

POLITWEETS: social media as a platform for political engagement between Victorian politicians and citizens

William Lukamto & Andrea Carson

To cite this article: William Lukamto & Andrea Carson (2016) POLITWEETS: social media as a platform for political engagement between Victorian politicians and citizens, Communication Research and Practice, 2:2, 191-212, DOI: [10.1080/22041451.2016.1186485](https://doi.org/10.1080/22041451.2016.1186485)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/22041451.2016.1186485>



Published online: 12 Jul 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 8



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

POLITWEETS: social media as a platform for political engagement between Victorian politicians and citizens

William Lukamto  and Andrea Carson 

School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Melbourne, Parkville, Australia

ABSTRACT

Political parties and candidates' adoption of social media technologies engender both optimism and concern about voter engagement in Australia. On one hand, scholars have expressed hope for a more democratic politics freed from traditional media's gate-keeping role; on the other, researchers find political communication through social media generally fails to transcend politics 1.0. Following international studies, Australian scholarship focused on candidates' use of Twitter and Facebook for political campaigning has identified a largely unfulfilled potential for a more participatory public sphere. This article contributes original research to this question of online political engagement by examining Victorian state politicians' social media use during both non-election and election periods. We undertook quantitative content analysis and social networks analysis of politicians' Facebook and Twitter use in 2014. We find state politicians like their federal and other state counterparts are rapidly adopting digital technologies, particularly Facebook, for political communication. Yet, despite the significant increased social media use by Victorian politicians for public communication purposes, we find that similar to other recent Australian studies the extent of political engagement between politicians and voters on these social media sites remains low. We identify two related factors that impede political engagement in the digital sphere, they are citizens' negative comments and politicians' long-standing desire to control the political message.

KEYWORDS

Social media; political communication; public sphere; election; social network analysis; Twitter hashtag

Introduction

Among digital communication tools of the twenty-first century, social media websites Facebook and Twitter provide innovative ways for politicians to connect with citizens. A central question arising from these nascent technologies is whether politicians' use of online communication tools improves upon traditional mass media's gatekeeping role of informing the public about politics. Put another way, can social media assist in reinvigorating the public sphere by allowing for greater political communication and engagement between political parties, candidates, other political actors, and voters?

The idea of new communication technologies has for some time raised such hopes for new forms of political engagement. Before the turn of the twenty-first century,

Kellner (1999, p. 101) predicted that political actors excluded by traditional media would use technology to have their views heard more broadly to provide: 'a radical democratic techno-politics that will use new technologies to advance the interests of oppositional social groups and movements that have been excluded from mainstream media and political debate'.

In Australia, early studies into politicians' Twitter usage also generated optimism and speculation that the 2010 federal election could be the 'Twitter' election (Grant, Moon, & Grant, 2010, p. 599). These findings are in contrast with a pervasive pessimism about conventional political engagement mediated through traditional media. Successive studies have identified voters' diminished interest and participation in democratic politics, falling levels of trust in politicians, and also of the mainstream media (Dahlgren, 2009; Gibson, Lusoli, & Ward, 2008; Martin, 2010; McAllister, 2002).

Internationally, the use of social media during the 2004 USA presidential election campaign was viewed as a critical turning point when online politics was described as having reached a mainstream audience (Xenos & Moy, 2007, p. 704). Since this perceived turning point, Australian governments, political parties, and other international scholars have focused on Web 2.0 technologies to explore social media's potential for interactivity and multidirectional communication to revitalise and strengthen political discourse necessary for a well-functioning democracy (Auger, 2013; Bruns & Highfield, 2013; Gambs, 2012; Grant et al., 2010; Highfield, 2013; Macnamara & Kenning, 2011, 2014; Shirky, 2012).

This article seeks to add to our understanding of the role of social media for political communication and engagement of voters, and uniquely looks at politicians' online communications in both election campaign and non-campaign periods. It is the first study to focus specifically on Victorian politicians' Facebook and Twitter use before and during the 2014 state election campaign and provides broader insights about trends in online political communication in Australia.

Understanding the public sphere and rise of social media

Our understanding of social media's potential political engagement role in democracy is inherent to the concept of the political public sphere as it relates to traditional media. Habermas (1991, p. 27) famously defined the public sphere as the communal, communicative space for critical-rational discourse in which 'private people come together as a public' with the newspaper serving as its 'preeminent institution'. Schudson (2003, p. 67) noted that Habermas' contribution, while not without vigorous critics, was nonetheless important because it provided 'a normative model of exemplary civic life'. Thus, Habermas provided a model of how private persons could freely discuss and debate public issues of the day to foster open political discourse in a democracy, and that the mass media would act as a faithful intermediary to relay that information beyond face-to-face communication.

The normative public sphere serves key functions in a democracy. First, to exercise the right to vote, an adult citizen ideally engages with the public sphere to make rational and informed decisions after weighing and deliberating on as many public opinions as possible (McNair, 2011, p. 17). Second, the public sphere renders transparent the exercise of government to the public so that those with power are scrutinised and

accountable to citizens, which serves to legitimise political decisions as democratic (Habermas, Lennox, & Lennox, 1974, pp. 52–53).

Of course, Habermas went on to decry the rampant commercialisation of mass media and its implications for the functionality of the public sphere as the primary discursive site for political discourse. Other criticisms of mass media over time have also included the exclusion of minority opinions and appearance of bias or exaggerated information that can undermine mass media's check on government power and limit pluralism of opinion (Beyle & Ostdiek, 1996, p. 7; Gans & Leigh, 2012; Niven, 1999). This can contribute to public dissatisfaction with the media because citizens perceive themselves to be under-represented (Fishkin, 2009, pp. 15–16; Rakove, 1997, p. 203). Australia is often singled out as especially vulnerable to this weakness because of its highly concentrated ownership of news outlets (Finkelstein & Ricketson, 2011, p. 60; Gans & Leigh, 2012, p. 127). Commercial media can misuse the public sphere to promote their agendas for commercial or political reasons (Herman, 2000, p. 102). This includes what former British Prime Minister Tony Blair (2007, p. 487) described as holding politicians' reputation to ransom.

These perceived weaknesses in the public sphere facilitated by traditional media are among reasons why political and social science scholars are keenly investigating social media's potential role in revitalising the public sphere. Technological and ideological aspects of social media separate it from traditional media. In contrast to traditional media's largely one-way transmission of political information, social media technology allows politicians and citizens to engage each other in multiway communications providing a greater potential for political participation (Boler, 2008, p. 39; O'Reilly, 2007). This is notwithstanding limitations broadly defined as the 'digital divide' relating to accessibility based on geographical and socio-economic factors (Keane, 2009). A digital public sphere can be said to be the normative public sphere reimagined through digital communication and networks (Boeder, 2005, p. 1; Goode, 2005).

In contrast to traditional media's function of regulating the flow and content of messages through gatekeepers, social media relies on user-to-user interactivity, collaboration, and self-regulation in the production of media messages (Harrison & Barthel, 2009, p. 160; Jenkins, 2008, p. 243). In this way, the audience is able to be both consumer and producer of media content (Harrison & Barthel, 2009, p. 160). Self-regulation potentially provides more honest and raw opinions of the public that are, unlike traditional media, not bound by broadcast programming commitments, editorial guidelines, or interests of media businesses (Grant et al., 2010, p. 1) – although there might still be other agendas at play. Some scholars note that social media can counteract 'a spiral of silence' of public opinion as long as the platform allows anonymity because it protects the user from offline social isolation (Liu & Fahmy, 2009, p. 36). With the exception of banned users, citizens can voice unpopular minority opinions regardless of the number of dissenters, within the confines of law.¹

However anonymity, while counteracting a spiral of silence, can be a double-edged sword that allows a user to push their actions beyond acceptable social norms since, barring legal ramifications, there is no consequence for extremism other than negative responses from other users. This has led to antisocial users, or 'trolls' colonising the Internet, using personal attacks or bullying tactics for personal entertainment (Philip, 2014, p. 22). Phrases like 'don't feed the trolls' are designed to discourage the majority

from engaging such users (Bergstrom, 2011); however, labels can be subjective and sometimes are misused against those who simply have a different or minority opinion (Osell, 2007, p. 50). This offensive culture can devolve social media into a vicious and uncivilised public sphere at times and discourage engagement between politicians and citizens (Bergstrom, 2011, p. 5).

