Chapter 2 — Obama-o-rama?

Winning needs no explanation, losing has no alibi.

— Greg Baum

For the majority of Australians the political process is most visible during elections. In our system of government, elections serve a wide variety of perceived functions. Under the representative form of decision-making they have a strict legal role in determining who gets to form part of the assembly of legislators and cast votes in the place of members of the public. The traditional justification for this is it serves to free individuals from the onerous labour of directly legislating (Kornberg and Clarke, 1992: 176). Thinking of political systems as information systems, elections are also ‘focusing events’ (Kingdon, 1984: 98), which draw attention to policy issues and the institutional mechanisms and actors able to address them — this is an agenda-setting view. Finally we can also see them as both ritualistic and symbolic, they are public performances that reaffirm the participative nature of democratic government and convey political legitimacy on the elected government and their political manifesto. This legitimacy is important in allowing governments to achieve their policy objectives and is protected through mechanisms like independent electoral administration bodies (the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC), and its state-based cousins). Where this legitimacy is challenged (formally or rhetorically), government capacity can be undermined.

Because of the multiple functions of elections — the relative significance of which is not explicitly agreed among political elites or members of the public1 — assessing the impact of digital media on the processes and practices of elections is complex. At the most basic level, students of digital media politics are often asked about the ‘return on investment’ these channels provide: does a dollar invested online ‘buy’ more votes than one invested in traditional media, or put into public relations, or spent on ‘facetime’? As we’ll see, the advent of digital media, with its undoubted ability to collect data on performance and behaviour (page views, unique visits, click through rates, dwelling times), has not yet answered this question in Australia. In addition, while votes may be the ultimate measure of electoral success for some, the position of digital media in the wider media ecosystem and the impact of this on the way political information is communicated can be seen as a more significant, but even harder

1 Indeed, the relative importance is one of those areas of political dialogue in Australia that Deborah Stone (1998: 137–38) would argue remains deliberately ambiguous because of the freedom of action it affords political elites. Political leaders are wont to talk about mandates when they have them, making decisions irrespective of election agendas when the need arises, and few are ever keen to discuss the dramaturgy of elections when in office (for rare examples of this, see Tanner (2011) and Latham (2005)).
impact to identify with certainty. To examine these impacts, this chapter looks at the popular debates around the use of digital media and election campaigns, the adoption and use of technology by political parties, candidates and civil society groups, and then draws together these observations to illustrate the impacts of technology on the process of elections in Australia today.

Questions for e-lections

To go beyond the descriptive, let’s examine two areas of interest about the role digital media plays in election campaigns today.

Democracy +

The first questions we should ask concerns democratic impact. This focuses on how the use of digital media affects the ‘playing field’ of politics. In the Australian context, with the dominance of the two major party groupings, this is expressed through the ability of smaller political parties to gain representation or visibility. In this context, the features of digital media that lower the cost of content production and distribution are significant for minor parties, allowing them to employ a range of online channels to distribute their message at comparatively low cost when compared to paid advertising. Increased accessibility of information about more parties is therefore indicative of ‘more’ democracy, through the assumption that more players are likely to increase the competitiveness of the contest (Gibson & McAllister, 2011). Additionally, and more substantively, as the major parties have tended to move to a ‘central’ position in the political spectrum (Mulé, 2001: 124), this can also be seen as a proxy for the increased range of policy opinions put to voters. Thus, even if the more visible minor parties are electorally unsuccessful, their ideas and concerns may be coopted by the dominant parties, which seek to appeal to their constituencies.

These democratic questions provide us with a triumvirate of measures. At the simplest level it is possible to see how a range of existing and new smaller parties have gladly adopted digital media in Australia as a means to gain visibility. It is more difficult, however, to determine if this translates into increased electoral success given the range of variables at play. Internationally, Small’s (2008b) analysis has argued that the heightened visibility of parties has not come with corresponding electoral victories. This finding is seen as a result of the inability of many digital channels to ‘pull’ audiences. Websites (the most commonly studied of party digital media) are visible through active search, requiring pre-existing interest. Finally, at the most difficult level, it is hard to determine if the lack of electoral success of these newly digitised minor parties comes
from their comparative lack of ‘push’ media (e.g. advertising), or because major parties are adroit at coopting their agendas. This is by far the most difficult question to answer: requiring us to identify areas of agenda cooption, as well as assumptions of potential electoral success. Examples, like the cooption of aspects of the policy and rhetoric of Pauline Hanson’s One Nation party by the then Prime Minister John Howard in the late 1990s can be identified, but it’s not clear that Hanson’s success was due to her party’s extensive use of digital media (which they did employ with considerable success, Rutherford, 2001; Scalmer, 2002: 161), or the ‘natural’ recognition of an unserved section of the electorate (David Truman’s notion of the ‘potential interest group’; 1951: 516).

This first area of inquiry looks at the interface between macro and meso analysis: to what extent does the Australian political system produce outcomes that are democratically ‘good’ (a macro view) based on the interactions between formal and informal groups (meso). To join the dots further we can also ask questions about the roles of individual actors and the types of actors in the adoption and use of technology. Our neo-institutional approach to analysis, discussed in Chapter 1, looks at the interactions between individuals and their organisational structures. This recognises the coexistence of influence: top-down in the role of party machines on the behaviour of individual candidates; and, bottom-up through the aggregation of individual actions into collective ‘norms’. Does the adoption of digital media arise from party organisations, or from a myriad of individual choices among political actors?

A strongly held contemporary view of electoral politics is that it has become a professional activity where entry, advancement, and success are driven through the acquisition of increasingly formalised skills drawn from international campaign practice and a range of contemporary media disciplines: corporate communications, public relations (PR), and marketing. This ‘marketing model’ of politics is detailed by Karen Sanders (2009: 59) as the adaptation of commercial communications and sales techniques which focus on the identification of consumer/voter desires, and serving these desires through the constant adjustment of party and candidate platforms. Rather than attempt to ‘sell’ a party platform to the public (convincing them of the merit of the proposals), political marketing conceptualises the voter as increasingly independent in their political allegiance and therefore more likely to engage in rational-choice decision-making. The rise of this approach to looking at the political environment as a ‘marketplace’ is backed up by the tendency for parties to become increasingly ‘hollowed out’ (where party bureaucrats give way to external professional communications and campaign consultants) and for the electorate to become more volatile (McAllister, 2011: 38–40).

A problem with the marketing model in the Australian context is the comparative inflexibility of our party system. As opposed to the United States, where the
proliferation of autonomous candidates makes it easier for platforms to shift in response to fickle public demand or issues of the day, Australia presents a tension between market responsiveness and internal party processes and individual interests. While it is true that the type of sales-oriented, manifesto-focused campaign appears to have been thoroughly discredited in Australia with the defeat of John Hewson’s Fightback! economic manifesto in the 1990s, Australian parties are not simply political action groups set up to support electoral campaigns, but continue to serve as vehicles for internal decision-making and debate. While the interest-mediation function of parties (the role of the party mediating between competing interests to develop party policy) has declined in recent years (Jaensch, et al., 2004: 54), the removal of Malcolm Turnbull as leader of the Liberal Party in 2009 demonstrates the power of internal policy debates over policy areas that are seen as highly sensitive to the party support base (Rodgers, 2009).

The counterargument lies in the similar (but possibly very different) removal of Kevin Rudd from the leadership of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) in 2010. While also a victim of carbon-trading policy, Rudd’s departure due to poor polling is more clearly a story of his perceived ‘market failure’. While considerable ink has been spilled over the ‘assassination of’ / ‘coup against’ the incumbent prime minister, what is clear is the role that the new professional skills of marketplace analysis played in his departure. Bob Hodge and Ingrid Matthews (2011), for example, examine the role of opinion polling in the removal of the prime minister, arguing that it was not public opinion that resulted in the decision to remove Rudd, but the weight given to particular interpretations of polling data by members of the parliamentary party. Thus, while Turnbull’s demise stemmed from the extent to which his support for climate science separated him from his peers, Rudd’s removal stemmed from faith placed in party pollsters. This reflects Eric Louw’s notion of the ‘PR-isation of politics’ (2010: 75–80). In his view, PR-isation sees an increasingly important role of public relations professionals and consultants in stage-managing politicians-as-performers for consumption by the public, and interpreting public opinion for elites. PR becomes important in ensuring electoral success, but also in manufacturing consent from a public that is weakly attached to formal politics. In this process, argues Louw, ‘low-involvement’ media like television are essential tools because their one-to-many communications structure requires acquisition of the technical skills of the PR industry, and serve to focus political power on a small number of key performer-politicians.

Ruddbots and real Julias

The second question is the degree to which artifice saturates modern politics. The rise and dominance of televised politics has led to concerns that contemporary
politicians emerge from ‘central casting’: plastic people who are unlike ‘us’. This sense of alienation from elites is a unique problem of democratic government, where the expanded notion of ‘we govern’ implies that we share some affinity with the political elite (something not automatically assumed in authoritarian and aristocratic modes of government). If this presents a problem, we need to ask if digital media are an answer to this social distancing.

Accordingly, new social media provides ways for elites to present themselves as ‘real people’ through a reduction in this distance. The perception of digital media as increasingly pervasive and occurring in real-time has seen an emergence of a new language of authenticity. Digital media allows greater interaction with, and information about, a wide range of elites (entertainment, sporting, political). It provides more substance about policies and positions, but also about elites as individuals. Social networking services (SNS) typify this: making it harder to feel distant from political elites when you can share the loss of their family dog or barrack for your favourite sporting team together—apart. The reduction of social distance can serve to make these individuals, once part of faceless organisations, ‘ordinary people’ — a characteristic that Gilpin, et al. (2010: 259–60) see as providing cues about that individual’s authority, fidelity, origin, credibility, sincerity, and accuracy. In the public life, authentic politics is a place of trustworthy communication between social equals.

This approach reflects a shift towards the political ideology of populism, particularly those elements defined by Catherine Fieschi and Paul Heywood:

... the claim to represent the ‘common man’, the average voter whose voice has long been lost; they claim to be able to return to a golden, more innocent age of politics during which politics and political decisions rested in the hands of those who contribute most significantly to the everyday life of the nation by their labour. (2004: 301)

Ingolfur Blühdorn (2007: 257) sees the notion of ‘authentic politics’ as an attempt to recapture, perhaps nostalgically, a modernist politics based on the ontological notion of an absolute and fixed reality: a politics where people mean what they say and say what they mean. This is significant in that Australia faces, if not a crisis of political trust, a tendency for it to be in consistently short supply. This is illustrated in Figure 2. Drawn from election studies undertaken by The Australian National University, we can see that, while Australians’ have an increasing level of satisfaction with our democratic system of political

2 Walter Benjamin (1936) would argue that this leads to a more ready and easy criticism of political elites: ‘The audience’s identification with the actor is really an identification with the camera’.

