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Does Scotland 'like' This? Social Media Use by Political Parties and Candidates in Scotland during the 2010 UK General Election Campaign

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Abstract

This paper reports the results of a study which investigated the use of social media by political parties and candidates in Scotland as part of their campaign for election to the UK Parliament in 2010. The study consisted of an analysis of the content of the social media sites belonging to parties and candidates standing in the 59 Scottish constituencies. During the five-week campaign period preceding the election date of 6 May 2010, the content of 81 Twitter accounts, 78 Facebook pages and 44 blogs was analysed in order to identify the ways in which political actors provided information to, and interacted with, potential voters. While parties and candidates appeared relatively keen to be seen embracing social media, they were used primarily for the one-way flow of information to the electorate. There was little direct, two-way engagement, and a general reluctance to respond to 'difficult' policy questions or critical comments posted by the public. The information provided also frequently lacked any meaningful policy comment. The followers, 'friends' and 'likers' of these sites seemed to be largely family, friends and associates of the candidates, or party members and activists. Thus, the

political actors appeared to be simply 'preaching to the converted' rather than providing opportunities for objective debate with the wider electorate.

Introduction and background

The 2010 UK General Election campaign was predicted by many observers to be one on which social media would have a significant impact (e.g., Helm 2010; Swaine 2010; Warman 2010). Citing the successful use of new, more interactive, Web 2.0 technologies by Barack Obama during his 2008 US Presidential campaign (e.g., Graff 2009; Greengard 2009; Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez 2011), they forecast that political parties and candidates in the UK would follow suit and make extensive use of social media applications in an effort to inform and engage voters, widen participation and mobilise support.

Other commentators, however, were more sceptical. For example, Williamson, Miller, and Fallon (2010) noted that there was little evidence that citizens would visit parliamentary or candidate social media sites in any great numbers; and that UK political actors tend to use social media tools as one-way publishing media only, ignoring their interactive benefits in terms of enabling conversation and engagement with the electorate. Williamson, Miller, and Fallon based their comments on their own previous research and on a select review of a growing body of literature examining digital campaigning in the UK.

Much of this literature has focused on the use of blogs, as they have become a relatively well-established communication tool in the British political sphere since Tom Watson, the Labour Member of Parliament (MP), became the first UK politician to begin a blog, in March 2003 (Auty 2005). In 2005, Coleman, noting signs of greater communicative directness and accessibility in existing politicians' blogs, argued cautiously that we might be witnessing the emergence of a new democratic relationship, where there would be an ongoing, online conversation between representatives and represented. However, as

various authors have pointed out, the interactive potential of UK political blogs has not yet been fully realised, largely because: many bloggers do not allow readers to comment on their posts (Ferguson 2005; Lilleker and Jackson 2009); those that do permit comments tend to receive very few responses (Stanley 2006; Norton 2007); and when public comments are made, or questions are asked, these are not always acknowledged or answered by the blogging politicians (Auty 2005; Francoli and Ward 2008). There are, according to Lilleker and Jackson (2009), only a small number of “pioneer” politicians in the UK who use blogs as an interactive channel.

More recently, the literature has turned its attention to politicians’ increasing use of Facebook and Twitter, as these have emerged as the most popular social media applications worldwide. For example, in spring 2008, the proportion of UK MPs using Facebook was estimated to be 23% (Williamson 2009), but had risen to almost one-third by June 2009 (Williamson, Miller, and Fallon 2010). However, despite the potential for two-way engagement offered by the Facebook architecture, it has been used largely as a one-way broadcast medium or “personal mouthpiece” (Williamson, Miller, and Fallon 2010).

On the micro-blogging site Twitter, meanwhile, since the Labour MP Alan Johnson became the first UK politician to ‘tweet’, in March 2007 (Jones 2007), the number of tweeting MPs rose dramatically, from two in December 2008, to 79 less than a year later (Williamson and Phillips 2009). Yet, while Williamson and Phillips believe that Twitter has the potential to become a “bridge” between MPs and their constituents, particularly when used as more than just a broadcast medium, they note that this potential is rarely exploited by parliamentarians. Indeed, the efforts of tweeting MPs have attracted the scorn of some commentators: Sylvester (2009), for instance, believes there is something of a “Dad-on-the-dance-floor feel” to “middle-aged MPs hoping they will look youthful and in-touch” by using the application.

With these points in mind, this paper reports the results of a study which examined the use of social media by political parties and individual candidates in Scotland during the 2010 UK General Election campaign. More specifically, it aimed to:

- measure the extent of the adoption and use of social media by parties and candidates during the campaign;

- analyse the nature of the communication that took place on these sites, in terms of the ways in which they attempted to provide information and up-to-date campaign news, promoted the parties and individual candidates, attacked their political opponents, or encouraged online interaction and debate with, and amongst, the electorate; and
- explore the broad topics being discussed by the political actors and, where applicable, the electorate on these sites.