Sunstein (2007, p. 1) also points to a worrying trend colloquially named the 'Daily Me' that allows for online users to be cordoned off into self-selected subcultures. Under this scenario, like-minded participants flock together and shun alternative views or information resulting in what is commonly called the 'echo-chamber effect'. One consequence of this is that deliberating groups online can tend towards polarisation and this in turn can foster division, misunderstanding, and animosity when groups of users with opposing views clash (Curran, Fenton, & Friedman, 2012, p. 10). Consequently, such online behaviour can present a challenge for politicians with different or opposing views who wish to engage broadly as an individual's filter settings often allow them to avoid arguments contrary to their pre-existing views (Sunstein, 2007, p. 116).

Some studies have flagged a relationship between online engagement with offline disengagement (Krauft et al., 1998) sometimes described as slacktivism or clicktivism. In these instances, citizens feel online engagement exonerates them from further political engagement in the physical world. Conversely, studies have suggested politicians will avoid online engagement fearing a loss of control of the message arising from spontaneous interactions online. Stromer-Galley (2000, p. 128) found that American candidates avoided online human interaction due to the 'potential loss of control and ambiguity of campaign communication'. Communication online is far more difficult to control and plan for, spreads several times faster and further than offline communication, and is almost always permanent. Thus, online politician-to-citizen engagement can appear 'risky, burdensome and problematic' to most politicians (2000, p. 128).

Social media through its unique technological and cultural aspects can, on one hand, create an environment conducive for greater political engagement between politicians and citizens and optimism for a more inclusive public sphere. On the other, the mixed results of studies in this field provide caution to researchers that social media is no simple fix for a more discursive public sphere because of the above-mentioned challenges that can impede genuine political engagement.

Political engagement and social media use in Australia

Political engagement is not easily defined. Broadly speaking, it relates to citizens' involvement in political affairs on issues that affect them (Ehrlich, 2000, p. xxvi). For others, this involvement is defined in terms of the public good. For example, political engagement represents the democratic right of citizens to define the public good, help determine the policies in seeking that good, and reform or dismantle institutions that would not serve that good (Korten, 1998, p. 30). Xenos, Vromen, and Loader (2014, p. 157) distinguish between *collective engagement* and *individual engagement*. The former is defined as the extent in which citizens work together in organisations towards engagement. The latter is the extent that individual citizens act towards political engagement – and will be the focus of this article. While there is a list of indicators that Xenos et al. (2014, p. 157) use to measure individual engagement – for

example, ‘raising money for charitable causes’ – this article examines engagement as it relates to the public sphere, public opinion formation, and interaction between citizens and politicians. In this way, political engagement can be said to be the exchange of reasoned arguments between citizens and politicians in the public sphere oriented towards finding some level of understanding on current political issues (Lynch, 2000, p. 316).

A challenge to this more involved idea of engagement as an exchange of ideas through the public sphere is the minimalist expectation of voter engagement by Schumpeter (1950, p. 269) who sees the act of voting itself, or the political candidate’s ‘competitive struggle for the people’s vote’, as sufficient for legitimising democratic governance. This article assesses how social media is being used as a platform for political engagement in Victoria, which we define here as political dialogue (two-way communication) between Victorian citizens and politicians, where citizens express and justify opinions, and politicians interact with those opinions online.

While many academics have studied political communication and engagement in the United States (see, among others, Bentivegna, 2002; Cogburn & Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011; Goodman, Wennerstrom, & Springgate, 2011), a surprising few have measured social media political engagement in Australia – and, until now, no study has investigated it in Victoria. This is despite major parties engaging with social media election campaigns in Australia since the 2007 federal election (Chan, 2008), and that Australians’ uptake of social media is comparatively high compared to other developed nations (Gibson & McAllister, 2008).

Of the limited Australian studies, Macnamara and Kenning’s (2011, p. 19) comparison of federal politicians’ social media use in the 2007 and 2010 federal elections is one that stands out, finding that while politicians’ political communication had increased from one election to the next, politicians mostly used online social networks for ‘one-way transmission of messages’. Their finding was further supported in 2014 in their longitudinal study of three Australian federal elections from 2007 to 2013. Despite the increasing usage of Facebook and Twitter by politicians, there was still an ‘overwhelming focus on politicians *speaking* in social media and a generalised lack of *listening* and two-way engagement’ (McNamara & Kenning, 2014, p. 68; emphasis in original).

A West Australian (WA) Twitter study comparing political coverage of WA state and federal politics in 2012 concluded that Twitter enabled the cultivation of ‘political elites’ mostly consisting of politicians and journalists (Highfield, 2013). These ‘political elites’ showed higher levels of engagement with politicians (or each other) rather than ‘politically non-elite’ users.

In a similar Queensland study, Bruns and Highfield (2013) analysed tweets using the hashtag *#qldvotes* during the 2012 state election. They also found a ‘presence of a dominant core’ of participants that accounted for ‘more than three-quarters of all *#qldvotes* tweets’ (Bruns & Highfield, 2013, p. 685). In measuring who was being retweeted most, they identified *@mentions* were highly polarised to favour only four to five users, all of whom were politicians (2013, pp. 681–683). This hierarchical class of political elites can hamper political engagement with voters as the voices of politically non-elite citizens are rarely listened to.

What the international and Australian literature suggests is that social media adoption and infrastructure are evolving rapidly. Twitter was launched in 2006 (Carlson, 2011) and Facebook in 2004 (Yadav, 2006). Yet, Twitter has increased from two billion

tweets a month in 2010 (O'Dell, 2010) to six billion tweets a month in 2014 (StatisticBrain, 2014a) and Facebook increased its 500 million active users in 2010 (Macnamara & Kenning, 2011, p. 8) to 1.3 billion active users in 2014 (StatisticBrain, 2014b). The infrastructure and algorithms Twitter and Facebook use are regularly updated. Such changes can alter the way social media messages are created and consumed, which subsequently affects the results of studies on social media. Given the dizzying pace of change in social media platforms' back-end operational code, the task of researching online political use 'will also struggle to keep pace with technological change' (Elmer, Langlois, & McKelvey, 2012, p. 17) and consequently studies on social media quickly become outdated (2012, p. 16).

The most recent social media studies described earlier suggest a trend for politicians to use social media predominantly as if it were a broadcast analogue medium. Politicians collectively have not yet progressed to politics 2.0 communication methods but rather are more likely to engage citizens online through a traditional campaign playbook of politics 1.0. Flew and Wilson (2008) did identify variability in political participation between Australia's states through an analysis of the digital *Youdecide 2007* project aimed at promoting political participation in Australia through 'hyper-local' citizen journalism. Queensland had particularly high levels of participation with 40% of online commentators, followed by New South Wales at 20%, and, lastly, Victoria at 13% (2008, p. 28). On another point, state politicians tend to have smaller budgets to commit to social media activities than their federal counterparts. Communication strategies will vary accordingly, as state politicians might have to post their own social media feeds in the absence of dedicated staffers (Bruns & Highfield, 2013, p. 668). However, no Australian study, until now, has focused exclusively on the Victorian case. This study advances understandings of politicians' online political communication by using 2014 data. Thus, this article aims to fill a gap in the literature to better understand Victorian political engagement in the digital sphere.

