UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY SYDNEY

AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR PUBLIC COMMUNICATION

Electioneering 2010: Social media in the Australian federal election

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Introduction

Faced with declining citizen interest and participation in democratic politics (Dahlgren, 2009; McAllister, 2002) and declining citizens' trust in politicians and representative institutions (Gibson, Lusoli & Ward, 2008, pp. 111–113), governments, political parties, and social and political scientists in a number of countries have focused increasing attention on the potential for online communication to address these deficits and revitalise democracy. In particular, the emergence of interactive Web 2.0[1] applications such as blogs, microblogging, social networks, and photo and video sharing sites, referred to as social media, are being increasingly enlisted in political communication during election campaigns as well as for ongoing citizen engagement in what is termed *e-democracy* (Kearns, 2002) or *government 2.0* (Department of Finance and Deregulation, 2010).

Social media were first identified as a significant factor in the 2000 US presidential election campaign (Bentivegna, 2002, p. 50). However, it was the 2004 US presidential election that was "a critical turning point" in use of social media, according to research by Xenos and Moy (2007, p. 704). They reported that "2004 marks the year in which online politics finally reached a mainstream" audience", although Gibson and McAllister (2008a) saw this promise unfulfilled in the Australian federal election of that year.

Following international trends and rapid growth of social media, the 2007 Australian federal election involved social media campaigns by major political parties on an expanding scale, such as the election-winning Australian Labor Party under its *Kevin07* theme as well as political candidates and interest groups. GetUp and specialist sites such as Election Tracker which presented a youth perspective on political issues and You Decide which invited citizens to report on issues in their electorates used social media to gain a voice, along with a number of independent bloggers and YouTube video 'broadcasters' (Flew & Wilson, 2008; Macnamara, 2008a, 2008b).

Nevertheless, while internet reporting and discussion of the election outstripped press, radio and TV coverage in total according to Goot (2008, p. 99), several studies of use of interactive Web 2.0 media by major political actors found that the 2007 Australian federal election did not live up to claims that it was "the YouTube election" ("The YouTube election", 2007) or the "Google election" (Gibson & Ward, 2008, p. 5). Only 13 (5.6%) of Australia's 226 incumbent politicians posted videos on YouTube; only 26 (11.5%) had a MySpace site; just 15 (6.6%) had a blog; eight (3.5%) had a Facebook site; and only seven (3.1%) podcast (Macnamara, 2008a, pp. 8–9). Furthermore, research found that most online media used by politicians and political parties were heavily moderated, with only one politician allowing critical comments to be posted. In short, political communication was carefully orchestrated and citizen comment and participation was restricted to "fan mail" (Macnamara, 2008a, p. 9).

However, the 2008 Obama Presidential campaign took use of social media for political communication to new heights. While much of this was aimed at fund-raising with a reported US$500 million raised online (Macnamara, 2010a, p. 162), a Pew Internet and American Life Project study reported that 46% of all Americans used the internet to access news about the campaign, share their views and mobilise others (Smith & Rainie, 2008, p. i). Whereas 13% of Americans said they had watched a video about the 2004 campaign online, 35% reported watching at least one political video in 2008 (p. ii). Perhaps even more significantly, 19% of Americans reported going online weekly to "do something related to the campaign" (p. i). This suggests a coming of age of online political engagement and draws attention to the 2010 UK and Australian elections as sites to further examine trends in e-electioneering and e-democracy.

Australians went to the polls in late August 2010 in a media-hyped flurry of tweeting, YouTube videos, Facebook befriending, blogging, and other social media activities, providing a further opportunity to examine social media use in electioneering and gain comparative data to identify trends since 2007.

Background

Use of the internet for political communication has been studied by many scholars and organisations throughout the late 20th century and early 21st century including Bentivegna (2002), Hill and Hughes (1998), Jones (1995, 1998), Livingstone (1999); McChesney (1996, 2000a, 2000b), de Sola Pool (1983, 1990), Schneider (1996, 1997), and the Markle Foundation (1997). A number of studies, particularly those pre-2004, have identified major limitations and even detrimental effects of online communication. For instance, critics and sceptics point to a 'digital divide' between those with access to new digital media and those with restricted or no access because of financial or other limitations (Gandy, 2002; Hoffman & Novak, 1998; Novak & Hoffman, 1998). Also some writers have warned of a further decline in social cohesion and social capital (Putnam, 1995, 2000; Shapiro & Leone, 1999; Wellman, 2000) caused by depersonalisation inherent in mediated internet communication and time spent with media rather than human interaction, termed the displacement hypothesis (Sparks, 2006, pp. 72–73).

However, many of these studies were undertaken before the evolution of what is termed Web 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2005), a range of interactive internet applications that spawned what are referred to as 'new media' (Flew, 2005, 2008; Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2002, 2005) or *social media* (the term used in this analysis). For instance, YouTube was launched in 2005, Twitter commenced operations in July 2006, and Facebook opened to the public only in September 2006[2]. Many of the social media most widely used today were in their infancy even at the time of the 2007 Australian federal election, which necessitates ongoing study to understand their use and potential effects. Today, Facebook is the world's largest social network with 500 million active members as at July 2010 (Facebook, 2010a). In the same month, more than two billion videos a day were being viewed on YouTube (2010) and two billion 'tweets' a month were being distributed on Twitter (O'Dell, 2010).

More recent studies and analyses including those of Chen (2008), Chen and Walsh (2009), Corner (2007), Dahlgren (2009), Flew and Wilson (2008), Gibson, Römmele and Ward (2004), Gibson and McAllister (2008b), Goot (2008), Macnamara (2008a, 2008b, 2010b), Smith and Rainie (2008), and others have been more optimistic than previous studies – albeit still cautious and qualified on some issues, and still with many unanswered questions.

Election campaigns form an important part of the *public sphere* proposed by Habermas (1989) as a space in which citizens come together and engage in "rational-critical debate" to become informed, contribute to political discourse, and reach consensus expressed in the form of 'public opinion'. Despite being criticised as a normative ideal (Curran, 2002, p. 45) and elusiveness in its realisation, Habermas (2006) describes the public sphere as "part of the bedrock of liberal democracies" (p. 412).

In contemporary democracies, the public sphere is recognised as predominantly a mediated space (Corner, 2007; Dahlgren, 2009; Garnham, 1992; Howley, 2007; Louw, 2005). Throughout the 20th century, this mediated public sphere was principally comprised of *mass media*. However, as shown by statistics on the size and growth of *social media* such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, these are now significant forms of media, and research in

Australia during the 2007 election, the US Obama campaign in 2008, and the 2010 UK national poll, shows that social media are an increasing part of the public sphere.

This study reports quantitative and qualitative content analysis of social media use by federal politicians and major political parties in the 2010 Australian federal election, compared with findings of a similar study of the 2007 Australian federal election (Macnamara, 2008a, 2008b, 2010a).

Research aims and objectives

To understand how social media are being used in political communication and compare 2010 election practices with 2007, two types of research questions were developed for this study, one relating to quantitative factors (how much and how many), and one relating to qualitative factors (how and in what way). As well as identifying the volume of social media content in relation to electioneering and comparing this with 2007, this study sought to examine levels of *interactivity* in the form of response and dialogue, and *authenticity* in social media use – factors identified as central to Web 2.0 and communication generally (Boler, 2008; Buber, 1947/2002, 1958; Bucy, 2004; Carpentier, 2007; Merholz, 2005, para. 5; O'Reilly, 2005).

The following five research questions were investigated in the quantitative stage of this study:

1. To what extent has social media use overall increased in the 2010 federal election compared with 2007 (an increase was reasonable to assume based on international studies in the US in 2008 and the UK in 2010)?
2. Which types of social media were most used by political candidates and political parties?
3. How much social media content of various types was produced and distributed by political candidates and political parties during the 2010 federal election (i.e. the number of tweets on Twitter, videos on YouTube, blog posts, etc)?
4. Which politicians used social media most by type and overall?
5. Which political parties, age groups, and gender used social media most by type and overall?

In addition, this study qualitatively explored the following three research questions:

6. To what extent did politicians and political parties respond to and engage in *dialogue* with citizens in social media?
7. What were the main uses of social media by politicians and political parties (explored by coding content into categories such as discussion of social and political issues, broadcast campaign messages and slogans; personal information; reporting campaign activities; responses to questions or comments, and so on)?
8. To what extent did politicians and political parties *control* their social media sites through moderation to block content, or strategies such as using Facebook pages which can be 'liked' but not commented on unless a user already 'likes' the site? This question included exploring the extent to which politicians and political parties accepted and displayed criticism or negative comment.

Methodology

This study used content analysis of social media sites deployed in a mixed method approach in two stages. This notes that content analysis is "the primary message-centred methodology" for analysing texts (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 9) and, while Neuendorf describes content analysis as a "quantitative analysis of messages that relies on the scientific method" (p. 10), other researchers describe qualitative uses (Curran, 2002; Neuman, 2006; Newbold, Boyd-Barrett & Van Den Bulck, 2002; Priest, 2010; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). These borrow techniques from text analysis as well as semiotic, discourse, frame, and theme analysis (Berger, 2000; Frey, Botan & Kreps, 2000; Priest, 2010; Punch, 1998).

In the first stage of research, quantitative data were collected in relation to research questions 1 – 6 by systematically counting and recording statistics such as the numbers of 'friends', 'followers', 'following', 'likes', views, blog and Wall posts, tweets, and comments from all relevant sites. These data were recorded and analysed in a series of Excel worksheets, including comparative analysis with 2007 data.

