

# E-electioneering 2010: Trends in social media use in Australian political communication

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In the wake of the ‘turning point’ 2004 US presidential election, the Obama campaign of 2008, the 2010 UK election, and *e-democracy* movements globally, Australians went to the polls in 2010 in a media-hyped flurry of ‘tweeting’, YouTube videos, Facebook befriending and ‘liking’, blogging, and other social media activities. Following a study showing that the 2007 Australian election was not a ‘YouTube election’ as claimed by many media and commentators, and that social media use in the campaign was mostly non-interactive promotional messaging, a study was undertaken during the 2010 federal election campaign to gain comparative data and updated insights. This article reports quantitative and qualitative content analysis of social media use by 206 federal political candidates and the two major political parties during the 2010 Australian election to identify trends in terms of the volume of *e-electioneering* content and activity, as well as the main ways in which social media are being used in political communication.

## Introduction

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

Election campaigns form an important part of the *public sphere* proposed by Habermas (1989) as a space in which citizens come together and engage in “rational-critical debate” to become informed, contribute to political discourse, and reach consensus expressed in the form of ‘public opinion’. Despite being criticised as a normative ideal (Curran, 2002: 45) and its increasing manifestation as a mediated space in contemporary societies rather than a physical site involving face-to-face communication (Castells, 2009; Corner, 2007; Dahlgren, 2009; Keane, 2009), Habermas describes the public sphere as “part of the bedrock of liberal democracies” (2006: 412).

Throughout most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this mediated public sphere was principally comprised of *mass media* involving a limited number of ‘voices’, limited opportunities for two-way interaction and citizen engagement, colonisation by market imperatives, and absorption by “the modes and content of entertainment” which contributed to citizen alienation from politics, according to Habermas (2006: 421–2) and others such as Dahlgren (2009). However, the growth of the internet has spawned a raft of studies re-examining the public sphere, and

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the rapid evolution of interactive 'social media' with their claims for democratisation and citizen empowerment warrant ongoing review and analysis.

## Literature review

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

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

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

Following international trends and rapid growth of social media, the 2007 Australian federal election involved social media campaigns by major political parties on an expanding scale, such as the election-winning Australian Labor Party under its *Kevin07* theme as well as political candidates, interest groups, and independent bloggers (Flew and Wilson, 2008; Macnamara, 2008).

Nevertheless, while internet reporting and discussion of the election outstripped press, radio and TV coverage in total according to Goot (2008, p. 99), several studies of use of interactive Web 2.0 media by major political actors found that the 2007 Australian federal election did not live up to claims that it was "the YouTube election" (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 July 2007) or the "Google election" (Gibson and Ward, 2008: 5). Only 13 (5.6 per cent) of Australia's 226 incumbent politicians posted videos on YouTube; only 26 (11.5 per cent) had a MySpace site; just 15 (6.6 per cent) had a blog; eight (3.5 per cent) had a Facebook site; and only seven (3.1 per cent) podcast (Macnamara, 2008: 8–9). Furthermore, research found that most online media used by politicians and political parties were heavily moderated, with only one politician allowing critical comments to be posted. In short, political communication

was carefully orchestrated and citizen comment and participation was restricted to “fan mail” (Macnamara, 2008: 9).

The 2008 Presidential campaign in the US has been widely reported as taking of political communication via social media to new heights. It has to be said that much of this was aimed at fund-raising with a reported US\$500 million raised online (Macnamara, 2010a: 162). Furthermore, with voluntary voting in the US, another key objective of social media use during the Obama campaign was gaining voter turnout. Gibson, Lusoli and Ward (2008) speculate that the existence of compulsory voting in Australia has “arguably diminished” concern for citizen engagement in political campaigns. However, a Pew Internet and American Life Project study reported that 46 per cent of all Americans used the internet to access news about the campaign, share their views and mobilise others (Smith and Rainie, 2008: i). Perhaps even more significantly, 19 per cent of Americans reported going online weekly to “do something related to the campaign”. In Australia, studies have shown that 57 per cent of citizens would like opportunities to comment on policies online and 36 per cent are interested in communicating with their MPs online (Gibson and Ward, 2008). This suggests a coming of age of online political engagement and draws attention to the 2010 Australian and UK elections as important sites to further examine trends in e-electioneering and e-democracy.