Research design

We aim to address three research questions about Victorian politicians' use of social media to engage voters. First, we seek to understand to what *extent* Victorian politicians engage with citizens on social media platforms. Second, we aim to identify any *barriers* that impede politician-citizen engagement online. Third, we seek to ascertain if there is a notable *change* in the level of engagement between a non-election and an election period.

The Victorian election was held on 29 November 2014. We collected Facebook and Twitter data during the six weeks leading up to the election and six weeks outside this period to determine if politicians used social media differently outside the intensity of an official election campaign. We used qualitative and quantitative content analysis of these social media sites to track the political communication of Victorian politicians' use of Twitter, and the two major party leaders' Facebook communications during each of these distinct periods.

Data collection

DiscoverText

We collected Facebook and Twitter data using *DiscoverText*, a cloud-based software for collaborating live social media feeds between 14 April and 26 May 2014 (referred to as

Table 1. Type and quantity of social media data scraped during both time periods.

Type of platform scraped	Non-election period	Election period
Twitter's <i>#springst</i> (tweets)	52,577	140,105
Facebook of Andrews (comments)	1677	5612
Facebook of Napthine (comments)	335	3018

Source: Author.

the non-election period) and between 17 October and 29 November, which we define for the purposes of this study as the election period. Both periods were 43 days.

From Twitter, we scraped 52,577 tweets from the hashtag *#springst* – the most prominent hashtag for tweets relating to Victorian politics – during the non-election period. We repeated this process and scraped again from *#springst* 140,105 tweets during the election period (see Table 1).

DiscoverText was also used to scrape Facebook comments from the official pages of the then Victorian opposition leader, Daniel Andrews, and the then Premier, Denis Napthine. The information gathered included status updates, photos, videos, and comments. During the non-election period, we scraped 1677 comments from Daniel Andrew's Facebook page and 335 comments from Denis Napthine's page (see Table 1). As with the Twitter data, we scraped more data during the election period for both politicians, 5612 comments from Daniel Andrew's Facebook site and 3018 comments from Denis Napthine's page.

NodeXL

NodeXL is an open-source template for Microsoft Excel that generates visual network graphs from social media data imported into *NodeXL* spreadsheets. After scraping the data and exporting it into an Excel spreadsheet, *NodeXL* was used to generate graphs from the scraped tweets and comments. For Twitter, only replies – *@mentions* and return tweets (RTs) – were analysed due to limitations of Twitter's application programming interface. This amounted to 4496 replies out of 52,577 tweets outside the election period and more than double this, at 10,609 replies out of 140,105, during the election period.

Social network analysis (SNA)

SNA seeks to explain social phenomena through analyses of interpersonal interactions (Fielding, Lee, & Blank, 2008, p. 141). We applied this method to see with whom Victorian politicians engage in one-way or two-way communications using social media. We programmed *NodeXL* to only scrape comments, *@mentions*, and retweets (RTs). We also merged duplicate edges. 'Edges' are nodes on the graph which symbolise one tweet or comment. One node in this study symbolised one user in the network. We also assigned nodes into groups (G1, G2, G3, etc.) and adjusted their position in the visual network graph according to their social characteristics – who they talk to more and how many replies they get. This made it clearer to detect patterns in the data.

Content analysis

Content analysis was used to quantitatively measure four features within the scraped data: positive or negative emotional sentiments; quantity of one-way and two-way messages between members of parliament (MPs) and citizens; presence of political messages; and number of negative messages. To make this task manageable, we randomly sampled 200 tweets in each time period from #springst. Similarly, we randomly sampled 200 comments in each period from Denis Napthine's and Daniel Andrew's Facebook pages.

Each comment or tweet was coded in terms of who the message came from and who it was directed to, for example, 'citizen to politician'; 'politician to citizen'; or 'politician to politician' communication. We coded sentiment as positive, negative, or neutral. The qualitative content analysis also allowed us to see if the message contained a political opinion or question regarding political topics, issues, or situations (1 = Yes, 0 = No). Specific to Facebook, we analysed who – whether a politician or non-politician – initiated the message thread.

Findings and discussion

Victorian politicians' rapid social media adoption

We analysed the profiles of all 128 Victorian MPs to determine their professional social media activities before the 2014 state election. Table 2 shows that across all of the investigated platforms more politicians were communicating using social media in 2014 compared to 2010. This finding is consistent with other Australian online political communication studies.

Table 2 shows that total social media use increased substantially by 48% from 2010 to 2014. A notable finding is that Facebook has replaced politicians' personal website usage as the most common platform for communication with the public. Twitter recorded the highest rate of increased use among Victorian politicians from one electoral term to the next, growing by 81%. We find that 73% of sitting Victorian politicians had a Twitter presence in 2014 (94 politicians), compared to 40% in 2010 (52 politicians). This particular finding is consistent with Macnamara and Kenning's (2014, p. 64) research into federal politician's social media use. They found that 76% of federal politicians had a Twitter account in 2013, compared to 45% in 2010.

Table 2. Victorian politicians' social media usage from 2010 to 2014.

Social media	2010	2014	Per cent change (2010 – 2014)
Personal website	98	102	4
Twitter	52	94	81
Facebook	91	117	29
You Tube	21	24	14
Flickr	9	29	222
Instagram	0	20	N/A
Google +	0	25	N/A
Total social media use	276	411	49

Source: Author.

Note: Data gathered from relevant social media from MP's date of page/account creation (when available), first posts, first tweet, comment, and so forth.

However, unlike what was found in Macnamara and Kenning's (2014, p. 64) study – in that 91% of federal MPs used personal websites compared to 81% of federal MPs using Facebook – we find that for Victorian politicians' use of Facebook had overtaken politicians' websites as the most common online tool for political communication. These results underscore the increased need for studies focused on Twitter and Facebook as the data here indicates that there is great potential for communication and engagement between politicians and citizens through these online platforms.

Hierarchical level of engagement on Twitter

To understand if two-way engagement between politicians and citizens or other groups occurred on Twitter, we undertook SNA of hashtag *#springst* during the 2014 election campaign period and outside that time (see Figure 1). As stated earlier, only @mentions and RTs – replies – were analysed.

Every node in the graph represents one individual user. Grey lines – vertices – represent relationships between nodes in terms of replies. Arrows pointing away from and towards the nodes symbolise which users had replied and to whom, and whether a relationship was one-way or mutual – in other words, whether interaction occurred. Nodes are also automatically positioned according to their social activities within the network in *#springst*. The parameters for deciding each node's position are determined by the number of @mentions and RTs that users received from other users within *#springst*. Users found closer to the centre of the sphere received the most number of replies from other users in *#springst*.

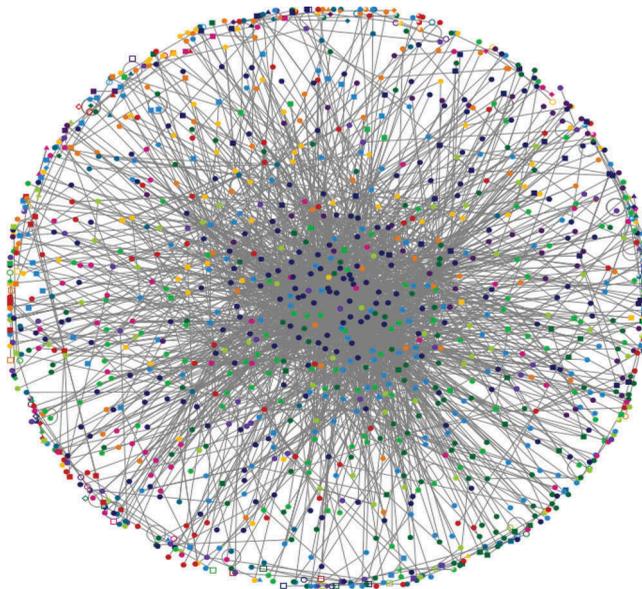


Figure 1. Social network analysis of replies in *#springst* in 2014 outside the election campaign period (14 April 2014–26 May 2014, $n = 4496$). Source: Author using NodeXL.

