Citizen Consultation from Above and Below:
The Australian Perspective

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Abstract

Citizen engagement and e-government initiatives in Australia remain somewhat underdeveloped, not least for a number of fundamental structural reasons. Fledgling initiatives can be divided into a number of broad categories, including top-down government consultation through blogs and similar experimental online sites operated by government departments; bottom-up NGO-driven watchdog initiatives such as GetUp!'s *Project Democracy* site, modelled on projects established in the UK; and a variety of more or less successful attempts by politicians (and their media handlers) to utilise social networking tools to connect with constituents while bypassing the mainstream media. This chapter explores these initiatives, and discusses the varying levels of success which they have found to date.

Keywords

Australia, politics, consultation, top-down, bottom-up, blogs, Project Democracy, social networking

Introduction[1]

In Australia, a range of state and Federal Government services have been provided online for some time, but attempts to achieve a more direct form of online consultation between citizen and governments, or even to establish a strong presence of politicians and parties online, remain relatively new. In part, this can be attributed to the comparatively slow take-up by Australians of advanced broadband services, which continue to be both slower and more expensive than comparable services in other developed nations (Green & Bruns, 2007/2009). The 2007 federal election and its aftermath have created a new emphasis on online political information and e-government services, however. During the election itself, the conservative Coalition government, its successful Labor challengers, and several minor parties utilised popular social media sites such as *YouTube* and *Facebook* alongside their own party Websites to galvanise support and promote their policy platforms (Bruns, 2008). Further, the newly elected Labor government's restructure of relevant government departments to form the new Department of Broadband, Communication, and the Digital Economy (DBCDE) provided a clear indication of its policy intentions in this area; these have been underlined further by its 2009 announcement of an A\$43 billion nation-building project for the development of a fibre-to-the-home high-speed National Broadband Network (NBN).

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[1] A version of this chapter was presented at the Conference on Electronic Democracy, Vienna, 7-8 Sep. 2009.

Improved e-government services that aim to provide a better platform for citizen consultation are an obvious and necessary part of these developments. But governments confront a dilemma when implementing such services. Sluggish, inept, or half-hearted deployment of citizen consultation facilities leaves governments vulnerable to criticism from their constituents, and such criticism can be severely damaging to the public perception of governments if it reaches a large audience through viral transmission in online social media. In Australia, for example, it can be argued that the suboptimal utilisation of *YouTube* by the 2007 Coalition election campaign, and the user-generated material parodying it, further cemented the public image of then-Prime Minister John Howard as 'out of touch' (Bruns, Wilson, and Saunders, 2007). A speedy rollout of consultation facilities, by contrast, has the potential to generate more citizen participation than government staffers are able to engage with in a meaningful way, leading to similarly vocal criticism of citizen consultation projects as no more than PR exercises which have no real impact on policy decisions. Even a well-managed introduction of consultation facilities for example in specific areas of government responsibility may lead to disgruntled responses from users who would like to see their areas of interest treated as priorities.

Even when enthusiasm for e-government consultation is generally high among those most concerned with such initiatives, then, regardless of how that deployment is conducted, it is likely to disappoint a substantial section of that community because there is no clear consensus about how and where such consultation facilities should be deployed either at the citizen or at the government level, and no clear understanding of the appropriate processes for such deployment exists in either group.

In the Australian context, this dilemma was evident during a recent trial of a government consultation blog by the DBCDE, which we discuss below. The problems experienced by this blogging trial point to fundamental, systemic limitations to the feasibility of a government-led deployment of citizen consultation facilities, especially where no clear understanding of how to utilise such facilities is shared between politicians, public servants, and citizens. An alternative to the top-down approach is the development of citizen consultation sites from the bottom up, by individuals and third-sector organisations: such sites provide in the first place a space for the formation of (ideally, non-partisan) communities of interest debating current policy challenges amongst themselves, with reference to the statements of relevant political actors; additionally, they offer an opportunity for the government of the day to tap into their collective knowledge and interest in policy development to draw out input for and responses to proposed policy initiatives. Australian political advocacy group GetUp!'s *Project Democracy*, which aims to generate debate on current political issues with reference to the parliamentary Hansard transcripts, provides a useful example for one such third-party space, and we examine it in a second case study below.[2] A third model builds on more individualised initiatives by political actors to engage with their constituencies through utilising social networking services, personal blogs, and similar online tools. Here, too, success and failure remain close companions, and the fate of such initiatives depends crucially on striking an appropriate balance between top-down information transmission and bottom-up receptivity to input from the citizenry. Those politicians who do use these services successfully for consultative

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[2] One of the authors of this chapter, Jason Wilson, was involved in developing *Project Democracy* during his time as GetUp!'s Director of e-Democracy.

purposes may be gesturing towards a new mode of political communication. This possibility is discussed in the third case study below.

