

# Pre- and post-election 2010 online: What happened to the conversation?

Jim Macnamara  
*University of Technology Sydney*

Following the trend of election campaigns in the US in 2000, 2004, and particularly the 2008 Obama Presidential campaign and the 2010 UK election, Australians went to the polls in August 2010 in a media-hyped flurry of ‘tweeting’, YouTube videos, Facebook befriending and ‘liking’, blogging, and other social media activities. Research found that the volume of political communication through social media increased by more than 100 per cent in the 2010 Australian federal election compared with 2007. However, a question that has not been adequately explored is what happens with online political communication after the cacophony of electioneering fades away? Do the thousands of blogs, social networks, Twitter accounts, and photo and video sharing sites of politicians and political parties continue to seek citizen engagement, or do they fall silent once the prize of election has been won or lost? This article reports quantitative and qualitative content analysis of social media use by politicians during the 2010 federal election and analysis of Twitter use by the 10 most active social media users among Australian federal politicians in the 60 days immediately following the 21 August 2010 election to explore the extent to which social media are a permanent part of the mediated public sphere and, if so, how they are used outside of election periods as well as during electioneering.

## Introduction

Over the past decade, governments, political parties, and social and political scientists have focussed attention on interactive social media as a strategy to address the ‘democratic deficit’ that has emerged a number of democratic states. Faced with declining citizen engagement and participation in democratic politics (Dahlgren 2009; McAllister 2002), declining public knowledge and interest in politics, and declining citizens’ trust in politicians and representative institutions (Gibson, Lusoli & Ward 2008, pp. 111–113), politicians and political parties have been at the forefront of initiatives to revitalise democracy through online engagement. In particular, the emergence of interactive Web 2.0<sup>1</sup> applications such as blogs, microblogging, social networks, and photo and video sharing sites, referred to as social media, are being increasingly enlisted in political communication during election campaigns as well as for ongoing citizen engagement in what is termed *e-democracy* (Kearns 2002) or *government 2.0* (Department of Finance and Deregulation 2010).

Social media were first identified as a significant factor in the 2000 US presidential election campaign (Bentivegna 2002, p. 50). However, it was the 2004 US presidential election that was ‘a critical turning point’ in use of social media, according to research by Xenos and Moy (2007, p. 704). They reported that ‘2004 marks the year in which online politics finally reached a mainstream audience’, although Gibson and McAllister (2008a) saw this promise unfulfilled in the Australian federal election of that year.

Following international trends and rapid growth of social media, the 2007 Australian federal election involved social media campaigns by major political parties on an expanding scale, such as the election-winning Australian Labor Party under its *Kevin07* theme as well as political candidates and interest groups. GetUp and specialist sites such as Election Tracker

which presented a youth perspective on political issues and You Decide which invited citizens to report on issues in their electorates used social media to gain a voice, along with a number of independent bloggers and YouTube video ‘broadcasters’ (Flew & Wilson 2008; Macnamara 2008a, 2008b).

Nevertheless, while internet reporting and discussion of the election outstripped press, radio and TV coverage in total according to Goot (2008, p. 99), several studies of use of interactive Web 2.0 media by major political actors found that the 2007 Australian federal election did not live up to claims that it was ‘the YouTube election’ (The YouTube election 2007) or the ‘Google election’ (Gibson & Ward 2008, p. 5). Only 13 (5.6 per cent) of Australia’s 226 incumbent politicians posted videos on YouTube; only 26 (11.5 per cent) had a MySpace site; just 15 (6.6 per cent) had a blog; eight (3.5 per cent) had a Facebook site; and only seven (3.1 per cent) podcast (Macnamara 2008a, pp. 8–9). Furthermore, research found that most online media used by politicians and political parties were heavily moderated, with only one politician allowing critical comments to be posted. In short, political communication was carefully orchestrated and citizen comment and participation was restricted to ‘fan mail’ (Macnamara 2008a, p. 9).

However, the 2008 Obama Presidential campaign took use of social media for political communication to new heights. While much of this was aimed at fund-raising with a reported US\$500 million raised online (Macnamara 2010a, p. 162), a Pew Internet and American Life Project study reported that 46 per cent of all Americans used the internet to access news about the campaign, share their views and mobilise others (Smith & Rainie 2008, p. i). Whereas 13 per cent of Americans said they had watched a video about the 2004 campaign online, 35 per cent reported watching at least one political video in 2008 (p. ii). Perhaps even more significantly, 19 per cent of Americans reported going online weekly to ‘do something related to the campaign’ (p. i). This suggests a coming of age – or at least a significant maturing – of online political engagement and draws attention to the 2010 UK and Australian elections as sites to further examine trends in e-electioneering and e-democracy.

## **Literature review**

Use of the internet for political communication has been studied by many scholars and organisations throughout the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and early 21<sup>st</sup> century including Bentivegna (2002), Fallows (2000), Hill and Hughes (1998), Jones (1995, 1998), Livingstone (1999); McChesney (1996, 2000a, 2000b), de Sola Pool (1983, 1990), Schneider (1996, 1997), and the Markle Foundation (1997). A number of studies, particularly those undertaken pre-2004, have identified major limitations and even detrimental effects of online communication. For instance, critics and sceptics point to a ‘digital divide’ between those with access to new digital media and those with restricted or no access because of financial or other limitations (Gandy 2002; Hoffman & Novak 1998; Novak & Hoffman 1998). Also some scholars have warned of a further decline in social cohesion and social capital (Putnam 1995, 2000; Shapiro & Leone, 1999; Wellman, 2001) caused by the depersonalisation inherent in mediated internet communication and time spent with media rather than human interaction, termed the displacement hypothesis (Sparks 2006, 72–73).

However, many of these studies were undertaken before the evolution of what is termed Web 2.0 (O’Reilly 2005), a range of interactive internet applications that spawned what has come to be termed *social media*, also referred to by some as ‘new media’ (Flew 2005, 2008; Lievrouw & Livingstone 2002, 2005). For instance, YouTube was launched in 2005, Twitter was launched in July 2006, and Facebook opened to the public only in September 2006<sup>2</sup>. Many of the social media most widely used today were in their infancy even at the time of

the 2007 Australian federal election, which necessitates ongoing study to understand their use and potential effects. Today, Facebook is the world's largest social network with 500 million active members as at July 2010 (Facebook 2010). In the same month, more than two billion videos a day were being viewed on YouTube (2010) – more than the viewing on most major TV networks – and Twitter is one of the fastest growing social media in the world with around 65 million tweets a day, or two billion tweets per month in mid-2010 (O'Dell 2010).

More recent studies and analyses including those of Corner (2007), Dahlgren (2009), Flew and Wilson (2008), Gibson, Römmele and Ward (2004), Gibson and McAllister (2008), Goot (2008), Jenkins (2006), Macnamara (2008a, 2008b, 2010b), Smith and Rainie (2008), and others have been more optimistic than previous studies – albeit still cautious and qualified on some issues, and still with many unanswered questions.

Election campaigns form an important part of the *public sphere* which Habermas (1989, 2006) identified as a space in which 'citizens come together and confer freely about matters of general interest' to become informed, contribute to political discourse, and reach consensus (1989). In contemporary societies, the public sphere is recognised as primarily a mediated space comprised of newspapers, magazines, radio, television – and now social media – in which 'political actors' and citizens discuss and debate issues and policies (Corner 2007; Dahlgren 2009; Garnham 1992; Habermas 2006; Howley 2007; Louw 2005).