The second stage of research was informed by quantitative data in relation to responses to citizens' comments and inquiries, 'following' numbers in Twitter (as opposed to 'followers'), and other interactivity features such as 'contact me/us'. In addition, qualitative analysis of the content published by the 10 most active users of Twitter and Facebook was conducted to explore questions 6 – 8. Open or *in vivo* coding as identified by Glaser (1978) and Punch (1998, pp. 210–214) was conducted on Tweets, Wall posts and comments to categorise content as per a coding list provided in Appendix A. Open or *in vivo* coding was considered sufficient for the purposes of this study.

Sample

Quantitative analysis focussed on incumbent federal politicians standing for re-election in 2010 to the 150-member House of Representatives and the 76-member Senate in the Australian Parliament. This produced a sample of 206 federal politicians, with 20 sitting members not standing for re-election. In addition, this study examined the social media sites of the two major political parties – the Australian Labor Party and the Liberal Party of Australia.

Qualitative analysis was conducted of the 'top 10' most active politicians' Twitter and Facebook accounts, the two major social media platforms used in the election. This sub-sample was identified by the volume of tweets, Wall posts and comments.

Period

Quantitative and qualitative analysis were conducted of all sites in the sample during the final three weeks of the election campaign from 1 August to 6 pm on 21 August (the close of polls)[3].

Limitations

The study did not include analysis of social media use by political candidates who were not sitting members. Many electorates had five or more candidates. However, many of these were from minor parties and inexperienced in federal politics. It was considered that sitting MPs and Senators were likely to be the best resourced and most prepared for political campaigning and, therefore, a representative site for a study of e-electioneering. A broader study of candidates would offer further useful insights, however.

Also, the study did not analyse political interest groups and activist groups such as GetUp. In a study of the 2007 Australian federal election, it was noted that such groups were more interactive users of social media than political parties and politicians. However, detailed analysis of these groups was considered beyond the scope of this study and deserving of further specific research.

Findings – quantitative

Overview

The most common online form of communication by federal politicians in 2010, as in 2007, was personal Web sites. During the 2010 Australian federal election, 157 re-standing federal politicians had a personal Web site (76.2%), compared with 137 in 2007 (60.6%). This shows a slight increase since 2007 when most incumbent politicians relied on their Australian Parliament House Web page for online communication (all 226 sitting MPs and Senators have a www.aph.gov.au Web page).

Facebook was the most used social media/network with a substantial number of politicians' 'profiles' and 'pages', followed by Twitter, YouTube, and blogs. MySpace, which was the most used social network in 2007, was much less popular in 2010, surpassed by Flickr for online sharing of photos. E-newsletters remained popular, but use of e-surveys and e-petitions declined (See Table 1). Nevertheless, the total number of politicians' online sites and activities increased by more than 100% over 2007.

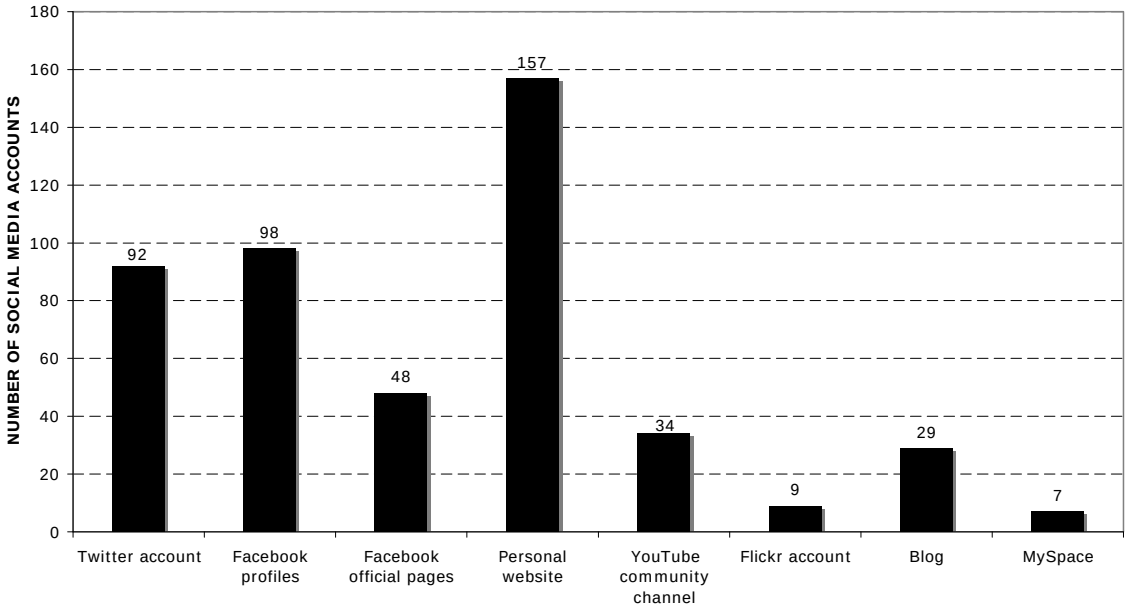

Figure 1. Social media most used by Australian federal politicians in 2010

Politicians on Twitter

The major growth areas in social media use in 2010 compared with 2007 were Twitter and Facebook. Twitter was not used to any discernible level by politicians in 2007 having only been launched in July 2006 in the US. In the 2010 Australian federal election campaign, 92 federal politicians (44.7%) had a Twitter account, although the volume and style of tweeting varied widely as will be discussed later.

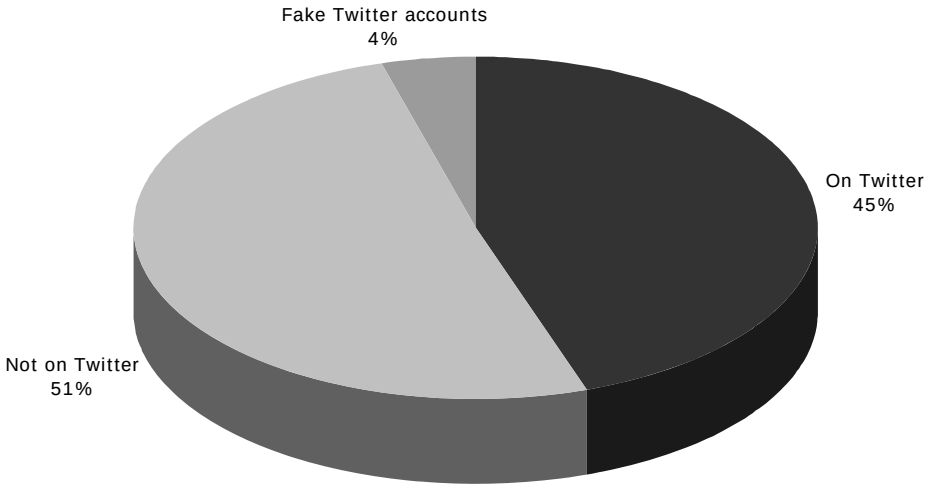

Figure 2. Australian politicians and Twitter in 2010

Politicians on Facebook

Almost all federal politicians had a Facebook presence of some kind in 2010, compared with just eight (3.5%) in 2007. However, clarification and segmentation of the different types of Facebook presence is necessary. Facebook allows creation of 'profiles' of individuals as well as two types of 'pages' – 'official pages' and 'community pages' – which can be established for organisations, companies, public figures, celebrities, or topics of interest. 'Profiles' display very limited information publicly, but through user-selected security and interactivity options allow for 'friends' to gain full 'read' and 'write' access to contribute content as Wall posts and comments on articles, photos, and videos. Both 'official pages' and 'community pages' display all content publicly, but do not allow for 'friends' to join. Visitors can only 'like' pages using Facebook's 'Like' button (Facebook, 2010b). Importantly in terms of this analysis, 'community pages' are often created by third parties unconnected with the entity or topic discussed on the page such as fans or 'hate groups'. Therefore 'community pages' of politicians and political parties were not counted or analysed in this study. Furthermore, because 'official pages' are less personal and less interactive, these were counted separately to Facebook 'profiles'.

Excluding third-party established 'community pages' that had no involvement of the politician or political party, 98 federal politicians had Facebook profiles (47.6%) and 48 (23.3%) had official pages, as shown in Figure 1. In total, more than 70% of federal politicians (146) were active to some extent on Facebook.

YouTube, blogs and other online media

In 2010, 34 federal politicians (16.5%) posted videos to YouTube, compared with 13 in 2007 (5.75%), and 29 (14.1%) had a blog compared with 15 (6.6%) in 2007. Nine politicians posted photos to Flickr in 2010 compared with negligible use in 2007, while podcasts, e-surveys, and e-petitions were all used less than in 2007.

MySpace

The 'biggest loser' among social media in the 2010 federal election was MySpace, with just nine federal politicians listing a MySpace site (4.4%), compared with 26 (11.5%) in 2007. Furthermore, most of these were inactive and have been for some time. For instance, Wayne Swan's MySpace site was last updated on 16 July 2007 and his 'About me' section begins: "Hello, I'm Wayne Swan, Treasurer of Australia in the Rudd Labor Government"

(http://www.myspace.com/wayneswan). The Labor Party continues to maintain an official MySpace site with 23,506 friends, but the ALP MySpace blog has not been updated since 25 July 2007. This is explained by the rapid growth of Facebook in comparison with MySpace and the latter's market repositioning as a specialist social network.

From this overview, the major shifts in social media use by politicians over the 2007–2010 period can be seen as massive increases in use of Twitter and Facebook; substantially increased use of personal Web sites, YouTube, blogs, e-newsletters and Flickr (the latter from a small base); and a decline in use of MySpace, e-surveys and e-petitions.