The Limitations of Top-Down Consultation

In late 2008, the Australian federal government's Department of Broadband, Communication, and the Digital Economy (DBCDE) launched its *Digital Economy* consultation blog. This move was suggested and foreshadowed in a number of earlier publications dating back even to the previous conservative federal government led by Prime Minister John Howard. In particular, a 2008 report by the Australian Government Information Management Office (AGIMO) had already pondered the "development of a government online consultation web space that includes blogs, online discussion forums and details of public consultations." It reported that

> Respondents said they would be more likely to participate in government consultations if:
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> • the discussion topic were relevant to their personal circumstances;
> • they had the opportunity to nominate the topics for discussion;
> • discussion forums included the participation of Government officials;
> • a range of registration options were available;
> • the site was well designed, easy to find and use;
> • participants were free to express their opinion without censorship; and
> • it were unbiased in its operation. (AGIMO 2008: 2)

Such considerations were furthered in a post by Finance Minister Lindsay Tanner in a post to his 'blog' (in reality, an online op-ed column) on the Website of major Melbourne newspaper *The Age*, which similarly raised "a number of questions" that "need to be thought through":

> Should we set up our own blogs or just pop up on blogs that are already operating?
>
> How much leeway should we give public servants to express opinions on behalf of the government?
>
> Should we have public servants blogging as informed private citizens or official representatives of government?
>
> How much additional resources should be provided to fund government participation?
>
> Should our blogging focus on specific areas of government activity?
>
> These questions involve genuine dilemmas. To be worth the time and effort, government blogging will need to be genuine, relevant and meaningful. (Tanner, 2008a)

Some such questions were eventually answered in practice by the 8 December 2008 launch of the DBCDE *Digital Economy* blog, published as a special section on the DBCDE Website and introduced by a guest post by Tanner even though his colleague Senator Stephen Conroy is the Minister responsible for the Department. The post described *Digital Economy* as "the first of what will be

several consultations taking place over the next six months, supplementing existing policy development processes", and noted that

> While the primary aim of this blog is to get your feedback on aspects of the digital economy, we also want to use this opportunity to explore the mechanics of government blogging and hear your thoughts on how we should interact with you online. (Tanner, 2008b)

The launch of the blog came at a difficult time for the still relatively new government Department. Much of the public attention directed at it in preceding weeks had focussed on one of two key policy decisions: first, Minister Conroy's controversial support for the introduction of a mandatory Internet filter designed to prevent Australian Internet users from accessing 'undesirable' content, which had been heavily criticised by users and industry organisations from both a civil liberties and a technical feasibility perspective, and second, the Department's protracted battle with the formerly government-owned, ex-monopolist communications provider Telstra over DBCDE's exclusion of Telstra from the tendering process for the project to build the next generation of Australia's broadband network. (Public sentiment ran strongly against the 'cleanfeed' Internet filter, but was mainly in favour of Telstra's exclusion from the tendering process as this was seen to increase market competition and bring down broadband prices.)

As a result of such public preoccupations, a majority of comments on the initial *Digital Economy* blog posts dealt mainly with those two hot-button issues rather than engaging with the substance of those posts themselves. In just over ten days, Minister Tanner's opening post alone generated more than 750 on-site comments, mostly attacking the 'cleanfeed' filter or demanding swift progress on deploying next-generation broadband access. In other words, while as far as community involvement and consultation is concerned, the DBCDE blog can be seen as a success, the disregard of citizen respondents for the blog posts' topics themselves must be seen as a significant problem. If the point of the government blog is to engage in a kind of crowdsourcing, harvesting some of the better ideas put forward by commenters on the blog as input for its policy development processes, and perhaps also to harness satisfied participants as virtual marketers for the government's policies, then the blog failed to achieve its purpose.

This failure is neither simply the fault of citizen commenters (for responding in ways other than those intended and invited by the government) nor of government staffers (for attempting to avoid currently heavily debated topics in favour of the somewhat more diffuse "digital economy" theme) – rather, the failure is systemic and points to both sites speaking past one another, at cross purposes; as such, it provides a useful and instructive example for the problems which can arise from top-down citizen consultation efforts even where (as in the present case) we may assume that they were well-intentioned.

Although citizens were perhaps not using the blog in the way its creators had intended it to be used, the blog was as good a space as any to air their obvious grievances – precisely because this blog was the first of its kind, there were precious few other spaces online where so direct a feedback mechanism to the relevant minister and his staff was available. Perhaps DBCDE staff should simply have tackled key issues head-on, and should have posted articles about the Internet filter and the Telstra tender to their blog so that those articles could have acted as clearinghouses for all those

comments, allowing the discussion around other posts to be detached from that topic: "if you want to harangue us for the filter proposal, here's your chance – just please leave the other posts alone."

