Northumbria Research Link

Face to Face(book): Social Media, Political Campaigning and the Unbearable Lightness of Being There

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Abstract

It is undoubtedly true that social media such as Facebook and Twitter are influencing the ways in which politicians engage the public, no longer hostage to the gatekeeping proclivities of traditional media but now able to broadcast their messages to anyone who wants to hear them. On the public's side, we can now follow politicians who are on Twitter or have a Facebook fan page, comment on their tweets and posts and send them messages directly. So far, so democratic. But how many of us actually do more than just read and how many politicians do more than just inform? Crucially, to what extent can the public influence the political agenda so that politicians not only hear but listen and act? The study on which this article is based aimed to explore how politicians in New Zealand use social media, especially Facebook, and their attitudes towards the effectiveness of social media in the context of a general election campaign. Findings suggest that despite their talk of citizen engagement, most politicians use social media as a means of distributing information (one-way flow) and to make themselves both visible and hip to the public. While cautiously optimistic about the role of social media in the lives of citizens, MPs also suggest that social media must be complementary to and thus incorporated in, a broad-based communications strategy, rather than be seen as a replacement for traditional campaign activities.

Introduction

Political parties and their politicians have always used media outlets to distribute their policy messages, but over the past few years, as the digital revolution has percolated down to the political classes, a new research field has developed which considers the use and impact of social media as tools of and for political communication.[1] Whilst some have come relatively late to membership of the *Facebook/Twitterati*, it is unarguable that all politicians recognise

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[1] See, for example, Nigel A. Jackson and Darren G. Lilleker DG, 'Building an Architecture of Participation? Political Parties and Web 2.0 in Britain', *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, Vol. 6, No. 3-4 (2009), pp. 232-250; Richard Davis, Jody C. Baumgartner, Peter L. Francia, and Jonathan S. Morris, The internet in U.S. election campaigns, in Andrew Chadwick and Philip N. Howard (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Internet Politics*, (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 13-25.

its importance, given the considerable claims for the Internet's prominence in an evolving public sphere.[2] The work on which this article is based draws on findings from a larger study of *Facebook* behaviour, which explored politicians' use of social media during the New Zealand general election in 2011.[3] The part of the study presented here asked politicians why they use social media in general and *Facebook* in particular, about their likes and dislikes of social media tools, and about their views on the role of such tools in an election campaign environment.

Much of the extant literature on the relationship between politicians and social media has tended to focus on the content of messages and posts and to mostly concentrate on European or US contexts with large parliaments and legislatures. Consequently, rather less research exists which explores the ways in which politicians in smaller parliamentary systems are taking up the opportunities afforded by informal media such as *Facebook*. However, as we show below, the findings from this study are entirely consonant with those which have emerged from other studies of politicians' use of *Facebook* and other social media behaviours.

Social media and political campaigning

An interest in politicians' social media use has developed from more established themes in political communication research including how social networks affect political participation[4]

[2] Peter Dahlgren, 'The Internet, Public Spheres, and Political Communication: Dispersion and Deliberation', *Political Communication,* Vol. 22, No. 2 (2005), pp. 147-162.

[3] See Karen Ross, Margie Comrie and Susan Fountaine (forthcoming) Facing up to Facebook: politicians, publics and political participation in New Zealand', *Media, Culture & Society*.
, The study analysed *Facebook* posts from the fan pages of 28 MPs in the four weeks running up to Election Day 2011.

[4] Bruce Bimber, 'Information and political engagement in America: The search for effects of information technology at the individual level', *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 54, No. 1 (2001), pp. 53-67; Aeron Davis, 'New media and fat democracy: the paradox of online participation', *New Media & Society*, Vol. 12, No. 5 (2009), pp. 745-761; Homero Gil De Zúñiga, Eulàlia Puig-I-Abril, and Hernando Rojas, 'Weblogs, traditional sources online and political participation: an assessment of how the internet is changing the political environment', *New Media & Society*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (2009), pp. 553-574.

and the impact of online political debate on citizen perceptions.[5] The growth and popularity

of social media suggests that, whatever its *actual* impact on citizens in terms of enhancing

political knowledge, increasing political participation,[6] or constituting *some kind* of public

sphere,[7] its popularity is unlikely to wane in the short or even medium-term. Shuster's very

recent work with young women in New Zealand suggests that they are increasingly turning to

social media as a way of organising themselves politically, appreciating the immediacy and

flexibility afforded by these informal structures.[8] Thus, better understanding how it works for

both politicians and citizens seems a useful research pursuit.[9] Some commentators even go as

far as arguing that social media have become so important that politicians are now using

Twitter as the preferred venue for broadcasting new policies or ideas.[10] However, most

studies in this admittedly young sub-field have produced rather more ambiguous or at least

mixed findings, especially in relation to the strategic use of social media by politicians and

their campaign teams. Jackson and Lilleker also point out that despite the interactive

architecture of social media tools such as *Facebook*, the ways in which most political parties

actually use the technical features offered is rather mixed.[11] A similar point is made by

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[5] Itai Himelboim, 'Civil Society and Online Political Discourse: The Network Structure of Unrestricted Discussions', *Communication Research*, Vol. 38, No. 5 (2011), pp. 634-659; Ken'ichi Ikeda and Jeffrey Boase, 'Multiple Discussion Networks and Their Consequence for Political Participation', *Communication Research*, Vol. 38, No. 5 (2011), pp. 660-683.