Social media	2007	2010	% change
Personal Web site	137	157	14.6%
Twitter	0	92	9200.0%
Facebook	8	146	1725.0%
YouTube	13	34	161.5%
MySpace	26	9	-65.4%
Blogs	15	29	93.3%
Flickr	0	9	900.0%
E-surveys	24	7	-70.8%
E-petitions	10	3	-70.0%
E-newsletter	42	78	85.7%
Total online sites/activities	**275**	**564**	**105.1%**

Table 1. Change in the number of politicians using various social media from 2007 to 2010.

Volume of social media content produced by politicians

In total, 2,273 tweets were posted on Twitter by incumbent federal politicians during the final three weeks of campaigning 1–21 August 2010. Significantly, 1,395 of these (61%) were posted by the 'top 10' politician tweeters. The total volume of Facebook Wall posts was difficult to calculate as these are publicly visible on 'pages' but only visible to 'friends' on Facebook profiles. From analysis of Facebook 'pages' and of profiles of politicians who accepted the researcher as 'friends', a high volume of Wall posts and 'notes' was evident, however. A number of politicians posted speeches as 'notes' on their Facebook profile or page, as well as Wall posts about their activities and policies.

Politicians using most social media

The politicians most active in social media in terms of the number of social media types and activities used are listed in Figure 3. This presents some surprises with Labor Senator Ursula Stephens; Liberal MP Scott Morrison; Labor's Jim Turnour; Liberal Senators Eric Abetz and Guy Barnett; Greens Senator Bob Brown; Victorian Liberal Kelly O'Dwyer; Labor MPs Bernie Ripoll and Bill Shorten; and Liberal MP Andrew Southcott the 'top 10' most socially networked politicians. Liberal shadow minister Joe Hockey was just out of the top 10. This shows a relatively even mix of Liberal (5), Labor (4), and Greens (1) politicians active in social media.

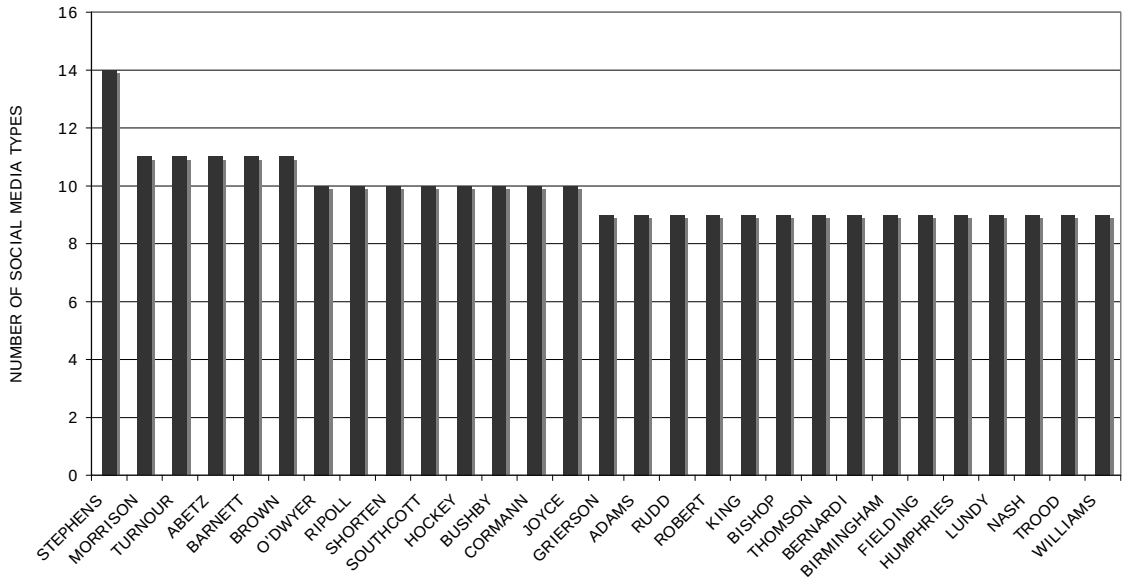

Figure 3. Australian federal politicians with the most social media sites and applications in 2010.

Politicians most active on Twitter

Figure 4 shows that the most active tweeters among federal politicians during the final three weeks of the election campaign were the Liberals' Malcolm Turnbull with 439 tweets, Scott Morrison with 158, and Andrew Robb with 142. Other frequent tweeters were Labor MP Tony Burke (134); Labor Senator Kate Lundy (104); Liberal Senator Mathias Corman (91); Liberal MP Alex Hawke (90); Labor MP Kate Ellis (90); Prime Minister Julia Gillard (75); and Greens Senator Sarah Hanson-Young (72).

Prime Minister Julia Gillard started using Twitter only at the beginning of the month in which the campaign was called (3 July), but tweeted regularly in the final three weeks of the campaign, while Opposition leader Tony Abbot managed only two tweets during the three weeks of this study and only four tweets during the whole election campaign.

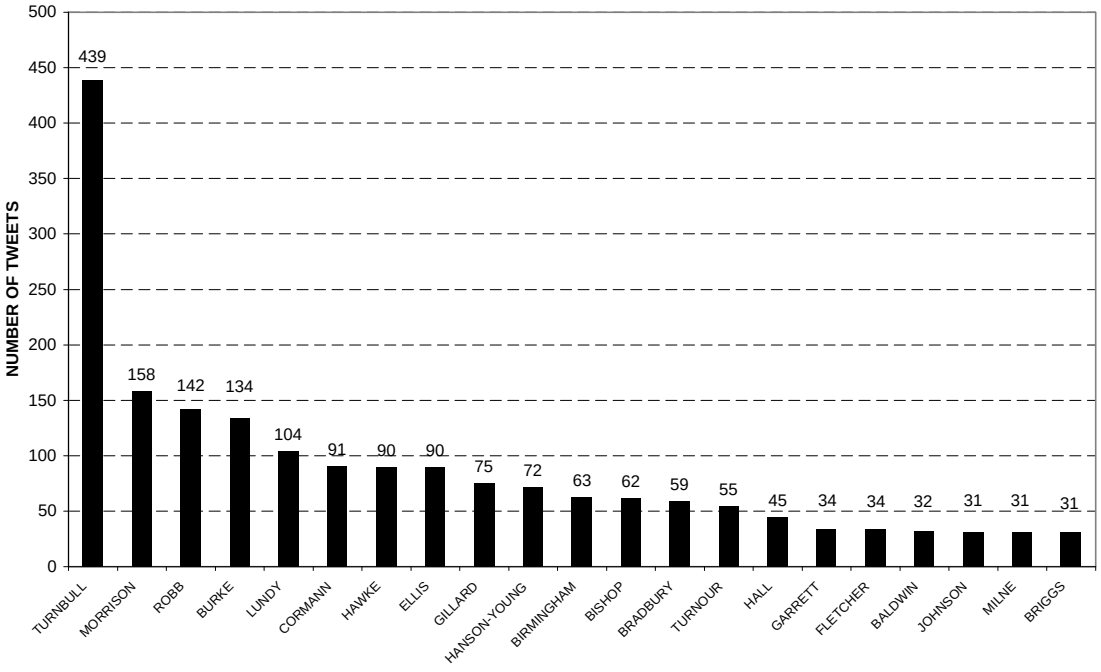

Figure 4. Top 20 most active tweeters among federal politicians.

Politicians most active on Facebook

In Facebook, most senior federal politicians used 'official pages' rather than personal profiles, with a few also having unofficial 'community pages'. Of the high profile leaders, most who had Facebook profile restricted the content of these and their Facebook 'friends' to their personal life, with political communication mostly undertaken on 'official pages'. Figure 5 shows the number social media users who 'liked' federal politicians' Facebook pages and the number of Facebook 'friends' of politicians. This shows that Prime Minister Julia Gillard dominated Facebook, followed closely by former PM Kevin Rudd. Other politicians prominent on Facebook were Greens Leader Bob Brown, Opposition leader Tony Abbott, and Liberal MPs Malcolm Turnbull and Joe Hockey.

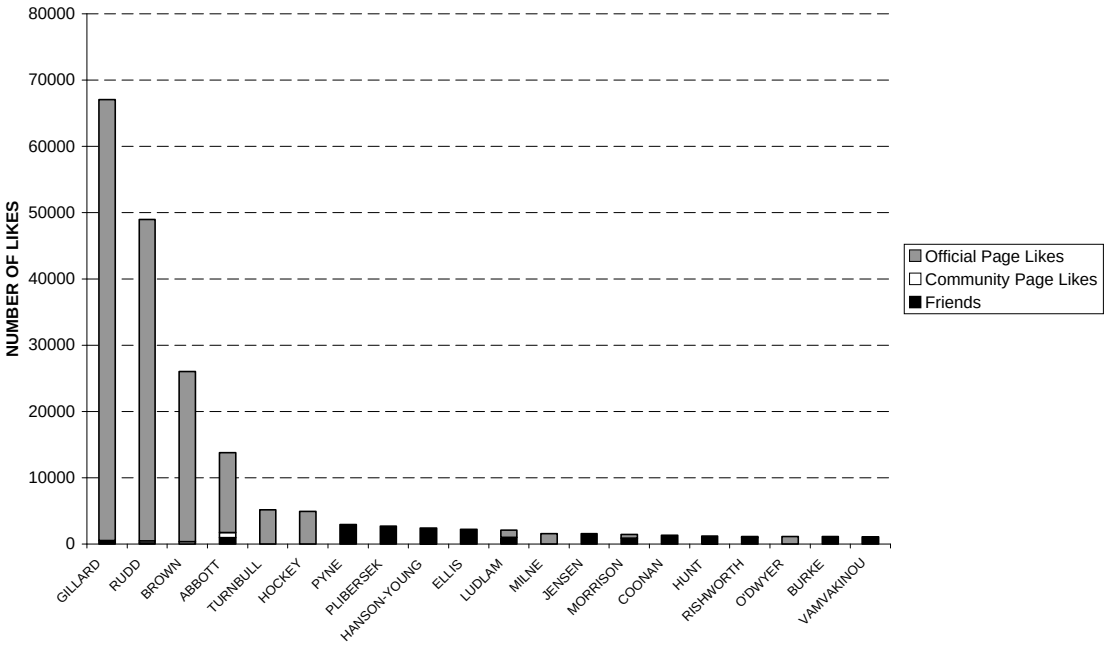

Figure 5. Australian federal politicians with most 'liked' Facebook pages and most 'friends'.