Indeed, a post titled "We hear you…" on 12 December – four days after the *Digital Economy* blog's launch – promised as much:

> in responding to the many comments on the blog to date (over 900 to date), there are a lot of comments related to the issue of ISP filtering. As we indicated in our introductory page, we plan to blog about this issue and respond to many of the issues you've already raised in the comments in an upcoming post and welcome anyone who has anything new to add to topic to respond to that thread. (DBCDE, 2008)

(That follow-up post, authored by Minister Conroy, was published another ten days later, on 22 December 2008; Conroy, 2008.)

But even if had been possible to quarantine all discussion about the Internet filter and the trouble with Telstra into dedicated posts, the underlying problem for the DBCDE blog is its inherent exposure as a – indeed, the only – high-profile government blog (with social media spreading the news, it achieved this profile even without any particularly substantial promotion for the blog). At issue here is the fact that there are significant and possibly immutable upper limits to the form of two-way community consultation represented by the 'government blog' format: as Clay Shirky has described it,

> communities have strong upper limits on size, while audiences can grow arbitrarily large. Put another way, the larger a group held together by communication grows, the more it must become like an audience — largely disconnected and held together by communication traveling from center to edge — because increasing the number of people in a group weakens communal connection. (2002, n.pag.)

Contrary to communities, however, audiences (in Shirky's definition) are unable to engage in meaningful citizen consultation. Thus, by immediately attracting a sizeable number of commenters in its first days of operation – by virtue of its being an official government blog – the *Digital Economy* blog never had a chance to move through the phase in which those social structures establish themselves that are so crucial to the effective functioning of user communities *as* communities. What was (necessarily) missing from the DBCDE blog was the presence of a community with a sense of purpose and direction, a community which may have restrained its urge to engage in complaints about the 'cleanfeed' filter, repeated *ad nauseam*, and (assuming genuine participation by the other side) could have moved on to a more fruitful discussion aimed at finding a mutually acceptable compromise.

An established community can be relied upon to do a substantial deal of self-management and self-policing – ensuring that comments remain on-topic, that participants exercise a modicum of civility, and that newcomers are effectively socialised into the established environment; though supporting technologies have changed from mailing-lists and newsgroups to Web-based environments and social media, the basic principles for such community processes are well established (see e.g. the seminal work in Baym, 2000). But such communities are best grown organically, from a relatively

small group of initial participants, as is evident in Australia's best-known political blogs; while – *pace* Shirky – with the right technological support structures in place some communities are able to grow very large (a site like *Slashdot*, for example, has managed to attract well over half a million users to its community spaces; see Bruns, 2005), it is very difficult indeed to retro-fit this sense of community into an existing site, even one as young as the DBCDE blog.

One question arising from this is whether future government blogs should have a more carefully phased roll-out. They may also be able to learn from the experience of sites like *Slashdot*, and to introduce more of the advanced community self-management and (ironically in this context) self-filtering functionality that exists there. This could involve peer-rating mechanisms allowing the community itself to highlight the best and hide the worst of what its commenters are saying, and perhaps even a contributor 'karma' system to reward consistently insightful and constructive contributors. Over time, this will help the community develop a sense of itself, and will curb instances of blind anti-government vitriol; additionally, it could also point DBCDE staff towards insightful voices in the community to be recruited for focus groups and other citizen consultation processes beyond the blog itself.

However, such technological support mechanisms do little to address the more fundamental problem that an official, top-down government blog must necessarily exist in a precarious, exposed position which may attract deliberate disruption from oppositional and lobby groups or may at the very least generate sustained criticism from interested respondents who are not necessarily at all intent on engaging in any form of constructive consultation processes. This is true even for blogs which – unlike *Digital Economy* – are not amongst the very first attempts by a sitting government to explore the use of online platforms for citizen consultation.

For this reason, it is also important for governments to explore alternative solutions to soliciting citizen responses through their own sites. In the context of the *Digital Economy* blog, for example, there already exist a number of very well-established Australian online communities which deal with a number of topics that fall within the purview of the Department. Rather than (or in addition to) inviting interested citizens to come and give feedback through the DBCDE blog, therefore, government staff may also need to engage directly and openly in such spaces. They could explore the views of the Australian Internet user community regarding the planned National Broadband Network, for example, by going to *Whirlpool.net.au*, the country's pre-eminent user-led Website for broadband discussion and advice; the *Whirlpool* community is at least as much a self-selecting group of interested stakeholders as is the DBCDE blog readership, and could contribute substantial expertise to the consultation process. Crowdsourcing policy ideas, in other words, can happen just as well by going out to meet the crowd where it is already gathered as it can by building a space where crowds may come to gather.