[6] Anders Olof Larsson and Hallvard Moe, 'Studying political microblogging: Twitter users in the 2010 Swedish election campaign', *New Media & Society*, Vol. 14, No. 5 (2012), pp. 729-747.

[7] José van Dijck, 'Facebook as a Tool for Producing Sociality and Connectivity', *Television & New Media*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (2012), pp. 160-176.

[8] Julia Shuster, 'Invisible feminists? Social media and young women's political participation', *Political Science*, Vol. 65, No. 1 (2013), pp. 8-24

[9] Kris Erickson and Darren G. Lilleker, 'Campaign Websites and Hypermedia Campaigning: Lessons from the Ed Balls Labour Leadership Campaign 2010', *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. 65, No. 2 (2012), pp. 404-424.

[10] William J. Grant, Brenda Moon, and Grant Janie Busby, 'Digital Dialogue? Australian Politicians' use of the Social Network Tool Twitter', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 45, No. 4 (2010), pp. 579-604.

[11] Jackson and Lilleker, 'Building an Architecture of Participation? Political Parties and Web 2.0 in Britain'.

Pedersen in her analysis of New Zealand party websites during the 2005 election.[12] Instead of fully adapting new features that enable direct interaction and deliberation with citizens, parties still attempt to exert as much control over the process as possible. Similarly, Williamson argues that although politicians regard social media as a positive force in supporting their communication with constituents, they use it 'primarily as a tool for communication to, rather than engaging with, constituents'.[13] In other words, politicians and their campaign teams try to adapt social media to meet their own needs by creating what Jackson and Lilleker describe as a 'hybrid of Web 1.0 and Web 2.0'.[14] As we demonstrate below, these findings are entirely consonant with those of our own study.

But what motivates politicians to create a *Facebook* page or *Twitter* account in the first place? There seem to be a number of influences on politicians' take-up of social media, not simply personal proclivities and interest in these new communication tools but also the status of their particular party. For example, some studies suggest that social media are adopted more frequently by parties in opposition than in government.[15] The use of *Facebook* and *Twitter* could also be linked to national proclivities and trends in the wider landscape of online media use. Strandberg's work on the 2011 elections in Finland, for example, found that social media use was embedded in the cultural practices of both politicians and publics.[16] As we see below, the same mix of motivational drivers were also present in our study.

Looking at social media from the public's point of view, findings from studies of various election campaigns suggest that social media *could* provide an opportunity for people

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[12] Karina Pedersen, 'New Zealand Parties in Cyberspace', *Political Science*, Vol. 57, No. 2 (2005), pp. 107-116.
[13] Andy Williamson, 'The Effect of Digital Media on MPs' Communication with Constituents', *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. 62, No. 3 (2009), p. 525.
[14] Jackson and Lilleker, 'Building an Architecture of Participation?', p. 247.
[15] Christine B. Williams and Girish J. 'Jeff' Gulati, 'Social networks in political campaigns: Facebook and the congressional elections of 2006 and 2008', *New Media & Society*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (2013), pp. 52-71.
[16] Kim Strandberg, 'A social media revolution or just a case of history repeating itself? The use of social media in the 2011 Finnish parliamentary elections', *New Media & Society*, Vol. 15, No. 8 (2013), pp. 1329-1347.

who are habitually less attracted to politics to get more involved.[17] The considerable body of

work undertaken on Obama's 2008 and 2011 online campaigns demonstrated that a key

strategy in those campaigns was to make specific requests to friends and followers to 'like'

and 'share' Obama's messages and thus extend his reach and potential influence.[18] At the

more active end of the political participation scale, there is now a proliferation of politically-

focused *Facebook* groups which have been instrumental in bringing together citizens to

pursue both online and offline political action, becoming important vehicles for political

expression.[19] It also seems that messages and posts made via social media can have the effect

of driving traffic to political websites,[20] thus acting as both a teaser but also providing a first-

step in what could be a more active political journey of citizen engagement.

      These kinds of digital developments point to a shift in how politicians and the public

connect with and to each other and could indicate a shift in the balance of political power

although the extent of their influence on *changing* that agenda is hard to quantify. Chadwick

goes as far as saying that these new digital media actors can now be seen as 'growing forces

in the mediation of political life',[21] and even if this appears a little over-stated, there is no

denying that the scale of social media means it needs to be taken seriously as at least a

potential source of political influence. However, there remains scant evidence either of the

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[17] Sonja Utz, 'The (Potential) Benefits of Campaigning via Social Network Sites', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2009), pp. 221-243.