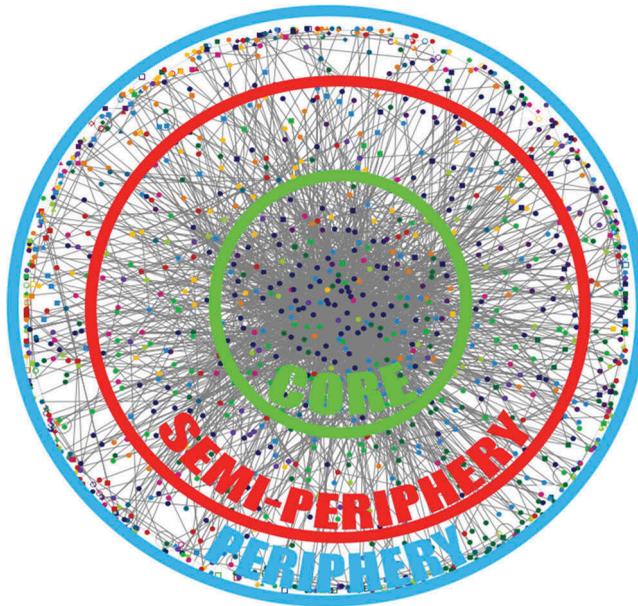


Figure 2. Social network analysis of Twitter replies (separated into group clusters) outside the election campaign period ($n = 4496$). Source: Author.

In [Figure 1](#), we clearly see a small and densely interconnected group of individuals at the core of the sphere where replies are heavily polarised. This is consistent with [Bruns and Highfield's \(2013, p. 683\)](#) findings in the Queensland election identifying a group of 'elite users' had dominated political discussion on *#qldvotes* – the Queensland equivalent of Victoria's *#springst*. To understand this hierarchical order better, we closely analyse the different characteristics and roles of users in the network. In [Figure 2](#), we divide Twitter users into three clusters (core, semi-periphery, and periphery) using *NodeXL's* 'group by cluster' function.

Outside the intense communication period of an election campaign, 44 Victorian politicians used *#springst* to communicate online. Twenty-one (48%) were core users, 16 (36%) were semi-periphery users, and 7 (16%) were periphery users. This is not to suggest that other MPs did not tweet using *#springst*, only that they were not captured in the sample.

Core users

Twitter users in the core region had a high number of *@mentions* and RTs. Predominantly, these users were either politicians who were active Twitter users, established interest groups, political journalists, or news organisations. Almost half of Victoria's politicians (47%) were identified here as core users outside the election campaign. In an online context, these users belong to the proverbial 'Westminster Village' – the political commentariat – and through their tweets they allow or disallow entry by replying or ignoring other users. Core users were found to engage mostly with each other and, on occasion, with semi-periphery users, but very rarely with those on the periphery. The same pattern of communication behaviour was true for others in the

core such as leaders of interest groups.² Core users also rarely used Twitter to engage with citizens in the periphery region of the sphere, supporting the findings of Kavada's (2005) study which found that established citizen interest groups showed little interaction with politically non-elite citizens online.

Semi-periphery users

Twitter users in the mid-level area of the graphic were mostly journalists (non-press gallery), news organisations, citizen reporters, interest groups, and some politicians (36%). Typically, the semi-periphery consists of users whose online communication acts as a conduit between the core and periphery users, often replying to both groups apparently indiscriminately.

Periphery users

Outside the election campaign period, Twitter users located in the periphery consisted mostly of citizens without any particular identifiable political roles. This group rarely received replies. About 15% of Victoria's politicians also belonged in the outer region of the graph during the non-election period. Periphery users represented a very large majority of the network population during this period. The nature of Twitter allows for public eavesdropping of the virtual Westminster Village, but attempts to participate in the conversation with the core by the periphery users are often ignored by core users and their communication effectively amounts to white noise.

These results support the finding by Bruns and Highfield (2013, pp. 681–683, 685) in that *@mentions* seem heavily polarised to favour a 'dominant core' of participants – many of whom were MPs – which make up the privileged minority in the network. Such a hierarchy can hamper political engagement as many citizens' opinions, especially those opinions forming in the periphery of the sphere (where the majority of users are found), will likely be ignored by politicians at the core.

To test for changes in distribution and inclusion of users in the core, semi-periphery, and periphery regions of the sphere during an election campaign, we repeated this method during the 2014 Victorian election for the same number of days, 43.

During the election campaign, the core grows substantially and its users are no longer the minority. However, importantly, the hierarchy remains despite the expansion of the Westminster Village as more users have become core users in the network (see Figure 3).

Unsurprisingly, the number of Victorian politicians identified within the core increases during the campaign, while their numbers outside the core decreases. Half of all Victorian politicians were communicating on Twitter using *#springst* during the campaign. Of these, about four-fifths (84%) were located in the core. Major Victorian news organisations were also core users, along with some prominent citizen users such as *@SpringStSource*, *@SpringStSauce*, and *@Mrs_DenisN*, which was not unexpected during an election campaign. There were still very few politically non-elite citizens found in the core region during the 2014 campaign.

These results suggest that while the Westminster Village has grown during the election campaign, it remains dominated by political elites – politicians, media outlets, journalists, and some influential citizens. While the 'dominant core' grows

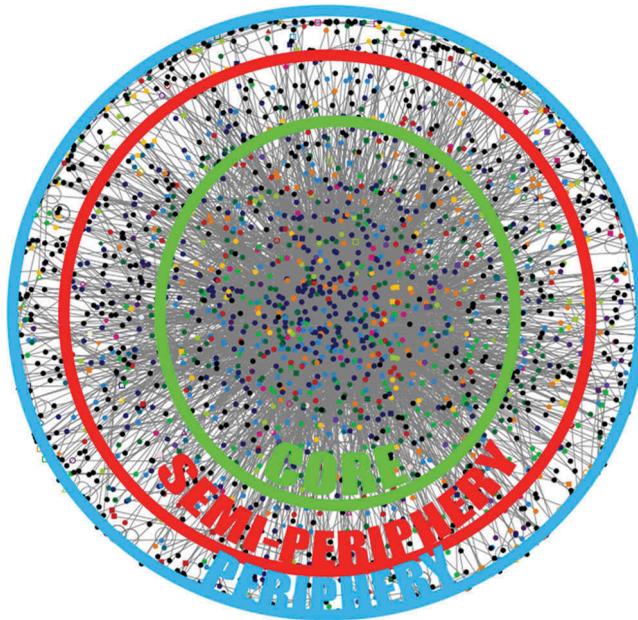


Figure 3. Social network analysis during the Victorian election campaign (separated into group clusters, $n = 10,609$ Twitter replies). Source: Author.

larger and is no longer the smallest group in the network, it largely consists of the ‘political class’. Again, this is consistent with the findings of Bruns and Highfield (2013, p. 685).

Yet, these results do not tell us the direction and flows of communication – whether it was one-directional in a broadcast fashion or multidirectional in a conversational paradigm. It could be argued that it is expected that politicians would receive more replies than other users in a politically motivated hashtag like *#springst*. Therefore, to better understand communication practices within *#springst*, we delve deeper and examine a case study from the core and the semi-periphery. First, we randomly select a core user, Liberal politician Michael O’Brien (*@michaelobrienmp*), using a random number generator tool.

