

## Chapter 4 — Anti-social media

I feel in the mood for a stupid and pointless argument in an online forum today.

— Walker, *How the Internet Brings Us Together* (2007)

One of the more important observations in political science is that the study of political action can reflect a bias towards the exercise of power (Schattschneider 1960: 71). The notion of subaltern (non-hegemonic) counter-publics, championed by Nancy Fraser, picks up on this concept, arguing for the need to identify areas of political dialogue and discussion that lie outside dominant political strata (1990). This is important in seeing the extent of opinion in the community, as well as being able to identify the genesis and conceptual DNA of new ideas that enter into the public sphere (John, 2003). The idea of the counter public is significant because it emphasises that, while some groups are on the edge of public discourse, they still exist within an intellectual community of interlocking ideas. Here Fraser draws a distinction between *publics* and *enclaves*: subaltern counter publics are not enclaves because they ‘aspire to disseminate one’s discourse into ever-widening arenas’. This is the desire for recognition and respect that rests within the human condition, as well as the important political work of ensuring recognition. For Fraser, these spaces may be places of periodic ‘withdrawal and regroupment’ (1997: 82), and this allows for these voices to re-emerge into the wider discourse at a later time.

An example of tension between public and enclave in digital-media politics is illustrated by the use of an email discussion list to support the work of the Australian Women in Agriculture (AWiA) group (Pini, et al., 2004). The list was identified as a useful space for building technical expertise and individuals’ confidence in engaging in public discourse (capacity building; 2004: 273–74). The comparatively homogeneous nature of the space was core to the process of building a political culture for the AWiA and re-crafting participants’ political subjectivities (the active process of self-development, as opposed to the interpellation of one’s political identity by external ideological institutions; Althusser, 1971: 127–88). Thus, the list served as a space for the deliberate fostering of political identities that ran counter to established stereotypes of farming women (‘farm wives’ implying marriage to the farm). In making this space, however, the researchers identified that the list contained its own internal power dynamics, and that these tensions saw ‘non-standard’ members leaving this list as the group focused more on promoting a core political identity of professional women in the farming sector.

In the social media context this raises questions about the way counter publics can use technology to develop and express their political positions. Ease of access and application provides these groups discursive infrastructure on a scale never seen. The more open and public the nature of the space created by technology increases the visibility of counter-public discourses to the majority: increasing their discoverability for potential members, normalising alternative perspectives and political identities, and reducing the ability of subgroups to control access to any particular space. We see evidence of this in the array of political positions and identities visible online, including those the wider public may find distasteful or threatening (such as groups opposed to the very discursive and political pluralism assumed by an expanded public sphere, such as extremist political organisations; Margolis and Moreno-Riaño, 2009: 86). Alternatively, this also limits the 'shelter' afforded by temporary enclaves from hostile perspectives or authoritarian actors who may wish to surveil or disrupt the formation of political and cultural opponents (Chase & Mulvenon, 2002). It is important to understand, therefore, the limits of tolerance in the Australian digital public sphere.

## Amongst the chatter, a new silence?

The very participative nature of the digital-media environment leads us to see this communicative environment as open and expansive. Early debates about the regulation of online content popularised the view that internet technologies are uniquely resistant to top-down control. Heath Gilmore famously argued this freedom of speech is fundamental to the internet's core design,<sup>1</sup> in his oft-quoted observation that the 'Net interprets censorship as damage and routes around it' (cited in Elmer-Dewitt, 1993). Popular reporting of digital media is not generally framed in terms of what is *not* done or *not* said online, but as a catalyst of 'innovation engines' (Thorp & Goldstein, 2010: 13) or more commonly as a place where every perspective is visible and available (Shade, et al., 2005). But is this true? Does the combination of openness and anonymity also have a role in suppressing dissenting views and political subjectivities through the generation of disparaging meta-commentary, hostility and negativity that serves to delineate and reinforce 'popular opinion' within the flow of conversation?

## The strange silence in some public spheres

To examine this question we can draw upon the 'spiral of silence' proposed by Elizabeth Noell-Neuman. This theory considers the way mass and interpersonal

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<sup>1</sup> The packet switching system that sees internet content routed through alternative network connections where a message or its component is lost in transmission.

communications interact to create and maintain public discourse with a stable set of ‘acceptable’ topics. Developed in the context of West German politics of the 1970s, the spiral talks about the way media systems generate a generally accepted zeitgeist (1974). This, in turn, encourages public discourse within ‘popular’ (acceptable) topics and discourages those views outside of the charmed circle.<sup>2</sup> Responsive to what is popular and accepted, this feeds back into the media system through market sensing (discussed in detail in Chapter 6). This, in turn, creates a self-reinforcing ‘spiral’ with each feedback loop narrowing and hardening this limited range of appropriate discursive topics.