[18] Scott P. Robertson, Ravi K. Vatrapu and Richard Medina, 'The social life of social networks: Facebook linkage patterns in the 2008 US presidential election', in *Proceedings of the 10th Annual International Conference on Digital Government Research: Social Networks: Making Connections between Citizens, Data and Government* (Digital Government Society of North America, 2009), pp. 6-15; Scott P. Robertson, Ravi K. Vatrapu, and Richard Medina, 'Off the wall political discourse: Facebook use in the 2008 U.S. presidential election', *Information Polity*, Vol. 15, No. 1-2 (2010), pp. 11-31; Juliana Fernandes, Magda Giurcanu, Kevin W. Bowers, and Jeffrey C. Neely, 'The Writing on the Wall: A Content Analysis of College Students' Facebook Groups for the 2008 Presidential Election', *Mass Communication and Society*, Vol. 13, No. 5 (2010), pp. 653-675.

[19] Julia K. Woolley, Anthony M. Limperos, and Mary Beth Oliver, 'The 2008 Presidential Election, 2.0: A Content Analysis of User-Generated Political *Facebook* Groups', *Mass Communication and Society*, Vol. 13, No. 5 (2010), pp. 631-652.

[20] Erickson and Lilleker, 'Campaign Websites and Hypermedia Campaigning: Lessons from the Ed Balls Labour Leadership Campaign 2010', pp. 404-424.

[21] Andrew Chadwick, 'Britain's First Live Televised Party Leaders' Debate: From the News Cycle to the Political Information Cycle', *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. 64, No. 1 (2010), p. 40.

real power that citizens have to effect meaningful political change through social media activity alone, nor of the desire on the part of politicians to *genuinely* dialogue with citizens and not only listen to their voices but act on their views.[22] Whilst it is undoubtedly true that social media are now playing an increasingly important part in civic and political life, taken up by social movements and activist groups as well as politicians and parties as means to mobilise, communicate and campaign, their transformative power remains at the level of potential rather than firmly established.[23]

Methods

The rapid rise of social media in the last few years and Team Obama's much-vaunted use of *Facebook* as the public mobilisation tool par excellence in his first leadership campaign in 2008 could suggest that political communication is moving closer to the ideal of deliberative democracy. In 2012, *Facebook* had over a billion active users globally.[24] It is therefore rather tempting to suggest that the voices of the public are becoming louder and more important as they post and tweet to a global audience, bypassing traditional media and promoting their own diverse perspectives, views and news. Whilst the interactive framework supported by *Facebook* in particular does indeed provide the means whereby a debating space in which many voices *can* talk to each other is enabled, finally realising Habermas's dream, quite how many of those voices are heard, by whom, and with what consequence is currently unknown. This study aimed to respond to some of these challenges by asking politicians what motivated them to use social media, and their views on social media's utility and efficacy as channels for political communication. These two issues constitute the primary research questions

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[22] Jodi Dean, *The Communist Horizon* (London and New York: Verso, 2012).
[23] See Andy Williamson, Laura Miller, and Freddy Fallon, *Behind the Digital Campaign: An Exploration of the Use, Impact and Regulation of Digital Campaigning* (London: The Hansard Society, 2010); Brian D. Loader, Dan Mercea (eds), *Social Media and Democracy: Innovations in Participatory Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012).
[24] Michael P. Cameron, Patrick Barrett, Bob Stewardson, 'Can social media predict election results: Evidence from New Zealand', University of Waikato: Department of Economics Working Paper in Economics 13/08.

guiding this work. In addition, and in particular, given the potential of social media to respond to the democratic deficit by enabling a less mediatised form of dialogue to take place between elected representatives and citizens as well as expand the extent of political participation, do politicians themselves consider that these are important developments? In other words, do MPs believe that the promise of social media as a democratising force can be realised via social media tools such as *Facebook*?

To begin with, we undertook a mapping exercise of MPs' online presence. Interestingly, despite the importance that is often ceded to digital media in a political communication context, tracking politicians' online presence was not a straightforward process. We started to identify an appropriate sample by looking at the formal profiles of all MPs who were contesting the 2011 election on the New Zealand Parliament website. We then looked at the major party sites, focusing on candidate profiles. This proved fruitful, as many profiles included links to personal websites, *Facebook* and *Twitter* accounts. Where we could not find information, we explored *Facebook* and *Twitter* sites directly, searching for the names of MPs, which yielded a few more 'hits'. Once we had applied these strategies, we identified 94 MPs (77% of all MPs) who were present online in some way, the most popular online presence being via *Facebook*. These MPs were then contacted by email, outlining the project and asking if they would be willing to be interviewed; 17 MPs (18% of those online) agreed to take part. We then developed and piloted an interview schedule that comprised a series of open questions relating to the two primary research questions, which we used in a revised form with the final sample. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or by telephone in October and November 2011 and lasted between 15 and 60 minutes. We then produced transcripts, which were subsequently analysed to identify thematic responses. All MPs agreed to be on-the-record for the interviews and were later circulated with a draft of this current paper and asked if they were agreeable for their comments to be attributed: no

one refused permission to be quoted. A list of the participating MPs can be found in the Appendix. We do not make any claims about the representativeness of the interviewees, since any self-selecting sample are likely to be more interested in the topic than all the others who failed to respond. Labour respondents were over-represented in the sample (9 Labour: 6 National) and women were also over-represented (9 women: 8 men), when compared to their numbers amongst the online MP community. However, the findings discussed below showed very little variation based on party, sex, age or status, with one or two exceptions, which are discussed below (see Appendix). There **were** differences in opinion, but these related more to personal preferences, positive or negative experiences of social media and a propensity to embrace (or not) new technologies more generally. For this reason and because the sample is relatively modest, we have not quantified the findings but instead, provide exemplary quotes to illustrate the general attitudinal trends we observed.