Habermas has been sceptical and even pessimistic about the capacity of traditional *mass media* to provide an effective public sphere, as he has championed *deliberative* democracy based on 'rational-critical debate' and thoughtful reflection. He has criticised mass media as overly focussed on entertainment, celebrity politics, and trivia. Within a Habermasian framework, an interesting issue to explore is whether social media are more or less able to provide a public sphere for 'rational critical debate'.

However, a broader approach to studying social media use in politics is required because not all support Habermas' notion of deliberative democracy. Peter Dahlgren (2009) says this form of political engagement puts 'excessive emphasis on rationality' (p. 8) and it is a normative ideal according to James Curran (2002, p. 45). Other political theorists argue that *representational* and *republican* models of democracy in which elected representatives and key 'political actors' engage in discussion and debate on behalf of citizens are more realistic. Another useful framework proposed by John Keane (2009) is *monitory* democracy, based on Michael Schudson's notion of the 'monitorial citizen' who uses various forms of media to monitor social and political developments and becomes active only when he or she decides to intervene (Schudson 2003, p. 55). Representational, republican and monitorial concepts of democratic participation provide broader frameworks for examining social media in the public sphere, and these are considered in the following analysis in addition to Habermas' deliberative model. Notwithstanding differing views on forms and levels of democratic participation, there is general agreement that citizen engagement and participation is desirable and even essential in all models of democracy (Dahlgren 2009, p. 15). As Rowe and Frewer note, there is 'a move away from an elitist model ... to one in which citizens have a voice' (2004, p. 513).

Statistics on the rapid growth of social media such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter (Macnamara 2010a), and research in Australia during the 2007 election, the US Obama campaign in 2008, and the 2010 UK national poll, show that social media provide increasing opportunities for citizens to have a voice and are increasingly part of the public sphere (Gibson, Williamson & Ward 2010; Smith 2010), and thus warrant continuing close study.

## Research questions

To understand how social media are being used in political communication in Australia, two types of research questions were developed for this study, one relating to quantitative factors (how much and how many), and one relating to qualitative factors (how and in what way). As well as examining social media use within the context of democratic political theory, this analysis sought to identify levels of *interactivity* in the form of response and dialogue and *authenticity* in social media use – characteristics identified as central to Web 2.0-based social media (Boler 2008; Buber 1947/2002, 1958; Bucy 2004; Carpentier 2007; Merholz 2005, para. 5; O'Reilly 2005).

The following research questions were investigated in the quantitative stage of this study:

1. To what extent were social media used for political communication during and immediately following the 2010 federal election and how did e-electioneering compare with the previous election in 2007?
2. Which types of social media were most used and how well do these support deliberative, representational, and/or monitory democracy?
3. Who used social media most—the ‘usual suspects’, or do social media expand the range of political voices and opportunities for engagement?

In addition, this study qualitatively explored the following two further research questions:

4. To what extent were social media used for interactive *dialogue* and *engagement* with citizens during and immediately following the election?
5. What were the main themes and topics in social media during and immediately following the election (explored by coding content into categories)?

## Methodology

This study involved two stages of content analysis of social media sites used by federal politicians during and following the 2010 Australian federal election. Both quantitative and qualitative content analysis were deployed to identify the scale of social media use, as well as gain insights into themes and topics of discussion, messages communicated, and the primary types of communicative behaviour exhibited online.

This notes that content analysis is ‘the primary message-centred methodology’ for analysing texts (Neuendorf 2002, p. 9) and, while Neuendorf describes content analysis as a ‘quantitative analysis of messages that relies on the scientific method’ (p. 10), other researchers describe qualitative uses (Curran 2002; Gauntlett 2002; Neuman 2006; Newbold, Boyd-Barrett & Van Den Bulck 2002; Priest 2010; Shoemaker & Reese 1996). These borrow techniques from text analysis as well as semiotic, discourse, frame, and theme analysis (Berger 2000; Frey, Botan & Kreps 2000; Priest 2010; Punch 1998).

Quantitative data collection and analysis was undertaken in relation to research questions 1–3. This essentially involved counting and scoring which was recorded in a series of Excel spreadsheets.

Qualitative analysis was informed by quantitative data on the number of responses to citizens’ comments and inquiries, and other interactivity features such as the number people whom politicians were ‘following’ on Twitter (as opposed to ‘followers’). In

addition, qualitative analysis of the content published by the 10 most active users of Twitter was undertaken to explore questions 4–6 using open or *axial* coding as identified by Glaser (1978) and Punch (1998, pp. 210–221).

All counting and coding were undertaken by the author, with double blind coding of 10 per cent of items performed by a second researcher to ensure reliability through intercoder reliability assessment. A ‘per cent agreement’ rating was considered sufficient for the relatively straight-forward axial coding scheme used, and 80 per cent agreement was achieved.

### ***Sample***

Analysis was undertaken of social media use by all incumbent federal politicians standing for re-election in 2010 to the 150-member House of Representatives and the 76-member Senate in the Australian Parliament. This produced a substantial sample of 206 federal politicians, with 20 sitting members not standing for re-election. While non-incumbent candidates standing for election also used social media, one of the objectives of this study was to compare findings with those of a study of sitting members’ use of social media in the 2007 federal election (Macnamara 2008a, 2008b), so the same sampling frame was necessary. However, further study of non-incumbent candidates would be a useful in exploring possible differences among new-entrants to politics and candidates from minor political parties.

Qualitative analysis was conducted of Twitter use by the 10 most active politicians’ in this medium during the campaign, identified by their volume of ‘tweets’. Twitter was selected as it is the fastest-growing social media platform used in political campaigning (as shown in Table 1). This involved content analysis of 1,395 tweets (approximately 28,000 words).

### ***Period***

The first stage of quantitative and qualitative analysis was conducted during the final three weeks of the election campaign from 1 August to 6 pm Eastern Standard Time on 21 August (the close of polls in major States). The second stage was conducted during the 60 days immediately following the election from 22 August to 9 am EST on 21 October 2010.

## **Findings during the election campaign**

### ***Overview***

Use of social media by politicians in the 2010 federal election campaign was more than double that in the 2007 federal election. For instance, the number of social media sites used by politicians during the 2010 campaign increased by 105 per cent, as shown in Table 1. While there were only minor changes in the number of federal politician using personal Web sites, and use of e-surveys and e-petitions has declined, there has been massive growth in use of Twitter and Facebook as well as substantial increases in use of Flickr and YouTube for political campaigning.

**TABLE 1.** Change in the number of federal politicians using various forms of online communication in 2010 compared with a similar study in 2007 (Macnamara, 2008a, 2008b).