3 Malcolm Turnbull; http://twitter.com/#!/TurnbullMalcolm/status/148633314268422144

4 Anthony Albanese; http://twitter.com/#!/AlboMP/status/102604447611494400
organisation, they are far less enamoured with the individuals who actually work within it (logarithmic trendline). Trust and authenticity, therefore, may help to close this gap.

![Figure 2: Citizens' views of government and democracy](image)

Source: McAllister, 2011: 74–76, 82 (annotated and rescaled)

While distrust of politicians is not new, the increased mediatisation of politics facilitates the rise of professional inauthenticity (Newman, 1997: 155). The concern about trust picks up on the notion of the development of the virtualised world as articulated by Jean Baudrillard. Looking at the development of media, technology, and society, Baudrillard examines a technological process by which the ability to (re)produce a representation of the world (say an image) moves from the capture of the real world, through to hyper-real representations of it: from enhanced or modified versions (the airbrushed model), through to purely artificial representations that claim a basis in reality. While Baudrillard sees this historical process embedded in the economic and social world, the separation of the real from signs masquerading as the real has led to an inversion of reality: the imagined representation precedes the real and shapes it (Baudrillard, 1988: 169–72). In this way, he argues that ‘[e]verything is metamorphosed into its inverse in order to be perpetuated in its purged form’ (177). This allows us to see how the PR-ised ‘Julia’ can be denounced to produce the ‘real Julia’: a more authentic, human, and electable politician.

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5 The estrangement of workers from the value and meaning of the goods they produce, and the separation of individuals from the natural environment.

6 This is drawn from a campaign speech by the Prime Minister Julia Gillard where, in response to criticism of her campaign, she announced that she would ‘make sure that the real Julia is well and truly on display’ (Hudson, 2010).
There is a tension here. Politicians want to be approachable and likeable, but run the risk of diluting that which makes them special and provides authority. From a non-political perspective, Sue-Ellen Case observes the power of the virtual ‘as alternative to the ubiquitous, pedestrian realm. Acting within that space requires particular codes of behavior, traditions of costuming, and training in specialized gestures or functions’ (2007: 2). These are apparent in the political world where politicians have their own recognisable argot, staging, and mode of dress. These conventions can be recognised and commented upon, such as in the popular blog *Tony Abbott Looking at Things* (Illustration 2) that illustrates the specific dress of politicians, regardless of its appropriateness. In this way, Case argues that virtuality is not simply a technical process of the representation of this specialised social environment, but that virtualisation conveys the performance space as ‘special’ and ‘specialised’. Overall, this questions whether adopting social media serves as a response to decreasing levels of trust that have emerged from the era of televisual politics. In so doing, however, do political performers run the risk of breaking the suspension of disbelief that gives them symbolic authority and influence?

**Illustration 2: Tony Abbott Looking at Things Tumblr blog**

Source: http://tonyabbottlookingatthings.tumblr.com/
‘10 in 10’: The evolution of online campaigning

The long primary and presidential campaign that led to the election of Barack Obama in 2008 is cited as a catalyst for renewed interest in digital media campaigning around the world. Obama represented a new form of politics for a range of reasons, both ideological and social and learned (and not so learned) books have been published exploring all facets of the campaign: the use of slick websites, campaign blogs and blogger conference calls, of social networking and micro-fundraising (Williamson, 2010: 15). Campaign staff and strategists, like Blue State Digital, were quick to tout their media strategies as key to this dramatic electoral event.

In the lead-up to the 2010 federal election, Google Australia hosted a series of events for political insiders to advise them of the services the company offered for election campaigning. Far from being simply a search engine, the multinational IT giant offers a range of products, from advertising to webmetrics, and the company was keen for Australian campaign professionals to consider the most effective/extensive way to use those products in the campaign. The core of the pitch, however, was a simple ‘10 in 10’: spend 10 per cent of your advertising budget online (personal correspondence: Stewart Jackson, 16 July 2010).

This anecdote is revealing about digital electioneering in Australia today. Over the past 20 years, parties and candidates have gradually expanded their engagement with these technologies: first tentatively, then tangentially and, now, as an essential part of their media and communications strategy. What has not happened, however, is the radical displacement of traditional methods and channels of communication. In the 2010 campaign, political parties continued to use mass media channels to distribute undifferentiated messages, and candidates employed direct mail and local signage as their most cost-effective campaigning tools. Given the high cost of TV advertising in Australia (Maher, 2010), only large institutional actors are able to take advantage of mass advertising. In addition, compulsory voting encourages campaigning that targets the undecided and the weakly committed (Taft & Walker, 1958: 162): a market that favours the use of intrusive advertising on high rotation. Google’s pitch to the parties, however, demonstrates the way in which online campaigning has moved from the realm of the amateur to that of the professional. The company advised party officials on the most effective ways to use online advertising, the need to set levels of expenditure, the nature of ‘always on’ campaigning, and — critically — the

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7 Strongly associated with the campaign’s voter outreach and fundraising strategies, the company was formed by staff who worked on the innovative Howard Dean campaign. Dean was a presidential candidate in the 2004 Democratic primaries in the United States. Generally regarded as an unlikely nominee, his use of digital media was highlighted as a strength of his campaign.
need to integrate online and offline campaign management (Google Australia, 2010: 2). What remains unclear is if a 10 per cent spend offers good or bad value for money.

This section examines the contemporary electoral digital landscape in three parts: first, we examine the way parties have engaged with digital media to win elections; second, the role of individual candidates in the online space — do low barriers to entry serve to unshackle these individuals from their parties?; and, finally, we assess online campaigning against the marketing and PR-isation hypotheses presented above.

**Vote for us**

The core of the Australian electoral process rests on parties. This is due to a range of factors, including the Westminster system of legislative management (Wlezien, 2010: 102), historical tensions between organised labour and the anti-Labor parties (Marsh, 1995: 17–19), the entrenched notion of the two-party preferred voting system (Sharman, 1994: 135), and the comparative homogeneity of Australian society that has remained stable over long periods of time. This party-centric model is not a universal way of organising political competition. As structure develops to reinforce culture, a range of laws and institutional behaviours have developed to entrench parties as the primary way in which Australians are encouraged to think about electoral politics: from how-to-vote cards (employed by half of voters to direct their vote based on party recommendations; Farrell & McAllister, 2005: 89) to the structure of the Senate voting system which assumes party-level competition for quotas.

In the Australian context this is important in the way public and private resources disproportionately favour, not just parties, but established parties who alternate in government. This is achieved through the disproportionate amount of donations these parties-of-government receive from corporate and union donors (Tham, 2010), but also in parties’ increasing use of public resources to support campaigning directly (public election funding) and indirectly (use of government advertising and parliamentary allowances; see Information subsidies and the growth of PR, Chapter 6). Overall, this is anti-democratic in the way it captures public resources to reinforce the dominance of a small, closed group of ‘insider’ parties. This ‘cartel hypothesis’, originally proposed by Richard Katz and Peter Mair (1994), argues that parties who share government become entrenched in power, become ‘insiders’ and move away from a genuine connection to the public, and increasingly limit the competitiveness of the political system by adjusting electoral laws and processes (a good example of this being the alteration of the number of seats in the Tasmanian parliament to prevent the election of candidates from the Australian Greens; Crowley,
1999: 186). Under this hypothesis, Labor and the Coalition can be seen as a
cosy club who limit competition to alternation between these parties. However
fierce their language, Australia is increasingly a ‘managed democracy’ guided
by entrenched political elites.

Regardless of the rights and wrongs of the party-centric system of electoral
competition (a question to which we will return), it is appropriate to begin the
examination of digital media in electoral campaigns by a look at these most
significant of actors.

Learning to love digital media

Political parties’ use of internet-based communications emerged slowly over the
last two decades. While parties established their first websites in the mid 1990s,
the new millennium saw online campaigning increasingly rise to prominence
as an active area of study and media attention. Interestingly, this initially
emerged in Australia at the level of state government: marked by contested use
of a political campaign website by the Liberal Party’s Jeff Kennett in the 1999
election (Martin, 2000). This website — part of a personalised campaign — set
the tone for online elections in Australia for some time: particularly in the use
of specific, time-limited sites for the election campaign, as well as a focus on the
figure of the leader. Sites largely remained static, information-based repositories
(Chen, Gibson & Geiselhart, 2006: 35), serving as electronic brochures aimed at
wide audiences.

The longevity of this model is interesting given that this early iteration of the
campaign website was quickly parodied by online pranksters (Illustration 3)⁸
who demonstrated just how low the barriers to entry to online publication
are. Ridiculing the ‘cult of Jeff’, which had emerged around the flamboyant
premier, parodies and more substantively critical websites received considerable
publicity during the election.⁹ This highlighted the risks parties faced in the
open access and anarchic medium of the internet. Where parties’ near monopoly
on TV advertising allowed control of message and timing, the internet allowed
participation from a wide range of individuals and groups who could use
guerrilla-marketing techniques and steal visibility from the party (‘brand
hijacking’; Levinson & Gibson, 2010: 162).

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⁹ A good example would be Stephen Mayne’s jeffed.com website which was critical of the policies and
management approach of the government. In some ways the success of jeffed.com led to the development of
the alternative media site Crikey!
These lessons shaped party engagement with digital media in a number of ways. First, an emphasis on control developed: digital media was a risky proposition that parties did not understand well and should be treated with caution. Unsurprisingly this led to a tendency for established Australian parties to limit their exposure to the web, particularly interactive content. Second, where innovation did emerge, this focused on negative campaigning that could not be hijacked. A good example was the Political Big Brother (PBB) site that was accessible during the 2001 election. Based on the reality television program Big Brother, the site encouraged subscribers to ‘vote out of the house’ key members of the government through an interactive set of voting rounds staged over the weeks leading up to the election: with the prime minister being the last person to be ‘voted out’ (Chen, 2001). PBB had a range of innovative and engaging elements: a focus on younger voters (Kerr, 2001), provision of information about the performance of the government as part of the voting system, and the collection of democratic user data as part of participation. Reflecting the emphasis on control, however, the site’s voting system was carefully managed to prevent subversion: Howard was always going to be voted out online just before polling day, if not in reality.

Barriers to adoption

Structural dynamics of the Australian political system have played a role in restraining innovation in the use of digital media. Compulsory voting limits the
The Australian Greens, for example, ran their first national campaign in 2007 (although elements of strong parochialism remain within the party), allowing resources to be centralised and a standard presentation of online content to emerge in the 2007–10 elections (personal correspondence: Peter Davis, The Greens, 19 December 2007).

