

Submission to “Social Media and the Transformation of Public Space”

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Panel Proposal: “Social Politics: Twitter, Facebook and Reaching out to Voters”

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Rationale: Previous research has argued that profound changes in both society and the media might result in a new form of political communication that is qualitatively different from its predecessors (Norris et al. 1999). Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) divided political communication in western democracies into three distinct historical phases: First, the two decades after WWII have been termed “the golden age of the parties”, and are recognised as a party-dominated communication system. The second phase started in the 1960s, with the emergence of television as the dominant medium for political communication. Third, the digital era imposed a new turn in political communication, both in terms of intensified professionalisation of political advocacy, and increased anti-elitism, popularisation and populism.

Recent research has demonstrated that social media impose changes in both mundane communication (Marwik and boyd 2010) and political communication (Lilleker and Malagón 2010). Social media have become a prominent tool for political communication in key Anglo-American democracies such as Australia (Bruns 2011; Grant et al. 2010), Britain (Lilleker and Jackson 2010; Jackson and Lilleker 2011), and the USA (Wallsten 2010; Wooley et al. 2010). Moreover, studies have shown that political communication has migrated online (Skogerbø and Winsvold 2011) and that social media, in combination with mainstream media, play an increasingly important role in the public sphere also in Nordic countries such as Norway (Kalnes 2009; Karlsen and Skogerbø 2010; Moe 2010) and Sweden (Larsson 2011; Larsson and Moe 2011). Politicians use social media as strategic tools for impression management and election campaigns with the aim to connect with publics, and advertise their candidacy (Westling 2007; Grant et al. 2010; Lilleker and Jackson 2010; Larsson 2011).

With these issues in mind – particularly strategic communication and impression management -- in this international panel, and using a diversity of theoretical and methodological approaches, scholars will present new research on the use of social media (Facebook and Twitter) for the purposes of campaigning by politicians/political parties, as well as by political lobbyists.

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Election days and social media practices: Tweeting as Australia decides

Tim Highfield, University of Technology, Brisbane

The use of social media for political campaigning and election coverage has become commonplace, and the subject of studies from around the world (e.g. Graham, Broersma, Hazelhoff, & van 't Haar, 2013; Strandberg, 2013). Such studies, though, primarily focus either on strategies and tweeting patterns of candidates and political parties during campaigns, or on the total election-related activity on Twitter. Key moments during elections are consistently found to provoke spikes in Twitter activity, from televised debates to the election day itself (e.g. Larsson & Moe, 2012). These individual events are comparatively under-represented in research into social media and elections, yet they encourage other tweeting practices beyond campaigning, as citizens, journalists, and politicians alike publicly contribute to the coverage of the election, and also shape and report the voting experience.

This paper addresses the research gap by identifying tweeting practices during election days. A comparative study of Australian election days evaluates the universal nature of such activities, testing for

their recurrence across different election contexts. The cases studied are the Queensland state election in March 2012, the Western Australian state election in March 2013, and the Australian federal election in September 2013.

Australian political discussions on Twitter are often accompanied by standard hashtags (e.g. #ausvotes, #qldvotes, #wavotes); within election day tweets, though, distinct practices and phases are apparent. In addition to the expected campaigning and partisan commentary, election days see regular tweeting during the voting period, as Australians vote and also tweet location-specific, user-generated reports about local polling places. As the polls close, tweets turn to results and conjecture, moving from the individual experience to the overall outcome. Broadcasters and analysts become increasingly focal accounts during this phase as their updates are widely-disseminated. Finally, with the confirmed results and leaders' victory and concession speeches, activity turns to live-tweeting, in keeping with other televised events as Twitter users quote, summarise, and critique the speeches and results.

The different phases of election day coverage and commentary highlight the practices of social media use by political actors. This paper then provides important information on how citizens, journalists, politicians, and parties alike make use of Twitter on election days, and in particular identifies the types of information provided, and interactions between, these different accounts. Election days offer insights into formal and informal uses of social media around a common context, further highlighting emerging and established practices concerning public debates and political discussions, including campaigning, online.

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Assessing the Permanence of Online Campaigning: A comparison of Political Facebook Pages in Sweden and Norway

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While research into online political communication provides a rich body of research, few studies have focused on online 'permanent campaigning'. The term signifies campaign-like activities at the hands of politicians also during non-election periods and has spawned a number of conceptual discussions. The present paper presents an exploratory effort, studying traces of online permanent campaigning in Norway and Sweden. The paper places its focus on Facebook, providing insights into what is labeled an 'election effect' – traces of online campaigning that can perhaps best be understood in relation the fact that Norway underwent an election during the time period studied.

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Targeting Politicians? Twitter and the National Rifle Association

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Using the concept of the 'conversational ecology' (boyd, et al, 2010) of Twitter, and building upon my own work on the use of Twitter by smaller, "third parties" in the US (Christensen, 2013), in this paper I examine the use of this social media platform by the National Rifle Association (NRA) - US group dedicated to protecting the right to bear arms, and a recognized Washington lobby force – for the purpose of influencing debate on the subject of gun ownership. Specifically, I have focused upon tweets from the NRA (from the end of 2013 through the start of 2014) with direct reference to either proposed legislation impacting gun ownership or statements made by sitting politicians on the subject of gun ownership.

Christian Christensen is Professor in the Department of Media Studies at Stockholm University in Sweden

All Politics Is Local? The Twitter Performance of Local Candidates in the 2013 Australian Federal Election

Axel Bruns, Queensland University of Technology

The phrase “all politics is local” is especially appropriate in the Australian federal electoral context, where all 150 Members of Parliament are elected on the basis of their success in the electoral contests in their local electorates and no adjustments are made to account for their parties' nationwide vote shares. Media coverage, however, tends to focus squarely on the national party leaders, with local contests receiving media attention only in exceptional circumstances. This paper examines the extent to which social media are able to address this gap. During the 2013 Australian federal election, we tracked activity around the Twitter accounts of some 350 MPs and candidates; here, we examine the extent to which candidates and voters use this medium to supplement insufficient local media coverage.

Assoc. Prof. Axel Bruns is an Australian Research Council Future Fellow, and an Associate Professor in the Creative Industries Faculty at Queensland University of Technology. He is a co-editor of *Twitter and Society*.