

CITIZEN CONSULTATION FROM ABOVE AND BELOW: THE AUSTRALIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

In Australia, a range of Federal Government services have been provided online for some time, but direct, online citizen consultation and involvement in processes of governance is relatively new. Moves towards more extensive citizen involvement in legislative processes are now being driven in a “top-down” fashion by government agencies, or in a “bottom-up” manner by individuals and third-sector organisations. This chapter focusses on one example from each of these categories, as well as discussing the presence of individual politicians in online social networking spaces. It argues that only a combination of these approaches can achieve effective consultation between citizens and policymakers. Existing at a remove from government sites and the frameworks for public communication which govern them, bottom-up consultation tools may provide a better chance for functioning, self-organising user communities to emerge, but they are also more easily ignored by governments not directly involved in their running. Top-down consultation tools, on the other hand, may seem to provide a more direct line of communication to relevant government officials, but for that reason are also more likely to be swamped by users who wish simply to register their dissent rather than engage in discussion. The challenge for governments, politicians, and user communities alike is to develop spaces in which productive and undisrupted exchanges between citizens and policymakers can take place.

1. Introduction

In Australia, a range of state and Federal Government services have been provided online for some time, but direct, online citizen consultation by governments, or even the strong presence of politicians and parties online, is 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 [10/11]. But the 2007 federal election and its aftermath have placed renewed emphasis on online political information and e-government services. During the election itself, the incumbent 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 [2]. The newly elected Labor government’s restructure of relevant federal government departments to form the new Department of Broadband, Communication, and the

Digital Economy (DBCDE) clearly points to its stated intentions to grow the Australian digital and online industries sector and to deliver better and more affordable broadband services to Australian users. As part of its stimulus efforts in reaction to the global financial crisis, the government has also promised the development of a \$43 billion fibre-to-the-home high-speed broadband network across the country, to be developed over several years in a public-private partnership.

Improved e-government services which aim to provide a better platform for citizen consultation are an obvious and necessary part of such developments. But governments confront a dilemma when implementing such services. Sluggish or half-hearted deployment of such citizen consultation facilities leaves them vulnerable to criticism from their constituents, and such criticism can 'go viral' and spread rapidly through online social network communities. The 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. Generally, online effective communities must be fostered gradually into being in order to be able to build their sustaining structures and processes of engagement [4] – this is very difficult for political actors whose online initiatives are closely scrutinised by the interested public and political opponents alike.

So while public sentiment amongst those strata of the citizenry which care at all about e-government consultation may be strongly in favour of deploying such facilities, regardless of how that deployment is conducted, it is likely to disappoint a substantial section of that community because there is no clear consensus within the community about how and where such consultation facilities should be deployed, and no clear understanding of the appropriate processes for such deployment. In the Australian context, this dilemma was able to be observed during a recent trial of a government consultation blog by the DBCDE, which we discuss below.

Such problems point to fundamental, systemic limitations to the feasibility of a government-led deployment of citizen consultation facilities. The alternative to such a 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 the sites' 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 below.¹ Finally, politicians can also take individual initiative by using social networking services to address citizens more directly, and those who use these services successfully may be gesturing towards a new kind of public sphere that may serve as a middle ground between top-down governmental processes and bottom-up political activism. This possibility is discussed in the concluding section of our paper.

2. 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

¹ One of the authors of this paper, Jason Wilson, was involved in developing *Project Democracy* during his time as GetUp!'s Director of e-Democracy.

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:

- 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. [1]

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. [14]

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 in a guest post by Tanner even though his colleague Senator Stephen Conroy was 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. [15]

The launch of the blog came at a difficult time for the still relatively new government Department, however: much of the public attention directed at it in preceding weeks had focussed on one of two key policy decisions – 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 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 the quantity of 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 quality 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 has to date failed to achieve its purpose.

This failure is neither simply the fault of citizen commenters (for responding in a way other than 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 tend to 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. [8]

(That follow-up post, authored by Minister Conroy, was published another ten days later, on 22 December 2008 [6].)

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 (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. [13]

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. The same is true to some extent for the ‘blogs’ of many news Websites, which for the most part are still merely print-style opinion columns with blog-style comments functions added into them. What was therefore (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 commentary about the ‘cleanfeed’ filter *ad nauseam*.

An established community can be relied upon to do a substantial deal of 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 [4]. 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 [3]), 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 could have an even more 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 vicinity 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 hopes, needs and wants 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 Website for broadband discussion and advice; while *Whirlpool's* membership hardly constitutes a representative sample of the Australian population, neither does the commenter community on the DBCDE blog, and the *Whirlpool* community is at least as much a self-selecting group of interested stakeholders as is the DBCDE blog readership. 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.

