Chapter 3 — Social media

> Twitter: Where 140 characters is more than enough to get you into trouble, but not nearly enough to get you out of it.
>
> — Angela Byron (@webchick)

Elections play to a mechanistic model of politics. Rule-driven and highly structured events, they allocate power to political parties based on a specific formula: populations separated into electorates, Senate quotas, and 50 per cent +1 vote to win a lower house seat. Elections provide access to the institutions of government and legislative design, but they take place within temporal, economic and social contexts. The most significant of these is the cultural and symbolic. While classic institutionalists would explain electoral systems and constitutional design as determining political behaviour by elites (in terms of the impact on elite behaviour due to channelling preferences through rules and procedures; Lowndes, 2010: 62–63), constructivists see these formal political behaviours more likely to be responsive to cultural norms and values that are plastic. This can explain problems that elected governments have in pushing through their agendas, as was the case when the Labor government under Kevin Rudd attempted to institute the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme and the Resource Super Profits Tax. These were not failures of institutional politics as much as problems with the ability of the government of the day to seek and receive support from the community and add the resources of popular legitimacy to that of the institutional.

This chapter explores this subject and, through it, the creation of the valuable political resource of *legitimacy*. To do this, we examine the notion of 'the public sphere', a metaphor for the sum total of public dialogue: the articulation of individuals' opinions and beliefs, and the aggregation of these into 'public opinion'. This opinion informs elites about the scope and boundaries of their authority, and in so doing directs public-policy making. It also reflects the way the community(/-ies) see politics and issues, revealing how our understanding of the political world is composed. To explore this topic we will first discuss how political theorists have conceptualised the public sphere, before examining 'sites' of opinion formation in the Australian digital environment. In doing so we need to ask how these conversational spaces work in channelling opinion, what opinions they most effectively promote, as well as who is left out of this new conversation.

'The' public sphere and public opinion

Popular legitimacy exists as a substance we call 'public opinion' in a vague place we call the 'public sphere'. The significance of public opinion is clear: governments rise and fall based on it, and policies are statements of pure reason or ridiculous follies depending on their correlation with it. What 'it' is, however, is ambiguous and contested, and subject to change over time. As Senator Cory Bernardi sends his weekly 'dose of common sense' email to supporters, he makes a claim to represent the 'sensible centre' of public opinion — the reasonableness of the average person with their practical concerns and 'real life' experience (Pearson & Patching, 2008: 7). When John Howard used the inclusive 'we decide' to talk about immigration restriction measures in his 2001 re-election speech, he too made the claim that his policies represented wider public opinion and, by extension, encompassed the public's view of who was excluded from the 'us' of Australianness (van Onselen and Errington, 2007: 225). Julia Gillard's proposal to establish a 'citizens' assembly' in the 2010 election to determine a policy for carbon pricing presupposed a process by which it could be determined.

These claims are the bread and butter of politics, and politicians who are 'out of touch' with 'the public' are punished. This logic has entered the popular vernacular of political discourse, privileging those psychic politicians who have an innate understanding of the 'mood' of the electorate. Thus, it is generally an accepted pejorative to describe a government as 'poll driven' or dependent on 'focus groups' (Clune, 2012: 310). Why? We know that elections are a terrible way to determine the policy preferences of the public beyond a very few top-line issues, particularly in a majoritarian political system such as Australia's, which distorts voter intention and focuses it on a few major parties (Hobolt & Klemmemsen, 2005). The use of opinion polling or other deliberative processes could, in a different view of politics, be seen as a positive way in which governments can be responsive and listen to the electorate, and balance out the lopsided access of 'monied' lobbyists (Lindblom, 1977).

Regardless of what could or should be, the relationship between politics and this idea of an aggregate measure of the political and policy views of the nation have become interlinked. Indeed, we can argue that the concept of an assessable view of a unitary public has become *naturalised* in political discourse in this country. Naturalisation refers to Hall's notion whereby the representation of something (in this case aggregate opinion) is presented as an objective truth beyond the capacity of the viewer to verify (1982). This is a powerful process in that it conceals the way information is constructed, in so doing stripping doubt and methodology. The reality, however, is far more complex. Like Gibson's notion of computer networks as 'cyberspace' (1984: 51), the public sphere is also a 'consensual hallucination'. We know we can't actually go into a

specific place called the public sphere, but, through a variety of mechanisms, we can interact with it and others 'within it'. The public sphere is a construct where political ideas are debated and considered. The product of the public sphere is snapshots of public opinion: highly abstracted representations of the collective will commonly materialised by news organisations as opinion polls in a regularised manner that suits news production demands.

The public sphere

The problem presented by the notion of the public sphere is its tendency to be used without due regard to the scope and limitations of the concept. Popularised following the translation of Jürgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Bourgeois Public Sphere* (1991), the idea is historically specific. Habermas argues that the rise of the educated bourgeoisie sees the development of a culture of public engagement and debate supported by emerging journalism (journals and newspapers facilitating an expanding information society). This process rests on enlightenment rationalism: the idea that truth (vis-à-vis Mill, 2009) is not the preserve of specific institutions or traditions (such as Christian churches or beliefs), but can be determined through active participation in reason and debate.

The educated and time-rich bourgeois class, according to Habermas, was able to gather and reflect on issues of public concern in salons and coffee houses to determine their shared interest. This social change also required the end of monarchical rule — with its arbitrary exercise of power — and an emerging consensus on the separation of the 'private sphere', the public sphere, and the sphere of government. Thus, the public sphere is not simply synonymous with 'public opinion'. The public sphere is *performed*. It only comes into its own when these publics mobilise their views and opinions into the governmental realm. Thus, public spheres come in and out of existence, rather than transcending their production and being reified as public opinion. Public opinion, as we see it today, is a static attribute of the public that can be measured. The public sphere is an active process of political expression.

Bursting the bubble

In unpacking this idea we can see its limitations are numerous, both in the historical context proposed by Habermas, and also as an analogy for practices of forming public opinion today. Nancy Fraser was one early observer to attack the concept for failing to recognise both diversity and alternative spaces for the formation of 'counterpublics' to the dominant gender and class composition of Enlightenment-era public spheres (1990). Using the example of women, but this might also apply to other (formally or informally) disenfranchised groups (such

as, at that time, labour), these criticisms note the contested nature of rationalism as being constructed of those views and opinions formed by a small and elite group of men. The public spheres of Habermas's historical review were exclusive clubs, and their ability to form a relatively cohesive set of opinions about what government should do was based on a comparatively narrow definition of the public interest. For a small, emerging class of professionals and business people, the development of a minimal state that ensured the provision of key infrastructure for the preservation of the public good, a system of laws and rules to allow citizens to interact and engage in trade in an effective way (contract law), and national defence. It is not surprising that this period of time sees the emergence of contemporary capitalism as a meta ideology which influences views of what is good and right in both public and private life (Salvatore, 2007: 216).

For Habermas, it is the expansion of the scope of the state (ironically in response to increasingly active participation by excluded groups and 'lower' classes) that drives the decline of this public sphere: the welfare state places 'spoils' into the public arena for groups to compete to be able to access them (Gómez-Ibáñez, 2003: 46). This shifts the public sphere from a place of rational debate to one where the mobilisation of large parts of the electorate can win greater access to public goods. Hannah Arendt diagnosed this as the 'rise of the social': the tendency for private production to come out of the home and into the public realm (1958: 38–49). Thus, where people were once free in the public realm because they had escaped the day-to-day concerns of 'economy', the development of industrial capitalism tends to force the process of identity formation and political articulation into the private realm. For Arendt this leads to the public sphere becoming dominated by the 'grubby' tasks of material debate, rather than the pursuit of higher-order values.

This argument is well developed through the insights of public choice theory and analysis of the conditions that favour rent seeking (concentrated benefits and diffused costs; Farber & Frickey, 1991: 24). Under the historical diagnosis of the public sphere, it is not the decline of the 'space' for civic participation that sees the end of the bourgeois-rational public sphere, but the changing nature of the state and expectations we hold of it. Australia, 'born modern' with strong state provision of welfare and the material conditions for private production (Simms, 1981: 83), has never experienced Habermas's classic public sphere. To reconstruct a society that was predicated on such fanciful public spheres, therefore, would be to adopt a radical liberalism that has not been seen globally for hundreds of years (if ever) and was never part of the pattern of state settlement in this nation.

The upshot of this is that while we rhetorically favour 'classic' Habbermassian public spheres with their implied warm cosiness, public opinion today is seen in

stark methodological terms: defined by positivist social science's development of the survey instrument, forced-choice decision-making (to increase response rates), and statistical inference that blurs correlation and causation. This means that, in practice, we tend towards a model of political decision-making more commonly associated with the 'marketplace of ideas' which sees participants as bringing preferences into the political realm fully formed and working to aggregate them together into simple majorities (Erikson, et al., 1991). This is the antithesis of the classic concept. As Cass Sunstein observes '[a]ggregate or marketplace notions disregard the extent to which political outcomes are supposed to depend on discussion and debate, or a commitment to political equality, and on the reasons offered for or against alternatives'(1993). In mass society, this technocratic mechanism for opinion formation clearly solidifies views that may not be firmly held (Bourdieu, 1979), but also speaks to a conception of society underpinned by individualism (Herbst, 1991).

Plug in your USB coffee warmers

Does the era of individualism preclude the return of policy debates based on rational discourse? In recent years, appeals for enlightenment-values have re-emerged in public life: in diffused appeals to govern in the 'public interest', or through more explicit programmatic attempts to incorporate 'evidence-based' policy-design processes in government (see An evidence-based Australian politics?, Chapter 7) (Marston & Watts, 2003). Here, Habermas and Arendt would differ. The waning of sectarian politics in Australia — most visible in the decline of unionism and the decreasing strength of party identification (McAllister, 2011: 41, 159) — would be seen by Habermas as reducing the factors that drive the seeking of 'spoils' through block mobilisation. Alternatively, Arendt would point to a shift in values away from the material towards the expressive (e.g. the rise of 'post-materialist' citizens; Charnock & Ellis, 2004; Hamilton & Denniss, 2005: 153–77) as a way in which more human values of self-expression and solidarity may be rediscovered in public dialogue. Both, however, would warn of the risk of ideational dominance from our key 'democratic' institutions: the mass media and government (see Chapter 6). This is because of their ability to mobilise propaganda to overwhelm a burgeoning new public sphere culture.

It is important to understand how the public spheres of mass society depend on media to constitute their discursive spaces. While Habermas's bourgeois public sphere talks of media *of* the public sphere (providing information for the subject of rumination and debate), mass society sees media *as also constituting* the public sphere. This has implications for the three key elements of public opinion formation: the type of interactions facilitated, the quality of interactions, and the legitimising role of media over particular types of opinions or issues (Crespi, 1997: 1). This raises the possibility that our digital media environment will

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facilitate the creation of new public spheres that are: (a) more directly interactive and conversational than, say, the letters page of the newspaper, and (b) more likely to be outside of the control of mass-media gatekeepers.

Thus, the advent of the internet as a new and better means for public opinion formation has been the go-to argument of deliberative democrats since before its emergence as a popular medium. Early computer networks were used as discursive political spaces by Polish unions in the 1980s (Jacobs, 2005: 68–69) and low-cost computers and dial-up modems were employed for local political debate and information exchange (McCullough, 1991: 17). Scott London was an early proponent of ICT-driven discursive democratic practice under the term 'teledemocracy' (democratic talk at a distance) (1995). More recently Lincoln Dahlberg, for example, talked about e-democracy initiatives (see 'the opinion makers', this chapter) in the United States as promising examples of new places for the formation of public opinion (2001).

Social media has more recently been identified as emergent sites for civic discourse and opinion formation that allow for spontaneous discussions. This type of fluid discussion reduces the ability of technology and service providers to control the nature of public discourse. Using the example of the comments sections of the video-sharing site YouTube, Kasun Ubayasiri (2006) argues that these places provide an array of spaces for political socialisation and interaction because of the high degree of control users have over conversational topics.[1] More recently, Andrew Murray has argued the contemporary internet is a place '… where political discourse may more freely be exchanged between the proletariat and the bourgeois, and one where thanks to the pseudonymity offered speech is less susceptible to [suppression and censorship by social, economic and government institutions]. This attractive prospect has encouraged many academics to discuss the 'virtual public sphere' as an extension of Habermas's original public sphere' (2010: 523).