As a testable theory, the spiral of silence has four components, it argues:

- That we fear social isolation and seek to avoid it.
- These fears are projected in the way we act and communicate. This can be explicit through speech, or implicit in our behaviours towards topics we find distasteful.
- Not only are these anxieties are communicated in our speech and action, but also the wider public has a ‘quasi-statistical’ sense of what views and opinions are and are not dominant. This has implications for individual behaviour: fearing social isolation people respond to their perceptions of mass opinion in ways that reinforce alignment with popular views and avoidance of unpopular ones.
- The *mass* media, which serves to both magnify (in terms of visibility) and reduce (in terms of what is repeated as being ‘acceptable’) public opinion.

The premise behind the spiral of silence is a meso-level one, linking together the interpersonal with institutional to explain observed phenomena. In doing so it can explain the narrowness of media representations of social diversity (Phillips, 2009), for example, as the spiral has a tendency to push towards a comfortable centre or average. The theory can also explain rapid ‘shifts’ in polling on public opinion, where suppressed viewpoints emerge due to a mass shift of individuals’ perception of the majority opinion (thus freeing suppressed views) or as a result of the lowering of social risks associated with the expression of deviant perspectives.

This theory has relevance for both assessing social changes under a new communicative environment that provides alternative means to assess public opinion and for expressing unusual views with a degree of anonymity, as well as the neo-institutional view of media employed in this book (being concerned with the relationship between structure and agency). Like most social theory, however, it has roots in a particular political culture and milieu: that of a pluralistic, postwar West Germany, still recovering from the psychic shock

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<sup>2</sup> Deviant and heterodox views can exist in society but are hidden from public opinion.

of fascism and 'intolerant of intolerance' (Rosenfeld, 2010: 262). Thus, there are questions as to the value of this concept outside of its cultural, media and structural contexts (Scheufele & Moy, 2000).

## Does the spiral turn down under?

The digital media has a range of characteristics that may challenge the underpinning basis of the spiral model. With both interpersonal communication and mass media characteristics, digital media allows for the development of communities of interest of intermediate sizes (larger than sustainable interpersonal networks, but smaller than mass-media audiences). Because of this we can ask if the suppressive power of social stigma is more or less relevant in this context. Certainly one of the strongest 'disciplining' effects of social media is the way that seemingly localised and immediate social interactions can, under specific circumstances become magnified and subject to scrutiny by mass audiences. As discussed in Chapter 2, social media exchanges have become 'scandals' for politicians, but it is also a reality for non-elites. Examples include a variety of forms of online harassment and victimisation where individual privacy is breached (AAP, 2012b).

Additionally we should ask: does digital media support or undermine the 'quasi-statistical sense' we get in interpersonal interactions about what is and is not an appropriate topic or argument? The social nature of the digital-media environment is not delivered solely through the use of databases to computerise interpersonal relationships and recreate social networks online, but also lies in the remediation of paralinguistic cues (non-verbal communication elements, like tone and facial expression). Where the online medium was once defined by its strict textual conventions (Chen & Hinton, 1999), successive generations of users have introduced and refined new forms of social signalling and forms of emotional communication (textual icons — such as emoticons and mood state indicators). This is not just a set of genre conventions that mark out playful engagement with a new social environment, for human communication has long seen the need for emotional indicators as a part of effective communication.

This points to a social ambiguity in flux, particularly in terms of social networking services' (SNS) 'publicity' (McNealy, 2012). These services encourage the sharing of personal information and the trivia of the day-to-day, which clashes with the trend to make profiles open to all web users (Boyd, 2011). Social expectations of these services remain fluid and it is unclear if these spaces are private, public, or 'private-public'. This latter category reflects the notion of a 'third place' where people can be 'alone together' in a community of fluctuating membership, but defined in terms of shared observation of external events (Shapira & Navon, 1991: 123–24). This is most commonly demonstrated

in the social pretext we see on public transport where personal telephone conversations are politely ignored ('civic inattention'; Phillips & Smith, 2003: 86) provided they fall within a vague range of 'acceptable' behaviours (Wei & Leung, 1999: 25; Humphreys, 2005: 369). The difficulty lies in policing social boundaries in media that allow for mass observation and participation.

Increasingly, therefore, the online behaviour of individuals is being subject to routine surveillance that can limit the inventive and creative nature of these new spaces. The clearest example of this is the practice of potential employers to vet applicants based on searches against their names and requests for access to their SNS profiles. As this practice becomes common, job hunters are educated in avoiding posting material online that may have a negative impact on employment. The Career Builder website, for example, cautions against posting material that may 'clash with employer's values' or reveal your views on 'sensitive issues' (Dehne, 2008). These admonishments against disclosure are reiterated by governments. The Australian Communications and Media Authority's (ACMA) *Cyber(smart:)* website advises teenagers against recklessness regarding the employment implications of their online posts (ACMA, 2009).