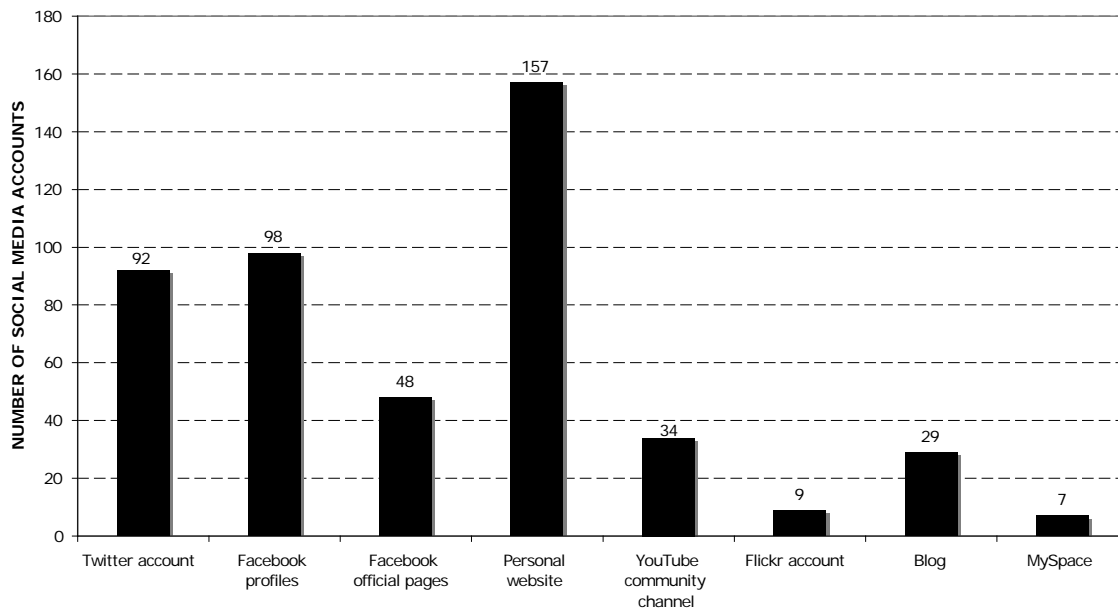
<b>Social media</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>% change</b>
Personal Web site	137	157	14.6%
Twitter	0	92	9200.0%
Facebook	8	146	1725.0%
YouTube	13	34	161.5%
MySpace	26	9	-65.4%
Blogs	15	29	93.3%
Flickr	0	9	900.0%
E-surveys	24	7	-70.8%
E-petitions	10	3	-70.0%
E-newsletter	42	78	85.7%
<b>Total online sites/activities</b>	<b>275</b>	<b>564</b>	<b>105.1%</b>

### ***Politicians on Facebook***

The most popular social medium among federal politicians in 2010 was Facebook, with more than 70 per cent of all MPs and Senators having a Facebook presence of some kind – compared with just eight (3.5 per cent) in 2007. Clarification and segmentation of the different types of Facebook presence is necessary. Facebook allows creation of ‘profiles’ of individuals as well as two types of ‘pages’ – ‘official pages’ and ‘community pages’ – which can be established for organisations, companies, public figures, celebrities, or topics of interest. ‘Profiles’ are more personal than ‘pages’ as they allow the acceptance of ‘friends’ with full ‘read’ and ‘write’ access to contribute content as Wall posts and comments on articles, photos, and videos. ‘Official pages’ and ‘community pages’ do not allow for ‘friends’ to join. Visitors can only ‘like’ pages using Facebook’s ‘Like’ button. Importantly in terms of this analysis, ‘community pages’ are often created by third parties unconnected with the person or organisation discussed (e.g. by fans or ‘hate groups’). Therefore ‘community pages’ of politicians were not counted or analysed in this study of politicians’ social media use. Furthermore, because ‘official pages’ are less personal and less interactive, these were counted separately to Facebook ‘profiles’.

Excluding third-party established ‘community pages’ that had no involvement of the politician or political party, 98 federal politicians had Facebook profiles (47.6 per cent) and 48 (23.3 per cent) had official pages, as shown in Figure 1.

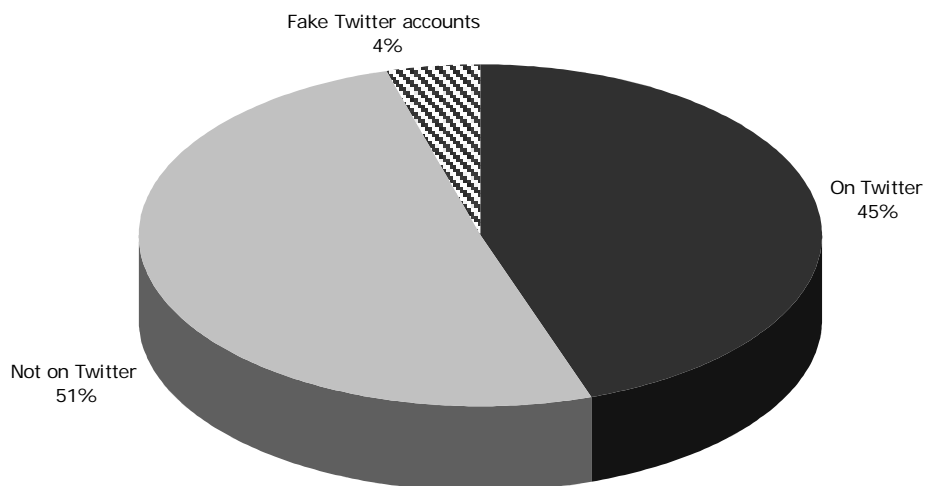
**FIGURE 1.** Social media most used by Australian federal politicians in 2010.



***Politicians on Twitter***

The fastest growing social media platform among politicians is Twitter. Having been launched only in July 2006, Twitter was not used to any discernible level by politicians in the 2007 campaign. However, in 2010 92 federal politicians (44.7 per cent) had a Twitter account. Federal politicians posted 2,273 tweets on Twitter during the final three weeks of campaigning (1–21 August 2010) – more than 100 a day. The volume and style of tweeting varied widely between candidates, however, as will be discussed later in reporting qualitative analysis.

**FIGURE 2.** Australian politicians on Twitter in 2010.



***Politicians on YouTube, blogs and other online media***

In 2010, 34 federal politicians (16.5 per cent) posted videos to YouTube, compared with 13 in 2007 (5.75 per cent), and 29 (14.1 per cent) had a blog compared with 15 (6.6 per cent) in 2007. Nine politicians posted photos to Flickr in 2010 compared with negligible use in 2007, while podcasts, e-surveys, and e-petitions were all used less than in 2007.