Social media as a deliberative space

In recent years the term 'social media' has become a popular way to describe a collection of online systems that allow for the production, storage and distribution of user-generated content (UGC). Social media allows for the creation of a virtual social space where groups of users can come together in synchronous and asynchronous interactions. These interactions can be structured (such as threaded responses to blog posts that are moderated), semi-structured (e.g. the discussion amongst groups of friends within extended Facebook social

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1   This is not to say these views are universal; as early as 1995 Poster argued that the analogy between the public sphere and the internet was a poor one.

networks), or unstructured in nature (such as in Twitter, where topics are not 'owned' but tied together through the ad hoc application of hashtags that can be used to locate and link together posts by a variety of different users).

Because of this comparatively diverse set of technologies and social conventions at play, Heidi Cohen (2011) points out that definitional ambiguity reduces our ability to make concrete statements about social media. Common definitions include allusions to the comparative ease of participation in social media, and its emphasis on multiple and simultaneous user participation in production of conversational elements (communication initiation, response and comment, social filtering/quality control). For our purposes an expansive definition is best. Andreas Kaplan and Michaeil Haenlein provide a useful typology that highlights variability, particularly in the extent to which these channels provide interactivity and self-disclosure (Table 4). This demonstrates the diversity of digital media channels in this category, and the way different combinations of social presence and interactivity come together to fill different user needs.

		Social presence/media richness/interactivity		
		Low	Medium	High
Self-presentation/ self-disclosure	High (nonymous)	Blogs (inc. Twitter)	Social networking services (e.g. Facebook)	Virtual social worlds (e.g. Second Life)
	Low (anonymous)	Collaborative projects (e.g. Wikipedia)	Content communities (e.g. Youtube)	Virtual game worlds (e.g. World of Warcraft)

Table 5: Social media typology

Source: Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010: 62 (extracted and annotated)

The political importance of social media is not simply that it provides alternative channels for institutional political actors' communication in structured election periods (as discussed in Chapter 2). Increasingly, the social media is seen as a place in which public opinion is formed, and where interventions in public opinion are possible by an increasing array of institutions and individuals. As Cohen points out, marketers and publicrelations professionals have been at the forefront of interest in this new environment due to perceptions that non-elite influencers who participate in social-media conversations are increasingly important in shaping public opinion (see, for example, Hot House Interactive, 2010) (2011). If this sounds familiar, it is. The notion of a 'two-step flow' of information and opinion from institutional sources to key influencers and then into their social network was introduced in the 1950s as media scholars attempted to understand the cognitive and social aspects of media consumption in real-world (social) settings. Recognising that media did not have simple, immediate

and direct effects on behaviour, field research identified that individuals in existing social groups (family, work, recreational), who were identified as having expertise on particular topics, were consulted by their peers to provide their opinion on information presented by mass media (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). This is a good example of heuristic-based decision making, where information can be assessed by reference to choices made by those deemed to be more informed than oneself.

This raises the question: is there something *really* new here? On the one hand, media has always been 'social', human communication, even of the barest facts, rarely exists outside of a social context, and commonly incorporates some notion of feedback (even if it is the most bare of responses, such as the 'market sensing' of media organisations that use sales or readership figures as proxy indicators of communicative success). The notion that mainstream or mass communications would be subject to 'social filtering' is not new, and the two-step flow model and its various descendants showed this. Alternatively, proponents of the power of social media as a new significant factor in public opinion formation point to a range of elements that make it significant for study: social media significantly increases the scale of social interactions because of the magnifying effect of the internet and computerisation. These media, therefore, provide a possible example of 'collective intelligence', the 'genuine capacity of a group to think, learn and create collectively' (Moral & Abbott 2009). Social-media conversational trends are visible and provide strong signals to mass media and elites about public opinion (Rana, 2009: 261).

To date we have seen some notable uses of collective intelligence by political elites in policy debate. Roxanne Missingham, for example, cites the use of Twitter by the opposition treasurer, Joe Hockey, to solicit feedback on carbon trading during parliamentary debate over the emissions trading scheme (2010: 11). Thus, the nature of social media provides the possibility for manipulation and the construction of public opinion (Long, 2011). If these practices have an effect politically, it is likely to be evident in Australia: Neilsen (2010a) has identified Australians as some of the heaviest users of social media, both in terms of overall rates of adoption (72 per cent) and time spent browsing these services (7 hours and 20 minutes per month in 2010).

Kids today ...

This argument is not without critics. These focus on a disconnect between social media's expressive politics and 'realpolitik' (Ma, 2009), the shallowness of these users' political interests and commitment (Jack the Insider, 2012), and a view

that effort engaged in online politics may salve the conscience, but 'expends' political energy without effect. This latter view is neatly summarised in the notion of 'slacktivism':

> … feel-good online activism that has zero political or social impact. It gives those who participate … an illusion of having a meaningful impact on the world without demanding anything more than joining a Facebook group. Remember that online petition that you signed and forwarded to your entire contacts list? That was probably an act of slacktivism. (Morozov, 2009)

Evgeny Morozov's criticism is the most damning, describing this kind of engagement as a mix of narcissism and political masturbation. This is not simply a slap-down of slacktivists, it has currency within media theories of a range of 'gratifications' that audiences derive from their choice of media (Blumler & Katz, 1974). In addition, shallowness is commonly associated with the misplaced political energy of youth (Morris, 2011). This, of course, raises the question of what counts as 'real' politics. As with our constructivist reading of media effects, Alan McKee is clear that we have to be expansive in looking at the cultural dimension of political action: 'what changes in culture makes political change possible' (2005: 192–93, 210). For him, arguments about slacktivist politics are important because of the explicit invalidation of particular forms of creative industry. This type of cultural pessimism is a coded way of endorsing the status quo, both about who can and should 'speak' (creating meaningful political content) and in terms of the policy arrangements of the day.

Using Australian survey data from four different social media: blog, Twitter and Facebook users, and the conservative online community CANdo (discussed in detail in The anti-GetUp!s, Chapter 5), we can scrutinise these questions. One of the easiest questions to examine, however, is that of demography differences and misconceptions. Figure 17 provides a demographic breakdown of the political users of these social media compared with the current Australian population (N). As this figure shows, the majority of these channels *under*-represent youth, with the sole exception of Facebook. The notion that social media represents a youth counterpublic (a 'safe' constituent space for non-mainstream discursive activity; Warner, 2002: 57) is not, therefore, wholly accurate.

Similarly, Morozov's views about slacktivism have encouraged interest in determining the relationship between digital media use and 'real' political participation (assuming, for one moment, that online political activity is wasted). Examining this 'displacement' theory we can identify research that contradicts this. Henrik Christensen (2011), for example, points out the existence of a positive correlation between internet use and political engagement in the population overall. Looking specifically at youth in the US context, a large survey found

that offline participation by younger voters was *positively* associated with the use of that most egocentric of digital media, Facebook (Vitak, et al., 2011). Looking at Australian evidence, Figure 18 compares the political activities of social-media users on average with those aged under 30. This figure shows that there are clear behavioural differences between youth and the population average. These differences do not, however, indicate a greater likelihood of political non-participation as much as different opportunities for participation: greater investment in activities that require a commitment of personal time (protests and meetings) over financial resources (consumer activism), lower levels of participation in industrial action (unsurprisingly, as younger people are more likely to be unemployed or work in non-unionised workplaces; Jenkins, 2012), and a greater likelihood to indicate positive intentions to participate in the future, rather than reminiscences of the past.
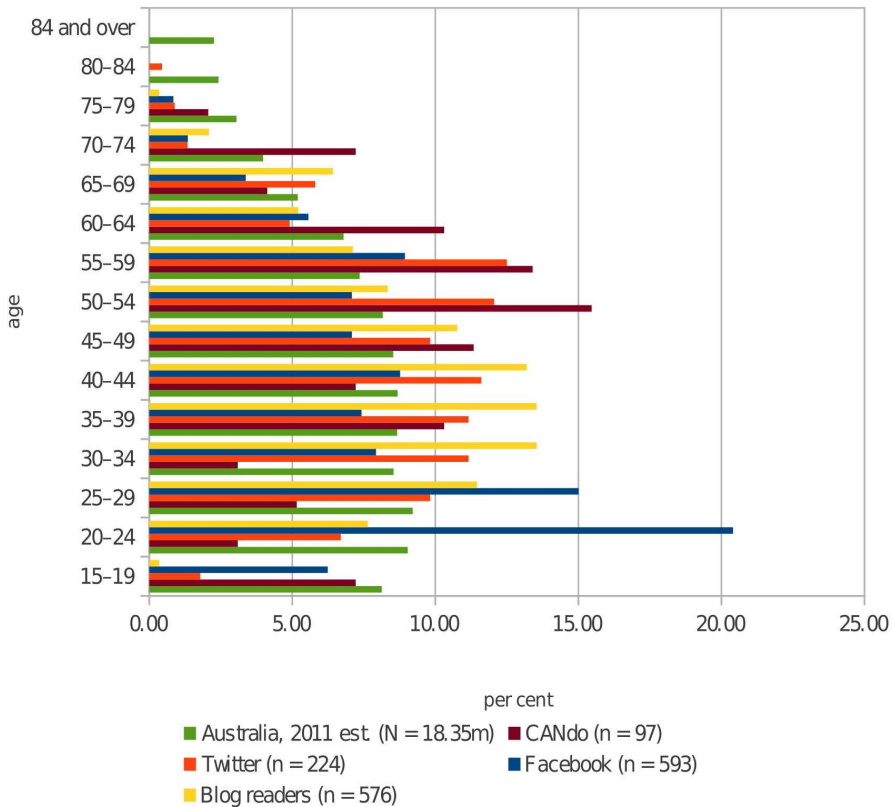

Figure 17: Age distribution of social-media survey respondents, compared to N
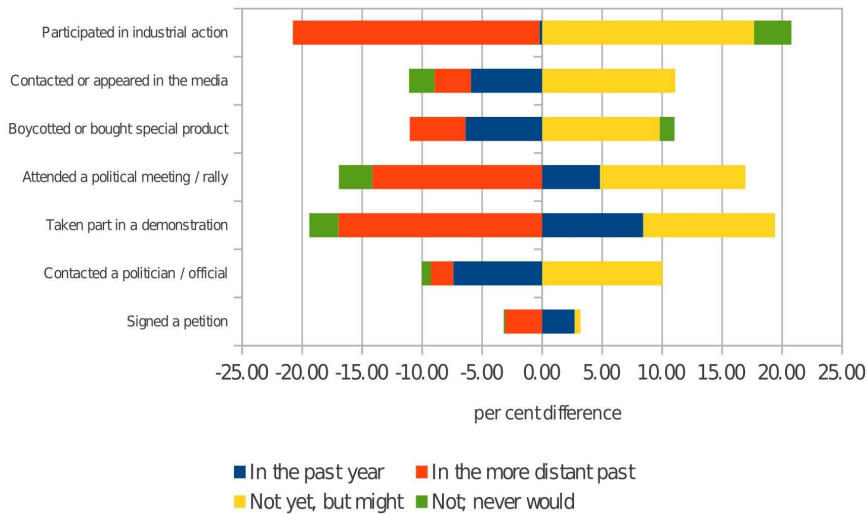
Source: Author's research

Figure 18: Difference between the political engagement of users of social media (n = 1393)

Source: Author's research

This appears to square with the US study which showed a tendency of younger people to engage more in low-resource-intensive activities (such as information acquisition, which is connected to political socialisation). Interesting, concerning the relationship between the amount of time spent on social media and political engagement, the US study found a non-linear, tapering-off shaped relationship: at some point the level of use of social media begins to reduce the tendency for political activity (Vitak, et al., 2011). While this finding is not supported by the Australian data (Table 6, showing average level of political activity on a four-point likert scale against self-reported internet use), it is logical under the uses and gratifications model (which sees rational media consumption choices as competing against other sources of personal gratification) that, at the extreme end of internet use, other activities would be squeezed out.[2] This illustrates the existence of a more subtle set of drivers than simply equating digital media use with the increased potential for political socialisation and mobilisation.

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2   Here the use of time categories, as opposed to estimated minutes spent, may be a too imprecise tool to see this in the Australian dataset, rather than ruling out this hypothesis.

