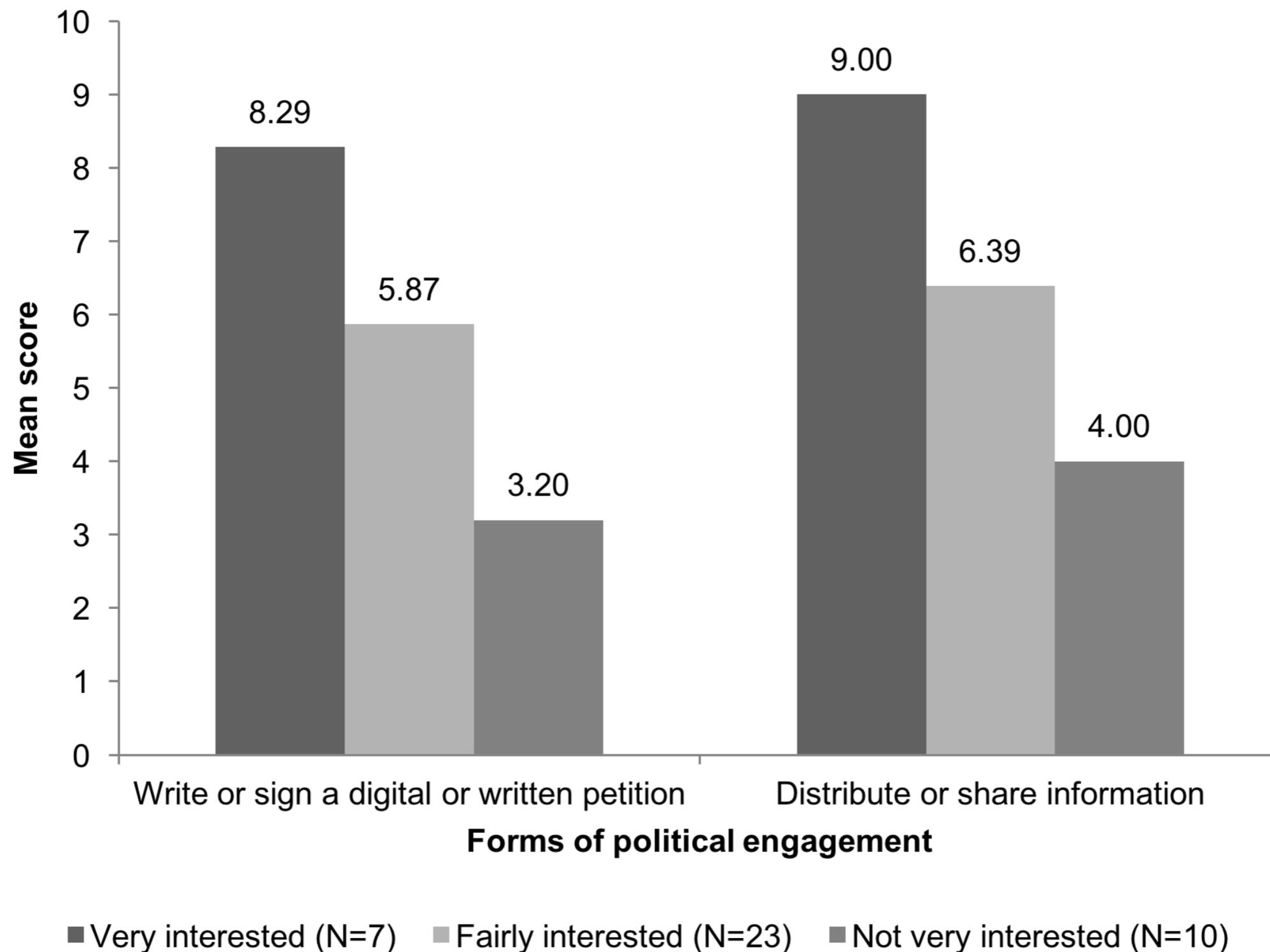
Change.org had a noticeably lower clickthrough rate

Table 7.4. Mean scores for future intention to engage based on exposure to the treatment