Recent studies of social media for political communication, including those of Chen (2008), Chen and Walsh (2009), Dahlgren (2009), Flew and Wilson (2008), Gibson and McAllister (2008b), Goot (2008), Macnamara (2008, 2010b), and Smith and Rainie (2008), have been more optimistic than previous research – albeit many questions still remain unanswered.

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

## Research questions

To understand how social media are being used in political communication in a contemporary context and compare 2010 election practices with 2007, two types of research questions were developed for this study, one relating to quantitative factors (how much and how many), and one relating to qualitative factors (how and in what way). As well as identifying the volume of social media content in relation to electioneering, this study sought to examine levels of *interactivity* in the form of response and dialogue, and *authenticity* in social media use – factors identified as central to Web 2.0 and communication generally (Boler, 2008; Bucy, 2004; O’Reilly, 2005). The following four research questions were investigated in the quantitative stage of this study:

1. How had social media use changed in the 2010 federal election compared with 2007?
2. Which types of social media were most used by political candidates and major political parties?
3. Which politicians used social media most by type and overall?
4. What patterns or trends, if any, were evident in relation to parties, gender or age?

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

5. To what extent did politicians and political parties respond to and engage in *dialogue* with citizens in social media?

6. What were the main uses of social media by politicians and political parties?
7. To what extent did politicians and political parties *control* their social media sites through moderation to block critical content or other strategies.

## **Methodology**

This study used content analysis of social media sites deployed in a mixed method approach in two stages. In the first stage of research, quantitative data were collected in relation to research questions 1–5 by systematically counting and recording statistics such as the numbers of ‘friends’, ‘followers’, ‘following’, ‘likes’, views, blog and Wall posts, tweets, and comments from all relevant sites. These data were recorded and analysed in a series of Excel worksheets, including comparative analysis with 2007 data.

The second stage of research was informed by quantitative data in relation to responses to citizens’ comments and inquiries, ‘following’ numbers in Twitter (as opposed to ‘followers’), and other interactivity features such as ‘contact me/us’, and additionally applied qualitative analysis to explore questions 5–7. Qualitative content analysis based on techniques outlined by Shoemaker and Reese (1996) and others was conducted on the content published by the 10 most active users of Twitter and Facebook on the basis that the most active users provided the most relevant sample. Less active social media users often provided small samples of content. Tweets, Wall posts and comments were coded at an axial level as identified by Glaser (1978) and Punch (1998: 210–221) to categorise content by type and form such as discussion of social and political issues, broadcast campaign messages and slogans; responses to questions or comments, personal information; and key themes.

### ***Sample***

While it would be interesting to analyse all social media use by all parties and candidates standing in the election, the substantial volume of content required sampling for both quantitative and qualitative analysis. Quantitative analysis focussed on incumbent federal politicians standing for re-election in 2010 to the 150-member House of Representatives and the 76-member Senate in the Australian Parliament. This produced a sample of 206 federal politicians, with 20 sitting members not standing for re-election. In addition, this study examined the social media sites of the two major political parties – the Australian Labor Party and the Liberal Party of Australia.

In depth qualitative analysis was conducted of the ‘top 10’ most active politicians’ Twitter and Facebook accounts, the two major social media platforms used in the election, identified by volume of tweets, Wall posts and comments.

### ***Period***

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

## **Findings – quantitative**

In total, the number of social media sites used by federal politicians more than doubled in 2010 compared with 2007. As shown in Table 1, the major changes in social media use by politicians over the 2007–2010 period were large increases in use of Twitter and Facebook and significantly increased use of personal Web sites, YouTube, blogs, e-newsletters and

Flickr (the latter from a small base), accompanied by a decline in use of MySpace, e-surveys and e-petitions.

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

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

### ***Personal Web sites***

The most common online form of communication by federal politicians in 2010, as in 2007, was personal Web sites. During the 2010 Australian federal election, 157 re-standing federal politicians had a personal Web site (76.2 per cent), compared with 137 in 2007 (60.6 per cent). However, analysis found that politicians' personal Web sites remain mostly Web 1.0 type sites without any major commitment to interactive Web 2.0 features. Only 35 per cent of politicians provided their personal e-mail address for contact, 44 per cent provided a contact form, and most offered only office phone numbers or addresses – i.e. traditional forms of contact.