If the Prime Minister and the 'Rudd factor'[4] are removed from this data set, Figure 6 shows that a number of other politicians were relatively active on Facebook. It also shows that, other than the party leaders, deputies, and former or alternative leaders, most federal politicians accepted 'friends' on their Facebook profiles rather than use less personal community pages. The reluctance of leaders to accept 'friends' is most likely a consequence of the volume and workload involved with high popularity.

An interesting observation is that, on a proportional basis, more Liberal politicians used Facebook profiles versus official pages, whereas Labor politicians proportionally relied more on official pages which are less personal than profiles (i.e. they can only be 'liked' rather than become 'friends'). See Figure 7 for a breakdown by political party.

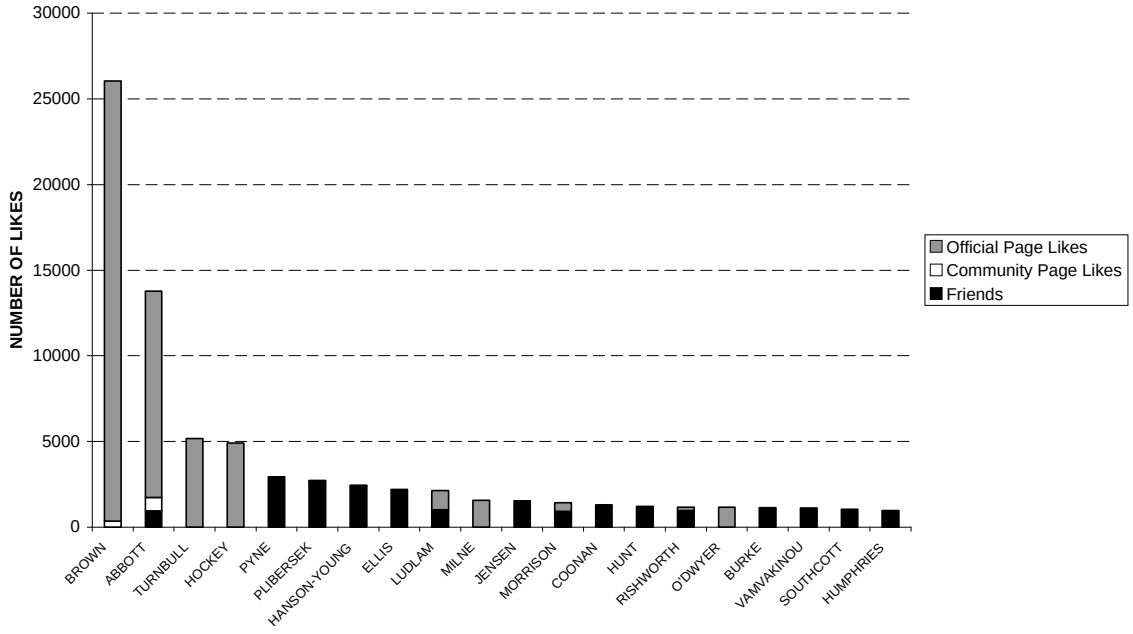

Figure 6. Australian federal politicians with most 'liked' Facebook pages and most 'friends' excluding Prime Minister Julia Gillard and former PM Kevin Rudd.

Politicians' social media use by party

Analysis showed approximately equal use of social media by the major political parties, although on a proportional basis, Liberal MPs and Senators used social media slightly more than Labor Party politicians who held a substantial majority in the parliament before the 2010 election. As shown in Figure 7, 42 Liberal politicians used Twitter compared with 39 of their Labor counterparts, 17 had YouTube channels compared with 13 Labor politicians, and 12 Liberals had blogs compared with 9 Labor politician bloggers. More Labor politicians had active Facebook profiles or official pages (71), compared with 56 Liberal 'Facebookers', although this was near equal on a proportional basis. While the three most prolific 'tweeters' were Liberals, the top 10 'tweeters' included five Liberals, four Labor, and one Greens politician, indicating relatively even social media usage.

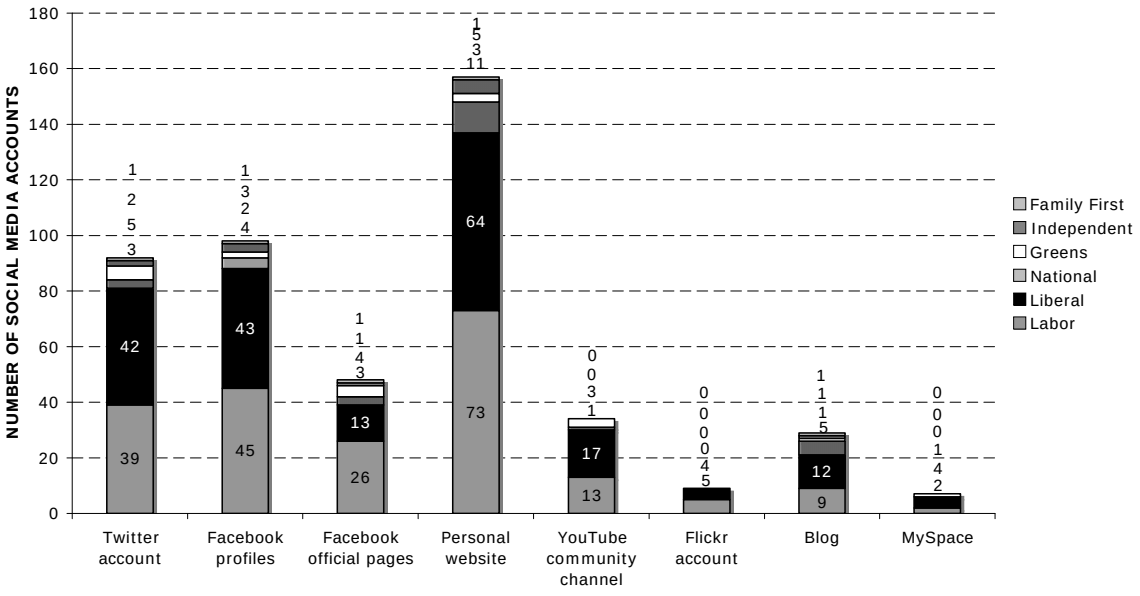

Figure 7. The number of federal politicians using social media by political party.

Politicians' social media use by age group

Analysis also found little difference in social media use among various age groups and no support for a generalised view that younger people use social media more than their older counterparts. Figure 8 show a wide age spread in politicians using Web sites and social media, with over-60s using Twitter (11), Facebook (20), blogs (3), and YouTube (1). Politicians aged 46–60 were the largest group on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, blogs, and with personal Web sites, as shown in Figure 8. This reflects the distribution of politicians' ages fairly closely.

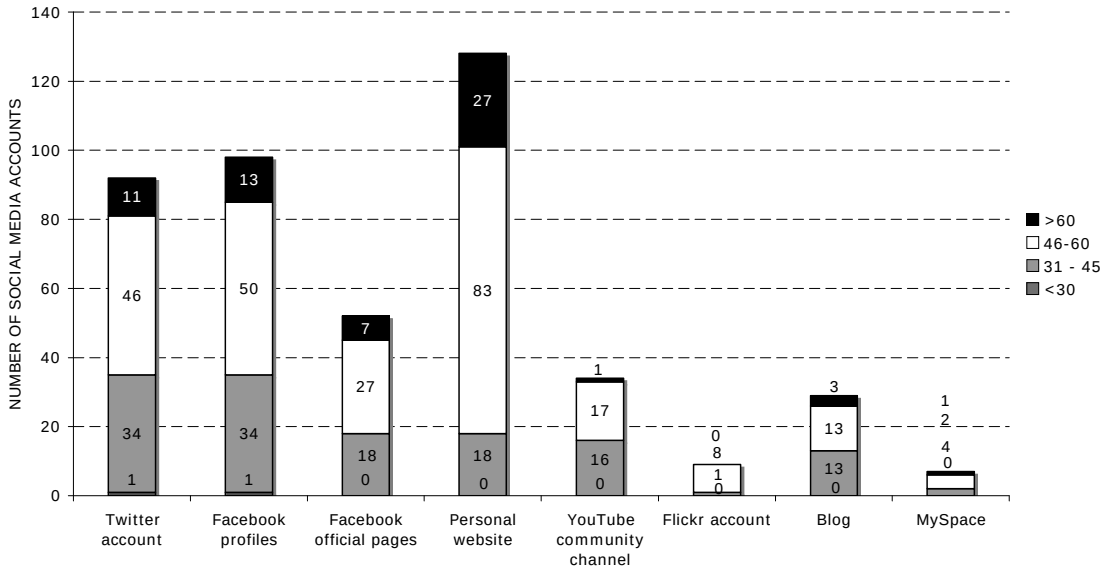

Figure 8. The number of federal politicians using social media by age group.

The one exception was a slight skew to younger politicians on Twitter as shown in Figure 9, with older politicians favouring personal Web sites and Facebook.