Over time these factors have become less significant and, in 2007, Australia saw a shift in the role of digital media from a peripheral element of the overall campaign, towards a more central role in the planning and execution of the campaign strategy. The ‘Kevin 07’ campaign moved back into the risky terrain of jeff.com: a personalised campaign portal, removed from the ALP’s main online properties, that emphasised the new leadership (of the party and the country) of Kevin Rudd (personal interview: Simon Banks, ALP, 18 February 2008). Again the federal dimension was important, with the leader-centric website model having been previously employed by Peter Beattie in campaigns for the premiership of Queensland. This election saw a range of digital media innovations take centre stage: use of social media strategies, heavy investment in online video, and leader branding through association with digital media.\(^\text{11}\)

The ‘internet election’: Drawing it all together

The ALP’s 2007 campaign drew considerably from the campaign strategies of Howard Dean and Barack Obama, but the lessons were not restricted to the Labor party. The Coalition were active in incorporating online fundraising into their campaign strategy (personal correspondence: Brad Henderson, The Nationals, 10 December 2007), while the Greens appropriated the value of open-source software (OSS) in building a low-cost national campaign platform.\(^\text{12}\) In the 2010 election this accelerated pace of international learning was also visible. Illustration 4 provides examples of more recent idea transfer: the adoption of a parody website from the United Kingdom to Australia allowing for the

\(^{11}\) This was supported by a set of policy positions emphasising a break with the Coalition government of John Howard: technology in schools, broadband expansion, climate change, an apology to the Stolen Generations (Indigenous Australians who were forcibly removed from their parents under colonial and neocolonial policies aimed at accelerating racial and cultural integration).

\(^{12}\) The Dean campaign employed a modified version of the OSS CMS Drupal to manage its campaign.
customisation of online billboards (transfer from a third party to the ALP), and the use of supporter image uploads to populate web content (transferred from the NZ Greens to the Australian Greens).

Illustration 4: Examples of learning and transfer among political parties


The second example of ‘cross-ditch’ transfer was also facilitated by the movement of Greens campaign personnel between Australia and New Zealand (personal correspondence: Peter Davis, New Zealand Greens, 19 December 2007). Additionally, the ideational exchange is undertaken by the major parties who are more systematic in their use of fact-finding missions to other jurisdictions for the purpose of learning new campaign techniques, as well as the recruitment of international consultancies to provide input into, and management of campaigns. In this case Australia may not be a thought-leader, but the major parties do appear more reflexive in their adoption of ideas and strategies from overseas, with the ALP rejecting the majority of the strategic recommendations made by their American contractors in the 2007 campaign (Hatcher, 2011).
Picking the right targets

While these aspects of the campaign demonstrate experiments in ‘viral’ media strategies (electronic word of mouth promotion), the role of websites is largely employed to support party strategies in contemporary media. Party strategists use the websites to customise content for a range of key target audiences, making websites ‘landing pages’ rather than ‘destinations’. Landing pages are specific pages, ‘mini-sites’, or sections of a site customised for particular readers (Ash, 2008: 28–30). They may or may not be generally accessible through the main page of the website depending on their purpose and the desirability for access by a wider audience. The most common example is the provision of press releases, photographs, and video clips on party sites that are then ‘pushed’ directly to journalists and other media workers through text messages and may be of limited interest to the wider public.

Other audiences, like party members, donors, supporters, or interest group representatives, may be provided with specific landing pages to collect donations, provide specific policy information, refute claims, spread disinformation, or redirect a web search through targeted advertising against a competitor’s name. The advantages of these strategies are for messages to be customised to specific audiences, but also for the response to particular messages to be measured through tools like ‘conversion rates’ (the number of potential donors who respond) and ‘click through rates’ (the number of advertisement viewers to click on a link). These measures allow campaigns to develop, test, and adjust their messages rapidly throughout the election (King, 2008: 85). To date the scope of this activity has been comparatively modest, but the major political parties have resources in place that will be able to make greater use of these methods over time. Thus, in addition to their financial and structural resource advantage, the major parties have extensive electoral databases built up over many years which provide them an advantage in the development and distribution of customised communication with the electorate (van Onselen and Errington, 2004). So far, these databases have been significantly underused when compared with data-driven campaigns in the United States (Kreiss and Howard, 2010), possibly because of the somewhat disorganised nature of these systems (such as their inclusion of large amounts of information in comparatively unstructured free-text formats; Millar and McKenzie, 2010).  

As their websites are not channels aimed at mass publics, parties have increasingly used a variety of strategies to attract audiences, including the extensive use of online advertising and the creation of issue-specific websites and social

13 The parties try to keep the nature and content of these systems out of the public eye and, accordingly, have exempted these systems from privacy legislation. In 2011 a police investigation was launched into a story reported in the Age newspaper under the auspices of illegal access to the party computer system (Murphy, P, 2011).
networking service (SNS) pages and groups to draw attention to the party’s messages and values, and to build customised mailing lists for direct messaging (personal interview: Peter Davis, Australian Greens, 20 December 2007). With a combination of fundraising and public financing of campaigns, major parties have a virtual monopoly on television advertising, and considerable advantages in the purchase of print and radio. Given their focus on uncommitted voters, who they perceive as largely disinterested in politics, mass media form the majority of campaign advertising. Figure 3, is a representation of party web traffic in the period preceding the 2010 federal election. While the election produces a spike in traffic at the very end of the campaign, the overall growth in interest in these sites is modest. This is supported by AEC survey data in Table 1, which shows the comparatively limited direct engagement that voters have with party sites, but also how parties with lower mass-media resources (Australian Greens in this instance) fair better in drawing voters to their websites.

![Figure 3: Traffic to party websites, May–August 2010](image)

**Table 1: Australians’ use of digital media in the 2010 election**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party identification of respondent</th>
<th>ALP</th>
<th>Liberal</th>
<th>National</th>
<th>Greens</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Read/accessed official sites</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>20.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signed up as supporter/for e-news</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used online tools to campaign/promote parties</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total engagement with official party campaign</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>22.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>628</td>
<td>596</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Gibson and Cantijoch, 2011: 13 (extract)
Winning the higher ground

Further to this argument for the comparatively static impact of digital media, we can see modest evidence for an association with democratisation. Figure 3 shows that the Australian Greens gain a disproportionately high increase in web traffic to their site during the election campaign. It is likely that this is due to the party’s demographic base of urban, educated voters who are more inclined to access the internet regularly (Jackson, 2011: 77). This interpretation is supported by evidence of the modest level of traffic to the Nationals, which has an older, rural support base. This is recognised by the Greens’ campaign managers, who place a higher value on online channels than their major party competitors (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2011: 9). Even so, this level of interest does not carry over to other important online campaigning channels. Had the democratisation hypothesis held up, we would see considerably higher interest in the Greens online video content (making up for their funding deficit and lower levels of television advertising) during the most recent federal election (Table 2), and greater levels of support among their key Facebook and Twitter profiles (Figure 4 and Figure 5).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ALP</th>
<th>Liberal</th>
<th>Greens</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>256,279</td>
<td>290,444</td>
<td>84,290</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Views</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average views</td>
<td>4344</td>
<td>13,202</td>
<td>4436</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>160,896</td>
<td>150,719</td>
<td>36,686</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Views</td>
<td>14</td>
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<td>Average views</td>
<td>11,493</td>
<td>6029</td>
<td>2620</td>
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</table>

Table 2: YouTube videos posted within 50 days of the 2010 federal election date

Source: Author’s research
Figure 4: Politicians’ Facebook friends/fans in the 2010 federal election

Source: Compiled from Facebook

Figure 5: Politicians’ Twitter followers in the 2010 federal election

Source: Compiled from Twitter
What is not evident in these last two figures is an automatic linear relationship between SNS performance and the position of the major parties in Australia. If technology is subsumed under pre-existing political power relations in this country — that is, if the powerful institutional actors employ their human, economic, and structural resources to become dominant in digital media in the way they are in old media — then we would see higher levels of performance of the opposition leader in both Figure 4 and Figure 5. What this demonstrates is a space for individuals to employ SNS to great effect, irrespective of the tendency for parties to control media strategies and focus attention on the leader. Certainly, the rapid rise of SNS popularity of Julia Gillard demonstrates the focusing power of the party PR machine, but the position of the two disposed leaders of the major parties is problematic for this style of communication management. Figure 5 is significant in this regard as, to demonstrate the relative growth of Gillard and her performance compared with Tony Abbott, the figure has had to be adjusted to exclude the followers of deposed leader Kevin Rudd, which sat at over 900,000 during this period. Leadership figures may be largely pre-packaged ham, but the results of the ALP’s use of SNS to build demonstrable support in the community runs counter to the centralising tendency of party machines.

The significance may be overstated. During the leadership spill in 2010, Rudd’s Facebook follower numbers increased as members of the public came out in support of the incumbent prime minister. This, however, had little bearing on the outcome of the spill. Overall, the tendency has been for the development of more and more sophisticated mediatised election campaigning techniques with a corresponding increase in the power of centralised campaign managers over root and branch party structures. This cuts both ways: when the management team is competent and experienced, the ability to coordinate a national campaign out of the party headquarters can be effective, but, when that team is inexperienced or lacks a local understanding, it can produce a systematically terrible result (Hatcher, 2011). Australia lacks the continual campaigning seen in the United States, where individual candidates across three levels of government support a huge permanent industry of campaign professionals. Because of this, it is more difficult to sustain expertise, both technical and experiential, even among the two major parties.

The tendency for this system to deliver variable electoral outcomes raises the question of whether this centralisation is inevitable and a feature of the media landscape. Looking at the emerging political forces in Australia we see two propensities. First, the rise of independents in recent years (as well as their longer history at the state level) might point to a break away from the power of undifferentiated national campaigns (Costar & Curtin, 2004). Should independents be a more permanent part of the landscape, it will be necessary
to examine their relationship with select media and, particularly, social media. Alternatively, the centralising tendency appears evident in emerging party politics in recent years. Thus, in his analysis of the evolution of the Australian Greens from a social-movement-based political party to an electoral-professional party, Stewart Jackson argues that digital media have served to further strengthen a centralising tendency within the party organisation. Placing this within the context of electoral success, which provides greater resources to members of parliament, Jackson notes that digital media allows the party to ‘... reach the bulk of the electorate without the need for mass organisations, so tended to centralise their operations using professional campaigners to do the work once done by staff or volunteers on the ground’ (2011: 25–26). What this highlights is the way resources drive power towards campaign managers, a shift that draws in the very professionals who will advocate for a PR-ised approach to election campaigning.

Vote for me

The observation that leaders and parties are the pre-eminent focus of election campaigning in Australia does not prevent the possibility that a more candidate-centric model could emerge. We can posit drivers for an inversion of the status quo. One is social. The shift towards celebrity culture places increased power in the hands of individuals with personal branding. Darrell West and John Orman see the rise of televisual culture as encouraging the expansion of everyday celebrity and the blending of different, once-distinct realms of social and professional life (2003: 14). Pop stars can become ‘soda-pop stars’ (e.g. Michael Jackson), musicians can be ministers of the Crown (e.g. Peter Garrett), journalists can be transformed into politicians and vice versa (e.g. Maxine McKew, Peter Collins, Aden Ridgeway), and politicians can perform as reality-TV stars (e.g. Pauline Hanson). In political terms, the rise of celebrity culture can serve to provide individuals with the valuable assets of personal constituencies and ready access to mainstream media.