### ***Politicians on Twitter***

While Twitter was not used to any discernible level by politicians in 2007 having only been launched in July 2006 in the US, in the 2010 Australian federal election campaign, 45 per cent of all federal politicians (92) had a Twitter account. However, the style and purpose of 'tweeting' varied widely as will be discussed later.

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

### ***Politicians on Facebook***

Almost three-quarters of Australia's federal politicians had a Facebook presence of some kind in 2010, compared with just eight (3.5 per cent) in 2007. However, clarification and segmentation of the different types of Facebook presence is informative. Facebook allows creation of 'profiles' of individuals as well as two types of 'pages' – 'official pages' and 'community pages' – which can be established for organisations, companies, public figures,

celebrities, or topics of interest. 'Profiles' display very limited information publicly, but through user-selected security and interactivity options allow for 'friends' to gain full 'read' and 'write' access to contribute content as Wall posts and comments on articles, photos, and videos. Both 'official pages' and 'community pages' display all content publicly, but do not allow for 'friends' to join. Visitors can only 'like' pages using Facebook's 'Like' button (Facebook, 2010b). Because 'official pages' are less personal and less interactive, these were counted separately to Facebook 'profiles'.

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

### ***YouTube, blogs and other online media***

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

### ***MySpace***

The 'biggest loser' among social media in the 2010 federal election was MySpace, with just nine federal politicians listing a MySpace site (4.4 per cent), compared with 26 (11.5 per cent) in 2007. Furthermore, most of these were inactive and have been for some time. The Labor Party continues to maintain an official MySpace site with 23,506 friends, but the ALP MySpace blog has not been updated since 25 July 2007.

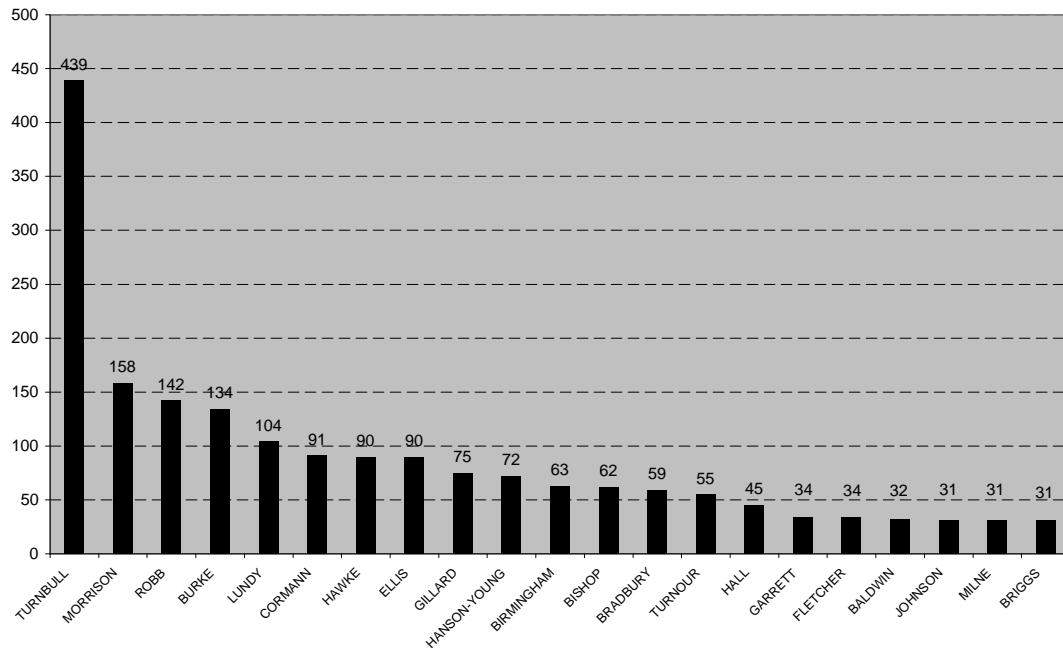
### ***Volume of social media content produced by politicians***

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

### ***Politicians most active on Twitter***

Figure 1 shows that the most active tweeters among federal politicians during the final three weeks of the election campaign were the Liberals' Malcolm Turnbull with 439 tweets, Scott Morrison with 158, and Andrew Robb with 142. Other frequent tweeters were Labor MP Tony Burke (134); Labor Senator Kate Lundy (104); Liberal Senator Mathias Cormann (91); Liberal MP Alex Hawke (90); Labor MP Kate Ellis (90); Prime Minister Julia Gillard (75); and Greens Senator Sarah Hanson-Young (72).