Michael O’Brien’s tweets are represented by a red node in the centre. Any user (node) who retweeted or mentioned O’Brien using his Twitter handle *@michaelobrienmp* is represented with a red arrow pointing towards O’Brien. Any user who received a reply from O’Brien is indicated with a red arrow pointing towards the respective node. For ease of comparison, these are highlighted with a yellow circle in [Figure 4](#).

This analysis shows us that O’Brien primarily received tweets from core and semi-periphery users, and rarely from periphery users. When we filter to only show O’Brien’s replies, we see that his communication patterns are not significantly different during an election campaign compared to the non-election period (see [Figure A1](#) in the Appendix).

For example, O’Brien only replies to other Victorian MPs, prominent journalists, and news media that also occupy the core region. In other words, O’Brien seems to only

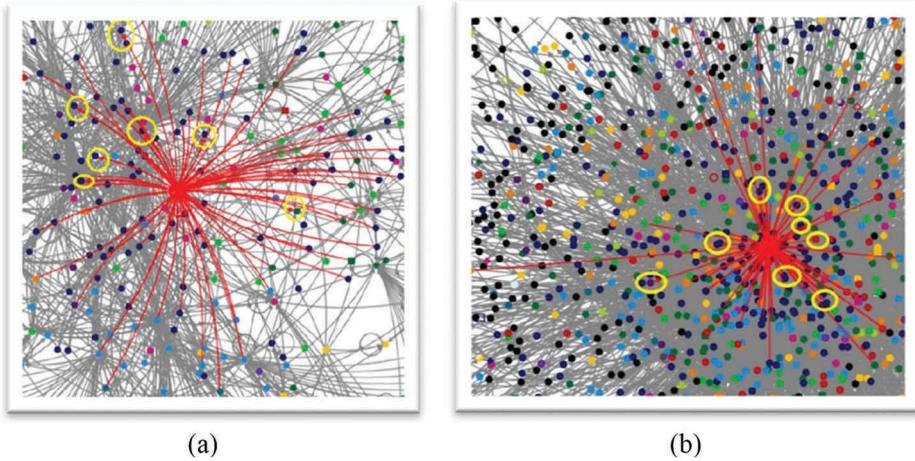


Figure 4. SNA of core user @michaelobrienmp in #springst outside (4a) and during an election campaign (4b). Source: Author.

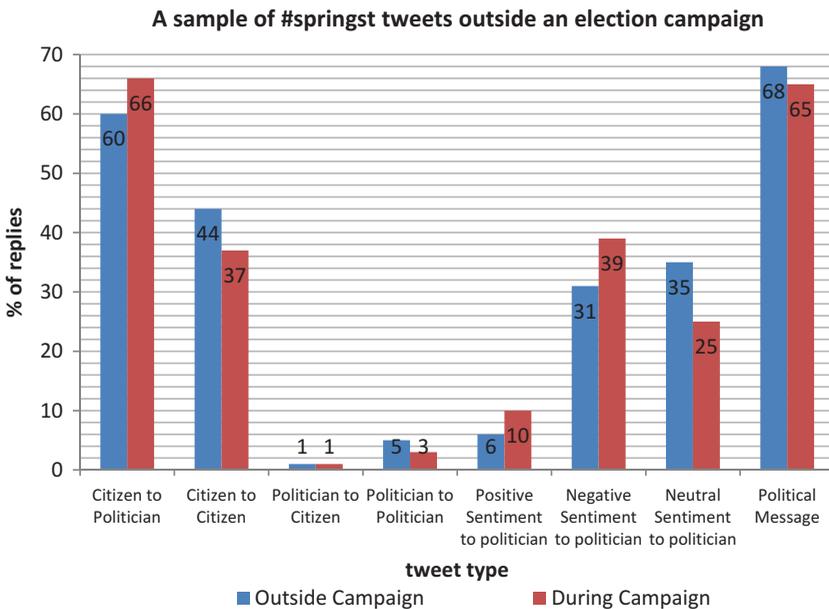


Figure 5. Content analysis of 400 replies within #springst before (in red) and during (green) the 2014 Victorian election campaign. Source: Authors using Twitter data scraped with DiscoverText.

tweet to the political class. Furthermore, O'Brien does not tweet to users in the periphery region.

Core users allow and disallow entry into their sphere by replying or ignoring certain users, effectively acting as gatekeepers, limiting their online engagement largely to other political elites. Prominent journalists and even prominent citizen users like

@*SpringstSource* and @*SpringstSauce* are sometimes allowed to ‘enter’ the inner circle of the exclusive Westminster Village by getting a reply from political elites. This behaviour is akin to how celebrity endorsements function in gathering awareness to a cause or the plight of an individual on social media. An influential celebrity would show support for an individual by engaging with them on Twitter, by either @*mentioning* or retweeting that user and alerting followers of the celebrity to take notice of the user themselves (Samman, McAuliffe, & MacLachlan, 2009, p. 137). Influential MPs could be said to be the ‘celebrities’ within the political online sphered denoted by #*springst*. Any user engaging with core MPs in this forum would be noticed by other users who follow the MPs. However, the great potential of social media to engage citizens is lost if MPs choose to engage or ignore users based on a user’s political influence. Our randomly sampled case study shows that a core user like O’Brien engaged predominantly with other political elites.

Stromer-Galley’s (2000) research might provide the rationale as to why politicians in the core area of the #*springst* online community do not interact with politically non-elite citizens on Twitter. Stromer-Galley attributes this to *fear* of losing control. The ambiguity of online communication and the viciousness of mostly anonymous participants in a medium which spreads messages instantaneously can make politicians cautious about engaging with politically non-elite citizens online. Former state and federal political advisor Nicholas Reece (interviewed 8 May 2014) argues this is a valid fear and recalls an event in 2008 – early in the hype of social media in Victoria – when state Labor politician Tim Pallas floated a controversial idea on mass media early one morning that went viral on social media by early afternoon. Reece explains,

They had 17,000 people sign up to a Facebook page saying, ‘Stop Tim Pallas from lifting the age to get a licence!’ I remember that event because it caught us by surprise... It sort of got away from us so quickly and we were still learning how to use these (social media) tools. We weren’t confident in using them.

A social media campaign officer (name withheld, interviewed 11 April 2014) for a major political party said politicians often limit their communication to the political elite online for good reasons:

I work for a lot of MPs and quite a lot of communication for them are mainly from unstable people ... sometimes it’s better to just turn them off on Twitter because they can fill up a Twitter feed very quickly with a whole bunch of stuff that isn’t appropriate for that medium.

According to both Reece and the social media officer, social media communication can be ‘unstable’ and ‘unpredictable’. Unlike political communication with journalists who have an offline reputation to uphold and are, thus, far more predictable in their communications, online citizens can be ‘wildcards’. However, while SNA can show us that the politicians are generally not engaging with users in the periphery, it cannot tell us why. For this reason, we took a random sample of 400 replies from #*springst* during and outside the election campaign.

What is evident in the sample is that the users’ replies on #*springst* were often negative outside the election period and became more so as the election drew closer. Sixty per cent of the replies given by citizens to politicians were negative outside the

election period as compared to 66% during the campaign. Replies with negative sentiments to politicians are the majority of tweets to politicians regardless of whether it was during or outside campaign periods. While positive sentiments increased from 6% outside the election period to 10% during the campaign, they were the least common type of sentiment in both periods. These increases in positive and negative sentiments were at the expense of neutral sentiments which decreased from 35% during non-campaign periods to 25% during elections – indicating a trend towards polarisation of citizen opinions during elections. As messages online are mostly negative, politicians might feel they are better served not engaging with public opinion on social media.