This research formed part of an ongoing series of investigations by the authors which have examined the use of the Internet by political actors in Scotland during parliamentary election campaigns (e.g., Marcella, Baxter, and Smith 2004; Marcella, Baxter, and Cheah 2008). This paper also complements another article (Baxter, Marcella, and Varfis 2011), which looked at Scottish parties’ and candidates’ Internet use more generally during the 2010 election.

Methodology

The study consisted of an analysis of the content of the social media sites belonging to those parties and candidates standing in the 59 Scottish constituencies during the 2010 election. It focused on those social media – blogs, Facebook and Twitter – where the content is largely textual, rather than on video or photo sharing applications such as YouTube and Flickr. The content analysis covered the five-week period immediately preceding the election date of 6 May 2010.

While the political parties’ websites generally provided links to the parties’ social media sites, they were less helpful in directing users to those of their individual candidates (see Baxter, Marcella, and Varfis 2011). In order to identify such sites, the researchers therefore had to rely on Google searches, on using the Facebook and Twitter search engines, and on systematically examining the lists of members or ‘likers’ of the parties’ social media sites. Interestingly, when conducting these searches, they identified a small number of candidates who had previously received some negative publicity concerning their social media use (e.g., Lister 2007; Barnes 2009), and who, perhaps chastened by the experience, had not adopted social media during the 2010 campaign. However, such high-profile cases did not appear to affect one

Table 1. Overview of candidates' use of Twitter, Facebook and blogs.

Party (and no. of candidates standing in election)	No. using Twitter	No. using Facebook	No. using blogs	Total no. using at least one of the three types
Liberal Democrat (59)	24	19	7	31
Scottish National Party (59)	13	18	12	28
Labour (59)	15	16	7	26
Conservative (58)	13	10	5	16
Green (20)	6	3	2	8
UK Independence Party (27)	4	1	3	6
Scottish Socialist Party (10)	-	2	2	4
British National Party (13)	-	-	3	3
Others (42)	1	4	3	6
Totals (347)	76	73	44	128

Labour candidate, Stuart MacLennan, who, just days into the campaign, was sacked for posting a string of offensive comments via his Twitter account (Rose 2010).

Once the searches were completed, it was found that 128 (36.9%) of the 347 candidates in Scotland were using at least one of the three types of application, with 76 (21.9%) having a Twitter account, 73 (21.0%) using Facebook, and 44 (12.7%) maintaining a personal blog. These proportions are decidedly lower than those identified in a UK-wide survey of candidates in 100 "key battleground and high profile seats," which found that 59% were using Facebook, 45% had Twitter accounts, and 29% were bloggers (Apex Communications and Get Elected 2010); suggesting that candidates in Scottish constituencies were lagging behind those in the rest of the UK, in terms of social media adoption. This was rather surprising, for, as Smith and Webster (2008) explain, new information and communication technologies have become a "cultural norm of contemporary parliamentary life" in Scotland, at least in the Scottish Parliament setting. It might have been anticipated, therefore, that the Scottish candidates would have followed the lead of their party colleagues and embraced new social media more enthusiastically. Perhaps they, too, were influenced by previous high-profile, online errors of judgement by politicians and other public figures.

Of the 128 candidates in Scotland using social media, 24 had both a Facebook and a Twitter presence, while a further 11 utilised all three types of media.

Table 1 provides an overview of the candidates' social media use, by political party. Of the four major parties, the Liberal Democrats appeared most willing to adopt social media, with just over half (31) of their 59 candidates using at least one of the three applications (a trend mirrored throughout the rest of the UK, according to Newman (2010)). Interestingly, existing MPs seeking re-election were significantly more likely ($p < 0.05$) to use Twitter than those candidates with little or no parliamentary experience. In some respects, this is at odds with the earlier findings of Williamson (2009), who established that longer-serving parliamentarians were less likely than political newcomers to adopt digital media.

Table 2, meanwhile, summarises the activity on the candidates' Twitter, Facebook and blog sites, in terms of the number of followers, 'friends' or 'likers' each one had attracted by election day, and the number of posts made by the candidates during the five-week campaign.