Findings

All the interviews began with the same open question, which asked about the interviewee's general attitude towards social media in general and *Facebook* in particular. This broad question was then followed up by more targeted questions as well as probing behind some of the comments generated by the first open question. The themes we explored in the interviews included: the positive and innovative aspects of social media, liking and sharing, differences between *Facebook* and *Twitter*, the extent of autonomy in posting behaviour, the integration of social media with more traditional campaign strategies, and the 'darker' side of social media. First, though, we provide an overview and then discuss the emergent themes.

Overview

Most MPs have been using *Facebook* since at least 2008, that is, around the same time that the explicitly political use of *Facebook* came to prominence during Barack Obama's first

presidential campaign. Aaron Gilmore makes an important point about the shift from seeing social media as merely *sociable* to seeing its *political* potential as a communication channel between politician and electorate, 'Initially, *Facebook* was something I used with my *real* [sic, original emphasis] friends as opposed to virtual friends but it's become useful as a way to communicate with voters …'. This point is echoed by David Cunliffe, who considers that being on *Facebook* is, '… part of my accessibility as a Member of Parliament, so I maintain contact between elections, as a general outreach tool rather than simply an election tool'. All MPs recognise the public's interest in and use of social media and are keen to tap into its growing popularity. However, while they appreciate the easy speed of *Facebook* in posting out information to the public, some also recognise that the scattergun effect of social media can also alert people to the fact of an event of which they were previously unaware. On the one hand, this is precisely what both *Facebook* and *Twitter* do so well, providing quick information about people, news and events. On the other, widespread sharing, re-tweeting and re-posting can have unintended consequences such as venues suddenly becoming dangerously overcrowded as news of an event spreads, or being gate-crashed by individuals and groups intent on causing chaos and disruption. This has led some politicians to be cautious about what they post on their *Facebook* wall and what they circulate via private messaging and closed groups as they acknowledge that they cannot readily control how their information is used or re-circulated.

> 'I don't always post openly on everything I do and quite often I use closed groups on *Facebook* which I didn't even know existed even three years ago, or I use private messaging. Individuals contact me via private messaging and younger people seem to like that better than email. Or there could be a group of residents in a suburb who don't want everybody in the world knowing what's going on in their lives, but they want to interact with me, so that's really useful for me' (Aaron Gilmore).

'I wouldn't say on *Facebook*, "Hey, we're having a campaign fundraiser, come
along" and include the address, in case some unpleasant person turns up and
scares people … but I will say, "hey, we're having a great movie night so come
along and support our campaign." I'm still quite nervous about where messages
go and who they go to' (Ruth Dyson).

A large part of the attraction of *Facebook* (and *Twitter* and blogs for that matter) is the
unmediated and mostly unmoderated nature of the communication between politician and
citizen, which is crucial for smaller parties who are otherwise marginalised by mainstream
media and who welcome the more direct form of address provided by social media. Some
MPs suggest that it is a 'levelling' media, allowing a conversation to develop which values all
parties and allowing a relationship to build between politician and constituent.

'I see social media as an increasingly important and much more direct tool [than
traditional media] and a way of having real interactions with people and it puts
you on the same level as the people you are trying to connect with … it means
that they can see you as a human being and they can ask you questions and you
get to defend your position first hand and it allows you to build relationships …
it's more holistic' (Clare Curran).

Whilst this view of 'conversation' doubtless does take place in some instances, it
requires the existence of dialogue and, as importantly, in order to *build* the relationship
Curran describes, the dialogic thread needs to be continuous and this is not how *Facebook*
works, nor is it how MPs actually behave on *Facebook* (see author et al., in press). What is
perhaps more realistic is to consider *Facebook* as a means through which to *begin* a
conversation with a politician which then goes offline or into private messaging, so *Facebook*
becomes the conduit of initial contact rather than the focus of ongoing communication on a
one-to-one basis. The notion that *Facebook* and other social media tools therefore represent
exemplars of democracy-in-action is only partially realised. Most studies, including this one,
suggest that the reality of most online interactions between citizens and politicians is a one-

way flow, the politician publicising an event or sharing a link but seldom inviting a response.[25] While individuals do make comments on politicians' posts, they are usually short responses and where a 'conversation' *does* develop, the topic of the original post is often lost as commentators react to what other people have said, discourse often degenerating very quickly into personal insult. In any case, at a very practical level, it would simply be impossible for a politician to reply to every comment made in response to a post on *Facebook*, although most politicians in this study did say that they tried to respond when asked a direct question or if someone posted up a comment to which a policy response would be helpful to more than the individual questioner.