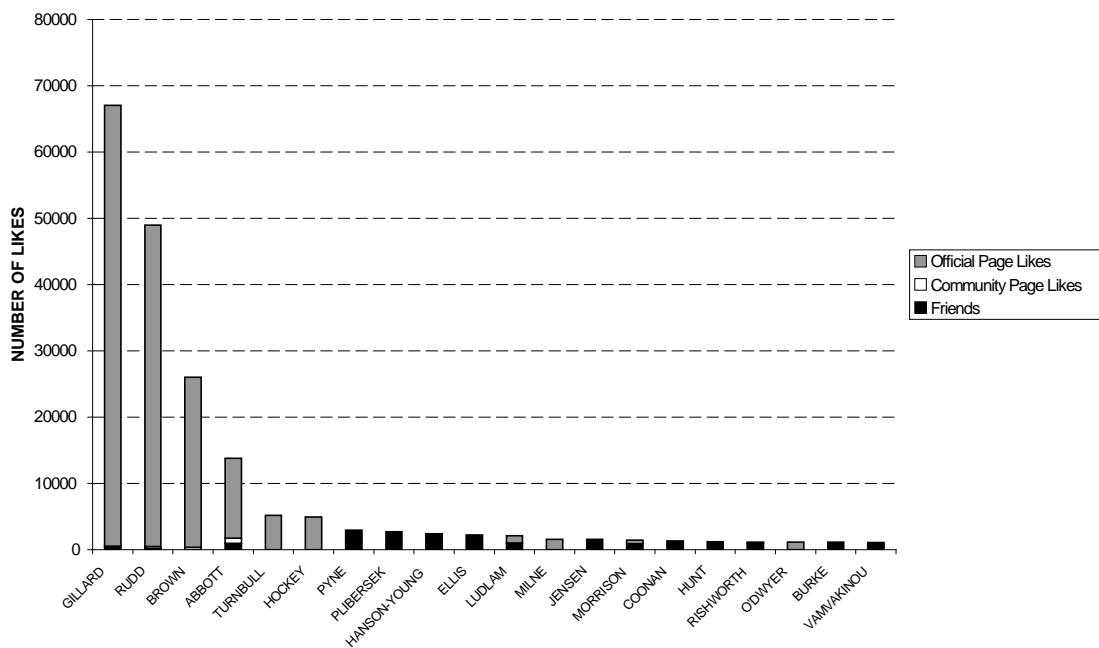
### *Politicians on MySpace*

The ‘biggest loser’ among social media in the 2010 federal election was MySpace, with just nine federal politicians listing a MySpace site (4.4 per cent), compared with 26 (11.5 per cent) in 2007. Furthermore, most of these were inactive and have been for some time. This is explained by the rapid growth of Facebook in comparison with MySpace and the latter’s repositioning as a specialist social network.

### *Politicians most active on Facebook*

Most senior federal politicians used ‘official pages’ rather than personal profiles on Facebook, with a few also having unofficial ‘community pages’. Of the high profile leaders, most who had Facebook profile restricted content and Facebook ‘friends’ to their personal life and conducted political communication primarily on ‘official pages’. Figure 3 shows the number of Facebook ‘friends’ of politicians and the number of social media users who ‘liked’ federal politicians’ Facebook pages. This shows that Prime Minister Julia Gillard dominated Facebook, followed closely by former PM Kevin Rudd. Other politicians prominent on Facebook were Greens Leader Bob Brown, Opposition leader Tony Abbott, and Liberal MPs Malcolm Turnbull and Joe Hockey. This suggests that the ‘usual suspects’ dominate social media – that is, the same high profile politicians who dominate traditional mass media.

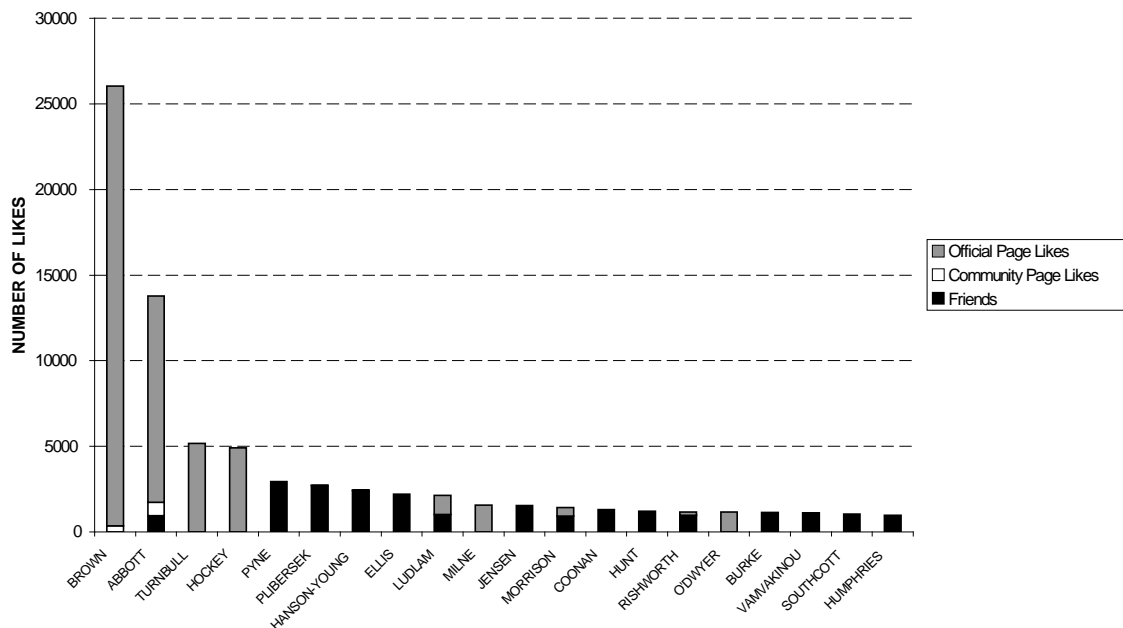
**FIGURE 3.** Australian federal politicians with the most Facebook ‘friends’ and the most ‘liked’ Facebook pages.



If the Prime Minister and the ‘Rudd factor’<sup>3</sup> are removed from this data set to reduce the skew of the chart caused by their very high profile, Figure 4 shows that a number of other politicians were relatively active on Facebook. It also shows that, other than the party leaders, deputies, and former or alternative leaders, many federal politicians accepted ‘friends’ on their Facebook profiles rather than use less personal community pages. The reluctance of leaders to accept ‘friends’ is most likely a consequence of the volume and workload involved with high popularity.



**FIGURE 4.** Australian federal politicians with the most Facebook ‘friends’ and the most ‘liked’ Facebook pages excluding Prime Minister Julia Gillard and former PM Kevin Rudd.



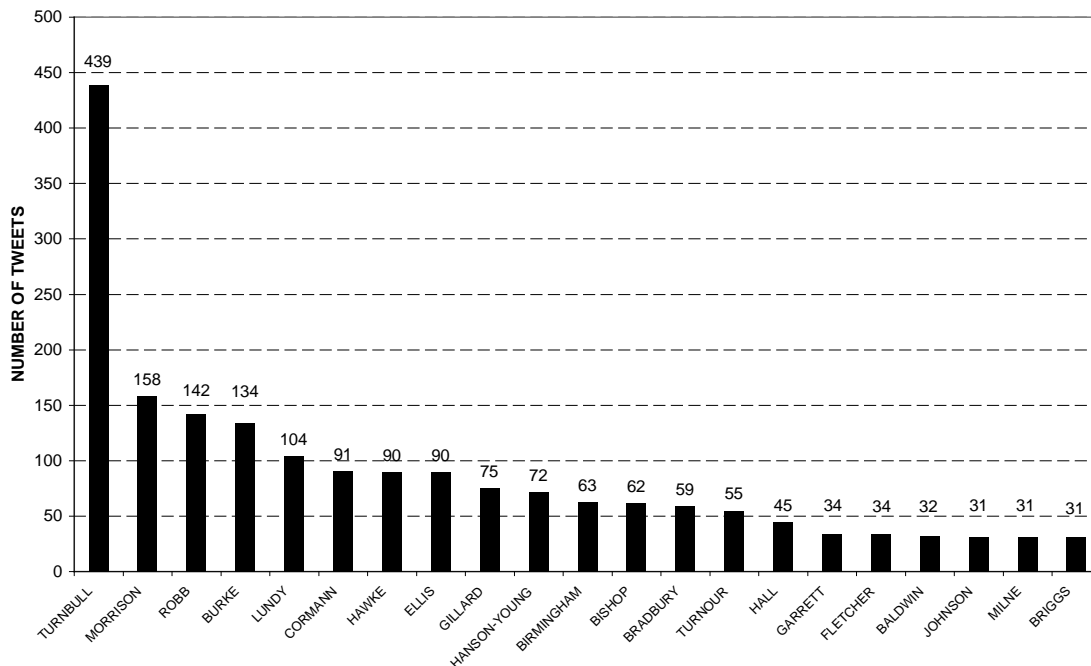
***Politicians most active on Twitter***

The most active Twitter users among federal politicians were former Liberal leader Malcolm Turnbull with 439 tweets and prominent Liberals Scott Morrison with 158 and Andrew Robb with 142. Other frequent tweeters were Labor MP Tony Burke (134); Labor Senator Kate Lundy (104); Liberal Senator Mathias Cormann (91); Liberal MP Alex Hawke (90); Labor MP Kate Ellis (90); Prime Minister Julia Gillard (75); and Greens Senator Sarah Hanson-Young (72).