Another reason behind an expanded electoral role for candidates is structural. Recent experiments in US-style primaries for candidate selection increases the power of candidates over the selection panels of political parties.\(^\text{14}\) While the Australian party system has traditionally encouraged loyalty to the system that promoted the individual into office (branch, faction or party), the introduction of primaries weakens this system of patronage (the extent remains unclear at this time). Finally, there may be specific reasons for extending the electoral role of candidates, who can build personal constituencies directly through existing

\(^{14}\) In recent years Labor and the Nationals have experimented in primaries in an attempt to increase public interest in party politics (Mark, 2011).
or new social and professional networks. While commonly portrayed in a negative way, concerns about ‘branch stacking’ reflect the ability of individuals to use personal networks to become candidates. While this has been a result of the decline in party membership over the last 50 years (Zappala, 1998), an expanded capacity of social networking can increase the ability for individuals to consolidate their influence at the local level.

Engines of creation and control

On the surface these tendencies are unrelated to digital media. What is interesting is how media has an effect on the factors that enable or prevent political candidates from having a greater role in the electoral process. While the previous section argued that online channels of communication are increasingly expensive to employ effectively in national election campaigns, this does not preclude the effective use of digital media for local electoral success. Digital media is seen to be associated with innovation because it allows for sophisticated experimentation at low cost, be this in terms of personal branding, local campaigning, or building and maintaining online networks. The ability for individuals and small political organisations to develop sophisticated websites and social media strategies has increased in recent years, particularly through the advent low-cost and free content management systems (CMSs)\(^\text{15}\) (Myers, 2011), but also as these skills become readily available within the community. Digital media, therefore, serves as an interesting place to look for a new autonomy of individual candidates in Australia.

This, of course, is not necessarily a given. In considering the nature of innovation in digital media, Christian Sandvig observes that the characteristics associated with challenging accepted practices lie not just in the availability of technology, but the presence of a ‘subculture of innovation’ (2008: 89). In the context of political innovation, this runs counter to the notion of the cartel party discussed in the preceding section: cartels’ response to innovation is suppression (external entrants) and discouragement (internal agitators). The message of the party system in Australia is join or die. What Sandvig would argue, however, is the existence of innovative subcultures allows for change even in industries that have entrenched monopolies. The disruptive role of companies like Google in the information technology industry is a good example, taking an innovative idea and rising to the challenge presented by the monopoly of long-established firms across a range of industry segments.

The extent to which Australian politicians have embraced digital media is an interesting story of experimentation and attempts at control by parties. While

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\(^{15}\) A website management system that allows for the publication of content online without programming or knowledge of HTML.
candidates are far less likely than their American counterparts to employ digital media, candidates’ use of digital media in elections is increasingly common. In addition, technology adoption by political candidates is not strictly linear over time. As we will see, this is partially a result of control by party machines, but also a function of the highly fluid nature of the digital media ecosystem.

**Brochureware**

If we first look at what is commonly called ‘web 1.0’ technologies (generally speaking, these are the type of online channels that were popular in the first decade of the World Wide Web (WWW): such as email and hard-coded websites that did not use CMSs). Figure 6 and Figure 7 provide a useful overview of the uptake of channels and channel elements (e.g. website functions) over time by candidates. In Figure 6 we can see the majority of candidates represented online, and this level of adoption has been increasing slowly. The majority of online representation, however, comes through the use of email and campaign mini-sites. Mini-sites, small websites which are generally part of the party website and located at a subdomain (normally in the format http://e electorate. party.org.au) tend to be provided (and commonly ‘populated’) as a template by the candidates’ party. Only a minority of candidates in Australia establish a personal campaign website and, given the comparative importance of party list tickets over direct campaigning, senators are less likely to employ campaign sites (Chen, 2005a). Overall, the degree of sophistication of these sites is modest and more focused on the provision of static information than interaction with electors. In recent years, particularly following the proven success of small unit online fundraising in the United States, more sites include ‘take action’ functions that generally focus on donations, but even these redirect the visitor back to the main party site rather than to local-level fundraising or volunteering options.

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16 Francisco Valverde and Oscar Pastor (2009: 131) provide this useful, but not perfect, definition: ‘From the social perspective, in “Web 1.0” websites, the end-user was a passive consumer of information that had been identified by the webmaster’.

17 The data presented in these figures comes from a series of content-analysis projects that were undertaken during successive Australian federal elections. Data was collected by searching for candidates, sampled by electorate.

18 Filled with content. This term commonly relates to the notion of ‘populating fields’ — filling predetermined database structures with information. These sites are therefore highly generic and similar in look and function.

19 The inclusion of e-commerce options on the candidate site would be indicative of a higher level of technical sophistication.

20 Individual volunteers, however, tend to be directed to the candidate’s campaign.
What is worth noting in Figure 7 is that the uptake of personal campaign websites by candidates from parties who are most likely to have electoral success has plateaued and even declined in the 2010 federal election. Overall, this reflects a degree of scepticism on the part of candidates about the value of
these channels. We can see this by looking at survey responses from candidates in the 2007 election in Figure 8. This figure shows candidates’ views of the value of a selection of campaign communication channels based on a four-point Likert scale. While websites were not the lowest-ranked communication channel, candidates substantially preferred more established forms of communication. This survey also indicated that candidates consistently feel that their resources are insufficient to meet their campaign needs and that access to more resources would result in their investment in channels of communication they feel are more effective.

![Figure 8: Candidates’ perceptions of channel value in electioneering 2007 (n = 55)](chart)

*Source: Author’s research*

This argument is admittedly at odds with both the notion of the web as ‘naturally’ becoming more important in politics, as well as the empirical findings of Jim Macnamara and Gail Kenning’s (2011: 5) comparison of *incumbents’* use of websites between 2007 and 2010 which saw a 14.6 per cent increase in the use of personal campaign websites. This points to the benefit of being in office, where parliamentarians (opposed to other candidates) (a) employ
parliamentary entitlements to employ and sustain online communication, (b) have greater resources overall and can be less ruthless in their use of channels, and (c) be able to maintain websites over time. This has important implications as incumbents are generally more likely to field legacy websites that are built on older platforms. This explains, to a large degree, the slow level of uptake of newer website features seen in Figure 6 and is reinforced by Macnamara and Kenning’s observation of a considerable decline in parliamentarians’ use of interactive website functions like e-surveys and e-petitions.

Points of presence and visibility

This observation, to some extent, explains why parties with parliamentary representation are better online performers. Looking beyond websites we can construct a measure of the ‘visibility’ of candidates online by mapping two factors:

- The total different ‘points of presence’ they employ to campaign (including, not just websites and mini-sites, but also the range of SNS profiles and other methods of distributing election content and interacting with electors); and,
- The amount of content and information they populate these points with.

Figure 9: Candidates’ ‘points of presence’ online in the 2010 federal election

Source: Author’s research

21 A good example of this can be found in the low use of RSS feeds in Figure 6. These simple tools to increase visits are standard parts of modern CMSs.
Figure 9 is based on a competitive comparison between parties’ candidates. The figure clusters party candidates together in this competitive space to show the average performance of candidates based on their use of all digital media. As is clear, with the exclusion of the Nationals (more likely to represent rural and regional electorates with lower levels of internet connectivity and take-up on average) and Family First (an anomalous senator whose election resulted from the vagaries of Senate preferencing), Australian candidates from parties with parliamentary representation are better performers in terms of the amount of content they produce online. They are less likely, however, to have a wide range of points of presence online. This makes sense as these candidates, as representatives of parties with higher levels of visibility, need not compete for attention as they already have higher levels of ‘discoverability’.

You voter. Me friend.

In the production of the analysis presented in Figure 9, we see it is necessary to look beyond websites as the focus of digital electioneering. In the 2007–10 period candidates rapidly adopted SNS into their communications portfolio. The advantages of these services are clear: simple to use and set-up, they are timely and immediate, provide measures of performance out-of-the-box, can be maintained easily by telephone on the road, and they can be used to direct internet traffic to party or personal-website landing pages, and switching between and syndicating across services is comparatively easy. For campaign managers, the value of SNS is their appeal to electors who may have lower levels of political knowledge and, therefore, are unlikely to head towards party homepages (personal interview: Simon Banks, ALP, 18 February 2008). Figure 10 demonstrates this trend, showing a doubling of use by candidates of SNSs from 2007 to 2010. Candidates also appear able to discern and respond to trends in the popularity of different services, rapidly abandoning Myspace over Facebook in the more recent period as the latter rapidly supplanted the former in the Australian marketplace (Moses, 2009a). Interesting, and contrary to the notion of a drag on innovation that comes from being within the cartel system, Macnamara and Kenning (2011: 5) identify the growth of Facebook at 1725 per cent among parliamentarians in this period — a higher rate than candidates.

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22 The axes are based on the individual candidate in the data set with the highest performance.
23 Not just with high-end smart-phones, but also with simpler technology and slower services, including email-to-web and SMS-to-web publishing.
In many ways politicians appear to be taking SNS very seriously. For some, they serve as their primary point-of-presence, with less emphasis being paid to populating websites (see Figure 11). As we can see in the figure above, however, there is a tendency for candidates to employ only one SNS in their campaign, rather than using multiple services to cover a range of different constituencies and therefore target their messages (Bebo, for example, remains popular among Indigenous Australians, and LinkedIn is popular among professionals). Overall, the more free-flowing nature of SNS has an impact on the way candidates approach online interactions. Macnamara and Kenning (2011: 11) observe that, while heavy moderation of posts to candidates SNS pages was de rigour in 2007 (deleting and vetting negative comments), this intervention lessened to some degree by 2010. Similarly, parties relaxed their moderation of comments posted on party sites and mini-sites (Chen, 2011a).
Patterns of adoption

The adoption and use of digital media shows a mixed pattern defined by experimentation within constraints. The use of digital media remains a lower priority than conventional advertising and interpersonal interactions with members of the public, but candidates are interested in tools that provide a quick, visible presence online and with low cost. Were the financing of elections to change (either through anti-cartel provisions that shifted money to the level of candidates, or as a result of the expansion of primaries that encouraged investment at this level of electioneering) candidates have considerable under-utilised capacity to expand the use of digital media. For candidates from non-mainstream parties, there is evidence they are utilising digital media channels more expansively than the entrenched parties: demonstrating a democratising effect to some degree (at least in terms of visibility or potential visibility of alternative political figures to members of the public), but there is also evidence that the amount of detail being provided online is decreasing through a focus on social media over websites.