These admonishments, and occasional media stories which feature the hapless who have fallen foul of routine employer surveillance of their social media (see, for example, Moses, 2009a; Whyte, 2011), reflect how online systems contribute to panopticism: Foucault's (1995: 285) insight into social regulation through the subject's internalisation of surveillance. In the context of the spiral of silence, this reflects how perceptions of majority opinion suppress the diversity of speech, through the accessibility of political speech by actors in the economic realm. In the case of youth cultures we can see how these forces are particularly powerful in the intersection of self-representation and social expectations regarding economic prerogatives. These disciplining forces interpellate young people into a narrow range of subjective desires (school tracking to employment), validate particular self-representation (largely focused on specific types of acceptable consumption; Best, 2009), while suppressing 'deviant' behaviour (sexual promiscuity, risk taking, drug use). Because of concerns that social media systems can freeze time, societal acceptance of the natural process of adolescent experimentation and distancing from parental authority is impaired: experimentation is not just a process of maturation, but a threat to your 'permanent record'. In this way CJ Pascoe (2011: 12) has argued that, while digital media presents new sources of risk and the resources to mitigate against it, there remains a similar 'dominant ordering of power' with regard to risk distribution.

Evidence for this can be found in the content analysis of wall posts discussed previously. Coding this content for misogynistic and sexist language<sup>3</sup> we can see that a considerable amount of material of this kind was posted on Facebook. This largely took the form of representing women as sexual objects or their sexual instrumentalisation (0.391 per cent of all posts), rather than statements about women's social role or position (0.092 per cent of all posts). While the quantum of posts of this nature is small overall, it is marked that almost 11 per cent of all posters in the sample group made one or more of these posts in the period measured. While men were the most likely to post this content (13.5 per cent), women were also represented (8 per cent) as regulators of their gender and sexuality.

At the most extreme end of the spectrum, however, very few clearly misogynistic comments were identified in the sample (0.021 per cent of posts, all from men). An example of this would be the group 'cutting your mum's car breaks [sic] when she cooks a bad dinner'. Importantly the majority of sexist statements are not personal utterances, but come from the membership of Facebook groups. This shows the role of social proof (support for individual behaviour assumed from others' participation in the same) in driving these attitudes: few of the posts were direct articulations by the sample group members but liking or joining groups with sexist titles and/or objectives. As we move from the nonymous space of Facebook to select, anonymous spaces we can see that this type of discourse can become more socially violent, such as the use of sexual images of young women in revenge<sup>4</sup> or 'tribute' picture<sup>5</sup> posts (Aston, 2012) to serve as an example of the way in which dominant gender relations are sustained and remediated.

## Enforcing the acceptable

In addition to the collective processes of the spiral of silence, the digital-media environment has also given rise to a range of self-appointed regulators. Websites like *You said it ...*,<sup>6</sup> *Fight Dem Back*, *Slackbastard* and *My iCrusade against Right Wing Extremists* patrol around the edges of Australian political dialogue online, exposing individuals and organisations they identify as having racist

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3 'Misogyny', drawing upon Edward Armstrong's operationalised definition (2001) to include references to assault, rape and murder and sexism ('any phrase that may be interpreted to be treating men and women differently, simply on the basis of their sex') based on the work of Boxill, et al. to include references to social, workplace/professional and sexual instrumentalism (1997: 114–45).

4 For example, Hunter Moore's *Is Anyone Up?* website (now at <http://yougotposted.com/>).

5 The provision of a photograph of a person with the request for others in the forum to repost a photograph of the printed image following their ejaculation on it. See, for example, <http://xhamster.com/search.php?q=tribute&qcat=pictures> (NSFW).

6 Formally 'the Anti-bogan'; <http://theantibogan.wordpress.com>

and extremist views. Generally this takes the form of exposure and ridicule (see, for example, Illustration 10): reposting screenshots of offending material on their sites. *Slackbastard* (out of the Melbourne anarchist movement) and You said it ... (from the Sydney socialist community) represent the best known of these types of site. The motivation of the founder of You said it ..., 'the anti-bogan', for setting up the site was the perceived failure of Facebook and blogging networks to effectively police hate speech, racist and sexist comments:

... we weren't getting very far. We were getting a lot of people banned, but once someone's profile is deleted they just start a new one and continue the public crap. So it was at that time I decided I would go the completely other way. Rather than attempt to censor all that crap I would try and expose it. If people really wanted an audience, I'd give them an audience.

The purpose of this exposure was to discourage this form of speech by raising the personal stakes involved and making these statements permanent, rather than change their views (personal interview: the anti-bogan, 20 July 2011).<sup>7</sup>



**Illustration 10: 'You said it ...' entry**

Source: Facebook. Used with permission; user tags not obscured in original

<sup>7</sup> The anti-bogan established another collaborative blog, *Is your mind made up* (<http://mindmadeup.net>) as a more educative channel.

The site did generate episodes of hostility. The provocative nature of the presentation of material on You said it ... led, in 2011, to white supremacists 'hijacking' the anti-bogan's identity online to imply he was a paedophile, and friending the anti-bogan's students (Hilderbrand, 2011: 3). Interestingly it was his employment as a teacher that had led to the anti-bogan moving his anti-racism politics online in the first place becoming 'less vocal and less public'. The identification of his name by opponents was a direct result of him talking at an anti-racism event as 'the anti-bogan' and being photographed. The real identity of *Slackbastard's* 'Andy Fleming' has been subject to speculation in Australian far-right blogs and discussion fora for some time (see, for example: Whitelaw Towers (2011)), with Fleming actively attempting to maintain his anonymity for reasons of personal safety (Fleming, 2012). This concern is not unfounded, with acts of violence committed against anti-fascist activists occasionally occurring in Australia (Begg, 1997).