This and other data showed no significant trend by political party with the ‘top 10’ Twitter users by volume comprised of five Liberals, four Labor, and one Greens politician. In total, 42 Liberal politicians used Twitter compared with 39 of their Labor counterparts. Liberals were also slightly heavier users of YouTube (17 YouTube channels compared with 13 Labor YouTube channels), and 12 Liberals had blogs compared with nine Labor politician bloggers. However, more Labor politicians had active Facebook profiles or official pages (71), compared with 56 Liberal ‘Facebookers’. Overall, social media use by politicians was approximately proportional to seats held in Parliament. There were also no significant trends by age or gender. In most cases, the most prominent politicians in social media were the most prominent in other political forums and other media.

Social media use is still evolving among politicians in Australia. Prime Minister Julia Gillard started using Twitter only at the beginning of the month in which the campaign was called (3 July), but tweeted regularly in the final three weeks of the campaign, while Opposition leader Tony Abbot managed only two tweets during the final three weeks of and only four tweets during the whole election campaign.

**FIGURE 5.** Top 20 most active tweeters among federal politicians.



### ***Qualitative analysis of politicians' online communication***

More important than descriptive data on the volume of social media use is qualitative analysis of what politicians did in social media. Based on coding of the content of the most active Twitter accounts of politicians, analysis found that, apart from a few notable exceptions, politicians used social media mostly for one-way transmission of political messages, rather than citizen engagement or listening to the electorate. Although 47.5 per cent of the tweets of the 'top 10' most prolific politician tweeters were direct messages or responses to individuals rather than broadcast tweets (See Table 2), this was inflated by Malcolm Turnbull whose 439 tweets included 335 direct messages (76.3 per cent). If Turnbull is removed from Table 2, just 23.5 per cent of the tweets of leading politicians on Twitter were direct messages, with more than three-quarters being broadcast messages.

Many of Turnbull's tweets were simple 'thank you' responses and acknowledgements, but some demonstrated the characteristics of *invitational* rhetoric and dialogue<sup>4</sup>. For instance, Brett Carey of Brisbane (Twitter name @pronto) sent Malcolm Turnbull the following tweet in relation to the National Broadband Network:

@TurnbullMalcolm Fibre has a shelf life, approx 15 years (suspended). Also no backup should cable be cut. Also most apps are now mobile.  
6.13pm Aug16th via Web in reply to TurnbullMalcolm

Turnbull replied: 'Good point. Is that right about shelf life? Interesting. Why does it deteriorate?' Turnbull also was one of the few politicians to exhibit personalising and humanising characteristics online, such as his whimsical literary tweet on 11 August: 'twitter twitter tweeting trite in the network of the night'.

As in the 2007 election campaign (Macnamara 2008a, 2008b), Turnbull showed the greatest propensity to accept criticism and respond to concerned and critical citizens in a constructive way. For example, on 18 August, a few days before the election, @anitrant accused Turnbull of being 'a snob'. Turnbull acknowledged the criticism, but engaged in debate,

urging @anitrant to not be 'thin-skinned' and 'lighten up'. As well as several exchanges with @anitrant, on the same day he agreed with 'MrQ's comments' and responded to three other tweeters. However, Turnbull was one of a few exceptions to the 'norm' in social media use by politicians. .

More than half (52.5 per cent) of 1,395 tweets posted by the 'top 10' politicians on Twitter in the period were broadcast messages. These were comprised of responses and retorts to others' statements (36 per cent); announcements of their local campaign activities and movements (18 per cent); attacks on their opponents (15 per cent); campaign slogans and election promises (eight per cent); and general political statements (seven per cent). For instance, the second most prolific tweeter, Scott Morrison, distributed 125 broadcast tweets compared with 33 personalised messages to others. The third most active politician on Twitter, Andrew Robb, tweeted only one personalised message compared with 141 broadcast tweets. Of these, 44 were attacks on Labor policy, 35 were criticisms of opponents by name (mainly Julia Gillard), and 30 were election slogans or promises. Only 13.2 per cent of tweets by the 10 most active politicians on Twitter were about social or political issues.

Analysis of the 73 tweets by the Prime Minister Julia Gillard during the period found frequent statements such as 'I'll deliver a strong economy, better hospitals and schools'. Other election campaign tweets by the Prime Minister included 'the NBN is vital for our future. Only Labor will build it. @TonyAbbottMHR will axe it. JG.' Most of the Prime Minister's tweets related to campaign promises and notifications of her campaigning whereabouts and activities such as 'I'm in Melbourne giving a major speech on our National Disability Strategy' (28 July).

The Opposition leader Tony Abbott tweeted only twice during the period and his tokenistic effort included 'the Coalition will stop the waste, stop the taxes and stop the boats' taken directly from the Liberal Party TV advertising campaign.

Comparison of the numbers of 'followers' and those who users are 'following' in Twitter provides an indicator of the objectives and purposes of social media use which informs qualitative analysis. While the number of 'followers' is an indicator of popularity, the number of people who a user is 'following' is an indicator of reciprocal interest and listening. In this regard, politicians fall down considerably – with a few notable exceptions. Figure 6 shows a considerable disparity between 'followers' and 'following' for most politicians active on Twitter, with a vastly greater number of 'followers' than people followed. This indicates a continuation of political rhetoric in which elitist voices dominate and seek supporters of their views, but spend much less time and effort listening and engaging in dialogue.

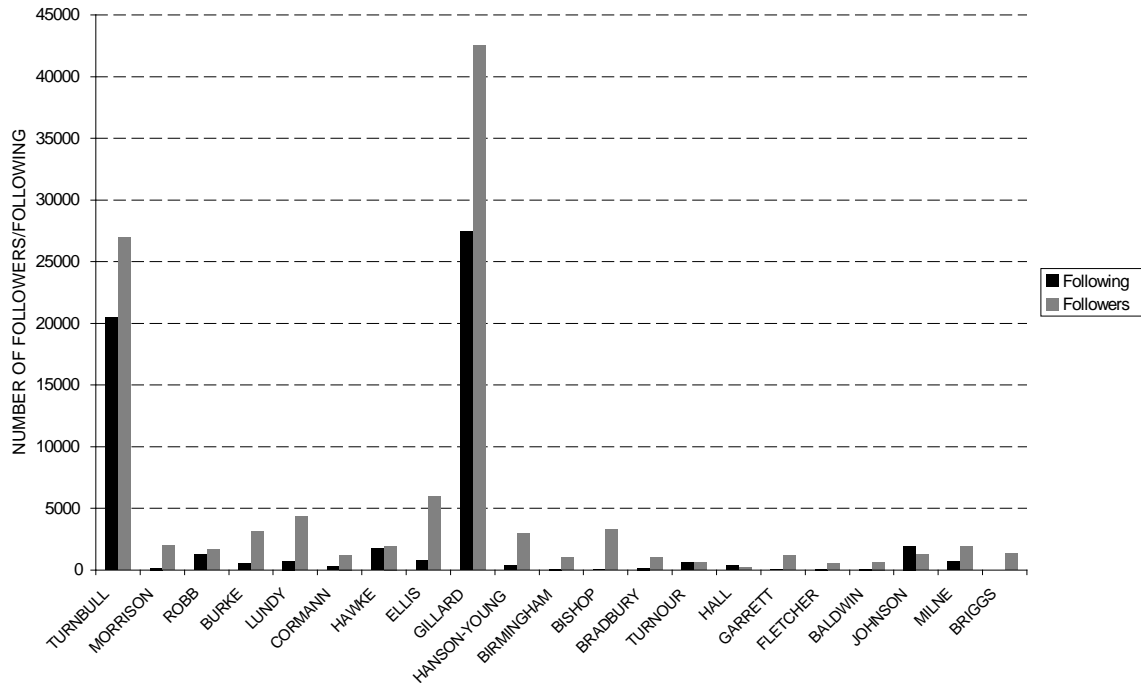
Former PM Kevin Rudd was excluded from Figure 6 as, although he had a very large number of 'followers' (944,000) and was 'following' almost 230,000 other Twitter users at the beginning of the campaign, his Twitter account was atypical in that it mostly reflected public outrage over his sudden removal as Labor Leader and Prime Minister before the campaign began.