The Bottom-Up Alternative: Political Informatics

Indeed, the further development of spaces for citizen engagement may well be driven at least as much by the non-government sector as it is by government initiatives themselves. One area of particular interest in this context are new technologies and practices which offer customised parliamentary information as a tool for political engagement and action and allow for a community-driven transition from political communication to *political informatics*. Such services radically disintermediate the flow of political, and specifically parliamentary news to the public. They work

with officially published parliamentary records to offer customisable streams of political information, and are aimed at encouraging candidate monitoring, direct engagement with political representatives, and activism. They use the affordances of contemporary information technologies to enable the parsing, publication and syndication of specific information streams, but they are ultimately motivated by an evident dissatisfaction with the professional performance of politicians and journalists, and a desire to build social capital and public engagement with political institutions. One of the authors was involved in the construction of such a project – *Project Democracy* – on behalf of the Australian online political activist organisation GetUp!, and this practice-based experience provides a unique insight into the affordances and constraints of these technologies of political informatics.

Theories of political communication in contemporary democracies have tended to emphasise its mass-mediated nature. On the whole, the selection and presentation of information in mass-mediated democracies is the responsibility of professional journalists working within established media institutions. Politicians and political institutions attempt to manage aspects of their narratives and selections – moderating, supplementing or countering them by withholding, releasing or 'spinning' information, and at the end of this process, more or less critical news audiences derive information from and base their political choices, activism and decisions on the stream of industrially-produced news.

But there has been, in recent years, an erosion in public faith both in journalism and in political institutions. The current so-called 'crisis' in journalism is many-faceted (see Flew and Wilson, forthcoming): it consists, among other elements, of a growing disconnect between journalists and the communities they traditionally serve, perceptions of a deleterious corporate influence on reporting, the 'source capture' of journalists by political actors, the decline in quality with a crisis in the business model of commercial journalism, and industrial journalism's failure to anticipate and assimilate the impacts of technologies of self-publication, content sharing and syndication. There is, simultaneously, a crisis of faith in the efficacy and responsiveness of democratic political institutions, and a cynicism about the motivations and performance of individual politicians. The latter phenomenon has been considered from a range of perspectives in political science and related fields, but work by researchers like Stephen Coleman (see e.g. Coleman, 2005) shows how the immediacy of online communications technologies has exacerbated perceptions that politicians and political institutions are 'out of touch', and remote from voters and their concerns.

This loss of faith in political institutions and the mediators of political communication feeds into user-led initiatives engaged in the tracking, filtering, and criticism of the mainstream media's work (including especially the practices commonly described as citizen journalism and political blogging), but it has also led to efforts to disintermediate the flow of political information by giving the public new, more direct forms of access to information that technically is already on the public record, but available only in comparatively arcane, non-user-friendly formats. This particularly includes the records of parliamentary proceedings: in recent years, a number of international and Australian initiatives have focussed on developing tools which enable citizens to receive customised information feeds about such proceedings, to track the specific contributions of their various representatives to parliamentary debate, and to directly engage with these representatives to provide feedback on their activities. Rather than being driven by the parliamentary information services which produce the records themselves, such efforts have been carried out mainly in the

third sector; they cut out the 'middle man' of parliamentary journalism, and give users the tools to customise their information diet and focus their activism strategically on specific issues and representatives.

The longest-established and most prominent e-democracy initiative in political informatics is the UK-based *TheyWorkForYou.com*. The project's name implies its commitment to re-establishing a more direct relationship between citizens and their parliamentary representatives, and the site is a project of MySociety, an organisation that is itself operated by the charity UK Citizens Online Democracy. This initiative was founded by Tom Steinberg in 2003, and in 2004 developed *TheyWorkForYou* as an open-source e-democracy tool. Steinberg founded the charity after reading his flatmate James Crabtree's manifesto article, "Civic Hacking: A New Agenda for e-Democracy." In this, Crabtree defines an ethic for e-democracy projects which goes beyond offering a veneer of consultativeness for the ailing model of disengaged representative democracy:

> This should become the ethic of e-democracy: mutual-aid and self-help among citizens, helping to overcome civic problems. It would encourage a market in application development. It would encourage self-reliance, or community-reliance, rather than reliance on the state.

> Such a system would be about helping people to help themselves. It would create electronic spaces in which the communicative power of the internet can be used to help citizens help each other overcome life's challenges. Most importantly, by making useful applications, it would help make participatory democracy seem useful too. (Crabtree, 2003)

TheyWorkForYou is just one project among many from MySociety – others include services for e-petitioning, emailing MPs, monitoring electoral pledges, and *FixMyStreet*, which encourages people to put pressure on their local authorities to improve basic amenities. All of these services represent attempts to enact this ethic of citizen empowerment.