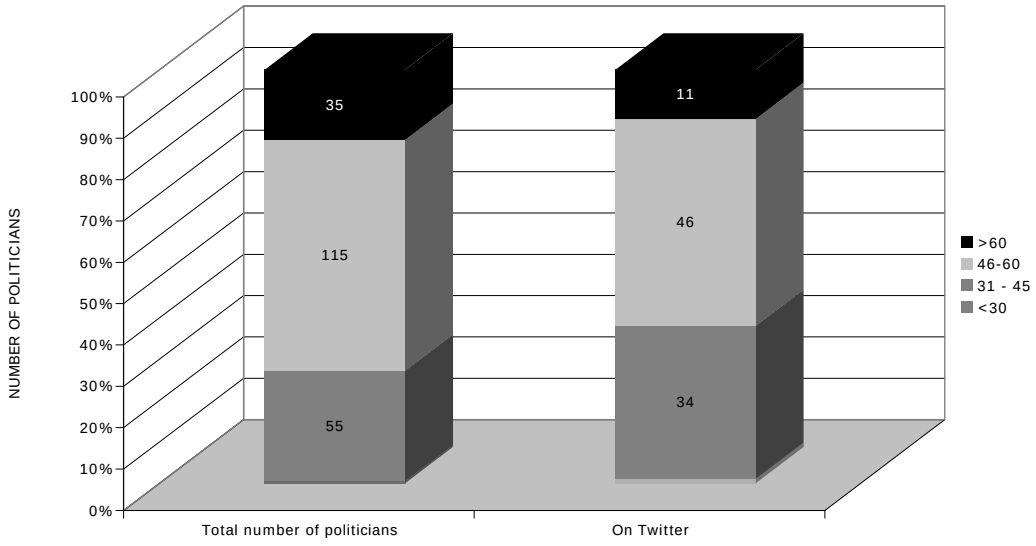

Figure 9. The number of federal politicians using Twitter by age group compared with the total number of federal politicians.

Politicians' social media use by gender

There was also little difference in social media use by politicians on the basis of gender. Overall, on a proportional basis, women politicians were present in social media slightly more often than men but, as shown in Figures 3–6, men dominated social media use in most categories, with only the Prime Minister Julia Gillard, Labor MPs Kate Ellis and Tanya Plibersek, Labor Senator Kate Lundy, and Greens Senator Sarah Hanson-Young being consistently in the top 10 most active users and most 'liked' and 'followed' in Twitter, Facebook, and other social media analysed.

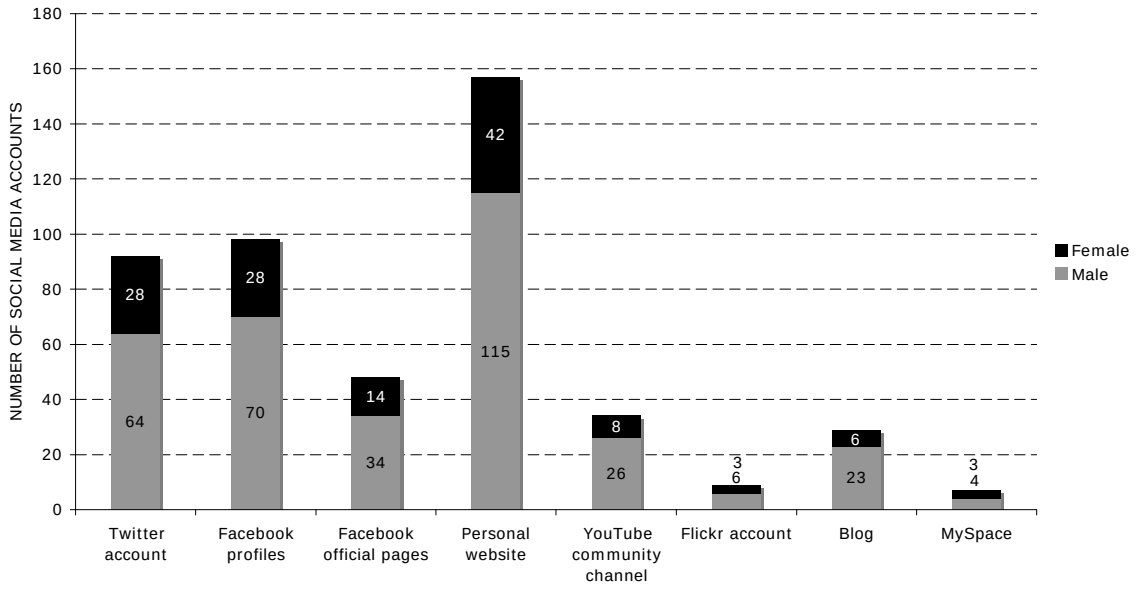

Figure 10. The number of male and female politicians using social media.

Fake social media

In addition to the almost 45% of federal politicians who had Twitter accounts, eight (4%) were victims of fake Twitter accounts as shown in Figure 2, including the Prime Minister Julia Gillard. Most fake accounts were 'outed' in a short time. While internet content is largely unregulated, resulting in the Web being hailed by some as a "Wild West" (Fitch, 2009), it does appear to exercise an emergent form of self-regulation (Macnamara, 2010a) through the role of what Eysenbach (2008) calls *apomediaries* – volunteer monitors who stand alongside (*apo*) rather than between (*inter*) content and users as traditional intermediaries such as media 'gatekeepers' do. Social media users quickly pointed out fakes.

Political parties' sites

Quantitative analysis of the sites of the two major political parties also showed increased use of social media in the 2010 federal election compared with the 2007 campaign. While all major political parties used each of the major social media to some extent in 2007 – and *Kevin07* in particular made major use of blogs, MySpace and YouTube – the volume of content distributed through social media and the level of engagement increased substantially in 2010. Table 2 lists the major social media used by the Australian Labor Party and the Liberal Party of Australia with key metrics on the types of content posted, as well as the numbers of views, uploads, members, 'likes', 'followers' and 'following'.

Party	Social media	Content & metrics	Site
ALP	Web site		http://www.alp.org.au/home
	Labor TV (YouTube channel)	32 video uploads 230,171 channel visits 1,247,009 total views 42nd most viewed in Aug	http://www.alp.org.au/labortv
	Labor Blog	32 posts	http://www.alp.org.au/blogs/alp-blog
	Twitter account	788 tweets in period 5,617 followers 4,203 following 1,735 total tweets	http://twitter.com/australianlabor
	Facebook page	3,467 'likes' 75 wall posts 616 comments	http://www.facebook.com/LaborConnect
	Labor ThinkTank	308 ideas 315 comments	http://thinktank.alp.org.au/issues
	Labor Connect	2,936 members	http://connect.alp.org.au
	MySpace	23,505 friends 6 comments 0 blog posts since 25/07/07	http://www.myspace.com/officiallaborspace
	Flickr		http://www.flickr.com/photos/juliagillard
LIB	Web site		http://www.liberal/org.au
	Liberal.TV (YouTube channel)	9 video uploads 98, 373 channel visits 639,111 total views 83rd most viewed in Aug	
	Twitter account	188 tweets in period 7,089 followers 6,645 following 1,985 total tweets	http://twitter.com/liberalaus
	Facebook page	16,450 'likes' 35 wall posts 2,959 comments	http://www.facebook.com/LiberalPartyAustralia
	Flickr		http://www.flickr.com/photos/tonyabbott

Table 2. Social media use by the two major political parties.

As shown in Table 2, the Labor Party used more types of social media than the Liberal Party with its customised social space Labor Connect, its official Labor blog, its issues discussion site Labor ThinkTank, a MySpace site, a YouTube channel, an official Facebook page, and a party Twitter account. Labor also published considerably more content in social media, including 788 tweets on its party Twitter site, compared with 188 tweets posted by the Liberal Party; 32 videos uploaded to its YouTube channel compared with nine uploaded to the Liberal YouTube channel; and 75 Wall posts on its official Facebook page compared with 35 Wall posts by the Liberal Party during the period of analysis (the final three weeks of the campaign). Labor had almost 1.25 million views of its videos compared with just under 640,000 views of Liberal videos.

However, the Liberal Party had more 'followers' on Twitter (7,089) compared with 5,617 who followed the Labor Party, and also was 'following' more Twitter users (6,645) than Labor (4,203) during the period. The Liberal Party appeared to focus more on individual tweeting by its politicians as shown in Figure 4, and also appeared to focus on Facebook in its

social media strategy. The Liberal Party's Facebook page attracted 16,450 'likes' compared with Labor's that had 3,467 'likes', and the Liberal Party's official Facebook page drew a sizeable 2,959 comments, compared with 616 comments on Labor's Facebook page.

Findings – qualitative

Based on coding of the content of leading Facebook and Twitter accounts of politicians, this analysis found that, apart from a few notable exceptions, politicians used social media primarily for one-way transmission of political messages, rather than citizen engagement or listening to the electorate. A significant proportion of their social media content was comprised of election slogans, attacking opponents, and political rhetoric – much of it of a banal nature.