With regard to Twitter, the number of followers each candidate had varied widely, from the seven individuals following one Conservative hopeful, to the 3,528 following a current Labour MP, Tom Harris (of whom more is discussed later). On average, the Labour and Liberal Democrat candidates had attained a larger following than those from the other parties. In terms of the numbers of tweets sent by candidates, these also ranged dramatically: seven candidates failed to post any campaign messages, while one Liberal Democrat sent over 700 during the five weeks. The

Table 2. Summary of candidates' campaign activity on their Twitter, Facebook and blog sites.

Candidate party	Twitter (n=76)						Facebook (n=73)						Blogs (n=43)		
	Followers at 6 May			Campaign tweets			'Friends' at 6 May			Campaign wall posts			Campaign posts		
	Min	Max	Ave	Min	Max	Ave	Min	Max	Ave	Min	Max	Ave	Min	Max	Ave
Labour	8	3528	743	0	562	133	13	648	244	0	69	14	0	8	4
Lib Dem	9	3329	506	0	722	108	36	4358	638	0	115	32	0	60	13
SNP	9	572	155	0	116	35	37	551	170	0	60	18	0	25	6
Conservative	7	858	195	0	95	18	2	1056	222	0	32	5	0	9	3
Others	10	735	120	2	564	90	38	347	117	0	80	23	0	22	8
Totals	7	3528	383	0	722	81	2	4358	310	0	115	20	0	60	7
	Median = 148			Median = 26			Median = 150			Median = 9			Median = 5		

Labour and Liberal Democrat candidates were, on average, most prolific in terms of the number of posts made.

A wide variation in the numbers of 'friends' and posts made also existed on the candidates' Facebook sites. One Conservative had only two 'friends' by election day while a prominent Liberal Democrat MP (a former leader of the party) had over 4,300; and while 16 candidates made no personal wall posts during the campaign, one Liberal Democrat produced 115.

While, unsurprisingly, the better-known candidates generally had more social media friends and followers than those contestants with a less prominent public profile, there were no obvious relationships between the frequency of use of Twitter and Facebook and the candidates' current political status. Little-known, first-time candidates in minority parties with no realistic chance of electoral success were just as likely to be frequent (or infrequent) posters as long-serving, high-profile MPs and Cabinet Ministers with large majorities and no serious constituency opposition. The frequency of social media use, then, appeared to be largely down to the candidates' personal choices and opportunities.

With the candidates' personal blogs, the readership each one had attracted could not be readily established. The posts made during the campaign, however, were relatively modest in number: nine candidate bloggers failed to make any posts, while one Liberal Democrat (incidentally, the most prolific tweeter) posted 60 comments during the five weeks. This resulted in an average of just over seven posts per candidate. It should be pointed out here, though, that Table 2 relates to 43 blogs, rather than the 44 noted in

Table 1. It excludes the Labour politician Tom Harris's blog, as it was so different from that of the other candidates, in terms of the nature and extent of the activity taking place on its pages, that its inclusion would have skewed the results significantly. The Harris blog will, therefore, be dealt with separately in the content analysis discussion below.

With regard to the 20 political parties contesting the 2010 election in Scotland, five had a Facebook site, five operated a Twitter account, with three of the four major parties – Conservative, Liberal Democrat and Scottish National Party (SNP) – using both types of media. Table 3 provides an overview of the campaign activity on the parties' Twitter and Facebook pages. As can be seen, the numbers of followers or 'friends' each party had attracted were relatively small (at least when compared with some of the individual candidates), ranging from the Scottish Jacobites' 96 Facebook 'friends' to the 3,305 following the SNP on the same application. The numbers of posts made were also relatively low, particularly on Facebook, where the most active party was one of the fringe contestants, the Scottish Jacobites.

On the election day of 6 May 2010, the content of these 81 Twitter accounts, 78 Facebook pages and 44 blogs, from the preceding five-week campaign, was captured electronically for subsequent analysis. While there are an increasing number of online sites and packages designed to archive and analyse social media traffic (e.g., Tweetdoc at www.tweetdoc.org, and The Archivist at archivist.visitmix.com), none met the specific needs of this research, therefore a simple 'copy and paste' approach was used, where all posts (i.e., tweets, Facebook wall posts and blog posts) were

Table 3. Overview of campaign activity on parties' Twitter and Facebook sites.

Party	Twitter		Facebook	
	Followers at 6 May 2010	Campaign tweets	'Friends'/'Likers' at 6 May 2010	Campaign wall posts by party
Labour	1224	65	-	-
Liberal Democrat	562	119	270	1
Scottish National Party	1006	432	3305	16
Conservative	223	220	343	6
Green	Not known	21	-	-
Scottish Socialist Party	-	-	525	9
Scottish Jacobite Party	-	-	96	56

copied and pasted into MS Word documents. The content was then systematically read and each post was coded based on the main thrust of its content. The coding was conducted using a series of pre-prepared coding sheets, and an example of that used for candidate Twitter accounts can be found as an Appendix to this paper.