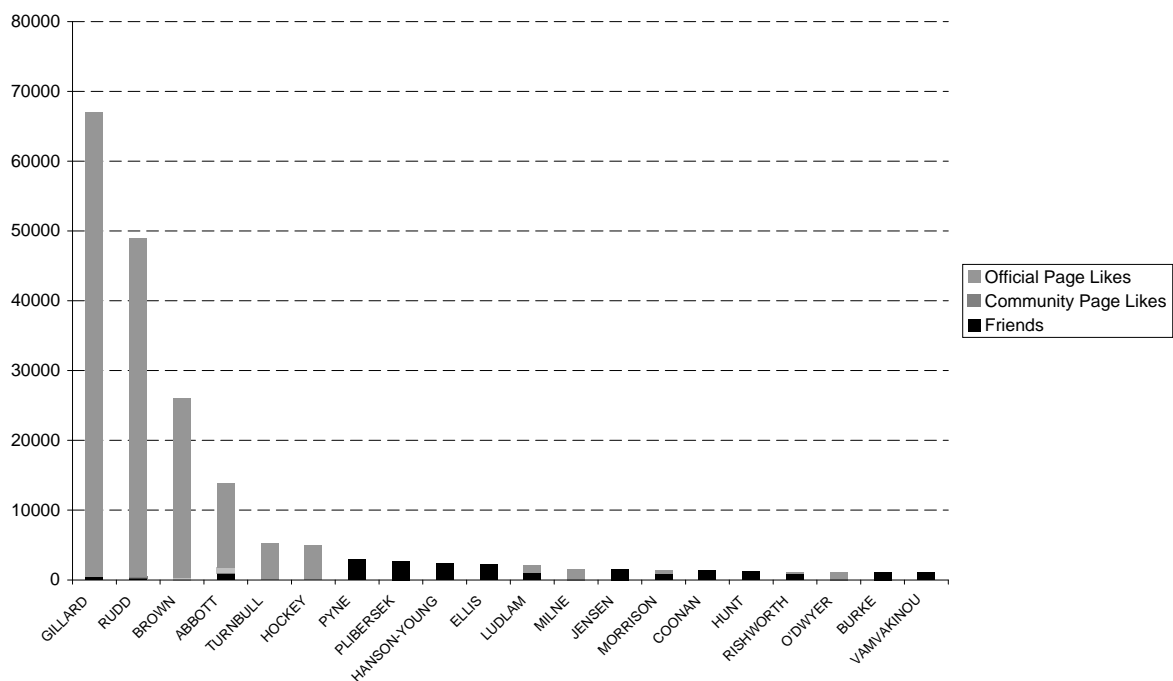
Prime Minister Julia Gillard started using Twitter only at the beginning of the month in which the campaign was called (3 July), but tweeted regularly in the final three weeks of the campaign, while Opposition leader Tony Abbott managed only two tweets during the three weeks of this study and only four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



**Figure 1.** Top 20 most active tweeters among federal politicians.

***Politicians most active on Facebook***

In Facebook, most political leaders, particularly the Prime Minister and former PM, used ‘official pages’ rather than personal profiles, with a few also having unofficial ‘community pages’. Figure 2 shows the number of social media users who ‘liked’ federal politicians’ Facebook pages and the number of Facebook ‘friends’ of politicians. This shows that Prime Minister Julia Gillard dominated Facebook overall, followed closely by former PM Kevin Rudd – albeit they used official pages with ‘likers’ rather than ‘friends’ (i.e. they were less personal). The reluctance of leaders to accept ‘friends’ is most likely a consequence of the volume and workload involved in high profile positions.