Future intention to engage mean score (0-10)	Treatment: Information type					
	BBC News	BuzzFeed	Change.org	Upworthy	Control Group	No click
Discuss the issue with family, friends and acquaintances	6.71	8.43	7.75	8.86	7.86	5.25
<i>Std deviation</i>	<i>3.45</i>	<i>1.72</i>	<i>2.22</i>	<i>1.46</i>	<i>3.18</i>	<i>3.37</i>
Take part in a protest/rally/demonstration	3.00	4.14	1.75	3.29	2.00	1.63
<i>Std deviation</i>	<i>2.16</i>	<i>3.98</i>	<i>1.71</i>	<i>1.80</i>	<i>2.08</i>	<i>2.33</i>
Write, call or email a newspaper, magazine, or television news organisation	1.71	2.00	1.50	2.00	0.57	1.50
<i>Std deviation</i>	<i>1.50</i>	<i>2.52</i>	<i>1.00</i>	<i>1.00</i>	<i>0.79</i>	<i>2.14</i>
Contact an official	1.71	1.57	1.75	1.43	1.14	0.50
<i>Std deviation</i>	<i>1.50</i>	<i>2.57</i>	<i>0.96</i>	<i>1.40</i>	<i>1.07</i>	<i>0.76</i>
Donate money to a charity or campaigning organisation	4.71	4.57	3.00	5.29	2.14	3.75