From the central party perspective, campaign managements are uneasy about the use of digital media by candidates. In response to this concern, they continue to exert control over candidate communications through a variety of strategies. This includes: the provision of candidate training, direct provision of websites and online services, discouraging some activities online for fear of going ‘off message’ or producing material of poor quality24 (personal interview: Peter Davis, Australian Greens, 20 December 2007), and through the use of online systems to exert discipline over local campaigns. In this latter area Ainslie van Onselen and Peter van Onselen (2008) have discussed how parties have employed secure websites (intranets) to create virtual campaign teams and regulate the behaviour of local candidates through the distribution of approved campaign materials and key message strategies (‘talking points’). The importance of these systems should not be understated, particularly as they can be used not only to pump prime local candidates, but can also serve to regulate them through the collection of performance indicators (such as fundraising levels).

Examples of ‘blow ups’ from social media are common enough to justify some concerns. Some candidates unthinkingly have linked official campaign sites to personal pages that contain photos and posts including criticisms of party leadership, expletives, and inappropriate images (Rolfe, 2010). Family First, for example, has come under considerable negative attention in successive elections: in 2007 a candidate’s naked photos were distributed online (Murphy, 2007) and, in 2010, a tweet equating gay marriage with child abuse became a major embarrassment to the party’s lead senate candidate for Queensland

24 Particularly video.
In the 2012 Queensland state election, Labor lost a minor candidate following the discovery of homophobic comments made online when he was still under the age of 18 (Wordsworth et al., 2012). Even the normally invisible behaviour of political workers have come under scrutiny; in 2011 a member of Sophie Mirabella MP’s staff was the focus of attention after they were outed bragging on Facebook about running up a $1000 taxi fare (Bunn, 2011). While these problems have been highlighted through the tendency for social networking services to hold and make available personal histories, it is questionable if these problems are ones of digital media, or are more reflective of the limited ability of some parties to effectively recruit and vet quality candidates given their decreased membership levels. What this does show, however, is how the long memory of SNS can feed into the shallow end of political reporting and ‘gotcha journalism’.

A ‘Marketing democracy’?

What is the impact of this on Australian political culture? Certainly the use of a wider array of communications technologies by parties represents the longer trend towards professionalisation and mediatisation. In addition, the adoption of personalised campaigning and negative messaging has been associated with the influence of the type of campaign styles developed over many years in the United States. While the idea of ‘Americanisation’ of politics is a common concern across the world (see, for example, Negrine and Papathanassopoulos; 1996), with underlying assumptions about cultural colonisation through the importation of media techniques, it is not clear that this is strongly the case in our experience. Australians appear more selective in their appropriation of techniques and campaign styles, pointing more to a ‘shopping model’ of selective adoption from a wider range of English-speaking jurisdictions, than a hybridisation or standardisation approach which sees American techniques and messages adopted systematically (Plasser and Plasser, 2000).25 What is apparent is that Australia selects from both American and British experiences in adapting campaigning technologies to local conditions. In recent elections the growth of the ‘marketing model’ of campaigning has been very apparent, reflecting both the professionalisation of political campaigns, and an inherent weakness in the Australian party system.

This change allows political communication to be read — as Steven Dann and Andrew Hughes (2008) do in Australia — through a purely marketing lens, which focuses on aspects of the campaign in terms of an increasingly familiar set

25 A multi-stage colonisation can, however, be seen. For example, in their 2008 campaign, the New Zealand Greens borrowed heavily from the web-design approach taken by Barack Obama’s campaign (personal interview: Gary Reese, Green Party of Aotearoa New Zealand, 14 January 2009). This, in turn, informed the Australian Greens site design.
of elements: longer campaign, audience selectivity, heavy use of market research, simple messages repeated often, clear coordination and planning, and external expertise (Gould, 1998: 55–56). Margaret Scammell (1988: 251–75) has observed that, while professionalisation of campaign management is not a particularly recent trend, technological specialisation has led to the displacement of amateur campaign organisation focused on large amounts of labour mobilisation in exchange for a smaller set of campaign professionals. This process has displaced internal party strategists for external professionals, while reducing the role of parties in the political socialisation of non-professional volunteers.

Hollow bells ring

The marketing model has a range of implications. One is that it increases the speed and variety of sources from which contemporary campaigns can draw their expertise. The 2007 election campaign saw a considerable role for advertising professionals (such as the advertising firm Lawrence Creative) in developing and delivering the Kevin 07 campaign from design to execution (similarly for the Union movements’ Your Rights At Work campaign, discussed in Chapter 5). In 2010, this was expanded with the ALP employing a multinational firm to develop the core messages of their campaign (Greenberg Quinlan Rosner), while the Liberal Party employed specialist advisors in female marketing to address candidate deficiencies (Splash Consulting; Cowie, 2010). Another implication, stemming from the undermining of the reason for party members to remain active in their branches, is the loss of local knowledge. There is also a tendency for attenuated relationships between party and campaign structures in these professionalised campaign structures, where considerable numbers of temporary staff and volunteers move between corporate and political environments (Farrell, et al., 2001). While this brings skills into the political process — particularly commercial public relations and advertising — it also reduces the longevity of the connection between the campaign team and the policy team, except to the extent that volunteers from the corporate sector often return in their professional capacity to act as lobbyists to the governments they helped elect.

In the last decade in Australia this trend has become increasingly acute and it has led to problems of governance. The Kevin 07 election campaign is a good example of this. On the one hand, the party employed key strategic and creative leadership from the mainstream Australian advertising industry, imported to deliver an innovative and creative media strategy based around online properties (particularly the integrated www.kevin07.com website and use of SNSs). On the other, three years later, the party was barely able to redevelop and launch a new social networking system. This shows how the absence of social media professionals in the intervening period failed to capitalise on the work undertaken for the 2007 election. This contrasts with the United States where the
movement of key campaign staff into government following the Obama election saw the social networking memberships reactivated in government to support the new president’s legislative campaigns, such as his heath-care initiative.

Overall, there remains a misfit. In Australia, research has identified that the two major parties are more likely to invest in their electoral-roll database systems and therefore build on the intelligence infrastructure of previous elections to extend their incumbent positions (Chen, 2005a). This does not, however, appear to have transferred into the area of digital-media campaigning, as the majority of the key planning and execution lies outside of the party proper. The NSW state election of 2011 is a good example of this, where local members had previously employed polling of their electorates to determine the allocation of community development funding. The ALP did not go on to employ the rich data this provided about preferences to ‘push’ information to members of these databases (Chen, 2012: 266–67).

Two steps forward ...

It appears that campaign management in Australia remains in an intermediate phase between Pippa Norris’s (2000) notion of the ‘modern’ mass-media-focused national campaign model, and that of the ‘postmodern’ campaign approach which employs greater narrowcasting and localisation within a national structure (or narrative). This is illustrated in the way the Obama campaign managed a tight, centralised campaign, but also empowered local campaigning through face-to-face meet-ups and localised campaign teams. Elements of postmodern campaigning in the 2010 Australian election was seen in the use of differentiated advertising by the Liberal Party in Western Australia (Liberal Party of Western Australia, 2010). There was also internal criticisms within the ALP that this approach was not adopted as national campaign themes had less tractability in that state. The implications of this are important, however, with evidence that the ‘stratified electioneering’ approach undertaken in the United Kingdom by New Labour contributed to voter disengagement, and considerable reconfiguring of the relationship between citizen and the state in terms of direct service provision in an increasingly narrow range of policy domains (Wring, 2005). Paradoxically, this may not lead to greater levels of voter satisfaction, but ‘professionally sanctioned cynicism’ (179). That this approach may present similar problems in Australia has been proposed in the aftermath of the 2010 election, where the narrow focus of both marketing-based campaigns failed to engage voters.

26 In addition, the emphasis on a limited set of concerns associated — correctly or incorrectly with western Sydney — were used by the ALP as national campaign issues, possibly at the expense of support on the left wing of the party that has been eroding towards the Greens.
While these developments are evidence of the increasing seriousness with which parties are regarding digital media in electoral campaigning, the impact of these developments in Australia is less clear. One key question about the role of digital media has been its impact on the nature and conduct of the democratic system: the extent to which democratic practice — a practice traditionally seen as informational in character — can be enriched by new information technologies. This tends to take a number of forms including the range of ‘voices’ (individuals and organisations) that can find expression within the public sphere, and new methods of engagement between elites and electors.

... two steps back?

In this regard we see mixed evidence. On one hand, the relatively low cost of online publishing has seen the ability for a wide range of minor party, individual activist, and alternative media organisations to emerge in Australia during the last 20 years. This has increased the range of information options available to electors. While Rachel Gibson and Stephen Ward (2002) observe that the uptake of digital media by parties (particularly websites) was strong in the mid-to-late 1990s, they also observe, however, that smaller parties were not systematically more likely to take advantage of these channels of communication compared with established parties with considerable resource and access advantages in the conventional media space. While minor parties were more likely to see these channels as more valuable than their larger competitors, they note that the ALP and Greens were more active in the late 1990s with regard to establishing their online presence. This appears to reflect a number of tendencies: first, that these two parties were in substantial opposition to the government of the day; and, second, a different nature to their demographic base of support (younger and urban).

More mixed evidence comes when we consider that the expectation of a gradual and natural increase in the amount of content published online by candidates and parties has not been realised. The shift by candidates towards the use of mini-sites (discussed in You voter. Me friend, this chapter) shows that technology adoption is not linear among this group of political actors, and parties are increasingly providing campaigning tools under a hosting model.

This is interesting for two reasons: first, these emphasise the party over the local area and serve to tie candidates more closely to the centralised resource base of the party machine. Second, while SNSs are more personal (although these are also often set up as a service by the central campaign team; personal interview: Simon Banks, ALP, 18 February 2008), the immediacy and linear presentation of...
content in these feeds emphasise the flow of events and issues more commonly associated with the wider campaign narrative, again something that ties the candidate more closely back to the party.

Expanding on this observation about the relationship between candidate online campaign strategies and their relationship with centralising tendencies, Figure 6 (this chapter) showed that, while the functionality of candidate websites is more limited than international comparisons, we can see that these sites have developed in the last two Australian electoral cycles in terms of the interactivity they offer (see also Macnamara, 2008), both in ‘thin’ forms of democratic interaction that do not engage citizens very strongly (Barber, 1999) like donations, but also ‘thicker’ informational aspects, such as subscription options and feedback form provision. Similarly, while the use of web 2.0 technologies, such as social networking, was actively discouraged by some parties as recently as 2007 because of perceptions that these channels introduced risks of subversion and attack that the central party were unable to control (personal correspondence: Brad Henderson, The Nationals, 10 December 2007), this has also begun to change as candidates become more experienced through use of the technologies in their personal and professional lives.

The ‘thickening’ of online interaction can be seen — albeit gradually — at the party level also. In 2002 Gibson and Ward observed that party sites were largely information repositories, rather than more interactive channels between parties and voters, a tendency that dominated the 2000s. In anticipation of the 2010 campaign, however, both the Labor and Liberal parties produced revised party websites with public discussion boards and social networking components, while the Greens used a Formspring (question and answer service) account for interactivity with members of the public. While these services attracted low levels of participation in the election, when compared with the SNS profiles of leaders and candidates (as illustrated in Table 3), their use demonstrates a willingness of the parties to engage in more dialogue online.