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Access Internet …	n	Political activity
Continuously throughout the day	311	3.04
Several times a day	124	2.98
About once a day	6	2.81
Less often	6	2.88
All	447	3.02

Table 6: Time spent on the internet and political activity, under 30s

Source: Author's research

The evidence for Australia is clear. Rather than talking about 'slacktivism', it is more useful to adopt Saayan Chattopadhyay's 'surrogate activism': political activity and the shaping and creation of meaning that leads to action (2011: 64–65). Chattopadhyay see this as a *process* 'where gradual legitimization and the solidification of the politics of belonging occur prior to the deployment of the movement in realpolitik'. In this view we need to recognise that classic definitions of media as 'speech modifiers' *privilege* speech as more authentic and real than other forms of communication. In the political realm, the privileging of any one form of communication should be a red flag to us that something significant is going on, because it demonstrates a gradient in the distribution of power within, or attributed to, particular forms of communication.

A bourgeois public sphere?

Before we examine the nature of these new public spheres, it is relevant to ask: are they bourgeois? That is, following Habermas's concern with the emergence of a new trade-focused middle class, to what extent do these deliberative spaces represent a narrow segment of Australian society? This is a harder question to answer than would appear at first glance. It has been observed that the notion of 'class' is subjective, particularly in a country like Australia where a shorter European history has led to less entrenched views of what constitutes social classes based on cultural capital (Hamilton, et al., 2007: 9). Indeed, there is evidence that most Australians identify themselves as 'middle class', reflecting a mix of social aspiration and avoidance of being a 'tall poppy' (Hamilton, et al., 2007).

Nevertheless, the question is relevant: if social media is an important emerging public sphere that may have real impacts on policy making, to what extent does it represent a narrow and privileged segment of the population? This concern plagued digital-media scholars in the early years of digital media, through recognition that 'early adopters' where more likely to come, if not from the educated and financial elite of society, then from those for whom the status quo

was serving them nicely (Margolis & Resnick, 2000: 110). This represented a bottom-up view of the normalisation-hypothesis discussed in Chapter 2, that the privileged in society would use these new channels to ensure their favoured access to the sphere of government would remain unchallenged.

Times have changed, however, and the cost of accessing digital media has fallen considerably in the decade since Michael Margolis and David Resnick's work.[3] We need to explore to what extent privilege is still inscribed in this space. This is aided through figures 19 and 20, drawn from our surveys of users of political social media. The first figure shows that the distribution of respondents closely matches the distribution of incomes in Australia: a pyramid that rests on a small base (ABS, 2011). Between the social media we can see differences that largely reflect age composition of their user base (as demonstrated in Figure 17 above): the higher proportion of retirees in the CANdo group and students in the Facebook group skew their incomes lower than the average for the group. What is interesting is the educational attainment levels reported in Figure 20, which disproportionately includes Australians with university degrees, particularly higher degrees. These findings replicate similar research undertaken in the United States, which associates higher levels of education with political interest, rather than economic position (Kaye, et al., 2012: 9).
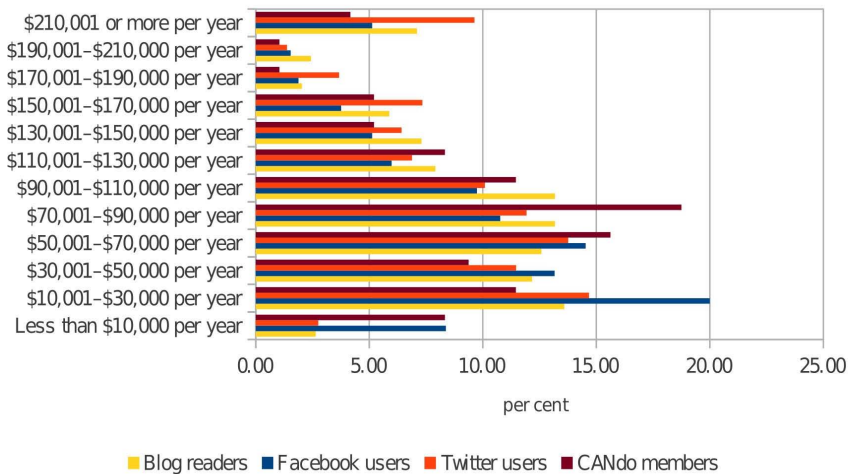
Figure 19: Gross household income, users of political social media (n = 1392)

Source: Author's research

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3   In addition, positive access programs have been undertaken by governments in response to this 'digital divide' through community-based access programs (e.g. internet services provided in libraries) and the direct subsidy of access technologies (e.g. laptops in schools and the provision of digital set-top boxes for people on low incomes).
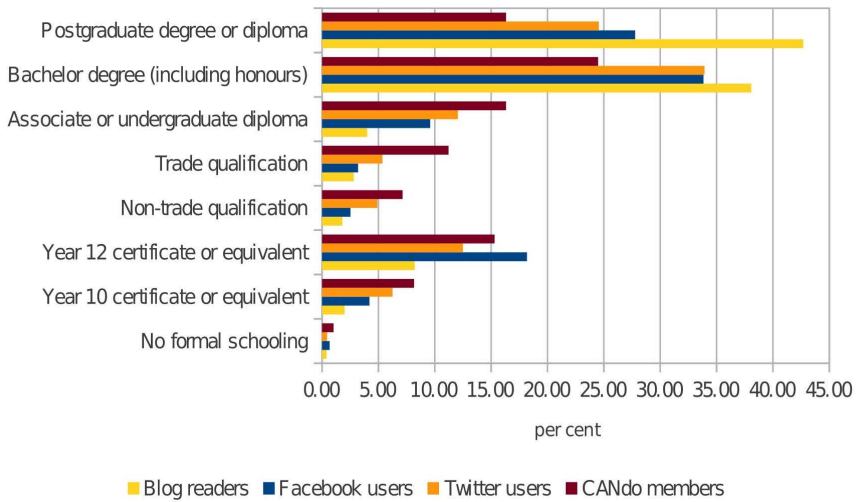
Figure 20: Highest level of education achieved, users of political social media (n = 1415)

Source: Author's research

These similarities and differences with the general public lead to the obvious question: is this important? This depends largely on the way the public sphere is viewed: if the public sphere is primarily a *deliberative space* for the exchange of information and formation of public preferences for policy makers (aka, the development of 'good ideas' and innovation), then broad economic representation combined with education might be seen as beneficial. In discussing the notion of collective intelligence in digital communities, Douglas Schuler sees the importance of having analytical skills and capacities to achieve new solutions to social problems (2004: 275, 7–8). Alternatively, if the public sphere is about *consensus building* then the disproportionate representation of certain types of people (those with the inclination or resources to undertake formal education) might only serve to drive a wedge between parts of society. This marks a considerable difference between the ideational and legitimising aspects of the notion of the public sphere.

Social media by the numbers

The long-form opinionistas: The Australian 'blogosphere'

Blogging represents one of the earliest forms of social media. Part genre (through the use of the chronological presentation of regular posts with a tendency towards

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informality), part technology platform (allowing authors to post material and enable comments to be attached to specific posts), blogs once represented *the* way for those outside of the media industry to court the attention of potentially large audiences. During the first decade of the new century these channels were regarded as one of those places where we were most likely to see the ambiguity between professional and amateur.[4] This interactive space led to conflicts at the time (as discussed in Chapter 2), but also encouraged creative engagement with the medium and experimentation in styles of public engagement and writing (Quiggin, 2006).

One of the most prominent early political blogs in Australia, Margo Kingston's *webdiary* resulted from the journalist being slowly pushed out of the Fairfax organisation and looking for an alternative channel for her views and opinions, eventually becoming independent of the company in 2005 through the use of readers' donations and contributions (Kingston, 2006). In this way, writers like Margaret Simons (2007) has identified blogging as part of the 'gift economy' — a cultural paradigm closely associated with the notions of the 'commons' (a shared space and public resource; Sievers, 2010: 3) and reciprocal altruism (a gratifications basis for participation).

While this is largely true — in that a self-supporting economic model for independent blogging has not presented itself in Australia (Ward and Cahill, 2007: 12) — there are a wide range of motivations behind blogging that include their use by academics (e.g. John Quiggin) and think tanks (e.g. The Interpreter, Catallaxy Files) to promote particular intellectual positions and ideas. From a more 'thermostatic' or functionalist perspective (see Media in an age of 'attention' economics, Chapter 6) there are prominent arguments that blogs have the potential to 'balance' the range of voices in the wider public sphere. Where a topic may not be well covered by commercial media (either because of media bias or due to market failure), low-cost digital publishing represents a perfect vehicle for counterpublic discourse. Examples range from blogs representing the view of the extreme left to right, but also those servicing specialist communities (for example, vegans or goths; Hodkinson, 2006: 187) and as embedded reservoirs of culture for extant social movements (see Digital media and movement (re)mobilisation, Chapter 5).

In the Australian context Axel Bruns and Debra Adams (2009: 90) have argued that the predominance of more left-leaning political blogs was a direct response to the perceived right-wing bias of the major media organisations.[5] A similar,

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4   Whereas, by the end of the decade, the majority of political bloggers are journalists (Solly, et al., 2007: 121).

5   A view contested by some bloggers who reject the focus on situating blogs on a political continuum precisely because of their interactive and community-building nature (Garden, 2010: 20). Thus, the 'nominal' orientation of authors may not necessarily indicate that of their audience/commentators.

but alternative perspective is put forward by Frances Shaw's (2011) arguments that the Australian feminist blogosphere represents a 'crisis response' by feminists who use blogging as a form of counter-hegemonic discourse in direct reaction to dissonance with mainstream representations of women and their social movement. This latter view is less about the projection of an argument in the face of a dominant media ideology as much as active defence against an imposed subjectivity.

During the era of John Howards Coalition government, prominent right-wing blogs were based either in mainstream media organisations (such as Andrew Bolt's popular blog; http://blogs.news.com.au/heraldsun/andrewbolt) or have associations with commercial media. A good example of the latter would be the early prominent blogger of the right, Tim Blair, whose blog eventually became part of the Murdoch press (Goggin, 2010: 436). This absence has also been noted within the political community of the centre-right, who formed the Menzies House (www.menzieshouse.com.au) conservative community in 2010. Founded by a staff member of Cory Bernardi and Tim Andrews (see the discussion of the Australian Taxpayers Alliance, Chapter 5), the purpose of the site is to act as a platform to host content from this perspective and grow the number of authors from the right. In this respect, Menzies House has been only partially successful, with Andrews seeing the Australian party system's strong pressure against expressing deviant opinions as a barrier to the recruitment of politically active writers in this community (Personal interview: Tim Andrews, 22 May 2012).

This 'competitive' view focuses on the nature of public discourse as an elite activity that leads to a 'protracted competition for cultural hegemony' (George, 2009: 7). In the context of recent Australian politics, this is called the 'history wars' (or 'culture wars', drawing from similar arguments in the United States). The limitation of this view is that it focuses on political competition as zero-sum activity between binary positions.[6] This is at odds with the notion of the public sphere as a site for meaning creation (as opposed to the establishment of ideational dominance), while also ignoring the existence of centrist voices in the Australian blogosphere (for example, *Club Troppo* (clubtroppo.com.au) or Press Gallery Citizen Journalist (http://parliamenthouse.wordpress.com)).[7] What does support this 'elite-driven' view of blog influence is the level of educational attainment of blog users (as discussed in A *bourgeois* public sphere, this chapter),

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6   Here, I would argue that the post-modern movement towards the deconstruction of binary oppositions is, in fact, reifying differences that may not exist.