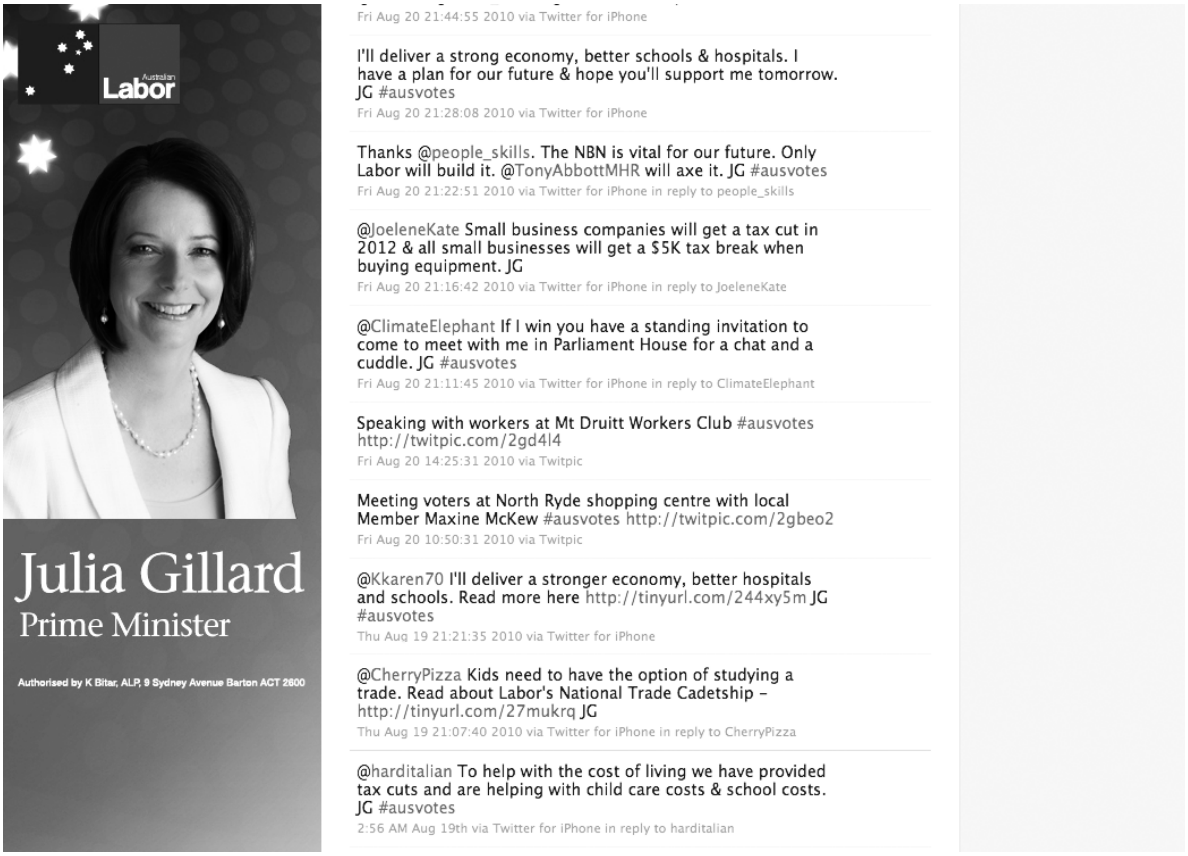

Figure 11. Prime Minister Julia Gillard's Twitter site showing frequent tweeting of election slogans.

Analysis of 73 tweets by the Prime Minister Julia Gillard during the period found frequent statements such as "I'll deliver a strong economy, better hospitals and schools". This campaign 'slogan' was used twice in slightly different forms in the eight tweets shown in Figure 11. Also, this two-day period of tweets included "the NBN is vital for our future. Only Labor will build it". @TonyAbbottMHR will axe it. JG." Most of the Prime Minister's tweets related to campaign promises and notifications of her campaigning whereabouts and activities such as "I'm in Melbourne giving a major speech on our National Disability Strategy" (28 July).

The Opposition leader Tony Abbott tweeted only twice during the period and his tokenistic effort included "the Coalition will stop the waste, stop the taxes and stop the boats" taken directly from the Liberal Party TV advertising campaign (See Figure 12).

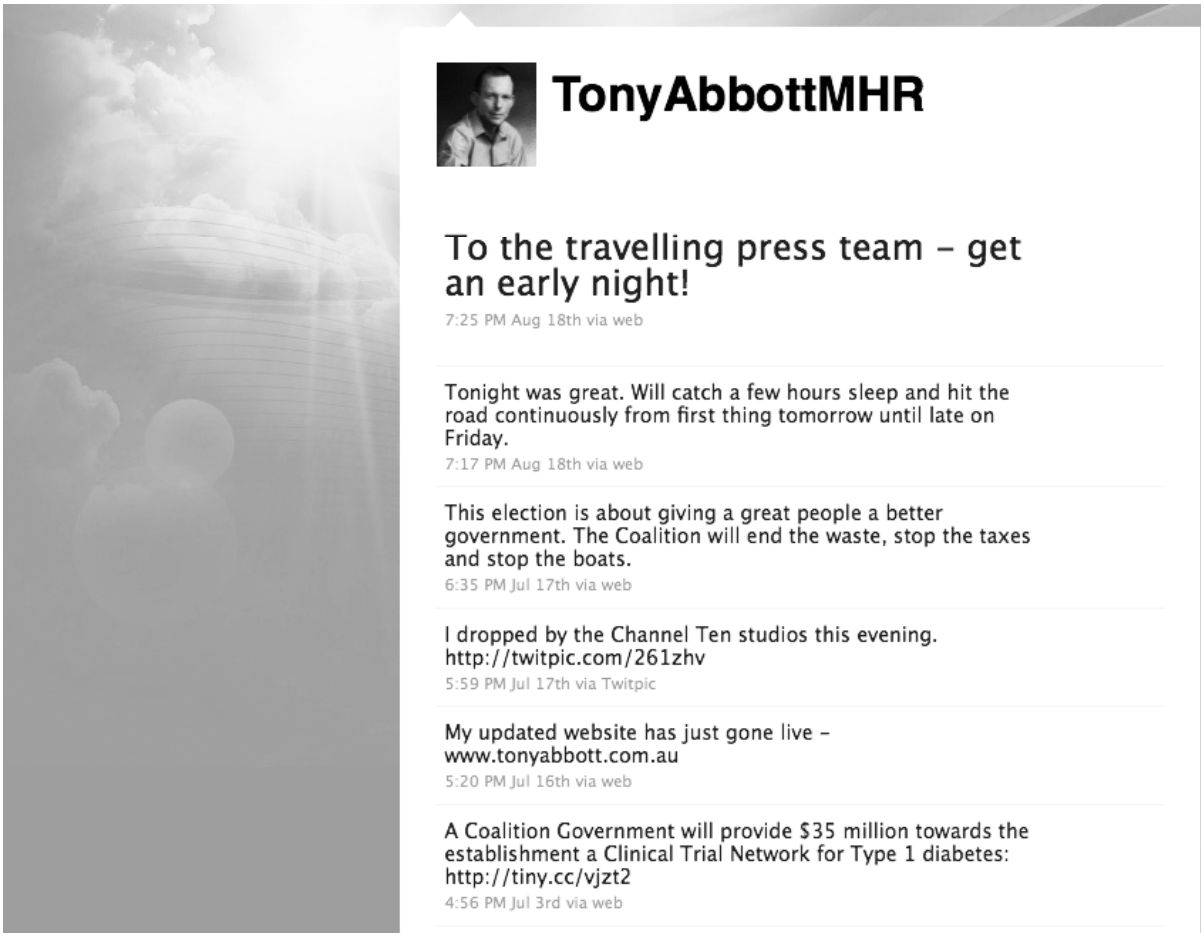

Figure 12. Opposition Leader Tony Abbott's Twitter site showing tweeting of election slogans.

Interactivity, response, listening and dialogue

Extensive literature identifies that the key characteristics of Web 2.0 social media practices[5] are human interactivity as defined by McMillan (2002) and Carpentier (2007) through dialogue and conversation including listening and response to others, as well as affording voice (Boler, 2008; Bucy, 2004; Merholz, 2005; O'Reilly, 2005). A number of factors can be measured to indicate interactivity online including:

- Provision of personal e-mail addresses for direct contact (versus 'contact us' forms);
- The number of others who a Twitter user is 'following' (versus 'followers'). This indicates interest in the views of others and potentially listening;
- The number of direct responses to individuals versus broadcast messsages;
- The number of responses to issues raised by citizens;
- The number and type of comments posted on sites;
- Dialogue (evidenced by multiple sequential posts on an issue involving more than the site owner).

Analysis of the first of these measures revealed that 90 federal politicians (43.7%) provided only a contact form on their sites. Only 73 (35.4%) provided a personal e-mail address. The vast majority provided an address and phone number, but this was almost always their electorate office where inquiries are directed to staff.

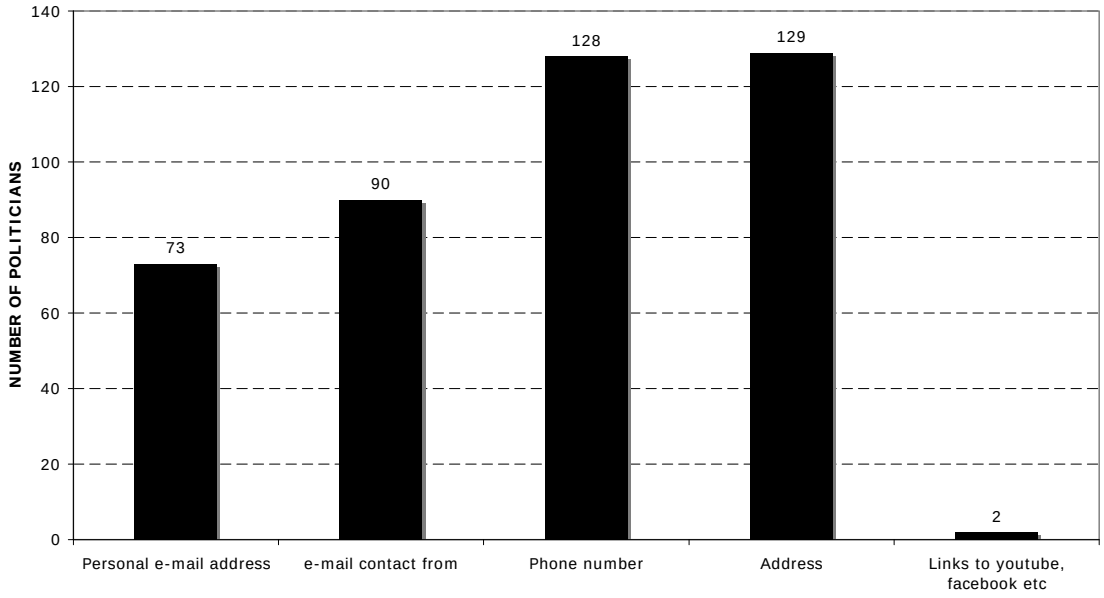

Figure 13. The forms of contact with politicians made available on politicians' online sites.