Content analysis findings compared to SNA

The results of the content analysis support the pattern of communication established with the SNA in that citizens' online communication can make it difficult for politicians to engage with them without politicians' losing message control. As with our SNA results, 'citizen to politician' tweets increased from 50% to 60% during the election period, whereas 'politician to citizen' tweets during this time remained constant at 1%. This shows that, regardless of the increased number of tweets that politicians receive, politicians do not engage more frequently with non-political individuals on Twitter during the election period using *#springst*. This would explain why 84% of politicians occupied the core region during the election period in [Figure 3](#), whereas less than half of the politicians (48%) occupied this region outside the election period as seen in [Figures 1](#) and [2](#). It would also account for why the number of politically non-elite citizens in the core region did not increase by much during the election period in [Figure 3](#). This is explained because with more citizens talking to politicians, 'citizen to citizen' tweets fell from 45% during the non-election period to 37% during the campaign period – denoting a 'switch off' or slow down of citizen-to-citizen deliberations in favour of 'citizen to politician' communications. These results indicate the public's desire for greater communication with politicians during the campaign period. But, even with greater opportunities for 'politician to citizen' engagement during the lead up to the election, most politicians are generally not taking the chance to engage with citizens any more than they did during the non-election period – which is to say, almost not at all.

Thus, the digital public sphere facilitated by social media does not seem to be meeting an important democratic criterion of widespread participation as discussed earlier (McNair, 2011, p. 16). A substantial majority of citizens are still overlooked in Twitter communications by politicians. If opinions generated in the public sphere are ignored, political engagement cannot occur. In [Figures 6](#) and [7](#), we look at a randomly chosen semi-periphery politician user to compare with our earlier analysis of a core politician user. Using a random number generator tool, we examined the tweets of semi-periphery politician Jaala Pulford outside the election period.

As we can see from [Figure 6](#), unlike O'Brien, Pulford replies to a broad spectrum of core, semi-periphery, and periphery users during the non-election period – ranging

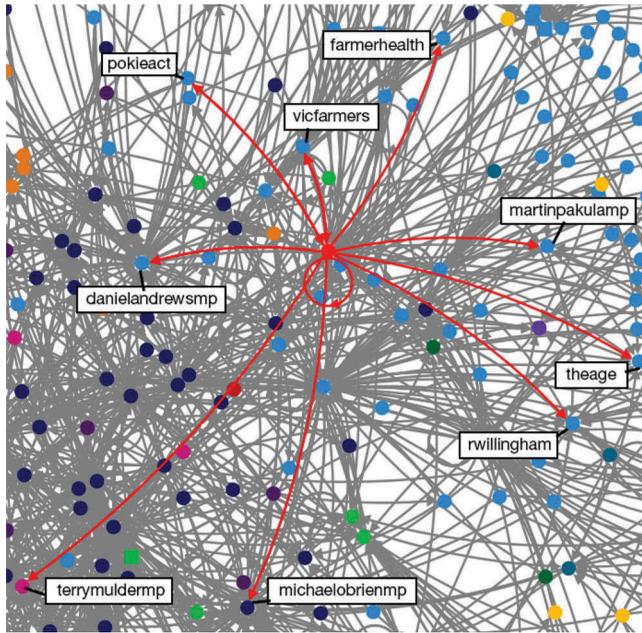


Figure 6. SNA of semi-periphery user @JaalaPulford in #springst (showing only her replies) outside the election period. Source: Author.

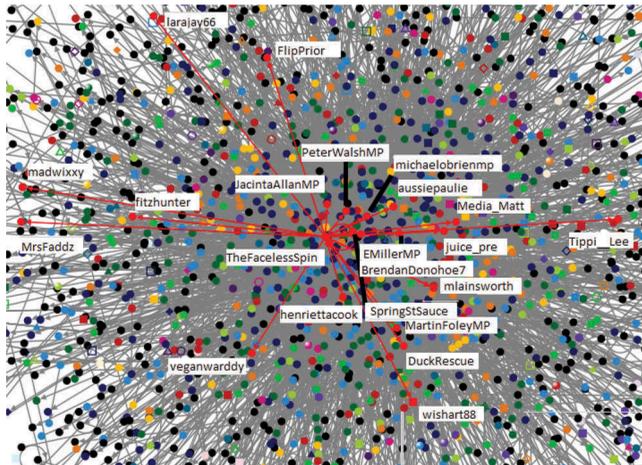


Figure 7. SNA of semi-periphery user @JaalaPulford in #springst (showing only her replies) during the election campaign. Source: Author.

from other politicians, citizens, journalists, and activist organisations. Her communication behaviour does not change significantly during the campaign, as seen in Figure 7.

During the campaign, Pulford occupies the core region of the online sphere, yet unlike many of her parliamentary colleagues, about half of the users she replied to were found in the semi-periphery and periphery regions. Put another way, despite Pulford

receiving more replies during the election period – hence positioning her at the core region – her online communication behaviour in replying to both political elites and politically non-elite citizens remains unchanged. This is unusual for a politician given the political communication patterns identified from the larger random sample.

This suggests that politicians in the core and semi-periphery regions can be casually divided into two modes of communication – what we term ‘broadcast-only’ and ‘broadcast-dialogue’ modes of communication. The former is used often by core politicians who use Twitter to broadcast messages, leveraging on other highly influential users and political elites to carry their message across the network. The latter is often used by semi-periphery politicians who not only use Twitter as a broadcast platform, but also try to engage a wider range of users in political dialogue. However, as [Figure 7](#) has shown, a core politician user – especially one upgraded from a semi-periphery status – may utilise a broadcast-dialogue strategy. These two modes, broadcast-only and broadcast-dialogue, illustrate the two primary strategies employed by core and semi-periphery politicians in communicating with other users on Twitter.

However, politicians in the semi-periphery region are in the minority as compared to those at the core. Outside of elections, 36% of politicians were in the semi-periphery region as compared to 48% at the core. During elections, 14% of politicians were in the semi-periphery region as opposed to 84% at the core during elections. This indicates a generally low level of politician-to-citizen engagement on Twitter.

It is also interesting to note that Pulford, aged 41, who entered Parliament in 2006 is a relatively young politician. However, as this article is examining only two case studies in detail – a politician using the broadcast-only strategy and a politician using the broadcast-dialogue strategy – we cannot generalise about personal or party-specific characteristics that might affect communication strategies. It should also be noted that Macnamara and Kenning (2014, p. 68) found ‘no significant differences overall in social media use by politicians based on political party, gender or age’. Also worth noting is that former Labor leader Kevin Rudd, 57, a veteran male politician was identified as being very interactive with citizens online during federal elections even before he became Prime Minister.

Limitations and further research

The findings of this article are limited to a sample of a much wider population of tweets gathered. Although random sampling was employed to boost external validity, the results of this study cannot be generalised to other political hashtags on Twitter – for example, *#vicvotes*, *#vicjobs*, or others. Also, this study focused on the hashtag *#springst*, the most popular state politics forum, and does not capture political communication outside this Twitter feed. It also cannot capture if political staff or politicians themselves are posting online. Further research with a wider range of platforms and quantity of data – and perhaps to detect signs of third-party posting, including astroturfing which can distort engagement through misleading communication – could more precisely track political engagement and further identify barriers to it. Such research will deepen our understandings of online political engagement as digital platforms evolve.

Conclusion

This article is the first of its kind to examine the political social media sphere of the second most populated electorate in Australia, Victoria. It does so both during and outside the Victorian 2014 election campaign. Our findings are consistent with other similar Australian studies of this nature discussed throughout the article. This study finds overall that the promise of social media technologies in facilitating a more inclusive political public sphere have not yet been fully realised in Victoria. Like other recent studies' findings, there is more evidence of broadcasting by politicians online than a conversation-styled approach that takes advantage of the many-way transmission available with these digital technologies. That said, there are signs of change with some politicians such as Jaala Pulford bucking the trend and communicating more broadly across the Twittersphere and not just with other political elites both during and outside election campaigns.