<i>Std deviation</i>	<i>2.36</i>	<i>2.70</i>	<i>1.83</i>	<i>2.81</i>	<i>2.12</i>	<i>3.77</i>
Write or sign a digital or written petition	8.00	7.29	3.25	4.71	6.14	3.63
<i>Std deviation</i>	<i>1.41</i>	<i>3.35</i>	<i>1.71</i>	<i>3.45</i>	<i>3.18</i>	<i>3.25</i>
Distribute or share information over social media	7.71	7.86	4.75	6.14	5.71	4.88
<i>Std deviation</i>	<i>2.14</i>	<i>2.73</i>	<i>3.30</i>	<i>2.41</i>	<i>3.55</i>	<i>3.14</i>
<i>n</i>	7	7	4	7	8	8

**Engagement:** Mean scores for future intention to engage based on exposure to the treatment

Information of any kind, excluding the e-petition, correlates with the likelihood of engagement



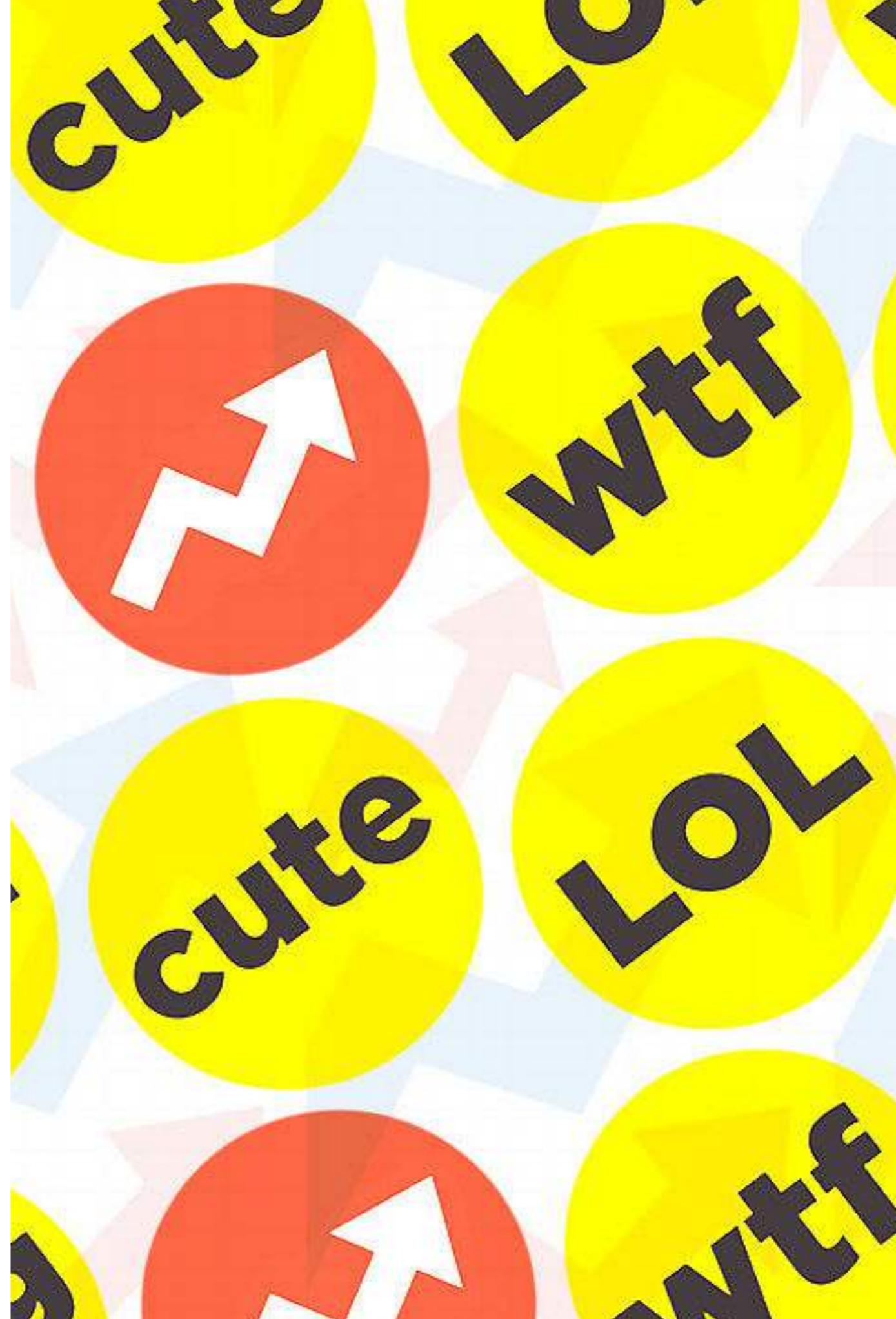
**Engagement:** Mean score for future intention to participate in digital micro-activism based on the level of interest in the environment