One of the most revealing indicators of the objectives and purposes of social media use is the number of people who Twitter users are 'following' compared with their volume of 'followers'. While the number of 'followers' is an indicator of popularity, the number of people who a user is 'following' is an indicator of reciprocal interest and listening. In this regard, politicians fall down considerably – with a few notable exceptions. Figure 14 shows a considerable disparity between followers and following for most politicians on Twitter, with a vastly greater number of followers than people followed. One of the most pronounced was Opposition Leader Tony Abbott who had 19,083 followers in the week before the election, but was following just 20 other Twitter users. He did not appear in Figure 14 as he tweeted only twice during the final three weeks of the election campaign.

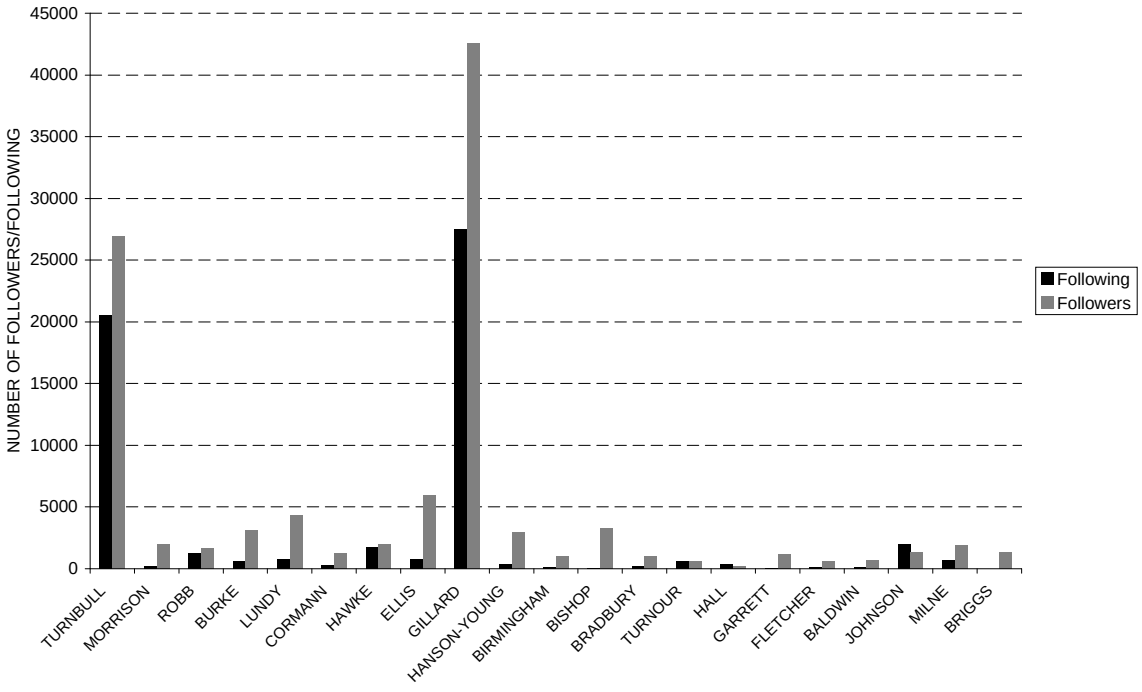

Figure 14. The number of followers of the 'top 20' most prolific politician tweeters and the number of Twitter users they were following.

The two exceptions to the predominance of speaking over listening on Twitter were Malcolm Turnbull and Prime Minister Julia Gillard who were following a lesser but nevertheless substantial number of other Twitter users compared with their followers. Julia Gillard was following 27,467 people on Twitter the week before the election, compared with 43,538 followers, while Malcolm Turnbull was following 20,498 compared with 26,943 followers. Former PM Kevin Rudd had a large number of followers (944,000) and was following almost 230,000 other Twitter users at the beginning of the campaign, but his situation is considered to be non-typical, as much of this was due to his tenure and then sudden removal as Prime Minister.

It would be naive to suggest that following on Twitter equates to active personal listening or considering the views of those followed. It is likely that many or most politicians employ staff to monitor their social media accounts – and in many cases to post comments and respond on their behalf – particularly those 'following' a large number of people. However, this is not entirely inauthentic, as staff advise politicians on issues and can relay information and concerns identified through social media.

In terms of responses. conversations, and topics of discussion, most of the politicians on Twitter and Facebook used their tweets and Facebook Wall posts, and notes to *broadcast* their messages rather than respond or engage in conversation. Among the 'top 10' most active politicians on Twitter, more than half of their 1,395 tweets in the period (52.5%) were broadcast messages. These focused on local campaign activities (18%), attacking their opponents (15%), campaign slogans or election promises (8%), and or retorts to others' statements. For instance, the second most prolific tweeter, Scott Morrison, distributed 124 broadcast tweets compared with 32 personalized messages to others. The third most active politician on Twitter, Andrew Robb, tweeted only one personalized message compared with 141 broadcast tweets. Of these, 44 were attacks on Labor policy, 35 were criticisms of opponents by name (mainly Julia Gillard), and 30 were election slogans or promises. Only 13.2% of tweets by the 10 most active politicians on Twitter were about social or political issues.

There were some notable exceptions. For instance, as in 2007, Malcolm Turnbull engaged in discussion and debate with citizens online, as shown in Figure 15. Of Turnbull's 439 tweets in the period, more than 76% were direct responses or messages rather than broadcast tweets. While many of these were simple 'thank you' responses and acknowledgements, some demonstrated the characteristics of *invitational* rhetoric and dialogue[6]. For instance, Brett Carey of Brisbane (Twitter name @prronto) sent Malcolm Turnbull the following tweet in relation the National Broadband Network:

> @TurnbullMalcolm Fibre has a shelf life, approx 15 years (suspended). Also no backup should cable be cut. Also most apps are now mobile.
> 6.13pm Aug16th via Web in reply to TurnbullMalcolm

Turnbull replied: "Good point. Is that right about shelf life? Interesting. Why does it deteriorate? Turnbull also was one of the few politicians to exhibit personalising and humanising characteristics online, such as his whimsical literary tweet on 11 August: "twitter twitter tweeting trite in the network of the night".

TWITTER	Turnbull	Morrison	Robb	Burke	Lundy	Corman	Hawke	Ellis	Gillard	Hanson-Young	TOTAL	%
CONTENT												
National political or social issue	29	16	10	9	14	1	2	3	3	15	102	7.3%
Local political or social issue	24	14	1	5	16	0	15	6	1	0	82	5.9%
Where am I?	81	48	17	9	22	5	13	8	20	24	247	17.7%
Personal information or feelings	28	6	1	1	2	0	2	3	4	2	49	3.5%
Election slogan / promise	4	9	30	9	8	8	4	8	26	4	110	7.9%
Attack on opponent by name	2	10	35	10	4	31	2	0	4	9	107	7.7%
Attack on opponent's policy	7	6	44	4	7	18	13	2	0	0	101	7.2%
Response to question/statement	248	33	1	65	28	22	30	51	12	8	498	35.7%
General statement	16	16	3	22	3	6	9	9	5	10	99	7.1%
TOTAL Tweets	**439**	**158**	**142**	**134**	**104**	**91**	**90**	**90**	**75**	**72**	**1395**	100.0%
FORM												
Personalised message/response	335	32	1	66	48	47	40	63	24	7	663	47.5%
Broadcast	191	**125**	**141**	69	**76**	69	60	39	**63**	**64**	732	52.5%
Sending links	23	40	21	10	11	3	11	2	14	15	150	10.8%
FORMAT												
Text	439	158	142	134	104	91	90	90	75	72	1395	100%
Photos	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Video	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Table 3. Qualitative content analysis of tweets by the 'top 10' most prolific politician tweeters, coded as per the coding sheet in Appendix A.

Moderation

In 2007 a negligible number of critical or negative comments appeared on social media sites of politicians and political parties. It is unlikely that this was because there were none; it is more probably that sites were moderated to reject or remove critical and negative comments. In 2007, Liberal MP Malcolm Turnbull was the only federal politician to allow critical comments to be posted on his sites (Macnamara, 2008a, 2008b).

Again in 2010 Turnbull showed the greatest propensity to accept criticism and respond to concerned and critical citizens in a constructive way. Critical comments appeared on Turnbull's Facebook page in relation to 'notes' he published on climate change such as "Is this a joke ... I feel ill" and "fence sitter" (http://www.facebook.com/#!/note.php?note_id=84906939094&comments). Figure 14 is a screen shot of Malcolm Turnbull's Twitter site of 18 August, a few days before the election, which includes a tweet to @anitranot who accused him of being "a snob". Turnbull acknowledged the criticism, but engaged in debate, urging @anitranot to not be "thin-skinned" and "lighten up". As well as several exchanges with @anitranot, he also agreed with "MrQ's comments" and responded to three other tweeters. Overall it can be seen that Turnbull's tweeting is mostly personalised messages rather than broadcasts. The converse was the case with most politicians on Twitter.



Figure 15. Example of an online conversation in which the politician responds to citizens' tweets and engages in a back-and-forth conversation.