7   Greg Jericho (2012: 48) identified 24 per cent of Australian political blogs as centrist, 49 per cent left-leaning and 27 per cent right leaning (n = 324).

combined with the disproportionate representation of public servants in the user base of political blogs when compared with the population overall (Figure 21, compared with approximately 16.56 per cent of the population as at June 2011).[8]
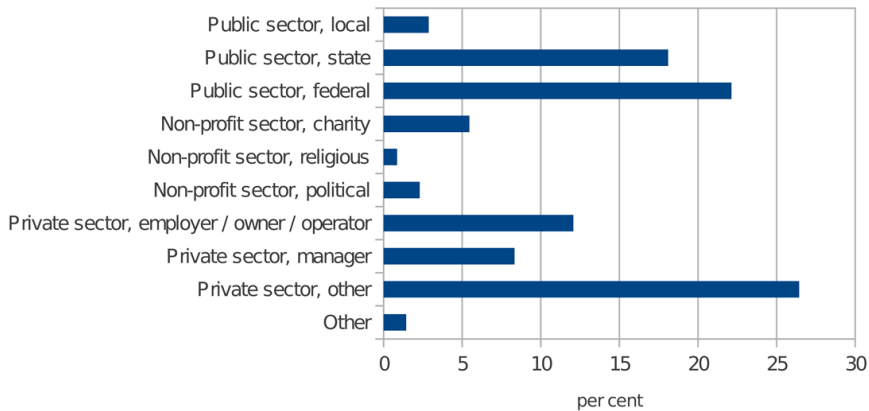

Figure 21: Political blog users, employment characteristics (n = 348)

Source: Author's research

The composition of blog users is significant in identifying the relationship between the discourse on these channels and connections to the sphere of government (in the 'conveyor belt' view of the public sphere moving ideas between spheres). At the civic level, political-blog users are active in political discourse, both online and off. This is demonstrated in Figure 22. Political-blog users, when compared with their non-political peers, are more likely to engage in interpersonal political dialogue, with a small, but significant group participating in persuasive political speech ('who to vote for'). This illustrates how issues developed in specific public sphere spaces 'break out' into the wider civic conversation about policy and politics in Australia. Other examples involve the identification of unique information contained in the discursive communities around blogs by journalists and other mainstream organisations that use these non-elite contacts as sources of specialist information.[9]

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8   The blog-user research was undertaken in the first half of February 2012. Participation requests were published by a number of participating blogs. These blogs were divided into two groups: explicitly political blogs (*An Onymous Lefty*: Andrew Catsaras: Andrew Norton: *Commentary from Carlton*: *Hoyden About Town*; and, *Larvatus Prodeo*) and not-explicitly political blogs (*kootoyoo*, and *Library Clips*). Because of the nature of the request (a public post), this was also reprinted by additional political blogs (*Club Troppo*, *Poll Bludger* and *The Intepreter*).

9   An example being the 'slackbastard' anarchist blog maintained by Andy Fleming (a *nom de guerre*) (http://slackbastard.anarchobase.com), who has increasingly been used by mainstream media as an expert on the far right in Australia (Fleming, 2012).
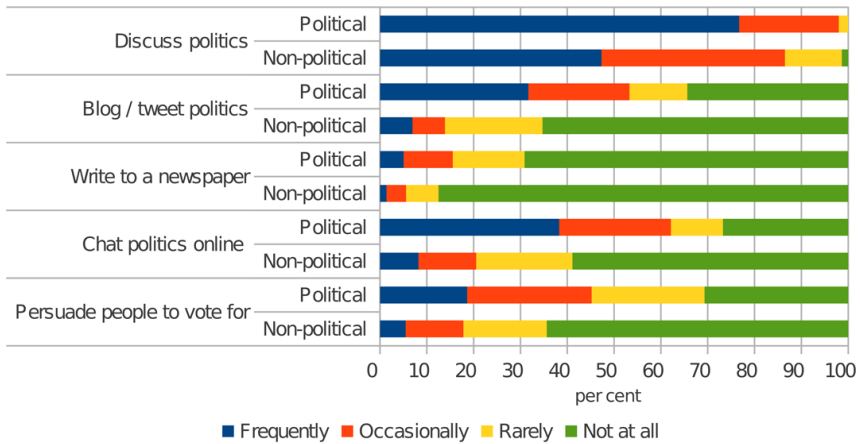
Figure 22: Discursive transfer: Political-blog users compared with general users (n = 580)

Source: Author's research

A more moderate notion of this thermostatic view is the idea that blogs can serve as non-exclusive checks on powerful institutions, particularly where existing sites of social oversight are ineffective (for example, in the cartel-party mode introduced in Chapter 2, or through a 'propaganda model' of capitalist media interests, discussed in Chapter 6). This represents an example of the use of these information sources by the 'monitorial citizen'. This notion of citizenship, proposed by Michael Schudson, talks about a type of individual who scans their political and media environment for issues that affect their personal and general interests and are willing and able to take action when these interests are placed at risk (1998). This idea expands upon the classical republican ideal for citizenship as focused on civic education for the participation in electoral politics, recognising the expanded range of political opportunities that are manifest following the 'rights revolution' of the 1960s (the increased capacity for direct litigation and other forms of administrative justice that stem from increased recognition of civil liberties), as well as new forms of political action (Kivisto, 2010: 262).

Examples of new forms of activism include political consumerism, stakeholder activism, and the increasingly common use of media campaigns attacking corporate brands to influence the policies of large commercial organisations. Two recent examples have been the advertiser boycotts aimed at the *Kyle and Jackie O Show* (Today FM) and the *Alan Jones Breakfast Show* (2GB) organised in response the male presenters' attitudes towards women (AAP, 2011). The latter example — still underway at the time of writing — is significant in its more partisan political implications, pertaining to Jones's statements that women in leadership roles are 'destroying the joint' (Farr, 2012) and an distasteful attack

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on the Prime Minister Gillard related to the death of her father (Aston, 2012a). The power of social-media users to mobilise a distributed campaign of letter writing aimed at advertisers led to Alan Jones's show losing a majority of major sponsors (Gardiner, 2012). This in turn emboldened the prime minister to attack sexist language in politics in the most vigorous manner of her premiership (ABC, 2012).

Looking at our survey data of blog users we can see that, while the readers are generally politically active overall, they are likely to have engaged in consumer activism, with over 80 per cent of users having 'Boycotted or bought special products for a political reason' at some time, over 60 per cent in the last year. In response to this, companies have become more active in monitoring social media for negative comments about their brands, increasing the value of political action to elicit a quick response from these organisations (Cox, et al, 2008: 6). This highlights the observation that the emphasis on explicitly 'political' blogs may be less important than the broader political impact of social-media participation on the political expressiveness of these citizens more generally (Bruns, et al, 2011).[10] Overall, Figure 23 demonstrates that blog users are willing to be politically expressive through a range of media (petition, direct interactions with elites, and through mass media).
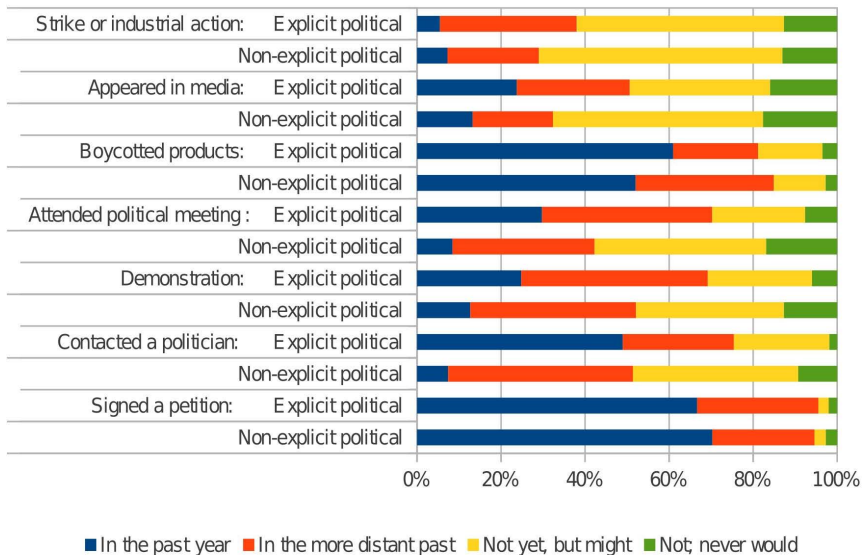

Figure 23: Political behaviour of blog users, comparative (n = 580)

Source: Author's research

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10   Political parties have begun to court non-political bloggers in Australia to influence their discussion of government policy. An example would be the 2012 morning tea for 'mommy bloggers', hosted by the prime minister (Poole, 2012).

With specific regard to the history wars and the reporting of politics and public policy, this idea is important in explaining the way in which bloggers have 'taken on' the mainstream media organisations that provide the bread and butter coverage that regularly drives blog content. The notion of blogs as providing citizen oversight of institutionalised media in the same way that commercial media established itself through the political claim of a legitimate watchdog on the powerful (Palser, 2002) remains, however, contestable. During the 2010 federal election, then anonymous blogger Grog's Gamut became the focus of attention when his negative comments about the conduct of political journalism during the campaign were cited by the ABC's managing director.[11] This led to a News Corporation journalist 'outing' Grog's identity and employment as a senior public servant.

The extent to which this positively (as opposed to the reactionary model of the monitorial citizen) shapes public policy in Australia is uncertain. While the public sphere would argue that the formation of opinion and its transmission to the political elite represents the most powerful part of the public sphere's role in shaping policy, this is often hard to identify. From a more conventional media paradigm Matthew Marks (2007) argues that the failure of Australian bloggers to 'break news' means their impact on politics in this nation remains comparatively limited. The comparison here is with prominent bloggers in the United States, such as Matt Drudge (who was prominent in highlighting the Monica Lewinsky scandal) and Andrew Breitbart (influential in a number of scandals, particularly the publication of undercover videos showing staff of a community organisation network engaging in illegal activities). To date only a limited number of Australian bloggers have moved into more formal 'journalistic' activities, but these tend to be either time-limited (see I'm figgering on biggering, Chapter 6) or minor interventions into ongoing stories. An example of the latter would be the use of *Freedom of Information Act* requests by climate change sceptic Simon Turnill (*Australian Climate Madness* blog; www.australianclimatemadness.com) regarding reporting of email threats against scientists working at The Australian National University (Readfearn, 2012).

Alternatively, Bruns argues that while news-breaking might be largely beyond the resources of most bloggers, blogs can serve a valuable function in the media landscape through presenting a new editorial role: 'gatewatching' (2006: 15–16). Gatewatching is a form of online curatorship over information where relevant and interesting material is identified and drawn together for the blog audience. As information overload is a real problem online, these forms of

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11   '… the voices of the public being heard more than ever before … through blogs and the Twitter traffic. Half way through the campaign, the ABC Executive met on a Monday morning and discussed the weekend blog by the Canberra public servant, writing under the tag Grog's Gamut. It was a lacerating critique of the journalists following the candidates, their obsession with transient matters, the political scandal of the day. He met a chorus of praise and support, triggering a barrage of criticism of campaign coverage' (Scott, 2010: 4).

new editorial activities can provide a considerable service for individuals with specific interests, but who lack the time or specialist attention to cull important information from the wide range of sources available. An example of specialist aggregation service would be *Open and Shut* (http://foi-privacy.blogspot.com) maintained by Peter Timmins. Open and Shut aggregates together media articles, government reports and other news about freedom of information and privacy legislation issues in Australia. These content communities are important, not only in addressing market failures in specialist information provision, but in drawing together communities of interest, which has the potential to lead toward mobilisation into more direct political action.

#shortform

For those with a too limited attention span for blogs, Twitter is a popular way to jump into the social-media public sphere without the onerous task of establishing a blog or becoming a commentator in a blog community. While primarily a textual medium, Twitter is not necessarily a 'readers channel'.[12] Its constant flow of updates and interleaved responses makes it impossible to engage in a holistic understanding of any particular conversational thread. Instead it is ideal for downtime 'grazing' and hit-and-run participation with an opinion, counterpoint or non sequitur (Cross, 2011: 3–5). The flexibility of the medium comes from its use of social-networking tools to identify and follow other users, with the incorporation of hashtags that allow the formation of spontaneous discussion topics on the fly and without the need for a central organiser. Presently the exact number of Twitter accounts held by Australians is unknown, with estimates ranging from a low 550,000[13] to a high of 2.5 million.[14]

Interestingly, while often attacked as a trivial medium because of the default content limit of 140 characters (Hartwich, 2010), the high proportion of politicians, journalists and celebrities who have embraced the form in recent years have seen it receive considerable attention in mainstream media (for a detailed discussion of this, see Who's following whom, Chapter 6). There are also practical reasons for this level of visibility. Malcolm Farnsworth (2010) argues that the medium's inherent focus on the immediate makes those who use it seem responsive to their publics and 'in touch'. Twitter has also been one of the most visible of the 'convergent media',[15] being used to provide instant feedback

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12   Though it does serve an important gate-watching function through the use of embedded links as positive referrals by posters.
13   An underestimate, based on those accounts that include Australia in the location (Bruns, 2011).
14   A second-hand report based on now unverifiable research by BinaryPlex/Tribalyistc (Sperti, 2010).
15   'Convergence' remains a contested term in the study of new media. Henry Jenkins (2004: 34) observes that 'Media convergence is more than simply a technological shift. Convergence alters the relationship between existing technologies, industries, markets, genres and audiences'. The importance here is that the technical is just one part of a wider *process* of change.

on television broadcasts through the selection of tweets marked with a show's hashtags. That Twitter is increasingly being taken seriously by established elites is also evident in the number of high-profile lawsuits it has generated in recent years,[16] as well as strong advocacy by civil society groups to encourage public figures to adopt the channel as an indicator of increased transparency. The website *TweetMP* (http://tweetmp.org.au), for example, not only provides a list of Federal Members of Parliament Twitter accounts, but facilitates users to send messages to their MP encouraging them to use the service as a way of being more democratically accountable.