**Evidence of a positive linear relationship between interest & likelihood of future digital micro-activism**

# Tentative Conclusions: Critical Citizens

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- Subjects seem to prioritise issue interest > information type
- Post-test measures show participants do not just accept the views of the source material
- BuzzFeed: entertainment, not a space for political learning
- Upworthy: engaging and informative



# **Experiment 2: Testing for the effect of Facebook likes**

Table 7.6. Clickthrough rate on the treatment

<b>Treatment: Threshold of likes on e-petition</b>	<b>Page views</b>	<b>Group size</b>	<b>Clickthrough %</b>
None (0)	4	9	44.4
Low (3)	4	9	44.4
High (16)	7	10	70.0
Control group	7	10	70.0

**Attention:** Clickthrough rate on the treatment

Correlation between the level of likes and viewing the treatment

Table 7.8. Petition signatories in each treatment group

Treatment: Threshold of likes on e-petition	Signatories	Entire group		Clickthrough only	
		Group size	%	Group size	%
None (0)	3	9	33.3	4	75.0
Low (3)	1	9	11.1	4	25.0
High (16)	2	10	20.0	7	28.6
Control group	2	10	20.0	7	28.6

**Engagement:** Petition signatories in each treatment group

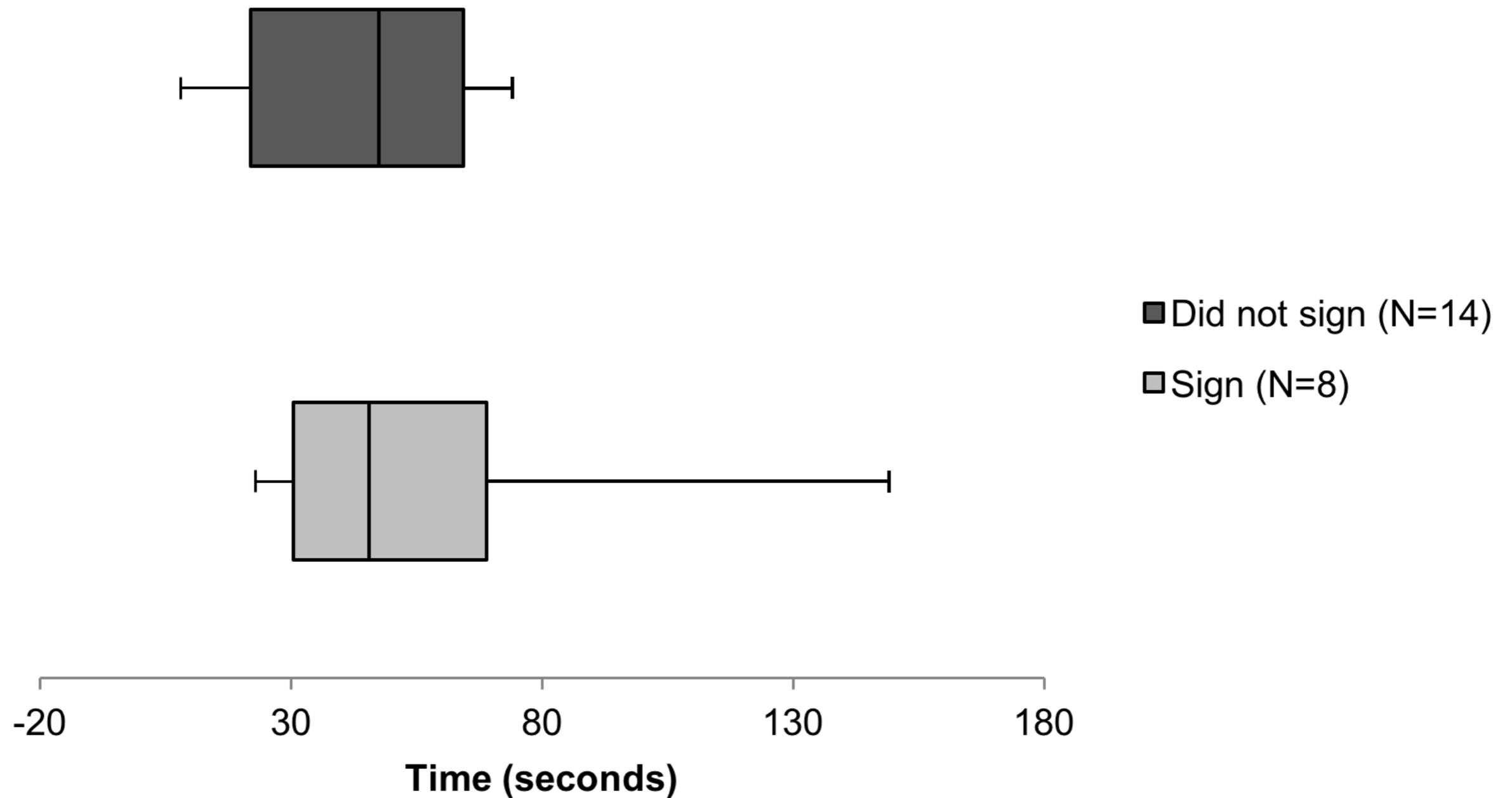
No correlation between the threshold of likes and the number of petition signatories

Table 7.9. Petition signatories based on level of interest in MPs' expenses

Level of interest in MPs' expenses	Signatories	<i>n</i>	%
Very interested	3	11	27.3
Fairly interested	4	16	25.0
Not very interested	1	8	12.5
Not at all interested	0	3	0.0

**Engagement:** Petition signatories based on level of interest in MPs' expenses

Weak correlation between the level of interest and the likelihood of a subject signing the petition