## Badges of shame, badges of honour

The impact (direct and indirect) of these sites is unclear. Individuals featured on You said it ... are difficult to access for their views on the consequence of their appearance, with few agreeing to interviews.<sup>8</sup> This is telling about the impact of the site. At the extreme end, some featured have lost employment (de Brito, 2011). Even those who see themselves as developing activist identities online have found exposure threatening. For 'respondent A' the use of Facebook represented a new way in which he could engage in conservative politics online — seeing his profile and discussions as possibly provocative, but also as a catalyst for democratic debate. Following his comments being featured on You said it ..., he changed the privacy settings of his profile to limit the visibility of his comments to friends only, but remained concerned that supporters of the site kept him under surveillance through fake profiles (personal interview: respondent A, 19 July 2011). In one way this demonstrates a basic difference of opinion of the nature of *publicity* on SNS. While the anti-bogan sees Facebook posts as public speech, respondent A saw greater ambiguity. One of his key criticisms of his exposure was that it took this content 'off site' and outside of the conventions of Facebook. For him this was inherently unfair. The short-term impact is that the ability for critics to penetrate these counter-public public spheres limits their effectiveness as sites for withdrawal, regrouping and microactivism.

While the silencing of some racist and non-hegemonic points of view is a result of these activities, there are also perverse outcomes. For those with more strident political opinions, being featured on the site can provide a 'sense of achievement'

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<sup>8</sup> By nature, those who have deleted or significantly altered their Facebook profile following this exposure are difficult to identify.

and vindication that their views are provoking the forces of political correctness. Following on from our observations about the role played by opinion leaders in social media (see Two-step flow, 2.0, Chapter 3), these individuals are not necessarily affected by the public silence of peers on their key issues, but see peer silence and the focus of sites like You said it ... as demonstrating their importance as brave opinion leaders who speak for a suppressed counter public (Personal interview: respondent B, 4 July 2011) or representing evidence that their political opponents are counter-democratic forces (Personal interview: Nick Folks, Australian Protectionist Party, 18 June 2011). In having enforcement undertaken by political opponents, these sites can generate debate leading to conflict. The impact of this is to hollow out intermediate positions, which limits the possibility of rapprochement or dialogue.

## L'Étranger: 'support Leb and Wog bashing day'<sup>9</sup>

The most visible and toxic aspect of anti-social media has been its use by 'hate groups': groups who advocate violence against ethnic and religious minorities. The 'rise' of these groups on SNS has featured in the media and they have been associated with outbreaks of racial violence (Pauli, 2009). While a negative social force, these groups also represent counter publics: giving voice and visibility to the dark parts of the public sphere. The extent to which the existence of racism and sectarianism is 'created' by these sites is unclear. Certainly the visibility of these groups makes them fodder for questionable journalistic trend pieces and tabloid sociology (Silverman, 2007: 118) that either purport to associate the rise of digital media with organised hate (*PM*, 2010) or identify these channels as a useful means to get around anti-vilification laws. As border control has been increasingly used to prevent the movement of spokespersons for extremist groups and ideologies, digital media has become a tool for these individuals to communicate with communities in states that actively restrict entry (Cunneen, 1997: 182–84). Even under the less, officially, 'politically-correct' period of the conservative government of John Howard (Simons & Fraser, 2010: 375), Australia continued to deny the entry of British Holocaust denier David Irving. High-profile, Australian-based Holocaust deniers, such as Fredrick Töben and the 'Adelaide Institute', have been similarly singled out for legal action by the Australian Human Rights Commission. The commission ordered the removal from Töben's site of some extreme claims about World War II genocides (Wainwright, 2009).

The changing nature of prejudice makes an objective determination of the 'level' of racism virtually impossible to determine, and this research has not

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9 Context of text message sent in the lead up to the Cronulla violence in 2005.

been longitudinally collected in Australia.<sup>10</sup> Had this existed it might allow the identification of a simple correlation (if not causation) between digital media and these attitudes. But, this is unlikely. Australia has a long history with organised racist and far-right organisations (such as the League of Rights) stretching back to the 1930s (Greason, 1997: 190) and, to some extent, newly formed online and offline organisations represent the natural tendency in the far right for fluidity of organisational leadership, membership, and name (202–03). What digital media allow is the internationalisation of this activity, while employing social networking to localise political action. The leak of membership details of the international neo-Nazi group Blood and Honor in 2011 demonstrated the existence of global membership, including a small number of Australians (part of ‘Operation Blitzkrieg’, see WikiLeaks, Chapter 5). For Barbara Perry and Patrik Olsson (2009), this permits the comparatively fragmented (ideationally and socially) far right to form more coherent collective identities.