This immediacy clearly responds to perceptions of social distance between citizens and elites that are associated with forces such as globalisation and the decline of locally based political party structures in Australia. Jim Macnamara (2010a: 155–57) sees this also as part of a 're-voicing' of the public: providing a means by which individuals achieve a sense of political efficacy through the ability to express their views in the public sphere *in a visible manner*. He would see this as a positive salve for the perceived 'democratic malaise' (see An electronic constituency surgery, this chapter) associated with the decline in participation in traditional political structures. From a cultural studies perspective, Jason Wilson (2011: 458) has highlighted the use of fake/parody profiles as a convergence of 'fan' and news-junkie cultures that allows 'average' users to break into the mediated political world that was once reserved for those with access to institutional power. The genre convergence here is reflective of the wider move towards 'soft news' — the use of comedy and satire within the context of news content and commentary highlighted by the popularity of television shows like *The Project* (Channel 10) (Duck, 2012).

Like most trade-offs, however, this is not a simple case of rebalancing the net level of political participation in society. The nature of the channel shapes the focus of political discussion and debate in the new public spheres it facilitates. In the case of Twitter, the machine-gun rapidity of the channel aligns itself (and accelerates) with the accelerating news-cycle (Turnbull, 2012: 60) and the emphasis of a lot of political communication (practitioner and journalistic) in focusing on only the most immediate issue or political event (Parmelee & Bichard, 2012). This is not a unique observation; other forms of communication have been long recognised for the ability to adjust the flow of events. Photography, for example, has particular implications for shaping meaning through its ability to 'freeze time' and highlight or capture a specific aspect of an event (Humphreys, 2008: 58). The implications of Twitter's effect on political temporality are mixed. For the average user, Twitter allows them to be 'in the action', part of the

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16   For example, the threat of litigation against Canberra-based academic Julie Posetti by the editor of the *Australian* (see Chapter 6); Lynton Crosby and Mark Textor suing Labor MP Mike Kelly over a tweet questioning their polling methodology in 2012; Berkovic, 2012.

evolving narrative-making of public events. For elites it provides the ability for high visibility and responsiveness, but — gaffes aside[17] — at the cost of agenda control. Twitter, and the 'rapid-response' political communication model in general, have reduced the agenda-setting power of political elites today.

This is not to say that Twitter presents an anarchic medium of disconnected individuals 'shouting into the void' (Green, 2011). In their analysis of the semantic content of discussion around the #WikiLeaks hashtag, Simon Lindgren and Ragnar Lundström (2011: 1015) demonstrate the relationship of each tweet within a shared community of discourse (see Online anarchists and the democratisation of hacking, Chapter 5). Through the use of a set of communicative tools (slogans and frames) within and through the Twitter feed (links to external sources and media coverage of the issue), this community develops and sustains a shared frame of reference, set of discursive conventions, and flow of dialogue about the political issues of concern to them. This type of research demonstrates the power of these fluid media to demonstrate how simple structural characteristics of a technology can assist in the development of emergent communities and patterns of social interaction (Fuchs, 2008: 134–35).

It is therefore 'natural' (or demonstrates a degree of automaticity) that this medium would develop concentrations around political issues and debates which, over time, exhibit enough ideational stability to be seen as genuine discursive public spheres, rather than simply places for pure self-gratification. In political discourse on Twitter this is clearly demonstrated as topics move towards more specific areas of discussion. This is depicted in Illustration 6, which compares snapshots of two Australian political topics, one general and one specific. This means that this medium has more 'value' (in the classic Habermassian sense of practical consensus formation in the public sphere) in the specific over the general, a finding which reinforces the view presented in Chapter 2 about the comparatively frivolous nature of some political discussion online associated with general observation-making about politics and politicians.

Turning to survey data collected from Australian Twitter users[18] we can see that this channel attracts a similar user base to that of political blogs: generally well educated and engaged in politics online and offline. Again, survey data demonstrates that Twitter participation does not substitute for other, more

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17   Such as the example of then leader of the opposition Barry O'Farrell's accidental public tweeting of a private exchange where he called the prime minister a 'ranga' (redhead) (Jackson, 2010).
18   The research used two twitter profiles with embedded requests to complete the survey instrument. One profile contacted active twitter users posting using relevant hashtags (#auspol, #qldpol, #nswpol, #actpol, #vicpol (excluding policing references), #taspol, #sapol (excluding Philippines references), #wapol, #ntpol), who used the words 'Gillard' and 'Abbott' in posts and users with 'Australian politics', including in their bios (through the search engine tweepz.com). The second profile contacted a geographically disbursed group of Australians using the tweepz.com search tool to identify Australian Twitter users based on location. The survey research was undertaken between 14 December 2011 and 12 January 2012.

traditional forms of participation in either Twitter users who employ the medium for political or non-political purposes. While political Twitter users are more likely to be members of parties, online and offline advocacy groups and local citizens groups than their peers from the non-political sample, they are not more or less likely to be 'joiners' overall.[19]
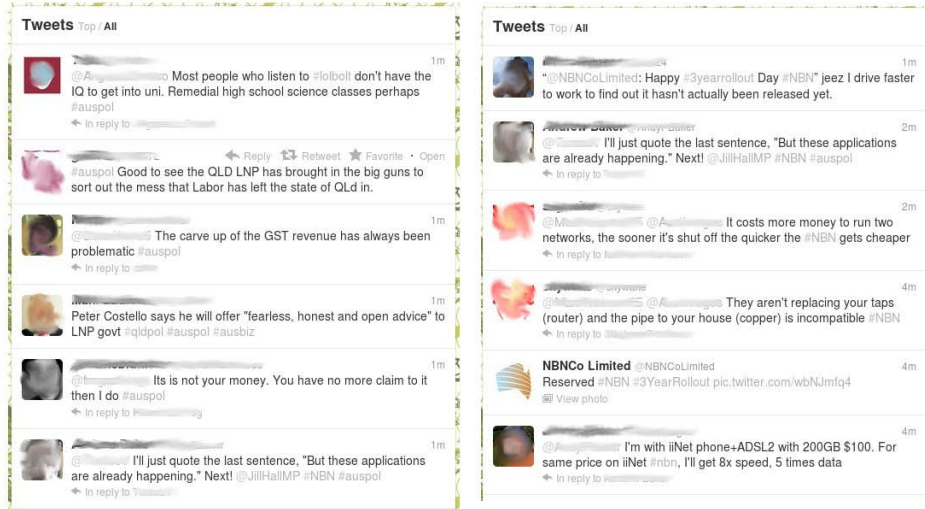

Illustration 6: Twitter conversations: #auspol and #nbn (29 March 2012) (user tags obscured)
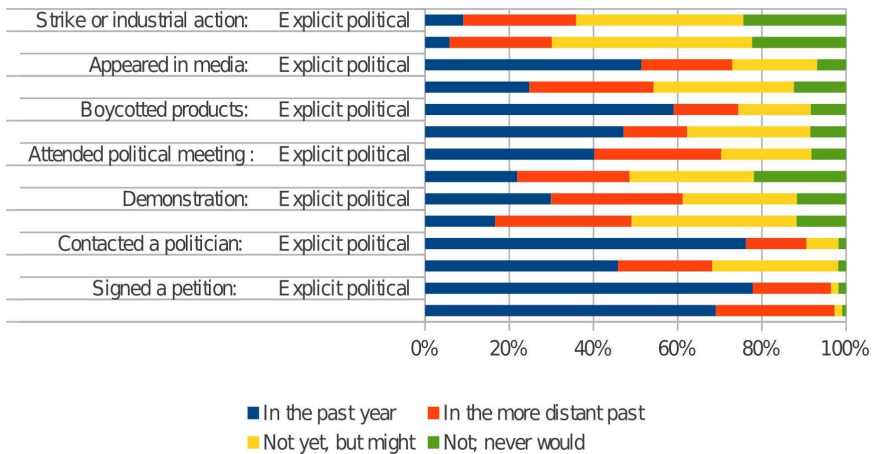
Source: Twitter

Figure 24: Political behaviour of Twitter users, comparative (n = 312)

Source: Author's research

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19   Non-political twitter users have greater representation in social groups, sporting organisations, and — interestingly — unions.

This flows through to the level of political activity undertaken by Twitter users (Figure 24), which, like that of blog users, is high. Political Twitter users, however, are more likely to have 'contacted or appeared in the media' for political purposes as well as 'contacted a politician, government official'. This is not surprising given the high proportion of politicians and media professionals who use the channel. One additional observation is that difference between political and non-political Twitter users' political activities is more considerable than that for blog users (Figure 23, this chapter). This is likely to be explained by the higher level of education of blog users (4.10 per cent are more likely to have a bachelors degree or equivalent and 15.21 per cent are more likely to have a postgraduate degree or equivalent). The implications of this are complex. While Twitter use appears to be strongly correlated with political mobilisation, this is moderated by educational differences between these channels.

All things being equal, it would appear that Twitter use is a stronger predictor of an individual being involved in other political activities. Non-participation appears not to be explained by either slacktivist arguments about expended political energy, nor does it appear that the channel promotes political cynicism. The combative tone of a high proportion of the discussion seen on Twitter does not significantly weaken the political trust of political Twitter users. Across four of the five measures of trust in government,[20] this group were less cynical of the capacity and motivations of government than the control group of non-political users. The one exception to this, interestingly, was in response to the proposition 'The government doesn't care what people like me think'. Thus, while overall more positive towards the government than the average Twitter user, political Twitter users see a deficit in the effectiveness of the political system to identify their demands. Twitter, as a public medium, therefore, appears a rational solution to this deficit through the broadcasting of their interests and concerns into the public sphere. As Twitter content (both substantive and in terms of aggregate trends — 'trending topics') is increasingly being picked up and reported by the media (see Chapter 6), this is a useful channel to amplify one's opinions and concerns.

Social networking services and politics

Over the past decade in Australia, interest in the political role of social networking services (SNS) (initially focused on MySpace and presently on the market leader, Facebook) has developed. There are a number of sources for this. First, profile-based SNS services have rapidly come to rival email as one of the most popular online applications (Vascellaro, 2009). As at January 2011,

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20   Most of the time we can trust people in government to do what is right; federal politicians know what ordinary people think; people in government usually look after themselves; and, government is mostly run for big interests.

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Facebook contained 9.3 million profiles for Australian residents,[21] over half of the adult population (Cowling, 2011b). Aside from membership, two-thirds of Australian internet users view content on the site (Nielsen, 2010a). Second, SNSs have been the focus of two recent high-profile election campaigns: the 2007–08 presidential race in the United States and the 2007 Australian federal election (Small, 2008a). In these races, the role of younger voters has been identified as playing a significant role. For Obama, younger voter turnout was important in the non-compulsory electoral setting of that country.

In the Australian context, Ben Eltham has talked about a 'young voters theory' (2007) putting emphasis on a range of policy debates (particularly industrial relations) that are of concern to younger voters. These voters are less likely to have a strong party alignment, and are subject to increased social mobility. Thus, the role of social media and SNSs in shaping their political decision-making is increasingly important. Valdis Krebs talks about the context of political decision-making for this group as best characterised as 'social voting': 'the social networks, voters are embedded in, exert powerful influences on [electoral] behavior' (2005). As discussed in Figure 17, these SNS are employed more by younger voters, serving as an ideal match for this constituency (Ward, 2008: 13; Howell & Da Silva, 2010), particularly as stable patterns of mass-media consumption (television viewing) break down.