**Figure 2.** Australian federal politicians with most ‘liked’ Facebook pages and most ‘friends’.

### *Politicians' social media use by party, gender, and age*

Analysis showed approximately equal use of social media by the major political parties, by gender, and by age based on the proportion of each in the parliament. For example, while the three most prolific 'tweeters' were Liberals, the top 10 'tweeters' included five Liberals, four Labor, and one Greens politician.

### *Political parties' sites*

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

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

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



As shown in Table 2, the Labor Party used more types of social media than the Liberal Party with its customised online social space Labor Connect, its official Labor blog, and its issues discussion site Labor ThinkTank, as well as a MySpace site, a YouTube channel, an official Facebook page, and a party Twitter account. This Labor focus on custom-built social media sites reflects an innovative approach to social media pioneered in Australian politics in the *Kevin07* campaign. Labor also published considerably more content in social media, including 788 tweets on its party Twitter site, compared with 188 tweets posted by the Liberal Party; 32 videos uploaded to its YouTube channel compared with nine uploaded to the Liberal YouTube channel; and 75 Wall posts on its official Facebook page compared with 35 Wall posts by the Liberal Party during the period of analysis. Labor had almost 1.25 million views of its videos compared with almost 640,000 views of Liberal videos.

However, the Liberal Party had more ‘followers’ on Twitter (7,089) compared with 5,617 who followed the Labor Party, and also was ‘following’ more Twitter users (6,645) than Labor (4,203) during the period. The Liberal Party relied more on individual tweeting by its politicians as shown in Figure 1, and also appeared to focus on Facebook in its social media strategy, rather than custom-built citizen engagement sites such as those used by Labor. This focus on public ‘off-the-shelf’ social media sites suggests a less innovative approach by the ‘conservatives’ of Australian politics. However, the Liberal Party’s Facebook page attracted 16,450 ‘likes’ compared with Labor’s that had 3,467 ‘likes’, and the Liberal Party’s official Facebook page drew a sizeable 2,959 comments, compared with 616 comments on Labor’s Facebook page. While less innovative, it could be concluded from this that the Liberal’s social media strategy is to go where people are online (i.e. the most popular public sites such as Facebook), whereas Labor’s strategy is to try to entice citizens to come to it online (i.e. in its proprietary social media spaces). It would be interesting to explore the underlying strategies of the major political parties further.

## **Findings – qualitative**

This analysis found that, apart from a few notable exceptions, politicians used social media primarily for one-way transmission of political messages, rather than citizen engagement or listening to the electorate. A significant proportion of their social media content was comprised of election slogans, attacking opponents, and political rhetoric – much of it of a banal nature. This accords with findings from analysis of social media use in the 2010 UK election which reported that UK parties and politicians primarily “operated on old-fashioned, top-down broadcasting principles” (Gibson, Williamson and Ward, 2010: 3).

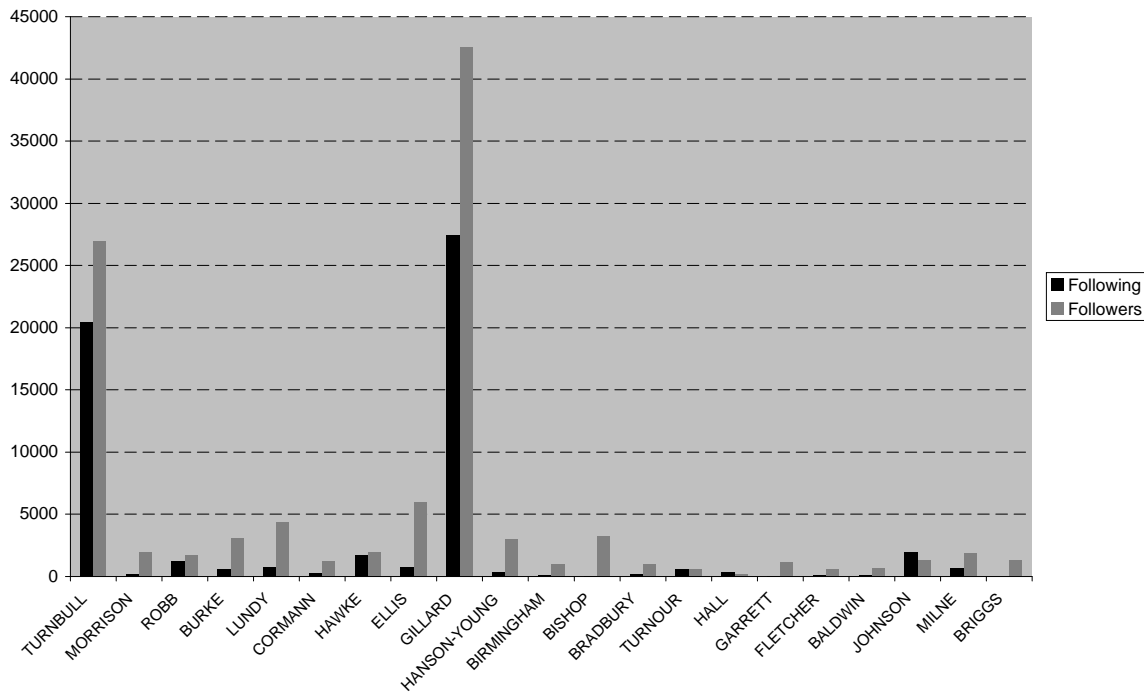
For instance, analysis of 73 tweets by the Prime Minister Julia Gillard during the period found frequent statements such as “I’ll deliver a strong economy, better hospitals and schools. Most of the Prime Minister’s tweets related to campaign promises and notifications of her campaigning whereabouts and activities such as “I’m in Melbourne giving a major speech on our National Disability Strategy” (28 July).