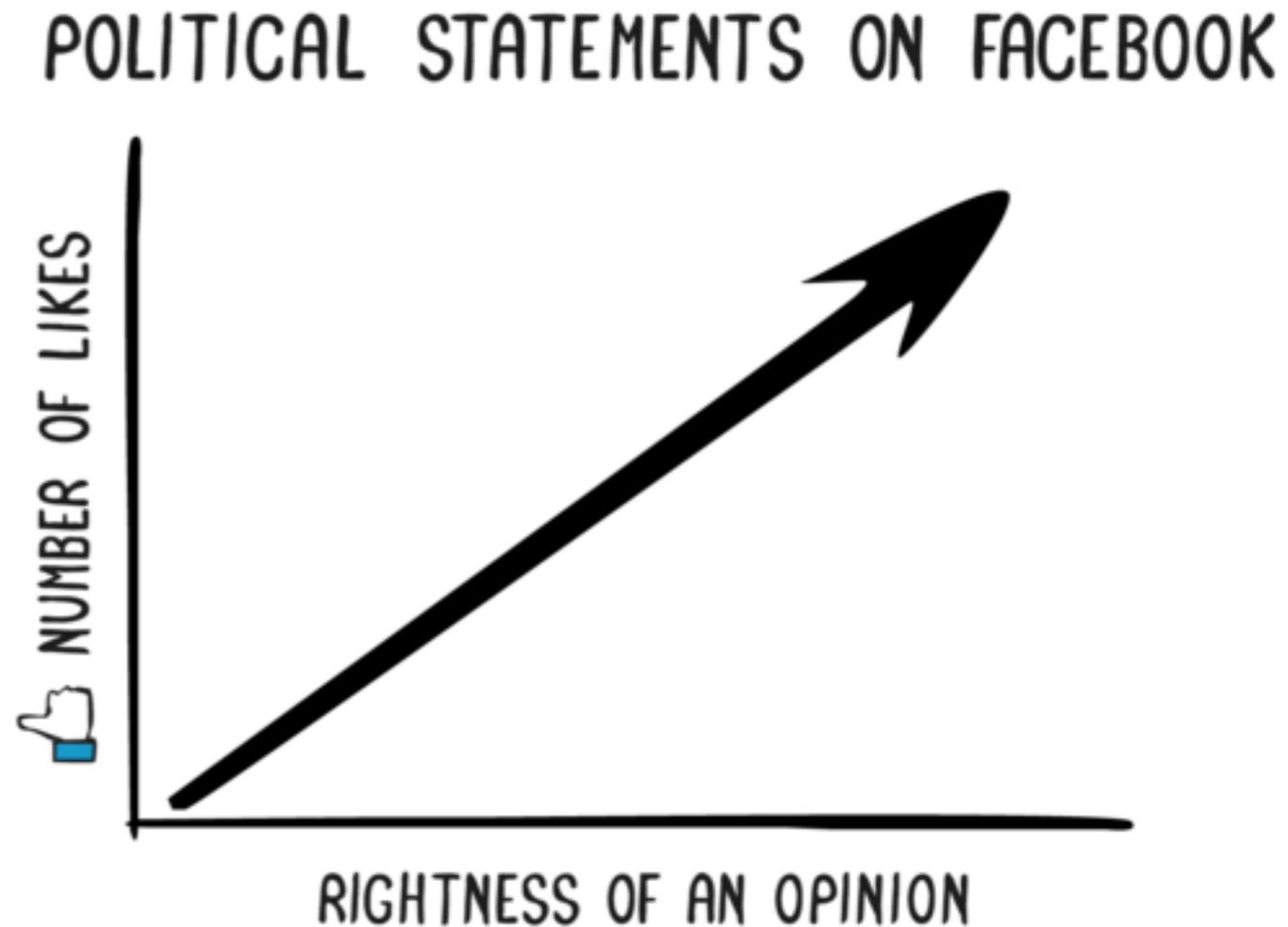
**Engagement:** Amount of time spent on the treatment

Of the eight participants that did sign the e-petition, only three spent more than one minute browsing the page

# Tentative Conclusions: Critical Citizens

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- Threshold of likes did have an association with attention but...
- Threshold of likes had no clear association with engagement measures
- Pre-existing views a more plausible explanation for participation



# Limitations (!) / Disclaimer

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- **Small n:** Low number of participants (and university students!)
- **External validity:** Mundane realisation was key motivation (e.g. Facebook feed; sign in with user credentials; selective exposure), but..
- **vs. Internal validity:**
  - One user account overlooks the effect of specific contacts on user behaviour
  - Artificial newsfeed — each user has a unique news feed; does not take into account FB algorithm
  - Timed and in “lab” setting on a desktop computer





but I would do it again...  
Need for “kludgy” methodologies to  
understand digital behaviours (Karpf,  
2012)

**We need moar experimental workarounds!**

# Thank you for listening

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[james.dennis@port.ac.uk](mailto:james.dennis@port.ac.uk)  
[@jameswilldennis](#)

[jameswilldennis.com](http://jameswilldennis.com)