> 'I try to respond and I think this is actually really important because there is no point otherwise. If people ask me questions and they are not deliberately trolling … I try and answer…but time really works against us and sometimes I look at comments and too much time has passed and too many comments have been made, and I just think: "Oh, I'm not going to jump in here …"' (Grant Robertson).

There is no doubt that tools like *Facebook* make it easy for citizens to communicate with politicians and this ease is likely to encourage individuals who would not otherwise make contact via more traditional means such as the constituency office or politicians' surgeries. In this way, *Facebook* can be seen to partially deliver the augmented democracy its proponents suggest, even if simply by virtue of making contact easier between politicians and the polity.

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[25] See Kaye D. Sweetser and Ruthann W. Lariscy, 'Candidates make good friends: An analysis of candidates' uses of Facebook', *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (2008), pp. 175-198; Rasmus K. Nielsen, 'Mundane internet tools, mobilizing practices, and the coproduction of citizenship'*, New Media & Society*, Vol. 13, No. 5 (2010), pp. 755-771; Jim Macnamara and Gail Kenning, 'E-electioneering 2010: Trends in social media use in Australian political communication', *Media International Australia*, Vol. 139 (2011), pp. 7-22.

Networking, sharing and liking

Social networking tools have the potential to enhance democracy by allowing a million flowers (voices) to bloom, enabling individuals to speak to the one and the many regardless of temporal and geographical differences. As well as dialoguing with the public, interviewees also point to the ability of *Facebook* to act as signpost to other sites and places.

> 'A really strong benefit is that it [*Facebook*] gives other media an additional life. For example, we've got a blog and all our MPs blog on it and we saw that the number of commentators on the site has been dropping over the past few years and a lot of those commentators were just trolls. But by pasting a link to the blog on *Facebook* and *Twitter*, it's given it another life, generating another round of comments. I'm finding that a lot more people comment on the blog link on *Facebook* than I see commenting on the blog post itself' (Gareth Hughes).

This observation highlights an outcome of social networking activities that is often overlooked. In addition to the benefits of simultaneous posting to both *Facebook* and *Twitter* in terms of consolidating effort, the pages to which links are posted, be they blog sites or Party sites or even personal web pages, can see a significant increase in traffic, a point which several Labour MPs made in relation to the party blog, *Red Alert*. National Party MP Nicky Wagner also sees considerable benefit in a multi-platform approach, where she can deliver one short message via *Facebook* and *Twitter* which includes a link to a longer piece on her website.

> 'I use *Facebook* because I think someone may pick up some information that way. It's information that I'm putting on my blog or sending out in an email or sending to the media anyway, so it's no more work for me to put it on *Facebook* too, so I stick it there. I use it to send people to my website, so it acts like a bit of a teaser'.

Most MPs do not receive a lot of comments on most of their posts although 'liking' is often the mechanism through which they get a sense of whether their posts are being read

and/or receiving friendly approval. 'Most people, if they don't want to comment on a post, will "like" it and that's always good to see but I don't get a whole lot of comments, mostly likes' (Rahui Katene). Perhaps this kind of easy 'clicktivist' approach is actually preferable for busy MPs who can at least have the satisfaction of seeing public endorsements of their views which are visible to themselves, their friends and anyone else who happens to be viewing on that day, but without the need to respond to a large number of comments.

Facebook vs. Twitter

Most politicians believe that *Facebook* and *Twitter* function in different ways and are likely to have quite different audiences, with *Twitter* attracting political 'junkies' and *Facebook* being used by a more diverse community. 'I find *Twitter* to be a bit more political insider traffic, whereas *Facebook* does seem to have more of a cross section of society, followers seem to be a mix of ages, sexes, geographic locations' (Gareth Hughes). Hughes also suggests, as did other politicians in this study, that *Twitter* posts are much more likely to be taken up and published by journalists than anything he says on *Facebook*. 'I can't think of a time when I've had a *Facebook* post published, but I can think of a number of times where I've posted an image or a comment on *Twitter* and that has been published, or journalists call me up directly because of a comment on *Twitter*'. As well as imagining different audiences for *Facebook* and *Twitter*, politicians are generally quite strategic in how they use these different tools, decisions being based on a mix of factors including time available, technological pragmatism, fitness for a particular purpose and potential for journalistic pick-up.

> *'Twitter* is really … a mobile thing for me and it's technologically-based as I have a Blackberry and it is much easier to use *Twitter* on Blackberry than to use *Facebook*, so I tend to use *Twitter* for more immediate media mobile situations, whereas on *Facebook* I tend to do a lot of links to videos …' (Grant Robertson).