TheyWorkForYou works toward this goal by providing a politically-neutral space in which citizens can monitor, track, and contact their representatives, and access information about the workings of the parliament as a whole. The site allows its users to find individual representatives in the UK, Scottish, Northern Irish and Welsh assemblies, by postcode or from an alphabetical list. On the pages tracking individual representatives, citizens are able to view speech transcripts, voting records, declared interests, and contact details, and there are off-site links to biographies, electoral records and further contact information. Citizens can also sign up to receive email alerts whenever particular representatives speak in parliament. These speaking records are made available through parsing the electronic publication of the UK parliamentary record, the Hansard, which is also presented as a chronological stream of debates. This way, users can also track specific issues of interest.

Since its launch in 2004, the site has had significant uptake. It had 2 million unique visitors in 2007 (MySociety, 2009), and it has had a measurable effect on the conduct of parliamentary representatives; *inter alia*, it has forced the UK Government to explicitly licence Hansard, where no previous licence existed. Indeed, *TheyWorkForYou*'s presence in public debate has triggered claims that some representatives have been asking frivolous questions in parliament just to boost their activity metrics on the site; at the very least, this indicates parliamentarians' awareness of the site's

efficacy in communicating the level of their political performance to the public. In response, the Leader of the House of Commons, Jack Straw, has claimed that the site's quantitative emphasis distorted the public's picture of parliamentary work, but again, it is also significant in the first place that the service has itself become a subject of parliamentary debate.

TheyWorkForYou's open-source parsing software was adapted for the first and most significant effort at political informatics in the Australian context, OpenAustralia. OpenAustralia is a volunteer-run organisation whose very small staff – including Matthew Landauer and Kat Symanski – have worked in their spare time to reproduce many of *TheyWorkForYou*'s features for the Australian political context. Subtle differences between the Australian and British parliamentary systems have meant that some aspects of the service play out differently; for example, Australia's comparatively strict party discipline means that precious few dissenting votes are recorded among parliamentarians in the major parties. The fact that Australia's upper house, the Senate, is elected on a state-by-state basis also changes how and why users would monitor their representatives. On the whole, however, the project aimed for a faithful translation of the *TheyWorkForYou* model to the Australian context.

In September 2008, Australian online campaigning organization GetUp! launched the site under the title *Project Democracy*. GetUp! had been established on the model of organizations like MoveOn in the United States, using online campaigning techniques to encourage progressive activism outside of traditional political organisations. Among its successes as a campaigning organisation were contributions to the repatriation of Australian Guantanamo Bay detainee David Hicks and a national apology to indigenous Australians. Alongside such specific campaigning initiatives, the organisation had wanted to establish an e-democracy initiative on the model of *TheyWorkForYou*, but which could also be harnessed for more activist purposes. The swearing-in of a new Senate, which ended the Coalition's domination of that house during its time in government, provided a new opportunity to generate public pressure on individual senators to act on GetUp!'s chief areas of campaigning activity – including climate change policy, indigenous rights, and constitutional reform. *Project Democracy*, then, was an effort to utilise the affordances of political informatics services as a component of online campaigning.

GetUp! were able to build on the work of *TheyWorkForYou* and OpenAustralia in creating *Project Democracy* as a site that not only parsed parliamentary information and allowed the tracking of individual senators, but which also allowed the aggregation of relevant news from a range of additional sources. The site was launched in September 2008, as the new Senate elected in November 2007 reconvened. *Project Democracy*'s adaptation of open-source parliamentary parsing technology was embedded in a service which also offered users the capacity to contribute blog posts and commentary on parliamentary events, thereby providing the foundations for active and direct citizen engagement beyond a mere tracking of parliamentary activity. Additionally, mainstream news was filtered into a number of streams, published to the site, which focussed on individual representatives, States, and areas of specific policy interest; these custom feeds were created using feed and syndication tools like *Google Reader* and *Yahoo! Pipes*. The site also had built-in visual tools, including interactive maps of the floor of the Senate and Australia, so that users could find representatives by state, and according to where they sit on the parliament floor. Finally, weekly updates to users also offered campaigning information, summaries of media coverage, and news of upcoming parliamentary developments alongside parliamentary news.