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29 For a detailed discussion of the concept of web 2.0, see Rewiring the state: Gov 2.0, Chapter 7.
### Table 3: Voter engagement by party website in the 2010 federal election

Source: Compiled from www.alp.org.au; www.liberal.org.au; www.formspring.me/GreensMPs

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**Experiments in online electoral democracy**

If, as the cartel party model would indicate, innovation is unlikely to come from the established party system, we should also be alert to attempts at change from outsiders. This drive towards innovation need not be associated with elections (see Chapter 5), but, as elections offer an attractive ‘focusing event’ whereby members of the community may be primed to receive political information, challenging the dominance of parties is most likely to be found during the electoral process. Possibly the most high-profile example of this in recent years would be the role of GetUp! in overturning electoral laws in 2010 that brought forward the cut-off date for new enrolments (see GetUp!, Chapter 5). Similarly, but less successfully, the organisation attempted to increase the ability of electors to choose candidates (rather than parties) that suited their policy preferences through the use of an online candidate matcher in the 2007 election. This system, which could have enabled a more candidate-centric electoral process, failed because of one obvious flaw: since the 1970s, the mainstream parties have forbidden their candidates to complete surveys distributed by lobby groups and non-government organisations following the disastrous outcome of a survey of candidates by the then nascent Women’s Electoral Lobby that revealed the archaic views of gender held by many MPs (Sawer, 2009). Without data on candidate’s policy preferences, a matching system is worthless.

To consider active experiments by insurgent democrats in the Australian electoral process, we will therefore explore two different innovations: one radical and one incremental.
Senator Online

One of the more interesting democratic experiments in recent years is the online political party Senator Online (SOL). Established three months before the 2007 federal election by Berge Der Sarkissian, their objective is the introduction of a form of direct democracy using a combination of online polling and the existing electoral system. The party promises that issues and bills will be put before the public through the SOL website with explanatory material (SOL, nd), and Australian voters will be able directly determine the issues on which the SOL senators will vote in the upper house. Rather than attempting to introduce this within established institutions or parties through constitutional or institutional change (see An electronic constituency surgery, Chapter 3), the pitch of SOL is simple: elect our candidates to the Australian Senate and they will act as delegates of the Australian people. This approach picks up on an age-old ambiguity in representative democratic practice: should elected officials act as delegates (agents of the people) or trustees (agents for the people). When keeping promises, politicians are inclined to point to the former — they claim their legitimacy comes from being elected. When exercising their discretion or breaking commitments, they are more likely to call for their performance to be judged at the next election as trustees of the public good.

Traditionally the problem with the effectiveness and legitimacy of the delegate model has been the need for the representatives to both act as a delegate and also have the capacity of accessing the views and preferences of their constituency (McCrone & Kuklinski, 1979: 278). In many cases, even if the former is met, the practical difficulty of the latter is problematic. Proponents of the representative trustee model have deemed movement of legislative debate to be too rapid, the public too disorganised, and the questions too complex for direct democracy. In the information age, however, this is challenged by the ability to reduce information costs and transaction costs. SOL sees the implementation of online information and polling systems to be feasible in the context of the technologies to hand: that parliament already generates considerable information about legislative initiatives under consideration, and two decades of experience in online transactions would allow for the automation of the Australian electoral roll.

SOL represents an interesting initiative in that it does not come from within the established political system, but from an individual who had limited previous political engagement and no experience within the Australian party system (personal interview: Berge Der Sarkissian, 10 January 2012). As we’ll see later in this book, this represents a minor trend where people who perceive the Australian political system to be deficient see the new communications and information technologies as means (and inspiration) to take direct action to address their concerns.
Often this involves active experimentation to determine what works and what doesn’t.\textsuperscript{30} In the context of SOL, Der Sarkissian is realistic about the long-term nature of the enterprise, recognising the considerable cost of developing a viable political party\textsuperscript{31} and the slow nature of change, and the difficulty in communicating the core concept to the Australian public. He sees, however, the influence of distributed, collective models of decision-making as an inevitable development in the way politics is undertaken around the world. There are examples of approaches that have similar elements to the model, including the proposal for citizen-initiated legislation in the United Kingdom (Hannan, 2010), and similar referenda processes in parts of the United States, New Zealand, and Switzerland. These approaches are varied (some are legislative, some non-legislative; some binding, others not), but they are all analogue in their administration and require the arduous and time-consuming collection of signatures as the basis for action (Maer, 2008: 9–13).

Ready for direct democracy?

The challenges in communicating its message and converting the public to direct democracy are clear in the small impact that SOL party has had. Even with strong media interest in its first outing (largely due to novelty; Karvelas, 2007) SOL received 8048 first preference group votes in 2007 (0.06 per cent of the total vote) and 17,441 in 2010 (0.14 per cent) (AEC). The party has also had to overcome scepticism about the ability to undertake the type of polling system it promises in the timeframe in which the Senate considers legislation (Moses, 2007), a process that can be unpredictable. Government is commonly thought to have only two speeds: very, very slow and very, very fast. Because of this, the party has introduced changes to its constitution to allow for proxy voting, a move away from its direct model and demonstrative of the problems of scaling direct participation that leads to representative democracy in the first instance. To ensure the party has the ability to respond to volatile legislative agendas, it will find itself having to proactively poll its members on large numbers of issues and interpret these findings against issues of the day at short notice. This will present the party with difficulties maintaining a perception of trustworthy neutrality when in office: interpretation remains a political act, and the party is likely to be forced into positions where it must choose between abstention and interpretation.

\textsuperscript{30} The party, for example, experimented with an online primary system to select candidates for the 2010 election, with nominees using Facebook to raise money and votes. This novel approach was problematic because low levels of participation lengthened the polling process, and it was eventually abandoned because of the issue of the writ.

\textsuperscript{31} By 2012 he had personally expended approximately $100,000 on the venture.
Below the line

Another, but less dramatic, attempt to increase the democratic character of the Senate has been the introduction of a number of ‘below-the-line’ voting websites (www.belowtheline.org.au and www.blowtheline.cc). These free services were established by individuals with the objective of assisting voters, using intuitive drag-and-drop interfaces, to prepare in advance their preference allocations for below-the-line voting on the Senate ticket. The use of the single vote for Senate list tickets was introduced in the 1980s. As nearly 95 per cent of Australians vote above the line, this system provides parties with considerable influence in determining the way preferences are allocated and — while reducing the tendency for invalid votes to be cast through error — can produce strange outcomes. Examples of this include the failure of Peter Garrett to win a seat for the Nuclear Disarmament Party in the 1980s with 10 per cent of the primary vote (Sawer, 2006) and the election of Steve Fielding in the 2004 election with only 0.08 per cent (Walsh, 2008).

Inspired by outcomes like the Fielding election (Rice, 2010), these systems assist voters in making a more informed and accurate allocation, demonstrating the power of new online programming techniques to deliver services of benefit, at low cost, even by individual members of civil society (Bellamy, et al., 2011: 20). Compared to the modest performance of SOL, which needs to get a quota to have a direct impact on the senate, these two sites together attracted approximately 100,000 unique visitors during the 2010 federal election, which produced approximately 50,000 customised how-to-vote cards (personal correspondence: Benno Rice, 22 August 2010; Cameron McCormack, 22 August 2010). At 0.378 per cent of the number of votes cast, this is a direct challenge to the control parties have in the negotiation of preference flows, if only a small one. The promotion of this type of service by the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) (something that is likely to be resisted by parties) would serve to increase their visibility and uptake. Practically, however, it is difficult to determine the impact of the service on below-the-line voting. Certainly the number of people who voted below the line increased from 4.22 per cent in 2007 to 4.88 per cent in 2010 (AEC, 2011: 70), however, this does not imply causation. What is important to note is that those jurisdictions with shorter ballot papers have higher levels of below the line voting, most likely due to the ease of completion.

What do voters do online?

Given their supposed centrality to the democratic system, it’s important to say something about the role of the public in electoral politics. In conventional interpretations of mediated politics this was a shallow role: voters, if they were
active beyond simply turning up at the polls on the right day, were likely to engage in comparatively low levels of information gathering from mass media. The market for high-quality and detailed political information is seen to be small, and tends towards those with higher levels of income and education (Young, 2011: 59). This state of affairs is generally seen as problematic as the quality of electoral outcomes is regarded as a function of public awareness of policy issues (being able to proactively determine which parties and candidates offer policies most suited to their preferences) and the behaviour of incumbents (being able to hold government to account for its performance). More specifically, in Australia, as compulsory voting sees higher levels of participation from the less-involved voter, the general level of political knowledge is of more direct relevance to political outcomes than in the majority of nations that lack this compulsion. Summatively, the willingness and ability of citizens to access relevant information marks the difference between a democracy that is of high quality because of good process (effective and corruption-free management of the machinery of elections) and those that are high quality because of good citizenship.

In the pre-digital-media age, two questions were asked of political audiences: First, were they good citizens — active consumers of information upon which they could make informed decisions (Lupia, 1992: 390)? Second, what was the quality of the political information available to citizens seeking to be informed? While these questions remain valid (for a consideration of media quality see Stories of decline, Chapter 6), we need to add to the discussion of information seeking with that of information production by citizens (see also the two-step flow model discussed in Social media as a deliberative space, Chapter 3). Picking up on the notion of the user-producer we discussed in Chapter 1, therefore, the digital era requires a more focused consideration not simply of audience attention, and top-down information provision from parties and professional media, but also bottom-up and horizontal information distribution from active citizens-as-producers who may be active constructivists through the receipt, transformation, and redistribution of information about the political world.

Grist for the mill: Information seeking

The conventional story of citizen information access during elections is spelled out in the two figures below. Contrary to the perception often presented that citizens in the developed world are generally increasingly political apathetic, disengaged, and/or alienated (McAllister, 2011: 95), research drawn from successive Australian Electoral Studies (AES) of voter’s beliefs and behaviours tends to point to a mostly static level of importance placed on elections over
an extended period of time. In this way Figure 12,\textsuperscript{32} tells more of a story about the relative importance of individual elections (fluctuation), than any shift in the way Australian’s generally see the electoral process overall. This supports the argument that elections still serve as important ‘focusing events’, as well as the findings about the resilience of Australian’s views about the quality of our democracy, of which elections are generally one of the most visible aspects (see Figure 2: Citizens’ views of government and democracy, Chapter 2).