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

### ***Interactivity – listening, response, and dialogue***

Extensive literature identifies that the key characteristics of Web 2.0 social media practices are human interactivity as defined by McMillan (2002) and Carpentier (2007) through listening to and accepting others’ comments, responses versus broadcast messages, and

engaging in dialogue (Boler, 2008; Bucy, 2004; Merholz, 2005; O’Reilly, 2005). Both Web statistics and content analysis can inform our understanding of how social media are used. For instance, while the number of Twitter ‘followers’ is an indicator of popularity, the number of people who a user is ‘following’ is an indicator of reciprocal interest and listening. In this regard, politicians fall down considerably – with a few notable exceptions. Figure 3 shows a considerable disparity between followers and following for most politicians on Twitter, with a vastly greater number of followers than people followed. One of the most pronounced was Opposition Leader Tony Abbott who had 19,083 followers in the week before the election, but was following just 20 other Twitter users.



**Figure 3.** The number of followers of the ‘top 20’ most prolific politician tweeters and the number of Twitter users they were following.

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

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

In terms of responses and conversations, most of the politicians on Twitter and Facebook used their tweets and Facebook Wall posts and notes to *broadcast* their messages rather than respond or engage in conversation. Among the ‘top 10’ most active politician tweeters just over a third of their 1,395 tweets were responses to citizens (36 per cent). Almost two-thirds

(64 per cent) were broadcast messages such as advising their whereabouts which was usually connected with local campaigning (18 per cent), attacking their opponents by name or by party (15 per cent), or campaign slogans or election promises (8 per cent). For instance, the second most prolific tweeter, Scott Morrison, distributed 125 broadcast tweets compared with 33 responses to others. The third most active politician on Twitter, Andrew Robb, tweeted only one personalised response compared with 141 broadcast tweets. Of these, 44 were attacks on Labor policy, 35 were criticisms of opponents by name (mainly Julia Gillard), and 30 were election slogans or promises (See Table 3).

There were some notable exceptions. For example, as in 2007, Malcolm Turnbull engaged in discussion and debate with citizens online. Of Turnbull's 439 tweets in the period, 76 per cent were responses or direct messages to individuals rather than broadcast tweets. While many of these were simple 'thank you' responses and acknowledgements, some demonstrated the characteristics of *invitational* rhetoric and dialogue<sup>2</sup>. For instance, Brett Carey of Brisbane (Twitter name @pronto) sent Malcolm Turnbull the following tweet in relation the National Broadband Network:

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

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

### ***Moderation***

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

Again in 2010 Turnbull showed the greatest propensity to accept criticism and respond to concerned and critical citizens in a constructive way. Critical comments appeared on Turnbull's Facebook page in relation to 'notes' he published on climate change such as "Is this a joke ... I feel ill" and "fence sitter" ([http://www.facebook.com/#!/note.php?note\\_id=84906939094&comments](http://www.facebook.com/#!/note.php?note_id=84906939094&comments)). On 18 August, a few days before the election, @anitrantot accused him of being "a snob". Turnbull acknowledged the criticism, although he engaged in debate, urging @anitrantot to not be "thin-skinned" and "lighten up".