Another notable omission from the 'top 20' Twitter users chart because he tweeted only twice during the period is Opposition Leader Tony Abbott who had 19,083 'followers' in the week before the election, but was 'following' just 20 other Twitter users.

'Following' of others on Twitter again shows Malcolm Turnbull the stand-out performer ('following' 20,498 compared with 26,943 'followers') while the Prime Minister Julia Gillard

(and/or her staff) also demonstrated some level of openness and interactivity by ‘following’ 27,467 people on Twitter the week before the election, compared with her 43,538 ‘followers’.

**FIGURE 6.** The number of ‘followers’ of the ‘top 20’ most prolific politician tweeters and the number of Twitter users they were ‘following’.



It would be naive to suggest that ‘following’ on Twitter equates to active personal listening or considering the views of those followed. It is likely that many or most politicians employ staff to monitor their social media accounts – and in many cases to post comments and respond on their behalf – particularly those ‘following’ a large number of people. However, this is not entirely inauthentic, as staff advise politicians on issues and can relay information and concerns identified through social media.

While most of Julia Gillard’s tweets were campaigning messages, negative comments were posted unmoderated on her official Facebook community page including ‘Gillard’s a Smurf, patsy for the union bosses’ and ‘what an absolute load of hogwash’. Also, some of the worst vitriol against a politician was allowed to remain as a comment on the Prime Minister’s Facebook page stating:

DO USE KNOW WHO I HATE THE MOST IN THE WORLD SHE IS A BULLSHIT ARTEST SHE LIES I HATE THE PROMISESE SHE MAKES I FELL LIKE KICKING HER ASS RIGHT NOW AND THTA IS JULIA FILLARD I FELL LIKE KICKING HER ASSS [emphasis and errors in original].

**TABLE 2.** Qualitative content analysis of tweets by the ‘top 10’ most prolific politician tweeters.

<b>CATEGORY</b>	<b>Turnbull</b>	<b>Morrison</b>	<b>Robb</b>	<b>Burke</b>	<b>Lundy</b>	<b>Corman</b>	<b>Hawke</b>	<b>Ellis</b>	<b>Gillard</b>	<b>Hanson-Young</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>%</b>
National political or social issue	29	16	10	9	14	1	2	3	3	15	102	7.3%
Local political or social issue	24	14	1	5	16	0	15	6	1	0	82	5.9%
Where am I?	81	48	17	9	22	5	13	8	20	24	247	17.7%
Personal information or feelings	28	6	1	1	2	0	2	3	4	2	49	3.5%
Election slogan / promise	4	9	30	9	8	8	4	8	26	4	110	7.9%
Attack on opponent by name	2	10	35	10	4	31	2	0	4	9	107	7.7%
Attack on opponent's policy	7	6	44	4	7	18	13	2	0	0	101	7.2%
Response to question/statement	248	33	1	65	28	22	30	51	12	8	498	35.7%
General statement	16	16	3	22	3	6	9	9	5	10	99	7.1%
<b>TOTAL Tweets</b>	<b>439</b>	<b>158</b>	<b>142</b>	<b>134</b>	<b>104</b>	<b>91</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>1,395</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
<b>FORM</b>												
Direct message	335	33	1	66	48	47	40	63	24	7	663	47.5%
Broadcast tweet	191	125	141	69	76	69	60	39	63	64	732	52.5%
Sending links	23	40	21	10	11	3	11	2	14	15	150	10.8%
<b>FORMAT</b>												
Text	439	158	142	134	104	91	90	90	75	72	1,395	100%
Photos	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Video	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

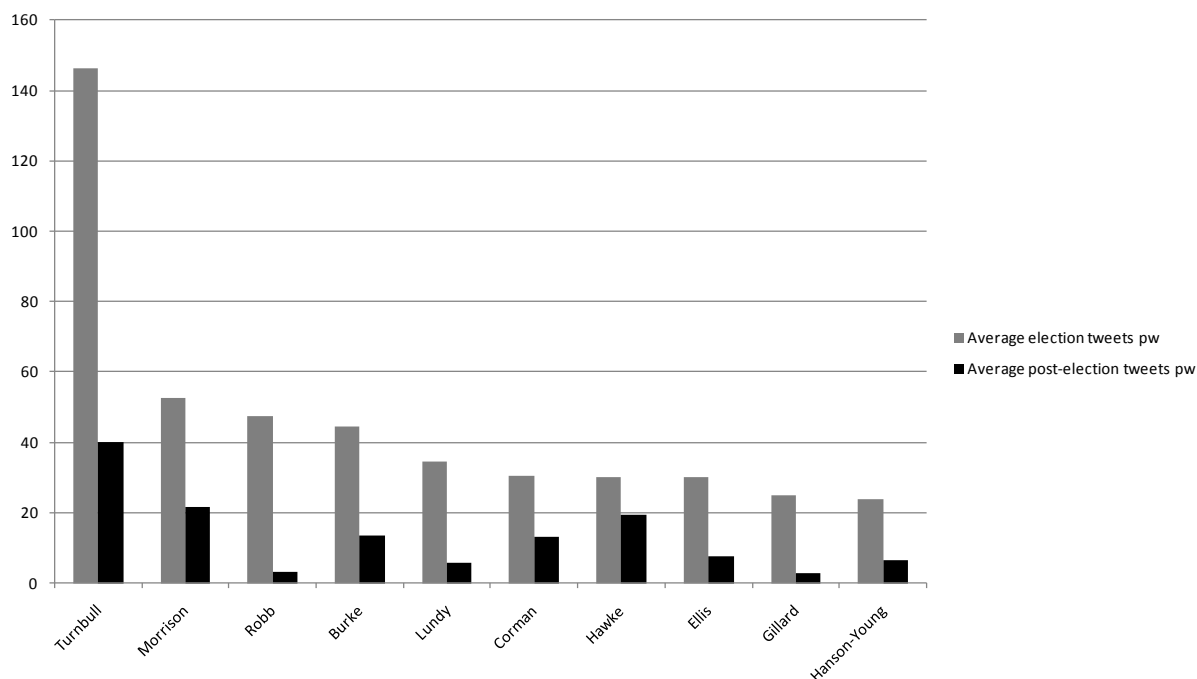
## Findings post-election

### *Post-election tweeting*

In the 60 days immediately following the 2010 Australian federal election there was a substantial fall in social media communication by politicians – even though the ‘hung’ parliament that eventuated and the continuing campaign for the support of independents maintained a volatile and competitive political environment. For example, Figure 7 shows a quite dramatic fall in the average number of tweets per week in the two months following the election compared with the final three weeks of the campaign.