## A spiral of hatred

One recent example of extreme political behaviour was the Cronulla ‘riots’ (December 2005), which consisted of two key outbreaks of violence: a 5000-strong violent demonstration to ‘reclaim’ the beach by the white population, and a smaller, ‘retaliatory’ attack against individuals and property. The immediate ‘cause’ of this violence was an altercation between two groups of beach users: Australians of ethnic origin and local lifesavers (Poynting, 2006). The role of digital media was highlighted through SMS messages that promoted violence (Tobin, 2006: 51).<sup>11</sup> Generally the media and elites have been quick to blame digital media as a catalyst for violence, possibly because that assumption deflects analysis away from more fundamental problems like entrenched racist attitudes. In the United Kingdom, violence following the shooting of a young black man in 2011 saw the government initially propose strict regulation of instant messaging services as a means of preventing the organisation of violence (Masnick, 2011).

The role of SMS and other digital media in the promotion of violence has, in this case, taken a back seat to concerns about the role of talkback radio in the days leading up to the crimes. In the case of Cronulla, John Hartley and Joshua Green (2006: 352) have argued that commercial media played an important role in fuelling dissent around these events through the characterisation of tensions

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10 Dunn, et al. (2004) provide an excellent review of the shift from ‘old racism’ (based on views of the inherent superiority of some racial groups over others) and the rise of ‘new racism’ (based on views of cultural incomparability) in their quantification of racist attitudes in Australia.

11 For example: ‘Every fucking aussie. Go to Cronulla Beach Sunday for some Leb and wog bashing Aussie Pride ok’ and ‘All leb / wog brothers. Sunday midday. Must be at North Cronulla Park. These skippy aussies want war. Bring ur guns and knives and lets show them how we do it’.

as assaults on the wider community or the essential Australian way of life. Violence was actively encouraged by ‘shock jock’ Alan Jones on 7 December,<sup>12</sup> who was later found to have violated the broadcasters’ code (Commercial Radio Code of Practice) (Alberici, 2007). Thus, the violence was not a spontaneous act of creation that emerged from social networks, but was set against a backdrop of media reporting about tensions on the beach, as well as the use of digital media by participants in this discourse (both those promoting violence and those advocating calm).

This is supported by James Forrest’s and Kevin Dunn’s assessment of the nature of anti-out-group<sup>13</sup> prejudice in Queensland and New South Wales. Rather than a correlation of proximity, they find that ‘the ability to make judgements about significant “others” or out-groups has been shown to relate more to abstract notions of self and national identity, reproduced in public by such as mainstream news media’ (2006: 184). The recent violence is thus marked as different to historical outbreaks of anti-immigrant violence in Australia that have had more economic proximate causes (anti-Chinese riots on the goldfields pre-Federation, anti-southern European violence against strike breakers in the 1930s and 1940s; Collins, 2007: 64–65). While members of the far right may have taken credit for the ‘uprising’ (ABC, 2006) the more compelling evidence points to the rise of a background encouragement of aggressive cultural nationalism under the Howard government, liberally mixed with mass-media goading and alcohol.

There is, therefore, a difference between what occurs at the extreme end of the political spectrum and majority views. While survey research undertaken by Dunn, et al. (2004) identified that one in eight Australians agree that they ‘are prejudiced against other cultures’, this prejudice is not writ large in the social media. The Facebook wall post study identified a low proportion of overtly racist statements (such as the example in Illustration 11), the presence of which would indicate a country so racist that these views are normalised in online social conversation (Sianne Ngai’s notion of ‘casual racism’ as demonstrating its social ordinariness; 2005: 386). Thus, in the sample of 29,660 wall posts, less than one-twentieth of one per cent (0.04 per cent) contained overt, casual racist or sectarian content.

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12 ‘... the only language the Middle-Eastern youth understand is a good hiding ... These Middle-Eastern people must be treated with a big stick ...’

13 Defined as a group to which the majority do not belong and who are likely to attract distrust from the majority (Ferrante, 2011: 93).



**Illustration 11: Example of ‘casual racism’ on Facebook (user tags obscured)**

Source: Facebook

## It’s a guy thing?

It is important to ask if violence in online discourse impacts on the character of online political discussion. This is relevant given the gendered nature of politics in Australia. Gendering normalises Australian politics as an inherently masculine ‘zero sum’ activity and, correspondingly, explains the low level of women’s participation as political elites (Crawford & Pini, 2010). In the context of the Australian political blogosphere, Mark Bahnisch (2006: 145) has talked about the dominance of masculine voices in this space (the majority of high-profile political bloggers in Australia are men), and the relationship between this and limited civility in these fora. Exploring this empirically, if we look at the respondents to the surveys undertaken into social media (Table 8) we can see a disproportionate response from men, particularly in the more ‘open’ social media of blogs and Twitter (as opposed to the comparatively enclosed space of Facebook). As these surveys include both active posters and ‘lurkers’, it is possible that the lack of non-male voices carries over into readership (there are, however, some methodological concerns about this, see the discussion of lurking, below).