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

<b>CATEGORY</b>	<b>Turnbull</b>	<b>Morrison</b>	<b>Robb</b>	<b>Burke</b>	<b>Lundy</b>	<b>Corman</b>	<b>Hawke</b>	<b>Ellis</b>	<b>Gillard</b>	<b>Hanson-Young</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>%</b>
National political or social issue	29	16	10	9	14	1	2	3	3	15	102	7.3%
Local political or social issue	24	14	1	5	16	0	15	6	1	0	82	5.9%
Where am I?	81	48	17	9	22	5	13	8	20	24	247	17.7%
Personal information or feelings	28	6	1	1	2	0	2	3	4	2	49	3.5%
Election slogan / promise	4	9	30	9	8	8	4	8	26	4	110	7.9%
Attack on opponent by name	2	10	35	10	4	31	2	0	4	9	107	7.7%
Attack on opponent's policy	7	6	44	4	7	18	13	2	0	0	101	7.2%
Response to question/statement	248	33	1	65	28	22	30	51	12	8	498	35.7%
General statement	16	16	3	22	3	6	9	9	5	10	99	7.1%
<b>TOTAL Tweets</b>	<b>439</b>	<b>158</b>	<b>142</b>	<b>134</b>	<b>104</b>	<b>91</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>1,395</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
<b>FORM</b>												
Direct message	335	33	1	66	48	47	40	63	24	7	663	47.5%
Broadcast tweet	191	125	141	69	76	69	60	39	63	64	732	52.5%
Sending links	23	40	21	10	11	3	11	2	14	15	150	10.8%
<b>FORMAT</b>												
Text	439	158	142	134	104	91	90	90	75	72	1,395	100%
Photos	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Video	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

**Table 3.** Qualitative content analysis of tweets by the ‘top 10’ most prolific politician tweeters.

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

This shows that the major political parties have loosened their moderation policies since 2007, with both major parties allowing critical and negative comments to be posted on their sites. Also, the volume of comments on political party and leading politicians' Facebook profiles and pages gives some encouraging signs that a significant number of citizens are engaging in politics online. For instance, a Facebook Wall post by Julia Gillard on the eve of the election (20 August) drew 1,200 comments – albeit these were largely well-wishers. An 18 August Facebook Wall post about the PM attending the People's Forum in Brisbane attracted 403 comments on the national broadband network (NBN) drew 331 comments.

### **Conclusions – ‘everybody’s talking at me’**

It is clear from this study that the level of use of social media and the volume of social media content used for political communication has increased substantially from 2007 to 2010. However, Web 2.0-enabled social media are being used primarily in election-related political communication for *one-way transmission* of messages, rather than engaging in listening, dialogue, consultation and collaboration. Their use resembles *mass media* communication and the practices of journalism, advertising and public relations in that content is largely controlled by ‘gatekeepers’ and image-makers. There are only isolated examples of politicians and political organisations using social media and networks as opportunities for listening and engagement with citizens or communities.

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

While social media expanded the public sphere during the 2010 Australian federal election, there is little evidence that their use has enhanced it qualitatively to any significant extent in terms of the level of listening to citizens and the diversity of issues discussed. As reported in relation to the UK election, “the internet has become an organisational necessity for election campaigning but ... it has not brought about that strategic change some have argued we should expect” (Gibson, Williamson and Ward, 2010: 2). But perhaps those expectations are unrealistic and caught up in discourses of cyberooptimism. There are some signs of change, not necessarily among party leaders, but among a small group of innovators in politics and public communication, and continuing research is recommended to track those emergent trends as the use of social media evolves beyond novelty and matures.

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<sup>1</sup> The term Web 2.0 was coined by Tim O'Reilly (2005) to refer to a new generation of interactive Web applications.

<sup>2</sup> Rhetoric can be either *manipulative* or *invitational* according to Heath (2006) and he and communication scholars advocate that invitational rhetoric is dialogic and, therefore, a more ethical form of communication.

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