Tweets by Andrew Robb fell from 47 per week to just three per week on average. Kate Lundy’s tweets fell from 35 per week to six per week on average over the period. Kate Ellis’ tweeting declined from a weekly average of 30 to eight. And the Prime Minister’s widely-reported tweeting fell from 25 per week on average during the campaign to just three per week post-election. Even voluminous tweeter and social media user in general, Malcolm Turnbull, reduced his tweeting from an average of 146 per week during the campaign to 40 tweets per week in the two months following the election.

**FIGURE 7.** The number of tweets per week posted by the 10 most active politicians on Twitter during the election campaign compared with the number of tweets posted per week in the 60 days following the election.



Nevertheless, all of the ‘top 10’ most active politicians on Twitter continued to tweet post-election. During the 60 days following the election, Malcolm Turnbull managed 362 tweets; Scott Morrison 195; Alex Hawke 175; Tony Burke 121; and Mathias Corman posted 119 tweets (See Table 3). Turnbull continued to actively engage in debate online about the National Broadband Network (NBN). The Liberals’ Scott Morrison, Mathias Corman, Andrew Robb, and Alex Hawke continued their election online strategy of attacking their political opponents’ policies, and Mathias Corman also directly attacked opponents by name. Labor politicians were not as vitriolic in relation to their opponents – although this could be a case of ‘winners are grinners’. Table 5 shows a remarkably similar range of themes and issues in post-election tweeting compared with during the election campaign.

**TABLE 3.** The number of tweets posted by the 10 most active politicians on Twitter in total, during the final three weeks of the election campaign, in the 60 days following the election, and their number ‘followers’, the number of Twitter users they were ‘following’, and the number of lists in which they were included as at 21 October (two months after the election).

<b>TWITTER DATA</b>	<b>Turnbull</b>	<b>Morrison</b>	<b>Robb</b>	<b>Burke</b>	<b>Lundy</b>	<b>Corman</b>	<b>Hawke</b>	<b>Ellis</b>	<b>Gillard</b>	<b>Hanson-Young</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>
Total tweets	1,773	1,762	253	797	1,118	1,109	1,245	568	160	1,402	10,187
During campaign	439	158	142	134	104	91	90	90	75	72	1,395
In 60 days post-election	362	195	30	121	53	119	175	68	25	60	1,208
‘Followers’ @ 21 Oct	32,991	2,546	2,484	4,077	5,067	1,579	2,335	7,453	61,493	4,319	124,344
‘Following’ @ 21 Oct	20,410	249	1,264	554	737	270	2,111	807	46,596	363	73,361
Lists @ 21 Oct	1,295	261	200	352	496	174	254	526	2,315	446	6,319

**TABLE 4.** Comparison of the number of citizens whom politicians were ‘following’ on Twitter during the election campaign compared with two months later.

	<b>Turnbull</b>	<b>Morrison</b>	<b>Robb</b>	<b>Burke</b>	<b>Lundy</b>	<b>Corman</b>	<b>Hawke</b>	<b>Ellis</b>	<b>Gillard</b>	<b>Hanson-Young</b>
‘Following’ 18 August	20,498	166	1254	550	720	273	1752	806	27,467	359
‘Following’ 21 October	20,410	249	1,264	554	737	270	2,111	807	46,596	363
Change (by volume)	-88	83	10	4	17	-3	359	1	19,129	4
Change (by %)	-0.4%	50.0%	0.8%	0.7%	2.4%	-1.1%	20.5%	0.1%	69.6%	1.1%

**TABLE 5.** Quantitative and qualitative analysis of tweets by the 10 most active politicians on Twitter during the 2010 Australian federal election in the 60 days following the election (22 August–21 October 2010).

<b>CATEGORY</b>	<b>Turnbull</b>	<b>Morrison</b>	<b>Robb</b>	<b>Burke</b>	<b>Lundy</b>	<b>Corman</b>	<b>Hawke</b>	<b>Ellis</b>	<b>Gillard</b>	<b>Hanson-Young</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>%</b>
National political or social issue	64	33	0	17	8	4	7	15	7		170	14.1%
Local political or social issue	2	9	0	2	2	0	7	4	1	1	28	2.3%
Where am I?	38	15	12	17	9	3	24	9	3	11	141	11.7%
Personal information or feelings	10	6	0	11	1	0	3	4	2	2	39	3.2%
Election slogan / promise	10	12	8	5	9	21	12	7	6	12	102	8.4%
Attack on opponent by name	2	4	3	0	0	12	0	0	0	0	21	1.7%
Attack on opponent's policy	7	13	7	0	2	20	11	0	0	1	61	5.0%
Response to question/statement	182	55	0	47	4	45	81	24	4	4	446	36.9%
General statement	47	48	0	22	18	14	30	5	2	14	200	16.6%
<b>TOTAL Tweets</b>	<b>362</b>	<b>195</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>121</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>119</b>	<b>175</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>1,208</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
<b>FORM</b>												
Direct message	299	76	0	72	8	75	96	43	5	9	683	56.5%
Broadcast tweet	63	119	30	49	49	44	79	25	20	51	525	43.5%
Sending links	26	50	16	3	17	8	17	8	13	60	218	18.0%
<b>FORMAT</b>												
Text	362	195	30	121	53	119	175	68	25	60	1,208	100%
Photos	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Video	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0



### ***Post-election ‘following’***

All of the ‘top 10’ politicians in Twitter continued ‘following’ a similar number of other Twitter users post-election, with the exception of the Prime Minister Julia Gillard who increased the number of others she was ‘following’ on Twitter by almost 70 per cent to more than 46,000 at 21 October 2010 (as shown in Figure 8). It could reasonably be concluded that the Prime Minister’s staff were monitoring and managing her Twitter account following the election, so this increase is not unexpected. In fact, the number is relatively small compared with the Australian voting population, as will be discussed further under ‘Conclusions’.

**FIGURE 8.** The number of citizens who politicians were ‘following’ on Twitter during the final week of the election campaign compared with two months after the election.