	Political blog users (n = 488)	Political Twitter users (n = 222)	Political Facebook users (n = 592)	CANdo members (n = 97)
Male	63.75	72.97	59.45	77.32
Female	35.64	27.03	40.55	22.68

**Table 8: Political social media, response rates by gender**

Source: Author’s research

While this could simply be an online mirroring of offline cultural norms, this does not neatly fit with the demonstrated use of digital media by women as effective sites for counter-public formation (as discussed above) and as willing participants in online survey research (Flaye, 2012). This may be explained by the over-representation of men in areas of technical and scientific professions, and as early adopters of new technologies (the latter tendency is declining over time, however; Murphy, 2011). As the presence of women in online discussions of politics remains small, this marginalises gender-specific concerns and associated agenda formation.<sup>14</sup> In addition, it may be possible to argue that, if women commonly find their online interlocutors are male, there exists a tendency for the presence of men to suppress (actively or through women self-censoring) women’s voices.

## Careful, he might hear you

This second proposition needs elaboration. Looking at discursive practices between men and women in an experimental setting, Annette Hannah and Tamar Murachver observed a propensity for women to speak less compared to their male interlocutors (2007: 286–88), adopting more ‘facilitative’ roles in conversation (short utterances, asking questions, etc.). Men just talk more, and it is socially acceptable for us do so. This appears to impact on those women who do choose to engage in online politics in the social media. If we look at the comparative willingness of men and women to engage in political speech where there exists social risk (revising the stranger on a train scenario) we see in Table 9 a considerable difference between those women who participate in political social media and those who do not in terms of willingness to talk. This difference is not found among men, reflecting our ongoing social and political dominance. We can argue that rather than feminise conversations, the non-participation of some women fails to challenge the aggressive and masculinised dialogue of Australian politics.

	Political		Non-political			
	Blog Readers (n = 491)	Twitter (n = 222)	Blog Readers (n = 74)	Twitter (n = 110)		
Male	61.09	67.3	*	76.81	Channel difference	
Female	52.57	76.67	45.71	43.9	Blog readers	Twitter
All	57.43	70.27	47.3	64.54	10.13	5.72
Gender difference	8.52	-9.37	na	32.91		

**Table 9: Stranger on a train scenario, gender differences**

Source: Author’s research (\* response rate too low)

<sup>14</sup> Here we need to recognise the work of women bloggers and tweeters to encourage and facilitate female participation in these spaces. A good example would be the *Hoyden About Town* group blog (<http://hoydenabouttown.com>).

Considering this absence, we have to recognise that this ‘non-participation’ may not be the result of direct exclusion, but *active* non-participation. The most common form of this would be ‘lurking’: the presence as a reader in online fora, without substantive contribution (reading without posting). Problematically, there is some evidence that lurkers may be less likely to respond to survey requests than non-lurkers. In their study of active non-participants (based on carefully selected interview subjects), Blair Nonnecke and Jenny Preece observed that people lurk for a variety of reasons (2001: 6):

- desire for anonymity to preserve privacy and safety
- work-related constraints (employment risk)
- channel lacks value to the lurker in terms of the substantive content (a low ‘signal to noise’ ratio)
- shyness
- time limitations.<sup>15</sup>

Some of these factors appear to be particularly sensitive to gender effects, especially perceptions of risk.

It is important to also consider the average age difference between users of these services (from the survey: Facebook (37), blog readers (42), Twitter (44), CANdo (48)), which correlates negatively with increased women’s representation. While this reflects a generational view of women’s participation associated with increased levels of education and workplace participation by women (Aitkin, 1977: 34), the participation gap has not disappeared. This problem was also apparent to the founders of yopinion.com.au, (discussed in Chapter 3) who had difficulty motivating female members to ‘convert’ from lurkers<sup>16</sup> to topic authors (personal interview: Dougal Robinson, 12 March 2012). This may relate to young women’s sense of political knowledge. The Australian Electoral Commission’s Youth Electoral Study found that young men were ‘more likely to report they had the knowledge to understand political issues, knowledge to understand parties, knowledge to make a decision when voting and knowledge to be able to vote’ than women (Edwards, et al., 2006). Here we see how male dominance of the political stage can have intergenerational impacts in discouraging women’s discursive participation.

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15 It should be noted that Nonnecke and Preece’s original paper also includes the consideration of the uses and gratifications model of media and consider positive reasons for lurking.

16 This concern was triggered by Robinson’s reading about low levels of participation by women in editing Wikipedia (Cohen, Noam, 2011).