Facebook users who demonstrate a political interest[22] are like other social-media users (particularly Twitter) in their level of political participation (Figure 25). Where this group differs from other social-media users is in their higher level of memberships. As we can see in Figure 26, Facebook users with political interests are active in a range of political and non-political groups. Most relevant for this discussion is their high level of party membership, and extremely high level of participation in political action groups that work predominantly online. This should not be surprising, as the nature of Facebook's social networking system reinforces and supports existing relationships, as well as providing access to new wholly virtual ones. In this way we can depart from Negroponte's notion of the digital environment as 'place without space' (1996: 165–66), but one that overlays the real and the simulated world in mundane, as well as interesting, ways (Dean, 2010: 36).

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21 Source: http://facebook.com; 4 January 2012.
22 The research on political Facebook users was undertaken between 9 August 2011 and 23 January 2012. Two recruitment methods were employed. First, requests for participation were posted to political group walls. Second, targeted advertisements were delivered to Facebook users resident in Australia, over the age of 18, who included an interest in politics in their biographies ($N = 22,360$).
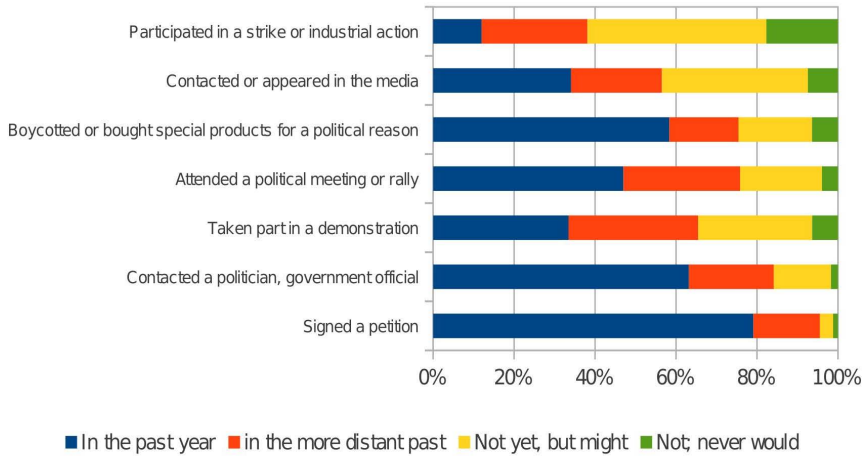
Figure 25: Political behaviour of Facebook users (n = 543)

Source: Author's research
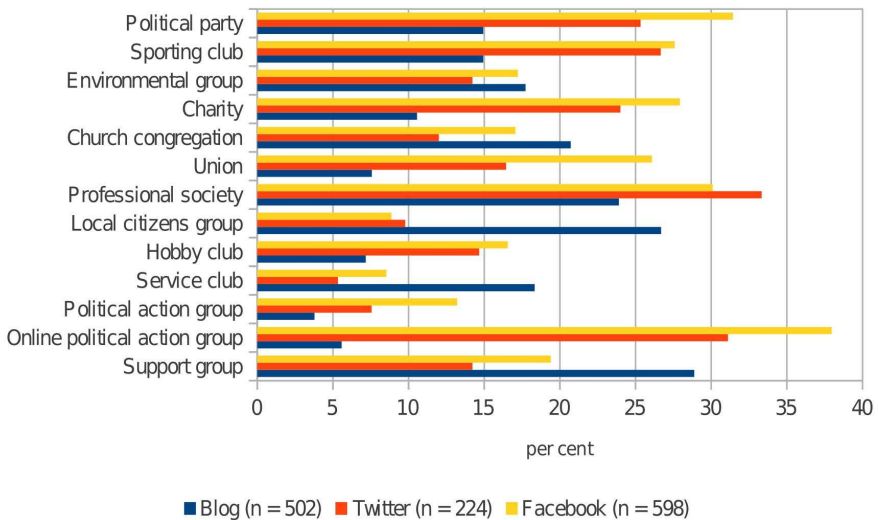
Figure 26: Propensity to group membership among social media users

Source: Author's research

The immediate impact of this may not be great. Kim Bale observes that the majority of these political groups and online causes have comparatively limited success in converting their popularity into more tangible political resources (particularly money) (2010). While the idea of political organisation

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via Facebook is viewed as a simple and low-cost method of converting passive support into politically useful resources, the reality is that these channels require considerable organisational effort in cultivating supporters, maintaining interest, and demonstrating legitimacy and tangibility. The predominant use of SNSs for personal news may undermine its channel credibility when topics shift from the personal to the societal. There is some evidence that more established channels (email and print) are still preferred sources for donation appeals, even by younger donors (Engelhardt, 2011: 64). This has implications for the cost-benefit calculus in adopting these tools. Converting 'likes' into resources through active strategies to mobilise and motivate their supporter base is a creative and time-intensive activity (such as preparing content for re-posting, Illustration 7). The upshot of this is that, just as it has become easier to connect with supporters, the number of requests of them increases, keeping the 'conversion' costs — costs spent on supporters relative to their returns — comparative over time (Hart & Greenwell, 2009).

Illustration 7: Referral to advocacy website (user tags obscured)

Source: Facebook

Proponents of SNS-based non-profit marketing see these criticisms as over-focusing on immediate financial benefits, cultivation of one-off 'transactional' donations, and the low unit donation rate largely seen to date (Chen, Te Fu, 2011). What these channels do allow is ongoing low levels of interaction between organisations and supporters, allowing for progressive reporting on fundraising activities to provide donors and potential donors with the social proof that their contribution has been matched by others (Margetts, et al., 2009), reassurance that 'paltry' levels of support are not wasted (relating to the building of personal efficacy; Shearman & Yoo, 2007), and fast turnarounds on information about the impact of contributions. Over time these interactions build shared identity with causes, and allow non-profit organisations to cultivate long-term donors through their lifecycle (e.g. picking up younger supporters who may be low-unit donors, but retain their support as they move into paid employment). Alternatively,

the provision of applications to support political causes (i.e. Causes, Pledgie, Petitions on Facebook) that provide rapid access to social networks, online world-of-mouth advertising, and cause infrastructure[23] can allow for effective promotion of 'flash-causes' (Watson, 2009). These causes, like the Kony 2012 campaign,[24] are often aligned with wider media coverage or specific events, and this level of attention can be capitalised on through the use of cause applications to capture and stabilise a community of interest.

Like my cause: Microactivism

When thinking about quasi-virtual political organisations it is important to consider the impacts that they have on the political activity of members (mobilisation from membership to action), and the way these associations impact on the wider communicative landscape. Following the slacktivist argument, some have questioned if participation in these types of 'microactivism' results in extended and enduring membership in social-media causes (Scholz, 2010: 27). This may put the cart before the horse: virtual organisation membership is often an extension of political life. As Jodi Dean argues, this fits with the nature of social-media practice that focuses on the personal connection with actual experience, the shared lifeworld (common understandings) (2010: 48–49). In a similar vein, José Marichal argues that microactivism enables self-identity creation and the development of 'activist identities'. Through the provision of an anonymous space/'front stage', individuals can experiment with political causes and activist personas in a public, but relatively safe place (2010: 6,15).

Here we can examine the value of political behaviour from the top-down as well as bottom-up. Reflecting the tendency of concept proliferation that still exists in this area of scholarship, Trebor Scholz uses the term 'nano-activism' to describe this form of behaviour (this will be picked up in Chapter 5). This is seen to have a different orientation: rather than focusing on the individual's engagement with the campaign (as in the above usage), the prospective campaign organiser might look at microactivism as a way in which activism can be purposively disaggregated into smaller and smaller component parts. This allows participation at lower levels of commitment (again picking up on Sachiyo Shearman's and Jina Yoo's research into 'paltry donation'; 2007). Just like the new-found value of micro-payments, micro-/nano-activism can be effectively co-ordinated through digital media at a lower transaction cost. This increases the number of low-level contacts and interactions that individuals may have with campaigns, without undermining the value of either each small act of participation to the cause, nor in identity-building. Research that finds a comparatively low level

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23   Such as petition systems, email gateways and e-commerce (payment) systems.
24   An online campaign developed by the charity Invisible Children aimed to highlight that Lord's Resistance Army commander Joseph Kony who remained at large in central Africa.

of direct translation from this type of activism, therefore, does not understate the potential of these spaces to develop political awareness and commitment. Indeed, concerns that low conversion rates indicate a weakening of political commitment may be unfounded. The low-cost of establishing a new online political group will invariably lead to both a proliferation of groups, as well as increased awareness of groups and cases that fail to effectively mobilise participation beyond the confines of social media. Clearly we run the risk of visibility bias towards online groups.

One way of examining in greater detail the political visibility and use of Facebook across the Australian population, therefore, is through interrogating the political content of material posted to this service.[25] This allows us to delineate between static 'affiliation' (liking a cause and having this part of the user's profile) and the generation and re-posting of political content. In addition to the extent of political material posted, this method also allows the content's character to be evaluated.

In the most general analysis, Table 7 demonstrates that the vast majority of content posted to users' Facebook walls is not political in nature (less than half of one per cent of posts made concerned institutional or issue-based politics).[26] This said, almost one in 10 users studied *did* post at least one political post to their wall during the study period of approximately one month's worth of wall posts. This tends to reiterate the general observation that Australians are not generally publicly politically expressive individuals. While it is difficult to determine in this context what contributes a large or small amount of political content, it would appear that Facebook is not a site for widespread political expression online by Australians. Even so, making political posts is not a social turn-off, as there is no correlation between a user's number of friends and their propensity to post political content on their wall (−0.015).

What is interesting about the Australian public's use of social networking services to exchange political information is the considerable *difference* that exists between the source of political content on SNSs compared with other environments. If we compare the Facebook research results with the political web-browsing behaviour discussed in What do voters *do* online (Chapter 2), we see in Figure 27 that users are far more likely to self-generate political content

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25   This analysis was based on a 2011 study of the content of 600 Australian residents' Facebook wall posts. Using a new Facebook user profile with no friendship ties, quota sampling was employed to randomly select user profiles with walls that were visible to the researcher (public). Quota categories were geographic, attempting to get a representative sample of Australians based on their location of residence (by state or territory and by rural or urban location). In addition, an equal number of men and women were sought. Users were excluded on the basis of: newness (too little content), predominant use of non-English (due to translation issues), or non-individual profiles (largely commercial profiles).

26   This study employed the same definition of 'political' as employed in the 2010 voter panel study, see footnote 37, Chapter 2.

on SNSs rather than simply repost material prepared by political organisations. This is illustrated by the figure's low numbers of 'institutional' content having been posted.