'Yes, I do use *Twitter* … I was an early adopter … I've been on it nearly three years and I've become a more frequent user in the last 12 months. It's another rather useful tool but with a slightly different use and for a slightly different purposes. A lot of journalists use *Twitter* but constituents use *Facebook*: *Twitter* is a different form of instant media, it's more snappy because of the 140 characters' (Aaron Gilmore).

Other politicians are much more circumspect, even reticent, about using *Twitter,* which is very different to their views on *Facebook*, which *all* respondents believe has become a necessary medium of public engagement. Jo Goodhew's comment is typical, 'I've shied away from *Twitter* because it's very much in the here and now, something that you have to be very responsive to, and I tend to be rather more orderly in how I use my time. I don't know if that's right, but that's the feeling I have for it'. This reluctance to engage with *Twitter* is thus partly about time but also about timeliness, recognizing that *Twitter* has an immediacy which requires an almost instant response if it is to have any impact. Another issue is purpose-effect, articulated in pragmatic terms by Michael Woodhouse who recognises that *Facebook* may be useful to build visibility and profile, but is yet to be convinced of *Twitter*'s use as a credible political tool, 'I don't tweet and I don't follow tweets … but in terms of using social media as a means of delivering frequent messages and profiling, I guess there's probably merit in the long run, I just haven't got into the habit of it'. David Cunliffe draws an interesting contrast between *Facebook* and *Twitter* in terms of their various audiences:

'*Facebook* is retail, *Twitter* is wholesale. *Facebook* is retail-level conversation with individual voters who have an interest in politics … I don't normally use *Facebook* for breaking news, but I will recycle media comment onto my page that has been generated by other means. I know that journalists monitor *Twitter* for the early feed on stories so if I'm trying to place a lead on a story, I might use *Twitter* or do a press release but I wouldn't use *Facebook* for that'.

Agency, autonomy and the party line

A number of participants discussed the extent to which MPs can exert agency in their posting behaviour. For example, although the Labour Party strongly encouraged all their candidates to use the *Own Our Futures* logo as their *Facebook* icon, the uptake of this request was mixed. When asked why some MPs were not adopting the icon, Brendan Burns shrugged and said, 'well, we're a disparate bunch'. Grant Robertson accepts that trying to standardise the behaviour of MPs in their use of a mostly unregulated tool such as *Facebook* is probably not sensible. 'The icon thing was obviously where people were trying to get particular messages across and *Own Our Future* is our election branding. We asked everyone to use that but the nature of social media is that if you try too hard to regularize or manipulate people, you can come undone'. The other problem with using slogans as icons is that they can be spoofed very readily as happened in this case, when National Party supporters started using the slogan, <u>*Owe*</u> *Our Futures* (our emphasis), a clever piece of negative advertising. There are also differences in the kinds of digital freedoms enjoyed by opposition MPs compared with politicians in the government benches, with politicians recognising the responsibilities which come with power.

> 'A politician's voice carries a particular weight if not a particular value, so you have to be clear about who and why you are engaging in conversations and on what topics. It imposes a considerable discipline because everything you say is expected to be representative of more than you, to be on behalf of your Party and in my case, the Government … and you have a duty of care in that regard' (Hekia Parata).

Not only, but also

When considering the integration of social media tools with campaign stalwarts such as the Town Hall or street corner meeting, door-knocking, sign-waving or even emailed newsletters, there was a clear view amongst all MPs that social media are supplements to, rather than

replacements for, traditional campaign strategies. At the same time, there was an acknowledgement that as the technology developed, more people were seeing its easy virtues as well as the pragmatic view that citizens are mostly now disinclined to turn out to listen to MPs and candidates in real time, other than when they want to be especially supportive (as activists and/or family members) or especially confrontational (as opponents or discontents). David Cunliffe makes a persuasive argument in favour of *Facebook* as a high-reach mode when he compares the return on his effort between the highly time-consuming task of organising a public meeting including renting a room where only 20 people turn up, with posting a comment on *Facebook* which can generate 100 responses in five minutes. However, there is a trade-off between reaching a small number of people face-to-face but who might turn out to vote for you, compared to reaching and debating with a much larger number of people on *Facebook* but who are not in your electorate.

Facebook was also identified as having potential to provoke action, either political or social. Lianne Dalziel, for example, suggests the benefits of a reciprocal interest between politicians and the public:

> 'It's been very useful for distributing earthquake-related information and I belong to resident association pages in my electorate so I put my updates on their pages and I quite often read those pages to see what their issues are. Sometimes that has led to my taking things up as political issues and getting some traction with the Government, so that's been a very positive experience'.

There was also a view, shared by the majority of respondents, that social media is a young or at least a young*er* person's medium and while there are doubtless any number of nonagenarians using *Facebook* and *Twitter*, most MPs believe that they are not the typical demographic. However, as Nicky Wagner points out, a significant proportion of the voting population are not digital natives and it is vital to remember that. 'We're still struggling to

communicate with some of our really keen people who are not even on email. Older people are the more reliable voters so we can't afford to leave them out, so it's a valuable platform but don't think it's the complete answer'. Thus, the most effective political campaign strategy is one which takes account of different approaches for different people and does not assume that everyone lives a 24/7 life online.