\textbf{Figure 12: Australians’ interest in election campaigns}

Sources: Sally Young, 2011a: 25; McAllister, et al., 2012: 34

This resiliency of political interest aside, we should look at the level of information consumption relevant to our notion of good citizenship. To this end, Figure 13 illustrates the extent to which voters actively follow Australian elections across a range of media forms. While this figure is based on relative, rather than absolute measures of consumption (e.g. hours), it points to declining use of media to engage with elections. This is interesting because it is specific to the contemporary media landscape, rather than a more general aspect of declining engagement. Thus, for example, this decline is not matched when measuring the propensity of Australians to attend political events or donate money (consistently low over the last 40 years; McAllister, 2011: 100). Internationally these findings have been explained by a variety of factors, including disengagement and apathy, a decrease in citizens supporting each other’s participation through social surveillance, the impact of individualism and material wealth on collective institutions (making politics less important for

\textsuperscript{32} Note that ‘not at all’ was not collected in 1969.
social mobility), and socio-technical factors like changes in the media landscape. This latter cause has been championed by writers like Robert Putnam (1995) who argued for a correlation between social inclusion and participation, and rates of television consumption. In short, TV rots your political brain.

The difficulty with studies like the AES (aside from known concerns about respondents’ bias towards being more politically interested overall; Young, Sally, 2011: 24) is their inherent relativism. In striving to produce valuable longitudinal datasets, there is an assumption that the questions and concepts evaluated remain largely static. While this may be generally true (depending on the degree to which you subscribe to a constructivist point of view), it is not a universal. Take, for example, concepts like ‘the environment’. In the 1960s, if surveyed on this idea, Australians would have likely had very little, if any, interest in the subject. If they did have an interest, the majority would have seen ‘the environment’ in the policy terms common to the era: principally nature conservation for the purposes of human recreation and non-destructive exploitation. Ideas about sustainability, let alone the importance of carbon, were yet to have an impact on public consciousness. Similarly, it is possible to argue that the notion of ‘following’ an event has considerably changed in the way people view and use media. If we look at the media landscape of the 1980s, the perception of ‘following’ an event would entail an individual being attentive to that event in the heavily programmed and linear presentation of news found in free-to-air broadcasting, and the selection of relevant stories in newspapers.

Figure 13: AES media research ‘Followed the election in the mass media’

Source: McAllister & Pietsch, 2011: 8 (rescaled)
where the order of importance were heavily signalled through the editorial process of placement, headline writing, and image selection. There was once a time when the only thing on television at 6pm was the news.

Today, ‘following’ an issue conveys a different idea: the fragmentation of communication channels, but also in the more conventional media environment (e.g. through pay-TV, digital multi-channelling, and time-shifting), places greater emphasis on audiences’ agency in actively following an election. In short, it is not possible to argue that following an election in a variety of media means the same thing over time, nor is comparative across media types. This is particularly the case with online media. To unpack the extent to which audiences are accessing politically relevant information online, it is better to employ methods that record their actual behaviour over time, rather than self-reported perceptions. To do this, it is useful to examine a study of Australian voters undertaken during the 2010 federal election. This research captured and analysed all the webpages visited by a panel group in two time periods: one before and one during the formal election period.\(^{33}\) The aim of the research was to identify the nature of the participants’ web browsing behaviour and the extent to which the pages identified could be classed as having political content.\(^{34}\)

Contrary to the perception given in survey research of low levels of online gathering of political information, this project found that the panel group was exposed to political content of some kind in nearly one third of their pages visited. This includes political content that was manifest (such as political party websites or news articles specifically about politics or policy), but also ‘mixed’ pages that only included more minor political references (such as newspaper homepages that included a mix of headlines of a political and non-political nature). Figure 14 illustrates the sources of the political content visited by the panel. Overall, visited political content is largely from media organisations online. This reinforces the findings that party websites do not appear to be significant destinations for the general community during elections (see Figure 3: Traffic to party websites, April–August 2010). What elections do produce, however, is a shift in the consumption of mixed political content (which has correspondingly

\(^{33}\) The research employed a two-wave panel design, with the inter-wave period lasting 26 days. Data was collected from 56 participants recruited from an existing online research panel of approximately 10,000 individuals. Following induction, participants completed a survey to collect demographic, voter intention, party support, and issue identification data and were provided with a customised version of Google’s Chrome web browser for installation on their primary computer. This software allowed each website visited to be recorded against a unique identifier assigned to each individual participant. In total 93,743 URLs were collected for coding and analysis.

\(^{34}\) For the purpose of this study, ‘political content’ was defined at content ‘explicitly pertaining to: Electoral politics; Organisations established for the contest of political office (parties); Organisations established for the advocacy of policy (political interest groups); Activities pertaining to electoral politics or policy advocacy by individuals or groups. Excludes implicit content and private politics’.
less detailed information relevant to the electoral decision-making process) to more specific political information (e.g. from homepage browsing to greater reading of stories specifically about the election and election issues).

![Figure 14: Source of web browsing of political content](image)

Source: Author's research, with Ariadne Vromen

We should recognise that, when compared with the AES, this research is based on a considerably smaller sample size, and is more likely to be biased towards the politically interested participant. The nature and source of political information, the tendency for elections to be relevant focusing events, and the smaller role of political campaigns as direct sources of information are, however, important observations. This stresses the enduring role of intermediating institutions, like media firms and journalists, in shaping the presentation of political information to the public (see Chapter 6 for more discussion).

Additionally, to address some of the limitations of this method, we can develop these findings using some of the more detailed AES survey data regarding the range of activities that voters engage in. Looking at Table 4 it is evident that a considerable portion of the respondents access online news where political information is likely to feature during the election. The extent to which this is engaged with in an active manner is lower. Active engagement by audiences — where audiences take ownership over the channel and are more involved in constructing the media environment — produces a higher level of intellectual and emotional response to the material being consumed, partially because attention is focused more directly on the content under active manipulation (Wicks, 2001: 100–02).
Table 4: Election activity
Source: Gibson & Cantijoch, 2011: 13; annotated extract

Voters as participants in electoral discourse

The greater source and channel selectivity of digital media may be fundamental to its users’ changing agency towards political information. As we saw above, however, this interactivity remains low when compared with more passive information handling. The ability of once-passive audiences to become active content creators provides new avenues for political expression, as well as the potential for the movement of information horizontally (within the ‘audience’). In the bandwidth-rich, but attention-poor digital environment, the provision of interactivity tools (‘email this story’, discussion boards, reposting tools for SNS) has become a way that content producers have attempted to make their sites and services ‘sticky’: increasing the time individual users spend on their properties (Woll and Raccah, 2010: 318). But this has had other impacts, including the ability of audiences to ‘talk amongst themselves’ and be more critical of the media they consume. Active engagement therefore comes from the top-down (from digital publishers through making once-static digital services into content creation and sharing ‘platforms’) and bottom-up (from individuals’ desires to be expressive and participative).

In the electoral context this is significant in that it serves to further undermine the ‘cartel’ of parties, large media organisations, and professional communications practices and norms. Participation becomes enabled through technology, but is also increasingly visible to other users. This has a feedback effect, the social surveillance aspect stimulates the production of ‘user-generated’ content.
Internationally, we see this clearly through the uptake of blogging. During the first half of the decade, the number of blogs grew at an incredible rate (the vast majority — 60 per cent — of whom are individual hobbyists; Technorati, 2011), at one stage doubling every six months over a period of 42 months (Sifry, 2006). Because of this, it is important to see elections as both simulating the interest of Australians into accessing political information online, but also the interest of Australians into (re)producing political information online.

**Voters as an active audience**

The study of this area of digital media remains formative, partially as we shift gears into thinking about audiences as producers, due to the natural lag between social behaviours and research data, but also because of the rapid changes that have occurred in how this productivity is expressed. If we look at that ‘first-generation’ of blogs with user-generated content, we can see that Australians do take an active role in elections, generating content about the electoral debates of the day. This is illustrated in Figure 15, which demonstrates a spike in references to key party leaders during the election period.

![Figure 15: Mentions of party leaders in blog posts, May–August 2010](image)

Source: BlogPulse (smoothed)

This is also reflected (Figure 16) in similar references on Twitter, one of the recent digital media channels that was the subject of considerable interest in the 2010 election campaign. Introduced in 2006, this channel has had considerable growth through the uptake and use by a range of political and entertainment figures in the 2007–10 period. Twitter has been the focus of research because
of its emphasis on real-time and continual short posts (as opposed to longer, less frequent ones on that are common to blogs) and the comparative ease with which posts can be located on the Twitter service (in one location, as opposed to blogs which are spread across services and individuals’ websites; generally all public, as opposed to Facebook) and aggregated together through the user convention of inserting hashtags (folksonomy classifications) in posts.

In their extended analysis of the use of Twitter in the 2010 election, Axel Bruns and Jean Burgess (2011: 44–49) identify a very active discursive community around the ‘#ausvotes’ hashtag. Their analysis of this community is interesting in that, while it contains political and media elites as core members of the social network of tweet exchanges (measured in terms of @username responses), the substantive content of users’ tweets does not map perfectly onto mass-media news agendas. The implications of this research is that this community of user-generated political information is not simply an extension of media topics (something we might assume by only looking at the data on passive information gathering only), but has its own interests and concerns that are more reflective of the political and policy interests of this specific community.36

![Figure 16: Mentions of party leaders in tweets, July–August 2010](image)

Source: Compiled from tweetVolume

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35 Informal classifications undertaken in a distributed manner by users, rather than pre-determined taxonomies that are regulated by a central body, professional standards, or other hierarchical system (Gruber, 2007: 1).

36 In this case, given these individuals are generally ‘early adopters’ and high-intensity users of digital media one of the key interests was the National Broadband Network (NBN). The NBN is of interest to this community because it will have a considerable impact on the cost and performance of digital media over a long timeframe.
Biting the hand that seeds

While this demonstrates media consumers can be independent, they can also be active critics of the media. Thus, these channels have been a useful place to locate criticism of media coverage of election campaigns in general, but also the staging of media events by campaign teams. This is important, particularly where the co-production of campaign news by journalists and campaigners can be too cosy and lack transparency regarding the artifice behind news making. Some good examples of this would be: The ‘July 12 incident’ in the 2007 election, where media coverage of polling data led to disputes by political bloggers over the statistical validity of poll reading within the Australian newspaper (Flew, 2008). This dispute, which was at times personal (Bahnisch, 2008: 10), did lead to increased sensitivity on the part of newsrooms to the way polling data was produced. More recently, in 2010, the conduct of Sky News’s televised ‘town hall’ debates was placed under scrutiny by Twitter users, who identified the son of a Liberal MP in an audience of supposedly ‘undecided’ voters (Kwek, 2010). This led to exposure on how media organisations ‘stage’ and ‘frame’ these events, led to questions about the quality of work done by Galaxy Research, and served to ‘de-naturalise’ (make visible) the artificial nature of these pseudo-events (artificially constructed events designed specifically for media coverage that do not exist ‘outside’ of media representations of them; Boorstin, 1992: 7–12). These, admittedly rare, interventions in dominant media narratives demonstrate how systemic barriers to journalistic discretion can be attacked by outsiders who do not operate on the media logics of access and competition (Semetko, et al., 1991).