Some challenges were shared by OpenAustralia and *Project Democracy* in accessing parliamentary information. In particular, a serious problem arose when the Australian Parliamentary Service changed the way it published Hansard online. By changing its publishing format to a searchable online record rather than a straight "shovelware" Web publication of the written record, the APS rendered the parsing technology obsolete. Although helpful and open to negotiation with NGOs, the APS made it clear that such organizations were not its priority when deciding how parliamentary information would be published and presented online. In effect, however, the APS ended up replicating part of the functionality of these existing services while making it impossible for them to continue without extensive further development work. These difficulties are still being negotiated by both organisations, and they point to the need for more liaison and collaboration between community-based and official e-democracy initiatives.

The story of sites such as *TheyWorkForYou* and *Project Democracy* provides an insight into how user-led, innovative extra-governmental e-democracy initiatives are being transmitted internationally, and how they can extend the affordances of their services in the process; they make use of open-source technology, and allow their own replication in different contexts. Such sites offer citizens a new opportunity to develop and maintain their specific political interests, track parliamentary debate related to relevant topics, and engage in focussed campaigning activities. Importantly, they do perhaps make parliaments and representatives seem less remote, and in doing so, they represent innovative third-sector solutions to the problem of political disengagement: in a sense, these are services which the state could not offer, but ought to be responsive to.

Such projects, then, provide an important bottom-up alternative or complement to the top-down, government-led attempts at citizen engagement through departmental blogging and similar initiatives which we have discussed above: as user-led initiatives emerging gradually from independent groups and organisations, they need not struggle nearly as much with the problem of developing sustainable community structures in the face of intense public exposure, but indeed are likely to gain wider public attention only as a direct result of attracting a critical mass of community participation. At the same time, however, they necessarily struggle much more with the challenge of attracting broad participation by mainstream political actors, for whom venturing out into such community spaces outside the control of government or party agencies is fraught with potential danger or embarrassment – and especially where they are supported by activist agencies, such sites also struggle to establish themselves as impartial and honest brokers of citizen engagement and consultation with political actors, even more so than journalistic or governmental citizen participation initiatives do.

Finally, such bottom-up initiatives also mainly address a specific clientele. To highlight this is less a direct criticism than a commentary on their structural dissimilarities with mass-mediated political coverage: although they deal with national institutions, such sites structurally fragment the attention of users along sub-national and single-issue lines. As they disintermediate the news reportage function of journalism, they are unable to narrativise the broader trajectory of political events – unless, as in *Project Democracy*, they offer users an opportunity to reintermediate the political process by contributing their own summarising coverage through blogs and other ongoing commentary (that is, by engaging in a form of citizen journalism). Thus, political informatics sites (if considered in isolation) may make it more difficult for those who are not already committed to tracking political news in some depth through other media to form a holistic view of continuing

political debates. And for those not predisposed to seek out such additional political information and commentary, they lack the capacity for summary and compression that mainstream news media exhibit. (See Prior, 2006, for a discussion of the constraints of the post-broadcast, high-choice media environment.)

All in all, however, such services do constitute invaluable tools for activists, the politically committed, and not least also journalists looking for focussed streams of political information. Instead of relying on the selections made by the professional caste of journalists in the news industry, users can now make their own choices, and pursue their own priorities more closely – and where sites such as *Project Democracy* also add commentary and discussion functionality, they provide an important platform for citizen consultation which builds on parliamentary debate and thereby extends it to, or connects it with, parallel debates taking place within the citizenry. What remains missing from the picture, however, are more systematic attempts by governments and politicians to interact with these extra-parliamentary debates and draw useful ideas emerging from them back into the parliamentary and governmental components of the political process.

Connecting Top-Down and Bottom-Up through Social Media

User-driven, NGO-led initiatives are one way in which political communication has been disintermediated. Another is the growing practice of politicians communicating more directly with constituents (and non-constituents) using social media technologies. Like any category of social media users, depending on their communication strategies politicians can be more or less successful in adapting these technologies to their own purposes.

The 2008 US elections marked perhaps a watershed in online campaigning, and the Obama ticket in particular were innovative in campaigning in online spaces. Obama's campaign communication strategy not only provided innovative features on campaign Websites, which generated a much larger groundswell of donations and volunteers than the McCain campaign could manage, but it also branched out into the skilful use of existing social networking technologies. Obama's success was also abetted by skilful new media campaigners like MoveOn.org. Although not the first politician to experiment with these techniques, Obama's success has perhaps vindicated the strategy of working around media institutions to talk directly to voters, utilising viral and social campaigning techniques.