As could be expected, politicians are highly pragmatic in terms of how much time they are able and willing to give to cultivating their social media profile, recognising both the opportunity cost of posting and tweeting when time-poor, but also regularly weighing up the strategic importance of spending time doing one thing over others. Nicky Wagner has an IT background and is very well aware of the power of social networking tools and the importance of being visible but believes they have yet to prove their worth: 'I use it [*Facebook*] because I understand the power of these things … and if I got a good response, I would be more encouraged to do it more regularly'. Rahui Katene considers that even without any clear evidence of effectiveness, an MP must 'do' social media. 'You can't ignore it, you've got to be part of it, otherwise you'll be left behind, so even though I don't know how many of my constituents are actually on *Facebook*, I still do it'.

Dark matter

All interviewees had some less than positive things to say about *Facebook*, especially those who have had bad experiences of social media. Examples of *Facebook* faux-pas by politicians more generally are legion and with the development of ever more sophisticated social media tracking software, their attempts to delete comments which they later consider to be ill-advised are being thwarted by sites such as Politwoops,[26] which track and then publish such deletions. For Darien Fenton, whose own provocative post about someone resulted in

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[26] Politwoops, *Sunlight Foundation*, http://politwoops.sunlightfoundation.com/ (5 April 2014).

her having to make a public apology, responses from some of her detractors were not only disproportionate but frightening. She readily admits that she was naïve when it comes to really understanding how *Facebook* works and, in particular, the entirely open and public nature of the *Facebook* wall. For Fenton, her sex was not an incidental feature in how people reacted to her and reflects an ongoing issue which is finally being tackled by *Twitter*[27] in relation to abusive and threatening tweets targeting women.

> 'Politicians get stalked on *Facebook*, it's quite creepy and I started getting some really nasty stuff from people … a whole load of things that you can't imagine, so I blocked everyone saying those things but of course, you can't stop the emails coming in … what it showed me is that *Facebook* is *really* public (original emphasis). It also showed me that we still have a male culture which leads men to think they can say whatever they like to a woman … so I am much more guarded now'.

Our interviewees had a range of views about allowing members of the public to post on their walls, some restricting this entirely whilst others were much more open, but always with the possibility of taking down posts and unfriending people. '*Facebook* gives you editorial rights to decide on what people can and can't say' (Aaron Gilmore). Some politicians are happy to allow people who they know do not share their political values to become friends, although they might warn them, in responding to a 'friend' request, that they expect that person to respect the rules of engagement, which allow vigorous debate and disagreement but not hostile or personalised attacks. There was also recognition that the nature of social networking sites requires certain flexibility in relation to 'acceptable' behaviour but there are limits and these mostly relate to the level of personal hostility.

> 'I never put up any information that I wouldn't put in a press release, because I think that *Facebook* is utterly insecure and that I may as well be releasing it on

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[27] Gross, Doug. "Twitter cracks down on abusive tweets', *CNN*, August 2013, http://edition.cnn.com/2013/08/05/tech/social-media/*Twitter*-abuse-button (5 April 2014).

email so I don't make any comments that I would be ashamed to have in the newspaper, because I'm sure that my enemies monitor the site' (David Cunliffe).

As Cunliffe demonstrates, politicians are very aware of their vulnerability in relation to hostile comments and the 'silent watchers' who lurk on their sites, waiting to share an injudicious throwaway comment which could cause embarrassment if circulated more widely. But they also recognise that they are public servants and their *Facebook* walls and fan pages are in the public domain, so post in the knowledge that the panoptic gaze is ever present in their lives, online as much as offline.

> 'Yes, you do you get trolls and I have engaged with some of them and on a few occasions ended up having an argument and then had to unfriend them. Sometimes they apologize, in which case I think that's fine. But sometimes I just take them off because I find them offensive and it's my right to do that but it's really only been a few and generally people are quite respectful' (Clare Curran).

Conclusion: present, future uncertain

In general terms, and in the context of a general election campaign, the primary reasons given by politicians for using social media are to: make themselves *visible* to the public, both national and local; *communicate* with their electorate (actual or potential) and the wider public about their policy positions and campaign activities; and to be *seen to be using* an increasingly popular and populist communication channel. While this is a modest study of a small number of politicians, their attitudes towards and use of social media find strong resonances with findings from other studies in other places, which suggest similarly strategic approaches to social media use.[28] While MPs certainly *talked* about engaging with the public, studies of how politicians *actually* behave on *Facebook* suggest that it is much closer to the

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[28] See Jason Gilmore, 'Ditching the pack: digital media in the 2010 Brazilian congressional campaigns', *New Media & Society*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (2012), pp. 617-633; Gunn Sara Enli and Eli Skogerbø, 'Personalized campaigns in party-centred politics', *Information, Communication & Society*, Vol. 16, No. 5 (2013), pp. 757-774; Morten Skovsgaard and Arjen Van Dalen, 'Dodging the Gatekeepers', *Information, Communication & Society*, Vol. 16, No. 5 (2013), pp. 737-756.