3. Political Informatics as a User-Driven, Bottom-Up Alternative

Some such interest communities have long been involved in building their own tools and resources for facilitating citizen consultation, even in the absence of direct involvement or interest from the government of the day. New technologies and practices which offer customised parliamentary information as a tool for political engagement and action can be seen as 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. Journalists working within established broadcasting or press outlets select and narrativise the actions and utterances of political actors. Politicians and political institutions attempt to manage aspects of their narratives and selections – moderating, supplementing or countering them by withholding, releasing or “spinning” information. 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. On the whole, the selection and presentation of information in mass-mediated democracies is the responsibility of professional journalists working within established media institutions.

But there has been, in recent years, an erosion in public faith both in journalism and political institutions. The current so-called “crisis” in journalism is many-faceted (see [9]). It consists, among other things, in 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 Coleman (see for example [5]) 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 metafiltering and criticism of the mainstream media's work, but it has also led to efforts to disintermediate the flow of political information by giving consumers new, more direct forms of access to information that is already on the public record. In particular, in relation to parliamentary records, international and Australian initiatives have focussed on enabling citizens to track and contact representatives and receive customised information feeds about parliamentary proceedings. Such efforts have been carried out mainly in the third sector, and are aimed at reinvigorating public political engagement and activism. They cut out the "middle man" of parliamentary journalism, and give users the tools to customise their information diet, and to 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*. In its name, it implies its commitment to re-establishing a more direct relationship between citizens and their parliamentary representatives. The site is a project of MySociety, which itself is run by a charity, UK Citizens Online Democracy. This initiative was founded by Tom Steinberg in 2003, and in 2004 with which it developed *TheyWorkForYou.com* 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. [7]

TheyWorkForYou.com 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. In all of these services, we can see attempts to enact this ethic of citizen empowerment.

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

Since launch in 2004, the site has had significant uptake. It had 2 million unique visitors in 2007 [16], and it has had a measurable effect on the conduct of parliamentary representatives. It has forced the UK Government to license Hansard, where no previous license existed. It has triggered claims that parliamentarians have been asking frivolous questions just to push up their metrics on the site, which at least indicates an awareness of its efficacy in communicating parliamentary performance to the public. The Leader of the House of Commons, Jack Straw, claimed that the

site's quantitative emphasis distorted the public's picture of parliamentary work, but again, it is significant 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 in an Australian context. Subtle differences between Australia and the UK's parliamentary systems have meant that some aspects of the service play out differently. For example, Australia's 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 will be monitoring their representatives. On the whole, though, this is a faithful translation of the *TheyWorkForYou* model to the Australian context.

In September 2008, Australian online campaigning organization GetUp! launched *Project Democracy*. GetUp! had been established on the model of organizations like MoveOn in the USA, using online campaigning techniques to build progressive activism outside the structure of traditional political organisations. Among its successes as a campaigning organization were contributions to the repatriation of Australian Guantanamo Bay inmate David Hicks and the national apology to indigenous Australians. Alongside their specific campaigning initiatives, the organization had wanted to establish an e-democracy initiative on the model of *TheyWorkForYou*, but which could be harnessed to a more activist purpose. The swearing in of a new Senate, which ended the former ruling Coalition's domination of that house, meant that an opportunity had arisen to bring pressure to bear on individual senators on GetUp!'s areas of campaigning concern – including climate change policy, indigenous rights, and constitutional reform. *Project Democracy*, then, was an effort to offer the affordances of political informatics services as a component of online campaigning.

GetUp! were able to build on the work of 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 news from a range of sources. The site was launched in September 2008, as the new Senate reconvened after the elections of November 2007. *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. News was filtered so that streams were published to the site which focused on individual representatives, States, and areas of specific policy interest: these custom feeds were created by using feed and syndication tools like *Google Reader* and *Yahoo! Pipes*. The site also had built-in visual extras, including interactive maps of the floor of the Senate and Australia, so that users could find their representatives by state, and according to where they sit in the parliament floor. The weekly updates to users, in this case, 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 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 from the 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, the APS replicated much of the functionality of these existing third-party 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.

Together, these sites offer a picture of how user-side e-democracy innovations are being transmitted internationally, and can build up their affordances in the process. All of the sites offer users the opportunity to focus and develop their political interests and campaigning activities. 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. They make use of open-source technology, and allow their own replication in different contexts. Importantly, they do perhaps make parliaments and representatives seem less remote.