This article sought to answer three questions. First, to what extent and how do Victorian politicians engage with citizens on social media? Second, are there any barriers that impede politician–citizen engagement? Finally, are there any changes in the level of engagement between the non-election and campaign periods (each 43 days) during the 2014 Victorian state election?

We found Facebook has replaced politicians' personal website usage as the most common platform for communication with the public, whereas Twitter has the highest uptake rate from one electoral term to the next. These findings are new as previously politicians' personal websites were most commonly used. This has obvious implications for the justification and ongoing study of these particular social media platforms for political communication.

Yet, despite the significant increased use of Twitter and Facebook by Victorian politicians for public communication purposes, we find that similar to other recent Australian studies the extent of political engagement between politicians and voters on these social media sites remains relatively low. This is the case both during and outside the intense election campaign period. Politicians' communications generally become more frenzied during the campaign but not more inclusive. During either time period, when politicians' interact on social media it is most often with other political elites, including the media. It would appear politicians typically use social media for promoting themselves and their policies, rather than for public interaction.

We find two barriers to engagement which contribute to this low level of politicians' political engagement using Twitter. First, despite the absence of direct moderation capabilities on Twitter, most politicians communicating in the *#springst* forum foster a hierarchical environment that largely ignores those users communicating from the periphery of this forum. This suggests most politicians play a gatekeeping role and that opinions expressed beyond the core of the online Twittersphere are effectively shouting on deaf political ears. While it is true that the number of participants in the core grew during the election period, this was mostly due to more political elites entering the core region, rather than more politically non-elite citizens becoming part of the core. There were notable exceptions. Some semi-periphery politician and core politician do engage with citizens in a broadcast-dialogue strategy, as opposed to the broadcast-only strategy that most politicians have adopted. Counter examples provide a viable pathway for voters to engage with their elected representatives and it also represents an area for further study.

Second, citizens more often direct negative tweets to their political representatives, possibly discouraging politicians from interacting online in an open, unmoderated forum. Victorian politicians appear to undertake a gatekeeping role on social media to control their social environment by way of hierarchy in the absence of traditional media gatekeepers. These barriers we suggest lead to a low level of political engagement for voters than is afforded by the capacities of these social media tools. Educating citizens on how they can use social media to engage with politicians responsibly and effectively might go some way to fostering a more participatory democratic environment.

Nonetheless, Victorian citizens on social media showed a consistently high level of interest and willingness to connect with their politicians – as seen in the large number of ‘citizen to politician’ messages. Therefore, the problem does not seem to be a lack of interest in political engagement on the side of voters, but more so politicians’ reticence to engage with the public using social media, which is virtually non-existent.

Notes

1. Note: Users are still vulnerable to libel and defamation suits. See, for example, Kelley and Zansberg (2014).
2. For example, President of the Public Transport Users Association Daniel Bowen replied to three MPs, two journalists, and only one politically non-elite citizen on *#springst*.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

ORCID

William Lukamto  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9886-2877>

Andrea Carson  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5503-3334>

References

- Auger, G. (2013). Fostering democracy through social media: Evaluating diametrically opposed nonprofit advocacy organizations’ use of Facebook, Twitter, and You Tube. *Public Relations Review*, 39(4), 369–376. doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2013.07.013
- Bentivegna, S. (2002). Politics and new media. In L. Lievrouw & S. Livingstone (Eds.), *The handbook of new media* (pp. 50–61). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Bergstrom, K. (2011). “Don’t feed the troll”: Shutting down debate about community expectations on Reddit.com. *First Monday*, 16, 8. doi:10.5210/fm.v16i8.3498
- Beyle, T., & Ostdiek, D. (1996). Is the state press corp biased? The view from political and media elites. *Spectrum: Journal of State Government*, 69(4), 6–16.
- Blair, T. (2007). ‘Media’ speech. *The Political Quarterly*, 78(4), 476–480.
- Boeder, P. (2005). Habermas heritage. *First Monday*, p. 1.
- Boler, M. (2008). *Digital media and democracy: Tactics in hard times*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, c2008.
- Bruns, A., & Highfield, T. (2013). Political networks on Twitter. *Information, Communication & Society*, 16(5), 667–691. doi:10.1080/1369118X.2013.782328
- Carlson, N. (2011). The real history of Twitter. *Business Insider Australia*. Retrieved June 1, 2014, from <http://www.businessinsider.com.au/how-twitter-was-founded-2011-4>

- Chan, S. (2008). Camilla Cooke explains the Kevin07 digital campaign. *Fresh & New(er)*. Retrieved April 2, 2013, from <http://www.freshandnew.org/2008/06/camilla-cooke-explains-the-kevin07-digital-campaign-notes-from-cci-creating-value-between-commons-and-commerce-conference-brisbane-2008/>
- Cogburn, D., & Espinoza-Vasquez, F. (2011). From networked nominee to networked nation: Examining the impact of Web 2.0 and social media on political participation and civic engagement in the 2008 Obama campaign. *Journal of Political Marketing*, 10(1–2), 189–213. doi:10.1080/15377857.2011.540224
- Curran, J., Fenton, N., & Friedman, D. (2012). *Misunderstanding the internet*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Dahlgren, P. (2009). *Media and political engagement: Citizens, communication and democracy*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Ehrlich, T. (2000). *Civic responsibility and higher education*. Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press.
- Elmer, G., Langlois, G., & McKelvey, F. (2012). *The permanent campaign: New media, new politics*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Fielding, N., Lee, R., & Blank, G. (2008). *The SAGE handbook of online research methods*. London: SAGE.
- Finkelstein, R., & Ricketson, M. (2011). Report of the independent inquiry into the media and media regulation. Australian Government, Canberra. Retrieved September 18, 2014, from http://www.dbcde.gov.au/digital_economy/independent_media_inquiry
- Fishkin, J. (2009). *When the people speak: Deliberative democracy and public consultation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Flew, T., & Wilson, J. (2008). Citizen journalism and political participation: The YouDecide 2007 project and the 2007 Australian Federal Election. *Australian Journal of Communication*, 35(2), 17–37.
- Gamb, D. (2012). Occupying social media. *Socialism & Democracy*, 26(2), 55–60. doi:10.1080/08854300.2012.686275
- Gans, J., & Leigh, A. (2012). How partisan is the press? Multiple measures of media slant. *Economic Record*, 88(280), 127–147. doi:10.1111/ecor.2012.88.issue-1
- Gibson, R., Lusoli, W., & Ward, S. (2008). The Australian public and politics on-line: Reinforcing or reinventing representation? *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 43, 111–113. doi:10.1080/10361140701842607
- Gibson, R., & McAllister, I. (2008). Australia: Potential unfulfilled? The 2004 election online. In L. Lievrouw & S. Livingstone (Eds.), *Making a difference: A comparative view of the role of the internet in election politics* (pp. 35–56). Lexington: Lanham.
- Goode, L. (2005). *Jürgen Habermas: Democracy and the public sphere*. Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press.
- Goodman, J., Wennerstrom, A., & Springgate, B. (2011). Participatory and social media to engage youth: From the Obama campaign to public health practice. *Ethnicity & Disease*, Summer 21(3 Suppl 1), S1-94-99.
- Grant, W., Moon, B., & Grant, J. (2010). Digital dialogue? Australian politicians' use of the social network tool Twitter. *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 45(4), 579–604. doi:10.1080/10361146.2010.517176
- Habermas, J. (1991). *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Habermas, J., Lennox, S., & Lennox, F. (1974). The public sphere: An encyclopedia article (1964). *New German Critique*, 3, 49–55. doi:10.2307/487737
- Harrison, T., & Barthel, B. (2009). Wielding new media in Web 2.0: Exploring the history of engagement with the collaborative construction of media products. *New Media & Society*, 11(1–2), 155–178. doi:10.1177/1461444808099580
- Herman, E. (2000). The propaganda model: A retrospective. *Journalism Studies*, 1(1), 101–112. doi:10.1080/146167000361195
- Highfield, T. (2013). National and state-level politics on social media: Twitter, Australian political discussions, and the online commentariat. *International Journal of Electronic Governance*, 6(4), 342–360. doi:10.1504/IJEG.2013.060648