## Ever thus? Incivility in political life

With the election of Australia's first female prime minister, Julia Gillard, in 2010, issues of gender and politeness have come into greater focus. As with the presidency of Barack Obama, the breakthrough of a member of an under-represented group into high office is seen by some to have generated considerable vitriol from conservative members of the community. In the United States, the legitimacy of Obama has been subject to sustained attack by 'birthers' who deny Obama as a 'natural born' citizen of the United States — a proxy for his race (Hehmana, et al., 2011). In this country, the legitimacy of the Gillard government has also been attacked. At a Canberra rally to mark the end of the 'Convoy of No Confidence' protest organised by the trucking industry over the introduction of a tax on carbon dioxide, signs proclaimed the prime minister was the leader of the Australian Greens' 'bitch' and a 'witch' (Campbell, 2011). The presence of the leader of the Opposition at the event was seen as an endorsement of this aggressive style of political rhetoric. Indeed, this type of personal and gendered attack came on the back of an earlier uproar following the Coalition Senator Bill Heffernan describing the future prime minister as unsuited for leadership because she had not elected to have a family and remained 'deliberately barren' (AAP, 2007).

In the same time period, the leader of the Opposition had been subject to discussion of his Catholicism as the basis for a personal 'hatred of women' (Mitchell, 2011), described as a homophobe in posters displayed by government MPs, and subject to considerable popular media discussion of his genitals because of his sporting attire (Maguire, 2009). The then leader of the Australian Greens Bob Brown talked about News Limited as the 'hate media' that ran a campaign of ongoing and consistent attacks on his party and character (Grattan, 2011). This situation has continued, with the embattled MP Craig Thomson reading into Hansard hate mail<sup>17</sup> that called for his suicide or assassination in response to accusations that he had misused his corporate credit card prior to his election to parliament. The MP has accused the Opposition of inflaming this type of attack through their pursuit of the issue while it has been subject to formal investigation. As a result, the Acting Speaker of the Parliament, Anna Burke, has recently stated that MPs conduct is the lowest in the 14 years she has been in Parliament (AAP, 2012a).

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<sup>17</sup> 'Go cut your wrists or, better still, hang yourself'; 'You are dead. A bullet between the eyes will save taxpayers' money' (Thompson, Craig, 2012, *Hansard*, Canberra: Parliament of Australia: 4715).



**Illustration 12: Prime Minister Gillard burnt in effigy, Eureka Dawn Vigil (3 December 2010)**

Source: Photograph by Takver, (cc), image source: [www.flickr.com/photos/takver/5226872939/in/photostream/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/takver/5226872939/in/photostream/)

At the heart of this type of discussion are concerns that uncivil and violent political dialogue undermine democratic practice through reducing the:

- quality of political dialogue and moving it towards invective and the trading of insults
- potential for speech to build consensus and form the basis of John Dryzek's deliberative democratic practice through turning political opponents into 'enemies' with whom consensus and agreement cannot be reached
- motivation of individual citizens with political interests to enter this hostile environment.

This type of argument walks a fine line between excessive conservatism through appeals to authority and tradition, and the need for speech to be facilitated through social rules that encourage, rather than discourage, participation.

## Net nasties

Discounting the possibility that people in public life today are just a bunch of ass-hats of a kind not seen before, it is possible to see a link between the media environment and incivility. Concerns about media and the quality of discourse are not new. Current communication technology is commonly seen to impact on the quality of political communication. Just as television 'dumbed down' political communication due to the channel effects associated with the production of news (the sound-bite; Gaber, 2005: 26), digital media is associated with a coarsening of public life.

The direct relationship between digital media and political rudeness is unclear, and a number of (not necessarily mutually incomparable) causes are cited. At the organisational level, the changing nature of the news media (driven by economics as well as technology, see Chapter 6 for an extended discussion) is often cited as blending opinion with journalistic reporting (Robinson, 2006). In this context 'opinion' is associated with inflammatory and intemperate language, not bound by journalistic conventions of neutrality and balance. Indeed, a range of media commentators have made it clear that they are not journalists in defending themselves against attacks on their conduct (Gallop, 2011). As increasing numbers of opinion writers compete for attention in a crowded media space, there is more room for 'sexed up' copy and headlines to attract readers.

Similarly, in empowering the public to engage with reportage, online newspapers and other mainstream and alternative media are filled with increasing amounts of lightly regulated content that tends towards the more informal and offensive. The 'loose talk', which was once filtered by the Letters editor, is now found online (as seen in Illustration 13). While this is a function of anonymity and



place’ (particularly transport, 2006: 894). This makes sense as people in motion engage in ‘drive by’ incivility with lower social risk than when they are likely to remain proximate to their interlocutor for longer periods of time.

This social change is embedded in norms of behaviour and as institutional rules. In Australia, the institutional regulation of civility in political discourse has declined. This now has a legal basis that has expanded the idea of freedom of speech to include uncivil talk (Stone, 2011). In *Coleman v Power* (2004) the High Court overturned the sentence of a student charged with the use of insulting words under the Queensland *Vagrancy Act*. This case was focused on political speech as the insult was made in the course of an interaction with a police officer over the distribution of written material accusing the Queensland police force of being a corrupt institution. As Adrienne Stone argues, institutions in Australia are seeing themselves as having less of an enlightenment role in improving political speech through the regulation of its content or form.