A discussion of these services' shortcomings would be less direct criticism, than a commentary on their structural dissimilarities from mass-mediated political coverage. That is, although they deal with national institutions, they structurally fragment the attention of users along sub-national and single-issue lines. There is a sense in which although they disintermediate the reportage/news function of journalism, they cannot specifically narrativise the broader drift of political events (unless, as in *Project Democracy*, they offer users an opportunity to contribute such summarizing material). They thus may make it more difficult for those users who are not already committed to getting as much information as possible to form a holistic view of political debates. And for those not predisposed to seeking out political information, they lack the capacity for summary and compression that broadcast media exhibit. (See [12] for a discussion of the constraints of the post-broadcast, high-choice media environment.)

All in all, however, such services are invaluable tools for activists, the politically committed, and even for journalists looking for focused streams of political information. Instead of relying on the selections made by a professional caste of industrial journalists, users can now make their own selections, and pursue their own priorities more closely.

4. Building the Middle Ground through Social Networking

User-side, NGO-led initiatives are one way in which political communication and citizen consultation have been disintermediated. Another is the growing practice of politicians communicating more directly with constituents (and non-constituents) using social media technologies, with varying degrees of success.

The 2008 US elections perhaps marked 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 established a much larger base of donors 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, and also points to the potential of viral and social campaigning techniques.

Less spectacularly, and beyond the campaign period, individual politicians – Australians among them – 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 using social media, arising from a disintermediation of communication and the development of more direct links with 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 campaigning media outlets. The potential threats from this more direct communication are also evident, however: the trade-off for more a more direct form of

engagement is that in order to measure up to social media's demand for communicative authenticity, politicians must relinquish some measure of "message control", as constituents talk back more directly to their representatives.

From the social media styles of Australian politicians, we can identify three broad styles of social media use, each of which has a differing degree of effectiveness. The first group are "managers", who attempt to carry over strategies of message control from mass media, and thus misconstrue the affordances 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. In Rudd's case, his *Facebook* and *Twitter* presences seem clearly to be curated by someone other than himself, and in that sense they are little more than an extra arm to the media management effort which is otherwise carried out via broadcast media appearances and press releases. By absenting himself from the upkeep of his social media presence, and by using these services in this way, Rudd treats social media as just another one-to-many channel. Given that his own 2007 election campaign was innovative in its employment of online strategies, it is perhaps disappointing that he is forsaking social media's opportunities for a more extensive dialogue.

A second group 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 make use of some of the affordances of social media. 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 this, Turnbull stands to create personal ties to users which are not possible in the broadcast environment, and lends a valuable aura of authenticity to his own presence.

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 banal, quotidian self. Some have recognized 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 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.

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

It may be that highly managed and buffed 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 visible 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 our media environment changes, and we become more engaged with 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:

by being themselves. How such ‘politicians-as-normal-people’ personae may then be utilised in sustained efforts at citizen consultation still remains to be seen.

5. Conclusion

Whichever examples for citizen consultation in Australia and elsewhere in the world are highlighted in current scholarly research: in discussing such efforts at building connections between governments, non-government organisations, citizens, and individual politicians, for the most part we are still faced today with initiatives and practices that are in a formative, even experimental stage. The precise motivations and starting-points for these efforts at disintermediating, renewing, or replacing existing styles of political communication are as different as the groups and individuals driving this process of exploration, and so are their perceived successes.

The DBCDE blog represents a qualified first step in the Australian federal government’s wider strategy for engaging with the community online. One can only hope that the righteous frustration which has been expressed at some of the Department’s recent policy proposals does not in turn frustrate its (ultimately very welcome) attempts to develop new approaches to citizen consultation. It is worth remembering in this context that 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. ‘They’ may be new at it, but so are ‘we’ – and it is evident from the early engagement around the DBCDE blog that both sides still have a lot to learn about the other.

Similarly, for NGO-driven e-democracy initiatives such as *Project Democracy*, there is a necessity for a greater dialogue with government agencies, parliamentary representatives, third-sector service providers, politicians, and users. If governments come to recognise such third-sector initiatives as possible, legitimate, and trustworthy solutions to the difficulties posed by in-house e-democracy initiatives, and if NGOs can fulfil their aim of using these tools to facilitate more extensive political engagement, they need to put in place the frameworks to enable relevant public service departments to work in concert with such initiatives, providing appropriate technical support in recognition for the public benefit derived from such third-party projects. The further mainstreaming of such initiatives may well lead to the establishment of new relationships between the state, citizens, and the public sphere well beyond their mediated interactions in the spaces of mainstream journalism.

Finally, politicians using *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and other social networking services may point 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 a steep learning curve ahead for them and for their constituents, as all parties learn how to best apply these technologies to the purpose of enhancing the political engagement of citizens, and the responsiveness of political actors and institutions. Neither of these three approaches, then, is likely to be able to exist, and succeed, on its own: what will be necessary instead is an intelligent combination and interweaving of top-down and bottom-up models, joined together, further enhanced, and populated with the online personae of real people at the middle ground of online social interaction.

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