traditional form of one-way flow than the dialogic process our interviewees suggest.[29] The

realpolitik that this contradiction implies is likely to occur for any number of reasons

including time scarcity, lack of experience in using the range of social media tools to their

best advantage, bad experiences of public interactions and negative responses such as

trolling, flaming and general hostility, a preference for more traditional and embodied forms

of political communication, a desire to control message flow, and understanding the need to

be moving with the digital times but not yet being convinced about their efficacy. Those few

politicians who *were* more genuinely enthusiastic about *Facebook* (and social media more

generally) are those who have a background in media or PR, or had been early adopters or

who see social media as a useful means to find a public voice in the face of their

marginalisation by mainstream media, such as MPs from smaller parties. However, there was

considerable ambivalence amongst most MPs about the potential of *Facebook*, or indeed any

social media, to change hearts and minds at the ballot box and all respondents suggested that

social media is no substitute for traditional campaign strategies which involve face-to-face

interactions.

> 'I love the razzamatazz of being on the street corner and talking to people … a lot
> of our constituents won't bother to read policy documents, aren't on *Facebook*,
> won't come along to the meetings but if they see you on a street corner with your
> billboard and they recognize you and the Party, hopefully they will tick the box'
> (Rahui Katene).

Some politicians are very clear about using *Facebook* as an explicitly *informal* mode

of communication, likening it to their living room in terms of its conversational style and

approach. 'I see *Facebook* as more like my lounge room: it's a space to have conversations

with people that are more considered and thoughtful and I guess light-hearted or at least, not

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[29] See also Pablo Aragón, Karolin E. Kappler, Andreas Kaltenbrunner, David Laniado and Yana
Volkovich, 'Communication dynamics in Twitter during political campaigns: the case of the 2011 Spanish
national election', *Policy & Internet*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2013), pp. 183-206.

really heavy and I feel that that's where I make the most contact with the people I really want to connect with' (Clare Curran). In these cases, politicians are promoting themselves as 'ordinary' people, perhaps believing that merging political statement with personal sentiment might encourage voters to consider them as fully human with regular interests such as sport and music as well as being good advocates for constituents. Others want to make a distinction between their public and private use of social media. 'I've been using it for nearly four years politically. I think it's a wonderful tool, in fact I'm using it almost exclusively for politics at the moment. I stay in touch with friends mostly from my wife's account to keep my *Facebook* page focused on politics-related issues' (Gareth Hughes).

The majority of our interviewees regard *Facebook* as an increasingly important way to connect with constituents and some believe that we are witnessing nothing short of a fundamental shift in the way in which politicians and publics communicate with each other, changing the form and character of political communication itself. 'I've got no doubt that what we are seeing is a transition in the manner in which MPs connect with constituents and members of the public and that social media is playing a very important part in that' (Michael Woodhouse). But this view seems rather optimistic when considering not only the very small number of people who are friends of MPs on *Facebook*, or who like their fan pages or who follow them on *Twitter*, but as well the fact that even fewer bother to like, share, comment or re-tweet messages.[30] Such a democratising view is also not borne out by most research studies, which show the one-way flow of communication and the lack of interest that politicians show in actively engaging with the public. By stating the opposite, however, perhaps politicians are attempting to reconcile a personal preference for the human touch (which most of them say they actually prefer) with the exhortations of their party's

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[30] See also Nielsen, 'Mundane internet tools, mobilizing practices, and the coproduction of citizenship'.

communications advisers who are in thrall to social media and believe everyone else should be too, mistaking noise for action, heat for light.

The findings from this study suggest that the take-up of social media by politicians is influenced by a range of personal and technological factors which work together to determine both motivation and behaviour. Most politicians are uncertain about *Facebook's* ability to deliver results at the ballot box or facilitate genuine dialogue between themselves and the public, but they also recognise that social media are too important to ignore. Grant Robertson's comment below exemplifies the pragmatic thinking that characterises the ambivalence with which many of our interviewees view *Facebook* and other social media, stressing that any communication strategy that does not involve human interaction can never deliver a 'gut feeling', can never enable a real conversation to develop or provide a genuine indication of political intent.

> *'Facebook* can't give you any certainty. I can get certainty when I look someone in the eye and say: "have I got your vote?" *Facebook* can't do that. I don't think *Facebook* is capable of personal level discussion, it's a proxy for that, but it's not a replacement'.

Appendix 1 - Interviewees

Name	Party
Aaron Gilmore	National
Brendan Burns	Labour
Chris Tremain	National
Clare Curran	Labour
Darien Fenton	Labour
David Cunliffe	Labour
Gareth Hughes	Green Party
Grant Robertson	Labour
Hekia Parata	National
Jacinda Ardern	Labour
Jo Goodhew	National
Lianne Dalziell	Labour
Michael Woodhouse	National
Nicky Wagner	National
Rahui Katene	Maori Party
Raymond Huo	Labour
Ruth Dyson	Labour

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