Less spectacularly, and beyond the campaign moment, individual politicians are "lifestreaming" to services like *Facebook* and *Twitter*, and experimenting with more direct forms of political communication and e-democracy. There are several potential advantages that politicians can derive from achieving such disintermediation by using social media and consequently creating more direct links with potential voters. Not only are politicians able to pass messages directly to voters who have chosen to follow or friend them in social media environments, but they are also able to determine constituents' concerns more directly, without these being co-opted by the agendas of media outlets campaigning in favour of their own preferred outcomes. Such use of social media by politicians therefore combines elements of top-down and bottom-up engagement by attempting to implement a more or less tightly managed citizen communication strategy in an inherently user-led environment outside the control of government or party. This places participating politicians in a potentially precarious situation in which possible threats are also evident. The trade-off for a more immediate form of citizen engagement is that in order to measure up to social media's demand for

communicative authenticity, politicians must relinquish some measure of "message control" and prepare themselves for constituents demanding to talk back more directly to their representatives.

From the social media styles of Australian politicians, it is possible to nominate three styles of social media use, with differing degrees of effectiveness. The first group are 'managers', who attempt to carry over strategies of message control from the mass media and thus fail to address the affordances and requirements of social media. Australian politicians like Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and Opposition Treasury Spokesman Joe Hockey use their *Facebook* profiles as little more than a channel for pushing straightforwardly political messages, for example; in Rudd's case, his *Facebook* and *Twitter* presences appear to be curated by someone other than himself, and in that sense they are little more than another arm of a media management effort which is otherwise carried out via broadcast media appearances and press releases. By absenting themselves from the upkeep of their social media presence, and by using these services in this way, such politicians treat social media as just another top-down, one-to-many channel, and in doing so may generate substantial resentment amongst existing social media users who expect politicians entering their online spaces to act according to their rules. Given that Rudd's own 2007 election campaign was innovative in its employment of online strategies, it is perhaps disappointing that the Prime Minister's office is forsaking social media's opportunities for a more extensive dialogue. (At the time of writing in mid-July 2009, Rudd has also launched an official "PM's Blog"; with one entry posted to date, and no direct responses by the PM to reader comments as yet, it is too early to assess the communication style of this initiative. See Rudd, 2009.)

A second group of social media users can be called "e-democrats". Although these politicians use their social media presence primarily to advertise their political activities and messages, they involve themselves personally in the social media environment, and take time to engage with other social media users, thus making use of some of the affordances of social media and responding to the unwritten rules of such environments. Malcolm Turnbull, Australia's Liberal opposition leader, uses his *Facebook* and *Twitter* profiles primarily to diarise his engagements and activities, but it is evident that he usually makes his own updates, and he is known to engage in dialogue with other users on these sites. In doing so, Turnbull is able to make more immediate personal connections with users which would not be possible in the broadcast environment, and lends a valuable aura of authenticity to his own presence. Nonetheless, the mix of top-down and bottom-up communication attempted here also risks providing a little of both worlds but satisfying nobody: users who wish for more extended bottom-up influence on policy development processes may come away disappointed if communication between citizens and politicians remains at a generic level, while politicians and party organisations hoping to profit from an increased access to the citizenry may be frustrated by the dilution of their messages in the absence of broadcast-style distribution processes.

Finally, a third group whom we might call "social politicians" may be pointing the way to a new kind of public sphere by using social media to expose a more mundane, quotidian self. Political actors in this group appear to have recognised that social media are not the best channel for retailing exclusively political messages, and that by personally investing in the versions of community found within social media environments, they are engaging with social media communities on their own terms. Understanding that environments like *Facebook* are where people engage in identity self-construction that blends their political, professional and personal selves leads to forms of engagement that contribute to an inclusive, extensive post-broadcast public sphere. This public

sphere is not inherently political, and politicians participating here do so in the first place as citizens themselves, rather than as politicians; rather than attempting to establish a precarious top-down communicative stance in a bottom-up environment, they are in effect joining the 'bottom', the general citizenry, and from this draw additional legitimacy and a greater immunity against accusations of being 'just another politician'.

In the Australian context, one politician who has made interesting steps in this direction is Tasmanian State Premier David Bartlett. Bartlett's updates, photos, and his use of *Facebook* applications do not speak of a consultant-driven approach to social media; instead, we get the sense that he, like other users, is there because he enjoys being part of a networked community. His contributions tend towards the personal and the everyday: what he reveals is often prosaic ("David wore the blue tie with red dots today") or idiosyncratic ("David is gearing up for the Hot Rods") – but it has the priceless patina of authenticity.

It may be that highly managed and polished media personae are artefacts of mass-mediated politics. For better or worse, many scholars and commentators argue that that period is passing away. Users of social media expect a much more conversational and unaffected style of political communication. There is palpable frustration on services like *Twitter* and *Facebook* when politicians will not engage in the dialogue that many users take to be the key function these spaces afford. As the media landscape changes, and more citizens become more engaged in online social networks, older methods of political communication and media management will start to have less purchase. Politicians struggling to import older methods of message management into new platforms might look to examples such as Bartlett's for an example of how to best exploit the affordances of social media: be yourself.