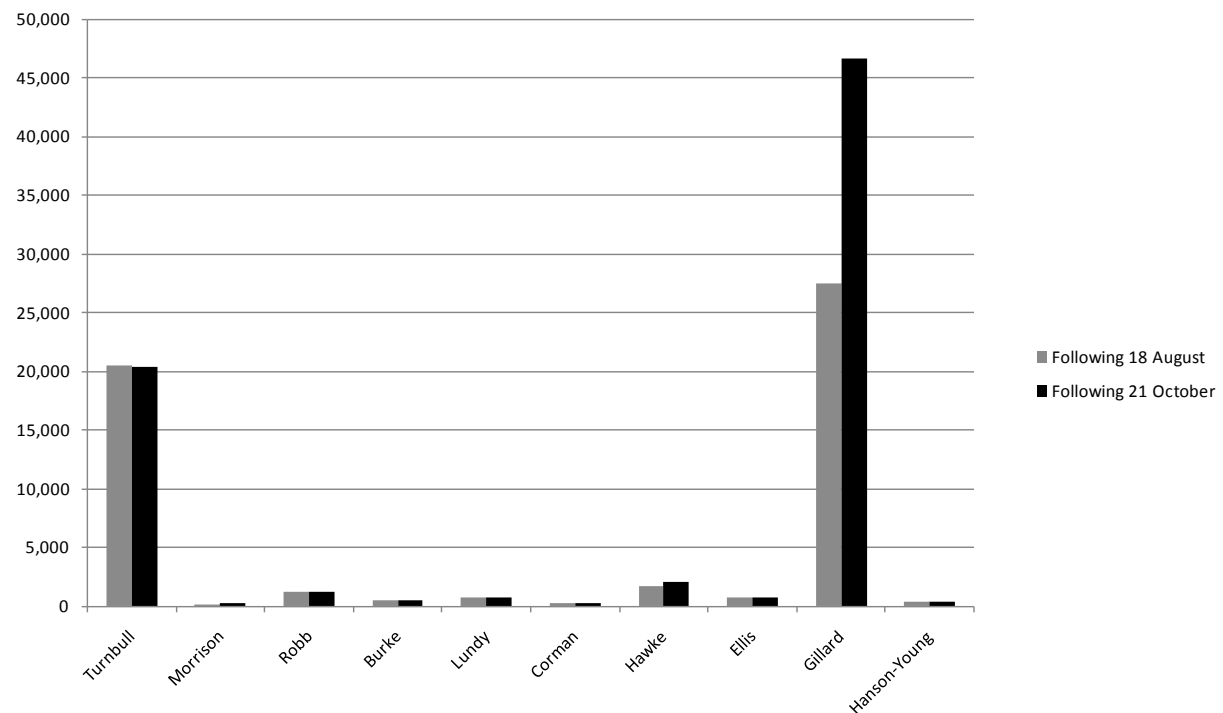


Table 4 provides a more precise picture of the change in ‘following’ of others by politicians. Apart from the substantial increase in ‘following’ by the Prime Minister’s office, the only notable changes were a 50 per cent increase by Scott Morrison and a 20.5 per cent increase by Alex Hawke. ‘Following’ of others by politicians remained constant in the two months following the election.

### **Conclusions**

It is clear from this study that the level of use of social media and the volume of social media content used for political communication has increased substantially over the three years from 2007 to 2010. In fact, the number of online sites and activities of federal politicians during the 2010 federal election more than doubled compared with the 2007 election.

There is also evidence that social media are not simply a gimmick for use in election campaigns, with a number of politicians continuing to actively use social media such as Twitter post-election.

However, Web 2.0-enabled social media are being used primarily in political communication for *one-way transmission* of messages, rather than engaging in listening, dialogue, consultation and collaboration. There are only isolated examples of politicians and political organisations using social media and networks as opportunities for listening and engagement with citizens or communities.

A number of scholars including Bobbitt (2003), Couldry (2001, 2008, 2009a, 2010), Crawford (2009), Honneth (1995), and Levine (2008) have argued that voice is an important element of democratic politics. But, importantly, they look beyond voice simply as acts of ‘speaking’ through words, texts, and other modes. Commenting on initiatives to give citizens increased opportunities to have a voice in democratic politics, Bobbitt (2003) argued that unless governments listen and there are mechanisms to process and act on citizens’ inputs, ‘there will be more public participation in government but it will count for less’ (p. 234). In contrast with the ‘hidden injuries of media power’ that are caused by institutionalised *mass media* which offer limited access to citizens (Couldry 2001, p. 155), Couldry says that digital media provide ‘the capacity to tell important stories about oneself – to represent oneself as a social, and therefore potentially political agent – in a way that is registered in the public domain’ (2008, p. 386). In a 2009 paper, he elaborated: ‘we do not just need a participatory democracy; we need a participatory democracy where participation matters’ (2009b). To matter and have value, voice must, as a corollary, have listeners, according to Couldry, Crawford, Levine, and others. This research indicates that there is still some way to go for social media before they provide what Couldry (2010) calls ‘voice that matters’.

Enthusiasm and optimism about the potential for social media to transform the public sphere need to be tempered with rational assessment based on empirical data which shows only 124,344 citizens ‘following’ the 10 most engaged politicians on Twitter – a relatively modest number in a nation with more than 11 million voters. The Prime Minister of the nation was attracting less than 50,000 ‘followers’ on Twitter in October 2010 shortly after her election. In mid-2011, the number of ‘followers’ of the Prime Minister on Twitter had still not reached 100,000. Even the most talked about Wall posts and Notes on Facebook attracted only a few hundred comments from citizens during the election campaign. These statistics indicate that social media, while expanding the public sphere and stimulating interest in politics, are only one forum for political communication and engagement – and still remain a relatively small forum compared with broadcast TV audiences and the readership of major newspapers.

As well as recognising the still relatively small size of the online public sphere and the one-way monologue that occurs despite claims of Web 2.0 interactivity and ‘conversation’, the nature of social media content also reveals challenges and limitations as a space for discussion and debate on important issues. For instance, the 140 characters (approximately 25 words) limit on microblog posts in Twitter is problematic in terms of facilitating deliberative democracy. ‘Rational critical debate’ and reflective reasoned discussion are unlikely to occur in such a format. Even the 420 character limit on Facebook Wall posts (another form of microblogging) is restrictive, and much of the content of social media is personal and even trivial rather than substantive. Furthermore, many studies show that as many as 90 per cent of internet users ‘lurk’ in sites without direct participation (Lange et al. 2008, p. 2; Napoli 2011, p. 106).

However, within a representational or monitory concept of democracy, social media provide sites for monitoring political representatives and political actors, as well as networks for connecting with others to become informed and gauge public opinion – even if that connection involves ‘lurking’ and watching. ‘Lurking’ is increasingly recognised as a form of participation. Social media also provide additional forms of governance and surveillance to

ensure transparency. Furthermore, as shown in the 2008 Obama campaign, social media are engaging citizens not previously engaged in or disengaged from politics. Finally, social media need to be seen as an integrated part of the mediascape and media ecology, rather than as an alternative. Users post comments and links to traditional media articles and Web sites as well as other social media content such as blog articles and YouTube videos. Social media sites are nodes in networks, rather than central hubs of information and activity. They are part of the public sphere, and despite all their limitations, they are a much-needed addition.

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<sup>1</sup> The term Web 2.0 was coined by Tim O'Reilly (2005) to refer to a new generation of Web applications that feature both a technological capability for interactivity and user 'principles and practices' to foster collaboration, co-creativity and dialogue/conversation. See also Boler (2008) and Merholz (2005).

<sup>2</sup> Facebook was launched in February 2004 but was initially a closed social network restricted to Harvard University students.

<sup>3</sup> Refers to controversy over the Labor Party's sacking of Kevin Rudd as Prime Minister and wide public interest in the former PM which on occasions over-shadowed election campaigning.

<sup>4</sup> Rhetoric can be either *manipulative* or *invitational* according to Heath (2006) and he and communication scholars such as Foss and Griffin (1995) advocate that invitational rhetoric is dialogic and, therefore, a more ethical form of communication.

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**Published Reference:**

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\* *Jim Macnamara PhD, MA, FPRIA, FAMI, CPM, FAMEC is Professor of Public Communication at the University of Technology Sydney and Director of the Australian Centre of Public Communication, positions he took up in 2007 after a 30-year professional career spanning journalism, public relations, advertising, and media research. He is the author of 12 books including 'The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Media (R)evolution: Emergent Communication Practices' published by Peter Lang, New York in 2010.*