More commonly, however, the ability of these bottom-up media to break into the highly scripted and performed media events is limited. The tweets regarding audience selection in the 2010 election was heavily reported by broadsheet newspapers, which used the initial Twitter reports as colour for their stories and pursuit of the issue. As we see in Illustration 5, a still from the public affairs panel show Q&A, the use of Twitter posts selected by ABC production staff to comment on the program’s content is less an intervention in the highly controlled process of media production as much as extension of the audiences’ shared perception of their passivity. Taking the type of references normally growled or shouted at the screen and broadcasting them may provide the sense of instant edification, as much as it remediates the viewership as a national

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37 A good example of where the new media and mainstream media came into direct conflict due to a challenge to the self-conception of journalists as having a special insider insight into the political process (Louw, 2010: 71).
38 Semetko, et al. identify a range of systemic limitations on journalistic discretion, including: strength of the party system, degree of media competition, and campaign professionalism.
‘lounge room’ conversation discussing and dissecting the performance of the participants, but it does not necessarily ‘break though’ into the programming. This does, however, grow a community of discussants around the show’s advertised hashtag (‘#qanda’).

Illustration 5: Opposition leader Tony Abbott responding to the audience on Q&A

Source: ABC (2010) Q&A, 16 August (broadcast date), accessible: www.abc.net.au/tv/qanda/txt/s2978032.htm, accessed: 3 September 2010; used with permission, Q&A, ABC TV

Stockholm syndrome

Overall, there is a strange and symbiotic relationship between established mass media and the online community of political conversationalists. On the one level, the online community depends on news reporting as catalysts for discussions. On the other, there is a wariness about the content and methodologies behind corporate news. Mapping analysis of blog content during the 2007 election prompted the argument that ‘… political debate in the blogosphere does not operate independently from mainstream journalism, but … it continues to derive substantial impulses from the opinion columns published by major news organisations’ (Kirchhoff, et al., 2009: 12). Combined with a crossover of membership between journalism, academia, and amateur writers, this explains, to some degree, why many bloggers and Twitter users have adopted the limited set of ‘neutral’ conventions of mainstream media when writing about politics.

These stylistic conventions are identified by David Swanson and Paolo Mancini (1996) and represent what we would call the ‘horserace’ focus of journalistic election coverage: an emphasis on campaign blunders and strategies over policy substance, and the ‘disdaining style’ of narrative voice (a tendency towards
third person writing). Good examples of this include campaign commentary that discusses strategies and tactics and is synchronised with the flow of campaign (pseudo-)events, emphasis on reporting polling data and overemphasis on the importance of this data, and the focus on minor personal observations about candidates and leaders. The example of this par excellence was Twitter users’ fascination with the prime minister's large earlobes during the televised leaders’ debate in the 2010 election campaign (becoming a significant subset of online discussion during the debate as a trending topic on Twitter; ninemsm, 2010).

**Implications for Australian electioneering**

It is clear that the non-linear nature of change, identified in Chapter 1, is borne out in the evaluation of the way digital media have impacted on, and been employed within, Australian elections. While the number of new communications channels being employed in electioneering has been increasing, this is not a simple case of incremental adoption. Different channels and approaches to online communication have come in and out of fashion, and successive elections have not automatically seen the work of previous campaigns built upon over time. This has a lot to do with the complex nature of the electoral process, but also the way new technologies have enabled different actors to participate in online campaigning. That digital media is going to have an increasingly important presence in electoral campaigning in Australia in the future is clear, but this may be more likely to be found in increased areas of niche messaging and ‘behind the scenes’ use of internal party intranets, targeted advertising, and the use of electoral databases.

To make a more circumspect summation of the impacts of the technology on electioneering, however, we can consider two related questions: does the adoption of these tools ‘win votes’ and how does the use of the technology — particularly by political parties — affect the way elections behave as mediated events.

**Winning votes**

The impact of digital media on the distribution of votes cast is a key question for practitioners and scholars. Unfortunately, it is a difficult question to answer. Based on successive comparisons of digital media performance and electoral outcomes, Gibson and McAllister (2011: 238–40) have been able to demonstrate a significant correlation between the use of more interactive online services (blogs, SNS and online video) and higher primary votes, controlling for other factors (including incumbency and resources). This advantage, however, is small
— in the order of one per cent increased vote per interactive channel used. Further, the finding is not generalisable, as it is only attributable to the success of Australian Greens candidates, rather than the major parties.

Significantly, this finding is demonstrative of a decline in the value of political websites in Australia, as these authors (2007: 256) had previously seen an electoral advantage of two per cent in use of candidate websites in the 2004 election. This makes the evidence on the under-investment in candidate websites, identified in Figure 7, a rational choice by practitioners. In general terms, these findings point, not to channel effects, but to a combination of audience characteristics and novelty as the core drivers of the value of these campaign tools. Overall, this makes sense. The notion that we could quantifiably ascribe electoral success to the adoption of channels is ludicrous. It would be like asking the per cent of increased vote received by using radio, rather than talking both about the extent of use and the nature of use.

A limitation of this type of research stems in its use of candidates and electorate-level vote as the data for its modelling. While Jackman has identified that individual electorate factors and candidate quality are not irrelevant in shaping electoral outcomes (2005: 340–47), we need to recognise that the majority of votes remain largely informed by decisions about parties over candidates in Australia. This area of competition is not amenable to the type of regression analysis undertaken by Gibson and McAllister and simple measures (such as traffic data) don’t serve to explain variations in vote given the complex way that parties employ their digital media assets in elections. Certainly the electoral success of the Australian Greens has seen a lockstep increase in their use of, and sophistication with, new forms of media, but it is not possible to determine causality here. While the Greens have more than doubled their primary vote between 2001–10 (Bennett, 2008), a wide range of other factors have to be taken into consideration including increased membership, fundraising and the decline of the Australian Democrats. Particularly their overall visibility in the wider media landscape and the way this presents them as a viable alternative to the other parties. This is a topic we should turn to.

**Winning media. Winning hearts?**

This leads us back to the argument that the impact of digital media, particularly in the context of election campaigns, is most significantly felt in the way they shape the wider media ecosystem. Rather than looking at a specific direct impact on voter behaviour, the use of digital media by parties, candidates, advocacy groups, and the public have a role in shaping the amount and focus of political information that is produced and consumed. For parties this is very indirect: as they already ‘own’ direct communications with electors through
mass media, the value of select media lies in shaping the content of newspapers and television, and directing the discussion of policies and candidates in the community through setting news and commentary agendas towards issues that benefit them, and framing the way in which discussion is undertaken.

This is relevant to comparatively conventional strategies regarding the media. First is the provision of repackaged content to media organisations. This takes a variety of forms, including press releases, reports and data, events and stunts, quotes and access to interviewees, audio and video ‘packages’ for broadcast. Their value is that they lower the cost of news production, particularly when provided in a timely manner and a format most convenient to their particular channel of communication (VanSlyke Turk, 1985). This can lead to an inherent bias where those parts of the political economy with the greatest ability to generate and distribute information subsidies have the greatest ability to shape debates (see Garbage in, garbage out, Chapter 6). With the advent of blogs and other forms of user-generated content, this process can operate via traditional distribution models (source-media-audience) as well as a more direct manner (source-producer).

Information subsidies are invaluable to political organisations, as they allow their messages to be repeated, not just in paid advertising, but also in ‘neutral’ news settings. This is common where framing comes into play. Framing is defined by Robert Entman as an:

… omnipresent process in politics and policy analysis. It involves selecting a few aspects of a perceived reality and connecting them together in a narrative that promotes a particular interpretation. Frames can perform up to four functions: define problems, specify causes, convey moral assessments, and endorse remedies. (2010: 391)

Framing can stem from a variety of sources (professional norms, channel effects, cultural prejudice, audience expectation, timing and sequencing), but the provision of information subsidies also serve as a mechanism to shape news and commentary through the transmission of preferred frames. In the context of the 2007 federal campaign, Ward (2008: 11–14) has argued that the use of SNS and online video were useful in framing the representations of Rudd as a progressive figure more in touch with the interests of younger voters. Rudd, through a combination of channel selection and messages about technology policy (medium and message), was effective in creative a narrative of ‘newness’ and change.

Digital media assists parties simply in conducting their election strategies, old and new. Parties have been able to, without giving away conventional revenue streams from donors and public funding, introduce new ways to raise funds
online through e-commerce systems that make small unit donations more cost effective. Targeted advertising and the ability to test ads against online audiences provide for more effective use of resources in conventional advertising. Similarly, digital media allows for the lower-cost (for parties) production and distribution of subsidised content to mainstream media organisations, as well as increasing the scope for timely delivery of material (by pushing information directly at journalists as they work up stories). This has been significantly aided by the crisis in publishing, which weakens journalists’ resistance to ‘spin’ (see Chapter 6). When undertaken effectively and in a strategic manner, digital campaign tools allow for the more sophisticated management of media agendas. The argument, however, that direct framing impacts have moved to the user-generated social media is less clear and, while there are tendencies for mass-media agendas and frames to be emulated online, there is also evidence of independence from the conventional narrative of elections.

**Democratic?**

In democratic terms, it would appear that the implications for electoral democracy in Australia is modest at best: while minor parties are more visible online, it is not clear whether this provides them a significant benefit. There is limited evidence that minor parties and independents can actually ‘level the playing field’ through digital media. The proliferation of channels and strategic integration with offline marketing strategies and other media means digital electioneering is no longer a cheap option. There are good structural reasons why parties who are traditionally likely to win government are advantaged in the era of digital media, even if their entrenched position in power may limit the competitive pressure to innovate and adopt the most cutting-edge forms of campaigning. The primary reason is clearly the resource advantage that parties of government hold. In addition, the likelihood of holding government after the election (or within a conceivable timeframe) means these parties are also more likely to raise private funds, particularly from organisational interests (unions, business interests and established pressure groups). Overall, while the major parties clearly made modest investments in online campaigning until the mid 2000s, once they became more convinced of the value of digital media, these resources allow parties to buy in expertise in online campaigning rapidly from an expanding international market of campaign providers.

The ALP’s 2007 election campaign is an excellent example of this, demonstrating how quickly the major parties could colonise the online space when they wanted. In this way the ‘Obama-effect’ can be seen as somewhat self-reinforcing: the association between Obama’s digital media campaign encouraged parties around the world to look again at digital campaigning techniques, and tended to recruit US-based campaign professionals to assist in emulating this effort. To date, the
minor parties’ key advantages remain in the area of social networking, where the construction of online discursive communities appear to buck the trend of normalisation towards message dominance by major parties. The question we need to examine is about whether this is because these online communities naturally counterbalance dominant political agendas, or if members of the particular minor party of the milieu, the Greens, are more likely to be discursively active — making this a phenomena of this particular minor party, rather than minor party members in general. To examine these questions and others, look at the rise of new public spheres in Chapter 3.