		All	Men	Women	Capital	Urban (non capital)	Rural
Posts (entries)	n	29,660	15,201	14,459	19,028	9524	1108
	Political (n)	136	68	68	110	22	4
	Political (%)	0.45	0.44	0.47	0.57	0.23	0.36
Posters (people)	n	600	309	291	382	193	25
	Political (n)	55	22	33	37	16	2
	Political (%)	9.16	7.11	11.34	9.68	8.29	8

Table 7: Political use of Facebook

Source: Author's research

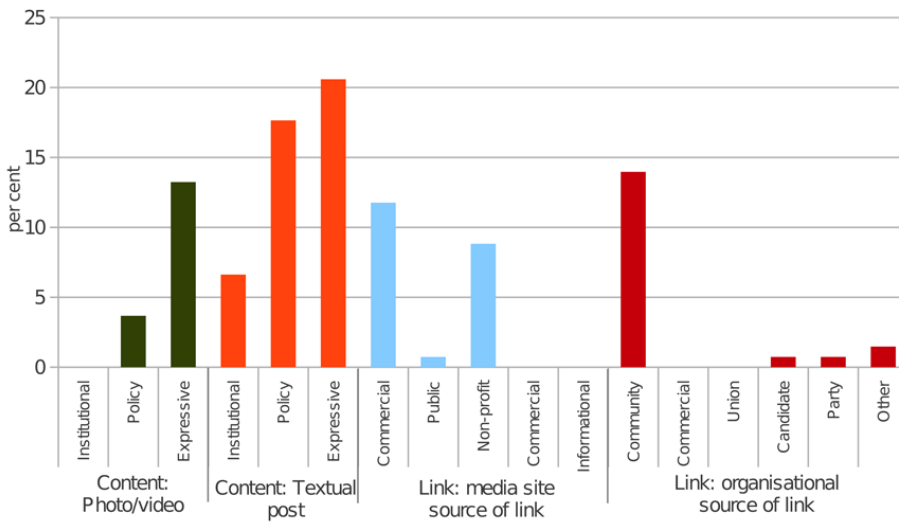**Figure 27: Political content on Facebook wallposts, by type**

Source: Author's research

In alignment with Marichal's identify formation argument, we do see that text and media posts tend to be more expressive than substantive: 'I support' statements rather than policy detail. An example of this is seen in Illustration 8, a pro-trucking wall post made in the period following the release of the

Commonwealth's carbon pricing policy that does not lead into a political or policy-oriented discussion, but one about shared identity (as car aficionados in this case).


```
^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^| |^^^^^^^^^^ ||P
| WITHOUT EM,WE HAVE NOTHING ^^^ ||""";..\___.
|......_____| |_____| _||__|..., ]P
"(@)'(@)""""""*I'(@)I'(@)I """""""""""""(@)'(@)""""'(@)
RE POST IF YOU SUPPORT AUSTRALIA'S TRUCKIES!
```

16 July at 14:37 · Like · Comment

👍 3 people like this.

💬 View all 4 comments

shit yea, see some scary shit sometimes hey..dya know any1 wantin a cortina,i want me coupe back on the road..
16 July at 16:55 · Like

na i dont mate, but i'll let ya know if i do. Im trying to find a BA or BF xr6 or xr8 ute to buy, any good buys over there?
17 July at 10:23 · Like

Write a comment...

Illustration 8: Pro-trucking Facebook post, ascii cut and paste (user tags obscured)

Source: Facebook

While some of this material does come from third parties, the sources are interesting. Unlike the previous study looking at browsing habits, links to political news sources only marginally favour mainstream commercial media, with a high level of representation of non-profit (non-public) media being distributed through Facebook. Similarly, outbound political links largely ignore established political organisations (parties and candidates), and favour non-profit community organisations. This, to some extent, demonstrates the influence of applications like Causes (www.causes.com) in assisting these organisations to gain a degree of visibility, even if their financial benefit remains in question.

Two-step flow, 2.0

The discussion of the political content and practices of social-media users is relevant to an aspect of the notion of the public sphere: that of political discourse within these new sites for opinion formation, as well as the mobilisation of these individuals within the realm of conventional politics. Following our discussion of the two-step flow model (Social media as a deliberative space, this chapter), we can also explore the question of whether these individuals are not simply politically expressive, but are active as opinion leaders outside of social media.

This is significant for two reasons. First, if, as we have identified, those engaging in these new public spheres are in the minority, we need to question if their deliberation and ideational exchange 'spills over' into wider political discourse. This is similar to the way commercial publications measure both their sales figures and secondary (or 'pass-along') readers to measure their real impact (Lee & Johnson, 1999: 192). If political social-media participants are engaged in political discussion outside the social-media space, ideas move between these on and offline communities. Second, and with relevance to the slacktivist arguments, it is also important to determine if participation in online political discussion extinguishes or expends levels of political engagement outside of these fora.

To this end we can construct Figure 28. This shows the willingness of social-media users who are interested in politics to engage in political dialogue outside of that setting. The figure is drawn from the survey data discussed above, with specific responses to a scenario where the respondent has the opportunity to have a conversation with a person who holds an opposing political view during a long journey in a confined space: the 'stranger on a train scenario'.[27] The purpose of this question is to determine the individual's comfort in engaging in political dialogue outside of a socially safe space. By nature, the train is public, but has a degree of intimacy, and the timing of the scenario means it would be difficult for the respondent to disengage from the conversation easily.

Figure 28 demonstrates that the users of political social media self-report as being willing to engage in this form of speech. Interestingly, we can also see that there is a tendency for increased willingness to talk to this stranger based on the degree to which participation in the medium in question is a 'performative' act. Blog users, for example, can be active or passive in their engagement with the blog and its content, whereas membership of Twitter and Facebook political communities tends to be defined more by participation. Similarly, the 'walled

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27   For example, the CANdo respondents were asked this question: 'You are taking a five-hour train trip and there is a person in sitting in your compartment who thinks that government regulation of business should be expanded to better protect the rights of workers. Would you talk to this person to get to know their point of view better, or wouldn't you think that worth your while?'

garden' nature of the channel employed appears to be correlated to a willingness to talk. Facebook and CANdo provide the opportunity for communities to self-select towards homogeneity through explicit membership requirements (CANdo's rules of membership, enforced by the site's management) or social pressure against 'trolling' political groups[28] that demonstrates the inclusiveness of members 'inside' this group.
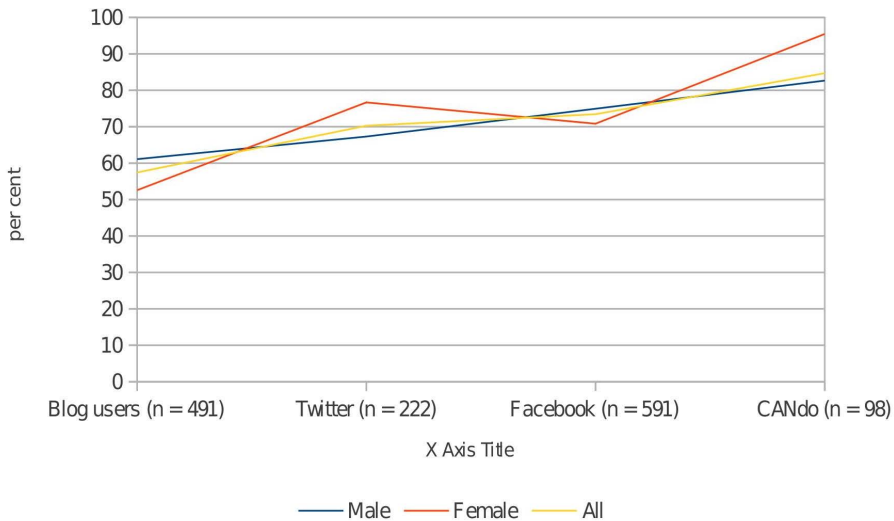

Figure 28: Stranger on a train scenario, willingness to talk

Source: Author's research

This confirms research undertaken in the United States that participation in social media and SNSs can encourage active political participation through cultivating individual's *capacity* for political speech (Fernandes, et al., 2010). This is a key methodological point, as it orients us to the distinction between action and agency, behaviour and capacity. The capacities approach focuses on the resources individuals have which permit the achievement of their objectives and desires (Qizilbash, 2008). We can see that the 'front stage' of social media both serves as a place to develop identity, but also communicative skills in areas of one's political interest. This varies between the different social media, which reiterates the demographic differences between the groups identified above. This is illustrated in Figure 29, but demonstrates a close tracking between these

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28   Claire Hardaker (2010: 237) defines a troll as a 'user who constructs the identity of sincerely wishing to be part of the group in question, including professing, or conveying pseudo-sincere intentions, but whose real intention(s) is/are to cause disruption and/or to trigger or exacerbate conflict for the purposes of their own amusement'. This definition captures the hostility aspect of trolling (as opposed to playful disruption) that fits well with the 'stranger on a train' scenario.

interests and the degree to which these issues get covered in the mainstream media (this is discussed in Chapter 6's consideration of mass media and agenda setting). It is interesting in that, if interest is shaped by the conventional media agenda, the finding illustrated in Figure 24 regarding the selection of outbound links for posting to SNS walls points to the translation of commercial media agendas through social media: annotation rather than reiteration.
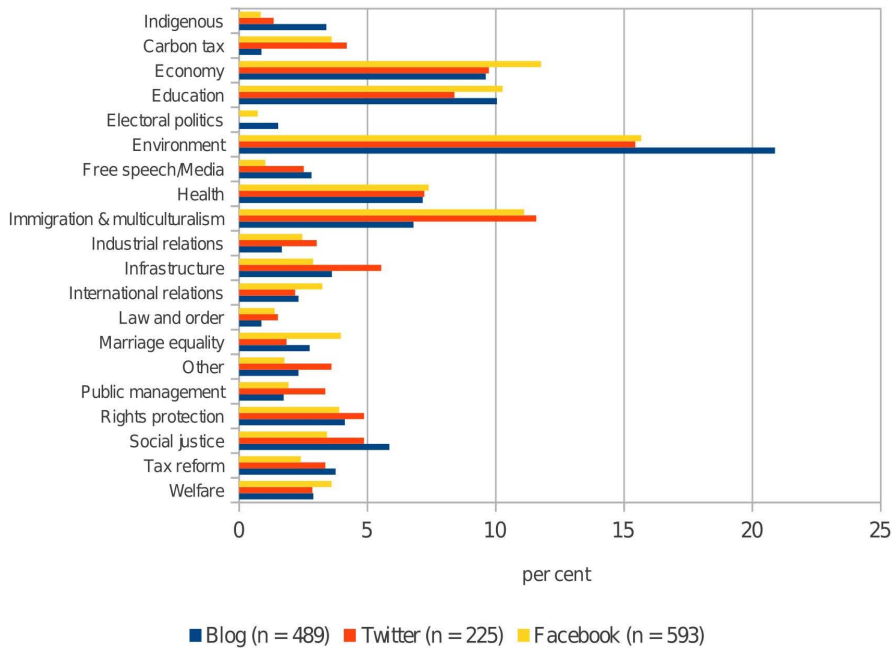

Figure 29: Policy areas of interest to social media users

Source: Author's research

Channel bias: Social media is 'leftist'

At this point it is worth exploring an essentialist proposition about social media and politics: that they tend to be more aligned with the politics of 'the left'. This argument stems from a number of sources. Empirically, in the United States, Lee Rainie and Aaron Smith's survey work has identified 'liberals' as more likely to join SNSs than conservatives (2012: 4). Generally, left-wing political ideology is commonly associated with underlying communitarian principles (Browne & Kubasek, 1999) that, in effect, point to greater participation in social commons. In this observation we can also see how the focus of research into new social movements in the 1960s and 1970s (for more detail, see Chapter 5) also tends to focus attention on existing organisations in support of social movements of

the left and see how they have used a variety of digital media to create a virtual presence similar to their physical one (see Illustration 9).[29] Increasingly, however, social media has been employed with considerable vigour by conservative organisations.

Illustration 9: South Australian Feminist Collective Facebook page (user tags obscured)

Source: Facebook. Used with permission

In the Australian context it is useful to know if these media have a political bias in their user base in examining if those on the 'left' of the political spectrum are more interested in online community activities than those on the 'right'. While this argument looks simplistic, there are foundations to the hypothesis we can see from theories of political action (that core beliefs about communitarian policy preferences will be exhibited in surface behaviours that are measurable; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993) and simple observation that members of the Australian Greens are over-represented in the survey responses of Twitter, Facebook and blog users collected for this book. We can test this through seeing if there is a correlation between digital-media users' place on the political spectrum (inferred through party identification) and the number of different memberships they report. Taking the baseline respondents to the

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29 Again, this does not mean this uptake is automatic. Petray's (2011: 927) work on indigenous activism using new media has argued that the comparative under-utilisation of these technologies reflects a cultural preference towards oral communication. This is irrespective of the potential value in channelling together a geographically distributed set of communities with similar interests.

Twitter and blog readers' studies (the non-political respondents) we can see there is no correlation between place on the political spectrum and the tendency towards being a 'joiner' (−0.002, n = 136).

Overall, generational characteristics appear to be a stronger factor on the political mix of social-media users (Greens voters are more likely to be younger overall; Phillips, 2010), however, we should also recall the thermostatic hypothesis presented at the start of this section: coming out of an era of Liberal Party political dominance, social media may serve as a site for counterpublics. If the former, the conservatism associated with ageing is likely to counterbalance this in the longer term. If the latter, it points more strongly to counter-organisation against majority opinion. One alternative explanation that we will turn to in the next chapter is that the predominance of the left online is the result of 'political correctness': a silencing of opinion out of step with the majority.