Julia Gillard's Facebook page also accepted negative comments, although there was an overwhelming majority of supportive comments and 'fan mail'. In response to her oft-said campaign theme 'I believe our best days lie ahead, not behind', comments included "Gillard's a Smurf, patsy for the union bosses" and "what an absolute load of hogwash … have to [sic] taken a look at the state of the world lately? Brink of collapse would be a severe understatement!" Also, some of the worst vitriol against a politician was allowed to remain as a comment on the Prime Minister's official Facebook page stating:

> DO USE KNOW WHO I HATE THE MOST IN THE WORLD SHE IS A BULLSHIT ARTEST SHE LIES I HATE THE PROMISESE SHE MAKES I FELL LIKE KICKING HER ASS RIGHT NOW AND THTA IS JULIA FILLARD I FELL LIKE KICKING HER ASSS [emphasis and errors in original].

This shows that the major political parties have loosened their moderation policies since 2007, with both major parties allowing critical and negative comments to be posted on their sites. For instance, while the 2,959 comments on the Liberal Party's official Facebook page were overwhelmingly supporters' encouragement, the Liberal Party did allow a number of quite critical comments to be posted including the following:

> Tony Laughton
> 10 August at 23:08
> Sorry. Im a stuck in mud Lib voter but this broadband idea is useless. Im sorry but fibre is the way to go and as much as I hate to admit it the labor rollout is by far better. What idiot came up with ours? [sic]
>
> Kathleen Mary Kahane
> 20 August at 20:19
> I would not vote for Liberal in a million years and i believe that Julia will make a real good prime minister as she knows what this country really needs [sic].

Similarly, the Labor Party allowed a number of quite negative and critical comments to be posted on its official sites. The following comment was posted on the Labor blog under a 3 August 2010 post about the party's policy for paid parental leave:

> I'm not in favour of funding of maternity leave. I believe that it will mostly benefit the high income earners, the executives, not ordinary working families and "ALL" will be paying for it. I believe a means tested family benefit offering refunds on purchases to benefit the family only, would be preferable and more targeted to those in need. Wealthy families can just budget an allowance for down time for maternity leave.
> (Leanne from Bundaberg, Qld *Saturday, 7 August 2010, 07:07*)

Following a post by Kate Ellis on 8 August 2010 titled 'no school no play', a long comment said in part:

> What a badly thought out policy – from the policy title to the implementation. It has failure written all over it. It is 'pink batts for everyone' mark II. Poverty is the reason that most children don't finish school. The children who play sport on weekends are already the children of the wealthy ... Instead of funnelling more money in the pockets of sporting businesses we [should] spend some more money directly in the schools where it counts ...
> (Shaygb from Eatons Hill, Queensland *Monday, 9 August 2010, 10:09*)

An even more negative comment was posted on the Labor blog following a 2 August post by Julia Gillard titled 'Supporting families with teenagers'. This is reproduced in full as it reflects the frustration and disenfranchisement of some citizens, as well as the type of discussion that can occur in open, interactive social media.

> Hi Julia, This place seems to be the only place I have attempted to join and you or your staff hasn't slammed the door in my face. I tried myspace 1st, back when Kevin Rudd was the leader and to no avail my friend request was deleted, I found this very rude & arrogant and UN-AUSTRALIAN, I am only assuming it had to do with my profile picture! Now I sent a request to Julia's facebook 1st and now I have also tried myspace again with the same response, again! My friend request has been deleted!!! I am finding this very disappointing as since I started voting @ 18, I have always supported The Labour Party! So has my family, but honestly after this pathetic display of one eyed narrow mindedness, lets judge on what we first see business, is a bit STONEAGE for me and a far cry from the phrase Labour is pushing...MOVING AUSTRALIA FORWARD!!!! What a Joke! Its funny because The President of USA and The 1st Lady Michelle had no problems accepting my friend requests … obviously they don't judge on what they 1st see, ultimately they saw me, a person who was happy that Barack was The new Leader! Pity Australian Labour Party can't see that I also was happy about Australia's new direction!! What a pity its very sad!! Julia you are not 1 of us, you are not the peoples person I thought you were and neither is the Labour Party, as a whole. Very Disappointed to say the least! Thanks 4 the links to the editor and talkback radio anyhow! I usually end with Peace n Good Karma 4 now n Later, but today I say, Karma make u Pay 4 your pathetic narrow minded 1 eyed way! [sic]
> (Ardqbeat from Bass Coast, Victoria *Tuesday, 3 August 2010, 12:03*)

The volume of comments on political party and leading politicians' Facebook profiles and pages gives some encouraging signs that a significant number of citizens are engaging in politics online. For instance, a Facebook Wall post by Julia Gillard on the eve of the election (20 August) drew 1,200 comments – albeit these were largely well-wishers. However, an 18 August Facebook Wall post about the PM attending the People's Forum in Brisbane attracted 403 comments including negative views, and a 12 August Wall post on switching on the national broadband network (NBN) in Tasmania drew 331 comments.

The Facebook pages of both major political parties also featured 50–100 comments following many Wall posts and notes, with both positive and negative comments, indicating a relaxation in moderation policies since 2007. However, all tweets on the Liberal Party Twitter account were broadcast campaign messages, with very few responses or direct messages. The Labor Party's Twitter account was managed more interactively with around one-third of its 788 tweets being direct responses to Twitter users. But this still meant that two-thirds of its tweets were broadcasts, most of which were campaign promises and attacks on the Opposition.

Conclusions – 'everybody's talking at me'

It is clear from this study that the level of use of social media and the volume of social media content used for political communication has increased substantially over the three years from 2007 to 2010. In fact, the number of online sites and activities of federal politicians more than doubled compared with 2007.

However, Web 2.0-enabled social media are being used primarily in political communication for *one-way transmission* of messages, rather than engaging in listening, dialogue, consultation and collaboration. Furthermore, their use resembles *mass media* communication and its practices of journalism, advertising and public relations in that content is largely controlled by 'gatekeepers' and image-makers. There are only isolated examples of

politicians and political organisations using social media and networks as opportunities for listening and engagement with citizens or communities.

A number of scholars including Bobbitt (2003), Couldry (2001, 2008, 2009a, 2010), Crawford (2009), Honneth (1995), and Levine (2008) have argued that voice is an important element of democratic politics. But, importantly, they look beyond voice simply as acts of 'speaking' through words, texts, and other modes. Commenting on initiatives to give citizens increased opportunities to have a voice in democratic politics, Bobbit (2003) argued that unless governments listen and there are mechanisms to process and act on citizens' inputs, "there will be more public participation in government but it will count for less" (p. 234). In contrast with the "hidden injuries of media power" that are caused by institutionalised *mass media* which offer limited access to citizens Couldry, 2001, p. 155), Couldry says that digital media provide "the capacity to tell important stories about oneself – to represent oneself as a social, and therefore potentially political agent – in a way that is registered in the public domain" (2008, p. 386). In a 2009 paper, he elaborated: "we do not just need a participatory democracy; we need a participatory democracy where participation matters" (2009b). To matter and have value, voice must, as a corollary, have listeners, according to Couldry, Crawford, Levine, and others.

While this research is not able to identify the effects of these methods of public communication, and has no causal data connecting the election result[7] with the forms and content of political communication, the reaction of the electorate is possibly a reflection of public disengagement from banal election slogans and politicking, and further evidence of public dissatisfaction with politics rather than a reinvigoration of the public sphere.

It can be concluded that social media expanded the public sphere during the 2010 Australian federal election in terms of sites of participation and increasing engagement by citizens. However, there is little evidence that social media enhanced the public sphere qualitatively in terms of dialogue, the quality of debate, or focus on major issues, except in a few noteworthy cases.

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Appendix A.

Coding List for Qualitative Analysis

No.	Category	Coding Instructions/guidelines
Content type:		
1	National political or social issue (focus on issue – not slogan)	Any major issue such as NBN, welfare, employment, boat people/immigration, etc
2	Local political or social issue (focus on issue – not slogan)	Local electorate issues in the candidate's area (e.g. local roads, hospitals, etc)
2	Where am I?	Comments about personal whereabouts or travels
3	Personal information or feelings	Information or photos re themselves, family, pets, or expression of personal feelings/humanity
5	Election slogans/promises	Use of at least part of an election campaign slogan or campaign promise
6	Attack on opponent by name	Negative comments about political opponents
7	Attack on opponent's policy	Negative comments about others' policies
8	Response to question or statement	Response to another's question or statement
9	General statement	General statement in own name (not party or slogan)
Form:		
10	Personalised message or response	Tweets or posts directed one person (e.g. @xxx)
11	Broadcast	General tweets, Wall posts and blog posts
12	Sending links	Any tweet or post containing a link
Format:		
13	Text	
14	Photos	
15	Video	

[1] The term Web 2.0 was coined by Tim O'Reilly (2005) to refer to a new generation of Web applications that feature both a technological capability for interactivity and user "principles and practices" to foster collaboration, co-creativity and dialogue/conversation. See also Boler (2008) and Merholz (2005).

[2] Facebook was launched in February 2004 but was initially a closed social network restricted to Harvard University students.

[3] Online communication is not subject to a three-day 'blackout' period before elections that applies to political advertising in broadcast media under Schedule 2 of the Broadcasting Services Act 1992.

[4] Refers to controversy over the Labor Party's sacking of Kevin Rudd as Prime Minister and wide public interest in the former PM which on occasions over-shadowed election campaigning.

[5] This refers to the practices of media production, distribution, and consumption as discussed by Nick Couldry (2004) in his concept of *media as practice* as a model for understanding media holistically.

[6] Rhetoric can be either *manipulative* or *invitational* according to Heath (2006) and he and communication scholars such as Foss and Griffin (1995) advocate that invitational rhetoric is dialogic and, therefore, a more ethical form of communication.

[7] For readers not familiar with the election, it resulted in a 'hung' parliament in which neither of the two major political parties had a majority to govern and relied on the votes of three independent MPs to form a working government.