That said, such social media models of politics are far from unproblematic in their own right. One danger – and it is a danger – is that politicians may be elected because based on their social media profiles they appear to be 'nice people' rather than necessarily effective and knowledgeable at conducting the business of government. Another, especially for newly-elected politicians, is that the constraints of the political environment may mean that private persona and public actions of the politician are notably disjointed. For all the connections with the citizenry at the bottom – the fundament – of the political system that social media-savvy politicians may have built up, doubtlessly this would leave their social media 'friends' disenchanted and may even lead to a community-organised and virally transmitted backlash that could create substantial damage. It is possible that the fact that the existing political system has forced politicians to become a distinct professional class also limits their ability to portray themselves as 'normal' people in social media environments.

Conclusion

In discussing these various top-down, bottom-up, and mixed-mode efforts at building connections between governments, individual politicians and citizens, we are faced with initiatives and practices that are in their formative, even experimental stages. The precise motivations and starting-points for these efforts at disintermediated or reintermediated styles of political communication differ, and so do their perceived successes.

The DBCDE blog represents a qualified first step in the government's wider strategy for engaging with the community online, on the government's own terms. In spite of its limited success to date, and the temptation (not least for the public servants operating the site) to categorise the initiative as an unproductive dead end, it is also important to understand this effort as an experiment, necessarily carrying a potential of failure; on this basis, one can only hope that the righteous frustration currently being expressed at some of the Department's recent policy proposals does not in turn frustrate these (ultimately very welcome) attempts to develop new approaches to citizen consultation. After all, as untried as government consultation blogs are at the federal level in Australia, so too are citizens unused to being able to engage with their government in this way. Evidently, both sides still have a lot to learn about the other: in particular, perhaps, to manage – and to communicate – their expectations of such initiatives. While there are natural limits to top-down initiatives for citizen consultation (linked especially to the size and structure of the communities they are likely to attract), it is likely that they do have a role to play – especially perhaps for specific consultative projects away from the mainstream of public debate.

Similarly, with NGO-driven e-democracy intitiatives there is a necessity for a greater dialogue with government agencies, parliamentary representatives, third-sector service providers and users. At present, these bottom-up projects are able to generate a more open, community-driven form of citizen engagement, but their independent status also limits their reach both horizontally (they are largely preaching to the converted, attracting mainly only those citizens who are already strongly politically engaged) and vertically (the ideas developed and expressed by their constituencies generally fail to penetrate the corridors of power to a consistent, reliable, and sufficient extent). This is true especially if such initiatives are suspected by politicians or citizens of political bias in favour of particular activist goals.

However, if governments do come to recognise third-sector initiatives as a possible solution to the difficulties posed by in-house e-democracy initiatives (perhaps as replacements, but also as complements), and if NGOs can fulfil their aim of using these tools to facilitate more extensive political engagement amongst a greater cross-section of the citizenry, we may see the outlines of a new relationship between the state, citizens and the public sphere. A special role in this process may be able to be played by trusted third parties which are seen by all participants as neutral non-combatants: such parties may include especially the public broadcasters, which are increasingly positioning themselves as providers of (online and broadcast) spaces for citizen-politician interaction, but possibly also the university sector or widely trusted non-government organisations.

Finally, the question remains open whether another group of trusted neutral parties also includes the social media sites themselves – some of which may today be seen as assuming a position as universal service providers, thereby playing a quasi-neutral role that nonetheless conflicts with their obvious commercial interests. To what extent can a *Twitter* or *Facebook*, or one of their successors, provide the space for insightful political consultation with citizens on current political issues? Politicians using such social networking services may be pointing the way to a more dramatic reorganisation of political communication, especially when they become genuine and enthusiastic participants in a peer-to-peer, post-broadcast communications environment. Here, too, there is still a substantial learning curve ahead for them as well as their constituents, as both sides learn how best to apply these technologies to the purpose of enhancing political engagement, increasing the responsiveness of political actors and institutions, and thus improving citizen consultation.

Alternatively, perhaps a genuine use of such technologies for political communication would require any clear division into 'citizens' and 'politicians' to disappear, as the heterarchical structure of social media erodes distinctions between 'bottom' and 'top'. The engagement between politicians and citizens as peers which could result from this levelling may be desirable on the on hand, but on the other hand it is also possible that the realities of representative democracy inevitably require the presence of a distinct political class. If so, social media provide no inherently new answers, and what we are likely to see there is simply another iteration of the ongoing struggle to develop effective combinations between top-down and bottom-up models of citizen consultation.

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Note: the publication date for this post which is now stated on the DBCDE blog is incorrect; it may refer to the latest revision of this post rather than to the original posting date.

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Index