The opinion makers

The classic public-sphere model involves an organic process of the formation of public opinion. That is, a spontaneous process of the formation and mobilisation of public opinion from the bottom up. In this way, the public sphere acts as a regulator of authority through the identification of under-serviced issues, the generation of new ideas, and the reification of political interests. This view places considerable emphasis on those in the sphere of government to moderate and mediate between competing demands and ideas. The expansion of mass society (with mass education, political participation and enfranchisement) makes this a more complex task. It is difficult not simply because of the manipulation of rational publics by self-interested interest groups and factions, but also due to the scale of demands that need be synthesised (Power Inquiry, 2006).

From the bottom-up perspective, the complexity of the policy environment encourages the growth of intermediating bodies, which provide individuals with the expertise to synthesise and systematise policy preferences (Lehmbruch, 1983). While this provides a rational solution to the problem of complexity, it also introduces the principal-agent problem reviled by public choice economists and feared by political elites (that engagement with 'representative bodies' does not deliver the support of these constituencies because they are not aligned with these interests; Strolovitch, 2006: 894). The extent to which social media provides an alternative for individual citizens to directly express policy views appears limited to the 'charmed circle' of the engaged and educated.[30] In response we have seen experiments in the creation of public opinion through

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30   As Ariadne Vromen's (2007) research demonstrates, this reaches across generations and the notion of an emerging, automatically engaged generation of the 'born digital' is overstated.

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the development of virtual spaces, and new channels of opinion to elites. These social-media spaces represent an older paradigm of online politics associated with the 'electronic democracy' initiatives pioneered in the 1990s (Aikens, 1996). While systematic study of these initiatives remains to be undertaken,[31] we can explore this area through examining a number of case examples.

Yopinion

Yopinion.com.au ('Your Opinion') was an experiment by a number of undergraduate university students studying politics and government and backed by some 'angel' investors from familial social networks. Using a centralised discussion-focused website, *Yopinion* employed a range of media (text, video, social) to attract participation from younger Australians (under 25) for informed policy debate and information exchange. This reflects the deliberate formation of counterpublic public spheres by elites within this cohort. To facilitate discussion, the site's staff used the mechanism of 'leader' stories presenting contemporary policy issues, pacing the publication of these stories to encourage deliberative discussion in depth. This took inspiration from the type of policy coverage seen in news magazines: more detailed and neutral coverage aimed to allow the readers to take a position on the material presented. In this way the objectives of the site were strongly influence by the rationalism of Habermas's view of the public sphere (personal interview: Dougal Robinson, 12 March 2012).[32]

The site's success was modest, growing over time to attract about 700 members and closing in early 2012. Yopinion's staff used a variety of methods to engage with their potential audience, but found video and Facebook the most effective way to connect to their target audience. In a deliberate attempt to improve the tone of discussions (civility), they required posters to be anonymous. Possibly because of this, the site struggled with recruitment and conversion (from readers to commenters and writers), reducing its effectiveness and the ability of the operators to leverage its patronage into a long-term viable model (either through partnership with other organisations or to pitch summaries of its members' opinions as a representative sample). These problems show the difficulty in building a self-sustaining community from scratch: constant effort was required to produce activity on the site that, in the end, wore the organisers

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31   This is a methodologically complex question and research will require care and attention to identify not just 'public' public spheres, but the use of new media *within* intermediating organisations to increase their consultation and capacity for representation of members. This latter area of activity allows representative groups (e.g. interest groups) to make strong claims about their capacity to 'deliver' the views of members to political elites.

32   Additionally, this deliberate choice was in response to what the founders' saw as the style of headline-driven writing in online news media in Australia, a problem exacerbated by the tendency for the effectiveness of online writing to be driven by click-through rates.

down financially. Failing to meet this 'critical mass' limited the founders' ability to free themselves from the intensive efforts of content generation, but also the ability to make a claim to legitimacy associated with the size of participating membership.

Tell 'em

Attempting to match limited resources with lower barriers to participation, *Tell 'em Australia* (www.tellem.net.au) is an example of an intervention into the Australian party system. Founded in late 2011, the website undertakes weekly polls of Australians against national and state-based issues. These polls are deliberately yes/no choices drawn from suggestions from site users and current affairs.[33] As results of the polls are intended to be sent to MPs, *Tell 'em Australia* collects participants' postcodes as the key means of verifying and reviewing the distribution of participants (*Tell 'em Australia*, 2011). While initially promoting the site through social media (particularly Twitter), the operators are aware of the problems associated with sample bias and the digital divide, attempting to target conventional media to promote their service beyond the world of social media.

While their site emulates the use of simple polling on the websites of national news organisations, the site operators see their position as independently attempting to frame their questions in a neutral way, facilitating agenda-setting from the participants through their input into question writing. The origins of the site lie in their personal conviction that the Australian political system is unresponsive to citizens, particularly due to the impact of parties' increased control over the policy position of MPs (personal interview: Christine Dodson, 6 January 2012). As a conduit between MPs and constituents, the site is the embodiment of the delegate model of representation seen in the motivations behind the formation of Senator Online, though without the heavy exceptions of participation (attendance, volunteering, financial donation) seen by that party (see Senator Online, Chapter 2). Citing a learning-by-doing philosophy, the site demonstrates how private individuals experiment with creating democratic fora at comparatively low cost and with the ability to create large communities of interest quickly (the site reached approximately 1200 individual survey respondents[34] within the first month of operations).

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33 Seen as a leveller of participation between the highly engaged and those with lower levels of engagement.

34 Newspoll, by comparison, builds a deliberative sample of approximately 1800 respondents.

An electronic constituency surgery

The comparatively modest levels of participation in these 'third party' sites makes their impact to date modest at best. Attempts to increase the autonomy and responsiveness of MPs remains a windmill at which democratic reformers continue to tilt, regardless of the structural and historical tendency for centralisation in Australia (Mulé, 2001: 20; Jupp & Sawer, 2001: 262). While Tell 'em's founders' lack of experience inside the party system is reflected in their binary view of individual MPs versus party control, rather than also as active members of party and parliamentary decision-making, there does seem to be traction with some MPs expressing interest in the development of the service. Indeed, access to decision-makers is an important determinant in the success or failure of many of these projects, as participants make a rational choice to invest time based on the likelihood of policy impact (Walsh, 2007: 11). In one way, third-party sites like this can encourage those MPs seeking to challenge party policy with data derived from polling the electorate. This can only occur outside of the party machine. Previous attempts by MPs to use online fora and polling have encountered problems where these results were generated through Members' personal websites. A good example is that of former MP Mark Latham who, prior to his time as Labor leader, established a personal polling site for his electorate, *Direct Democracy in Werriwa*, as a means to overcome perceived disconnection between the public and elected representatives (Bishop, et al., 2002). The forum was discontinued when it became clear that it would serve only to place the MP at odds with party policy.

This problem has not stopped parliamentarians experimenting with building digital public spheres. Possibly the best known and longest running recent example would be Senator Kate Lundy's (ALP, ACT) Public Sphere events — with the name giving us a very clear view of the Senator's self-conscious engagement with the Habermasian ideal. While the examples above provide(d) ongoing digital spaces for participation, Lundy's events focused on the identification of, and deliberation on, specific policy issues in a time-limited manner using an array of technologies and social-media channels to provide a structured consultation process (including collaborative idea generation and limited voting to determine the idea agenda).

To do this the Lundy and her staff established a methodology that permitted comparatively open discussion (Lundy, 2009), but also focused on producing tangible policy-related outputs:

1. Preparation of the topic, including achieving 'buy in' from the relevant minister and key stakeholders — by nature this means that agenda setting remains somewhat removed from the discursive process and is pushed back into the elite-controlled initiation process.

2. Consultation, promotion and collection of comparatively unstructured initial feedback and input through a variety of formats.

3. Public Sphere 'Camp', a physical and virtual event aimed at drawing together and focusing discussions and recommendations.

4. Post-camp consultation and development of findings.

5. Reporting to the relevant minister.

Here, the flexibility of the platform tools is important: a channel can serve a number of roles within this methodology. Twitter, for example, can be a useful constituent of the discursive space in the early part of the process, while shifting to being a secondary data-collection tool in the physical meeting context. The use of physicality is interesting and important, reflecting international research that shows how commitment to the objectives of virtual communities can be strengthened through offline events and interactions (Rosen, et al., 2011).

To date Lundy has run three Public Sphere consultations within her area of specific interest (High Speed Bandwidth, Government 2.0, and ICT and the Creative Industries).[35] Participation in these events has increased over time, with the final event attracting 800 contributors. The impact of this participation on policy process is less clear, however, with ideas moving into the closed world of elite politics at this point. What this 'top-down' (or at least, top-initiated) model sacrifices is the enduring character of other e-democracy spaces for the promise of access to policy-makers. What this 'top-down' (or at least, top-initiated) model sacrifices is the enduring character of other e-democracy spaces for the promise of access to policy-makers. These initiatives are a good example of the use of an e-democracy platform to provide capacity to participants. As Lundy observes, this provides participants with a simple exchange: 'tell me what you think, and we'll provide a means by which we can package that up and deliver it in the most effective way to government.' The notion of this e-democracy initiative as a 'project' that can be 'delivered' to a public is misleading, however, with Lundy arguing that the fit between her use of a variety of social media in these projects and the topics themselves is a natural alignment of the audience with their 'natural' environment. Thus, following the observation that policy begets politics (Lowi, 1964), the Public Sphere initiatives' focus on the technology community served to facilitate the development of the technology as an act of co-creation. Clearly this presents questions about the capacity to regularise this practice and extend it outside of the technology context (participants in these examples had high levels of capability with the technology platforms coming into the exercise).

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35   ALP NSW Parliamentary Secretary for Transport Penny Sharpe ran a 'NSWsphere' in 2009 using this model focusing on Government 2.0 for that state (Tindal, 2009).

The likelihood of this to be expanded more widely is questionable. While Lundy sees the presence of a number of 'tech savvy' parliamentarians as a key resource for members and senators interested in expanding their engagement with online public spheres, it is unclear if this would be elaborated to the extent that the public sphere initiatives have been to date. This has a lot to do with the question of motivation and the benefits of experimentation in new forms of constituent interaction. Interestingly, therefore, rather than the possibility that electoral marginality would encourage candidates to explore new means to increase 'alignment' with the public opinion in their constituencies, Lundy sees her comparatively safe seat as providing the freedom to engage in these experiments (personal interview: Kate Lundy, 12 March 2012). The notion of these activities as ongoing experiments appears problematic in terms of legitimising them as normal and routine ways to engage with the public, in the same way that other forums of elite-public consultation have been over time.

This reflects wider debates in Australian political parties regarding their level of engagement with the general public, of which the use of 'primaries' (pre-election candidate selection via ballot) is the most visible in recent years (van Onselen, 2009). At the ALP's national conference in 2011 the party accepted a proposal to further employ digital media to better engage members of the wider public through the creation of non-geographic branches (communities of interest), internet policy fora, and online memberships based on the community organising model (Crook, 2011). To this end the ALP has been successively investing in centralised ICT infrastructure over a number of years (Bitar, 2010) to build technical capacity. It remains uncertain if these developments lead toward a widening of the party's use of the discursive engagement model of Lundy's Public Spheres or more towards the market aggregation option of GetUp!

The more things change

Regardless of where you go, there you are. Social media has enabled Australians to create new public spaces for democratic and policy discourse as well as to 'virtualise' existing groups and communities of interest. In the process we can see that many of the 'usual suspects' are found online: the educated and emboldened majority, as well as the marginalised who seek for political identities and have expression into the wider public conversation. This reflects the power of the cultural explanation for technology adoption: that existing practices, discourses and power gradients are often reprinted on new technologies. At the same time there are clearly areas of deliberate and natural innovation in the use of digital media public spheres. Deliberate innovations can be seen in the way a range of groups and individuals from inside and outside the established political system have attempted to operationalise — knowingly or not — the idea of the

discursive public sphere. Overall, there has been a massive expansion in highly visible public talk about politics that encourages individuals to see themselves as part of a discursive community. But, is this all that there could be? Does the new environment really embolden free talk? In Chapter 4 we look at the limits of free speech.