## Who are you to call names?

But, is this tale of woe and decline really true? Incivility in public life is nothing new in Australia. Former prime minister, Paul Keating, was famous for his creative use of invective; indeed violent language (and behaviour) dates to pre-Federation settlement and outbreaks of extreme political violence after Federation (such as riots between the communist ‘red ragers’ and the Soldiers Imperial League of Australia in 1919; Evans, 1992). While Illustration 13 (above) demonstrates uncivil online speech in the new generation of opinion websites (see *I’m figgering on biggering*, Chapter 6) a range of new conventions have developed on these comment sites that have increased the quality of such comment sections. These include pre-moderation, post-moderation (take-down), and the use of threaded conversations (either provided by the content-management system or via the adoption of the @[interlocutor] convention). The extent to which individual examples represent a social trend, therefore, is questionable.

In addition, there is the possibility that the digital-media landscape is competent at regulating the political speech of elites. As their speech is increasingly mediated and accessible to a wider audience, elites have found they have a reduced ability to control access to what has been said (Young, 2007a: 250–51). This is beneficial in increasing the availability of political information and reducing the capacity of elites to make different policy promises to different audiences. Mediation also broadens the likely consumption of political content and the range of contexts in which it will be consumed. This decreases the ability of speakers to ensure their context will be ‘read’ in a specific, known, and predictable localised context. In Australia, most senior politicians understand this and are

increasingly cautious about the way they frame their statements, but not all in public life are professional politicians. In mid 2012, Tim Flannery's (Chief Commissioner of the Australian Climate Commission) offhanded comments at the end of a presentation on the health impacts of climate change in a medical conference were reported in a way that implied the Australian climate change policy would create the 'green job' of pulling teeth from the dead (Hambleton, 2012).<sup>18</sup> Thus, while many decry the blandness of contemporary political speech (Crabb, 2010), the multiplicity of potential audiences and contexts drives this caution in popular public discourse in a way not seen before.

In addition to this form of silencing, great care needs to be taken in any discussion of incivility and politics. The use of terms like 'rude', 'offensive' and 'uncivil' can be mobilised for political purposes. Accusations of rudeness in public life have been employed by political elites in response to persistent questioning on topics they prefer not to discuss (Wilkins, 2012), and by journalists with regard to their treatment by political elites (Massola, 2011). More systematically, Mills (2009) argues that the rhetoric of incivility is often mobilised as a way to characterise social 'out' groups. Through the definition of particular speech as inappropriate, this then forms a means by which the speech of certain groups can be discounted from political consideration. In the Australian context, Smith and Phillips (2001) have identified this in the way incivility in speech and action is associated with the notion of 'un-Australianness': not being part of the body politic of this country.

A recent example of how this type of characterisation denies the agency of whole groups of people can be found in some of the media reporting and associated commentary regarding an incident between the prime minister, leader of the Opposition, and a group of Indigenous protesters in early 2012. The context of this was a private function held *within* the precinct being used to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra. Following a tense confrontation between members of the gathering and the political figures, a considerable amount of reporting emphasised the disruptive nature of the Aboriginal protesters' actions, the rudeness of their behaviour and the threatening way the subgroup of protesters attempted to gain entry into the venue hosting the prime minister. What was not reported was that the prime minister's office elected to hold their private event 200 metres away from the Sovereignty Corroboree, a planned and advertised event.<sup>19</sup> Rather than reflecting on the bad taste of white political elites 'crashing' the venue of a significant Indigenous event, the popular response was to attack the actions of

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18 Instead, in response to a question, Flannery suggested that mercury-filled fillings should be routinely removed from corpses prior to cremation to reduce environmental pollutants.

19 In addition, the role of the prime minister's office in 'tipping off' protesters about the presence of the leader of the Opposition at the event, and disparaging remarks about the Tent Embassy's contemporary relevance demonstrates a cynical manipulation of the protesters' emotions in this case (AAP, 2012a).

the protesters. At the extreme end of this disempowering rhetoric Andrew Bolt (2012) argued this served as a justification for the end of political reconciliation with all Indigenous people.<sup>20</sup>

## Haters gonna hate

Over the last two decades the ‘world’ has increasingly begun encroaching on the free space of the digital environment. While dreams of cyberspace encourage thoughts of pure freedom, the social-media environment is social: it functions with some reference to the same social rules and norms of the offline world. While the comparative anonymity of the online environment tolerates increased diversity of discourse, the development of our online doppelgängers introduces new forms of social surveillance and self-representation. These SNS profiles and content trails permit experimentation with new political identities, but we’ve not escaped the ‘meat space of real’. The most powerful agenda-setting systems — the combination of mass media and self-censorship — still appear to have powerful roles in restricting the true development of a weightless public sphere. Thus, as social media pushes public opinion ‘up’ to political elites, the elites, considered in chapters 5 and 6, still control a range of social and economic institutions and, they hope, continue to set the informational and ideological context in which these conversations occur.

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20 Tony Abbott described the protesters as ‘un-Australian’ (Vasek, 2012).