- Jenkins, H. (2008). *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide*. New York: New York University Press.
- Kavada, A. (2005). Civil society organisations and the Internet: The case of Amnesty international, Oxfam and the world development movement. In W. De Jong, M. Shaw, & N. Stammers (Eds.), *Global activism global media*. London: Pluto Press.
- Keane, J. (2009). *The life and death of democracy*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Kelley, M., & Zansberg, S. (2014). 140 characters of defamation: The developing law of social media libel. *Journal of Internet Law*, 1, 1–10.
- Kellner, D. (1999). Globalisation from below? Toward a radical democratic technopolitics. *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, 4(2), 101–113. doi:10.1080/09697259908572039
- Korten, D. (1998). *Globalizing civil society: Reclaiming our right to power*. New York, NY: Seven Stories Press.
- Krauft, R., Patterson, M., Lundmark, V., Kiesler, S., Mukopadhyay, T., & Scherlies, W. (1998). Internet paradox: A social technology that reduces social involvement and psychological well-being?. *The American Psychologist*, 53(9), 1017–1031. doi:10.1037/0003-066X.53.9.1017
- Liu, X., & Fahmy, S. (2009, May 20). *Testing the spiral of silence in the virtual world: Monitoring opinion-climate online and individuals' willingness to express personal opinions in online versus offline settings*. Conference Papers – International Communication Association, Chicago, IL (pp. 1–36).
- Lynch, M. (2000). The dialogue of civilisations and international public spheres. *Millennium – Journal of International Studies* (03058298), 29(2), 307–330. doi:10.1177/03058298000290020601
- Macnamara, J., & Kenning, G. (2011). E-electioneering 2010: Trends in social media use in Australian political communication. *Media International Australia, Incorporating Culture & Policy*, 139, 7–22.
- Macnamara, J., & Kenning, G. (2014). E-electioneering 2007–13: Trends in online political campaigns over three elections. *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture and Policy*, 152(Aug 2014), 57–74. doi:10.1177/1329878X1415200107
- Martin, A. (2010). Does political trust matter? Examining some of the implications of low levels of political trust in Australia. *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 45(4), 705–712. doi:10.1080/10361146.2010.517184
- McAllister, I. (2002, March 23). Civic education and political knowledge in Australia. Papers on Parliament 38. Department of the Senate, Australian Government, Canberra.
- McNair, B. (2011). *An introduction to political communication*. London: Routledge.
- Niven, D. (1999). Partisan bias in the media? A new test. *Social Science Quarterly*, 4, 847–858.
- O'Dell, J. (2010). Twitter hits two billion tweets per month. Mashable.com. Retrieved April 2, 2014, from <http://mashable.com/2010/06/08/twitter-hits-2-billion-tweets-per-month>
- O'Reilly, T. (2007). What is Web 2.0: Design patterns and business models for the next generation of software. *Communications and Strategies*, 65, 17–37.
- Osell, T. (2007). What the trolls teach us. *The Minnesota Review*, 2007, 47–50. doi:10.1215/00265667-2007-69-47
- Philip, B. (2014). Trolls at the social media gate. *Canadian Business*, 87(15/16), 22.
- Rakove, J. (1997) *Original meanings: Politics and ideas in the making of the constitution*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- Schudson, M. (2003). *The sociology of news*. New York, NY: Norton.
- Samman, E., McAuliffe, E., & MacLachlan, M. (2009). The role of celebrity in endorsing poverty reduction through international aid. *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing*, 14(2), 137–148. doi:10.1002/nvsm.339
- Schumpeter, J. (1950). *Capitalism, socialism and democracy*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.
- Shirky, C. (2012). *The internet has advanced democratic causes*. Gale: Cengage Learning.
- StatisticBrain. (2014a). Twitter statistics. *Statistic Brain*. Retrieved April 2, 2014, from <http://www.statisticbrain.com/twitter-statistics/>
- StatisticBrain. (2014b). Facebook statistics. *Statistic Brain*. Retrieved April 2, 2014, from <http://www.statisticbrain.com/facebook-statistics/>
- Stromer-Galley, J. (2000). On-line interaction and why candidates avoid it. *Journal of Communication*, 50(4), 111–132. doi:10.1111/jcom.2000.50.issue-4

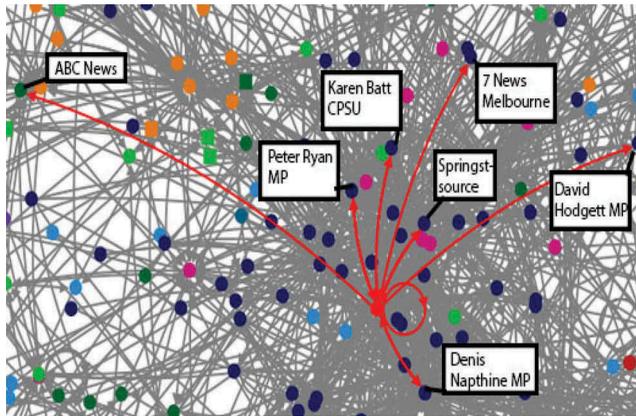
Sunstein, C. (2007). *Republic.com 2.0*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, c2007.

Xenos, M., & Moy, P. (2007). Direct and differential effects of the internet on political and civic engagement. *Journal of Communication*, 57(4), 704–718. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.2007.00364.x

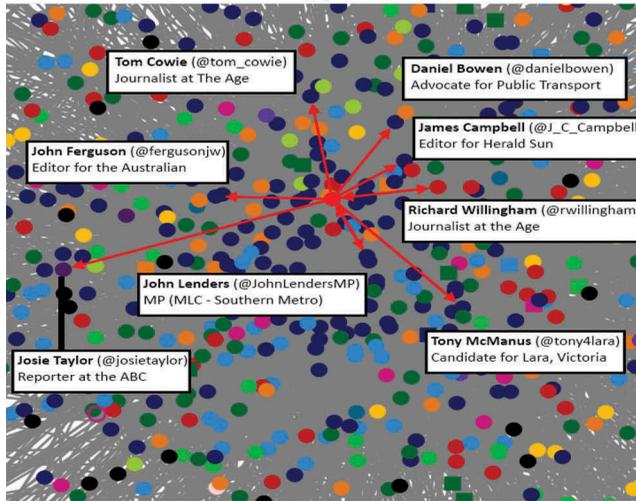
Xenos, M., Vromen, A., & Loader, B. (2014). The great equalizer? Patterns of social media use and youth political engagement in three advanced democracies. *Information, Communication & Society*, 17(2), 151–167. doi:10.1080/1369118X.2013.871318

Yadav, S. (2006). Facebook – The complete biography. *Mashable.com*. Retrieved June 1, 2014, from <http://mashable.com/2006/08/25/facebook-profile/>

Appendix



(a)



(b)

Figure A1. Social network analysis of @michaelobrienmp's tweets (showing only his replies) before the campaign (a) and during the campaign (b). Source: Author.

Downloaded by [128.250.0.111] at 23:57 14 July 2016