At the broadest level, the coding indicated if the posts comprised the original thoughts and comments of the parties and candidates, or were simply the dissemination of others' posts; if they were links to other websites; or if they were direct responses to public comments, criticisms and questions. A more detailed analysis also took place, however, which indicated if the posts discussed, for example, the candidates' campaign activities, national or local policy issues, media coverage of the election, or candidates' domestic lives. The coded content was enumerated on the coding sheets using the simple 'five-bar gate' method (i.e., manually tallying up the frequency of types of comment), with the resultant data input to, and analysed in, the software SPSS for Windows. This systematic, largely manual method was time-consuming yet manageable when analysing the relatively small number of 203 social media sites belonging to the contestants in the 59 Scottish seats. It might prove unwieldy, though, to replicate this approach in, say, a UK-wide study of social media activity throughout all 650 parliamentary constituencies.

The analysis of the 203 sites has resulted in a significant data bank of material, a detailed account of which would be beyond the scope of this paper. The main results are, however, discussed in the following sections.

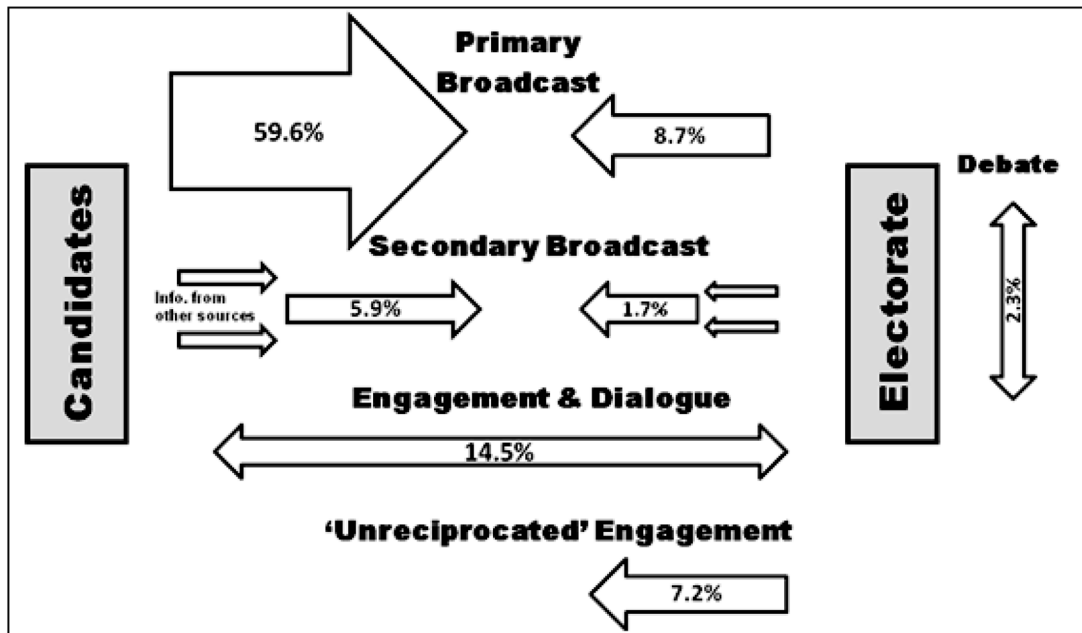
Content analysis of party and candidate social media sites

Candidate blogs

As was indicated above, the traffic on the vast majority of candidate blogs was low, with each candidate averaging around seven posts during the campaign, and nine failing to make any posts. Perhaps all nine were like the Conservative candidate who wrote subsequently, "I wasn't able to blog during the campaign, I was so busy talking to voters on the doorstep ..." Or perhaps some were, as Gibson, Williamson, and Ward (2010, 2) suggest, reluctant to "step out over the parapet" for fear of writing something that might embarrass their party and harm their electoral prospects.

Of the blog posts that were made, the largest proportion (56, or 16.4%) consisted of candidates offering their opinions on a range of national policy issues, from immigration to the environment, and from nuclear weapons to taxation. Almost as many posts (53, or 15.5%) discussed the candidates' personal campaign activities (e.g., door-to-door canvassing and media appearances), where they either let their readership know that these events were about to take place or provided an account of how they had transpired. Local issues, such as the threatened closure of community facilities, or severe weather payments to farmers, were the subject of 8.8% of the posts; and a similar proportion discussed national campaign events, including the latest opinion poll results and the party leaders' media appearances.

Readers' responses to candidate posts were, however, somewhat lacking, partly due to the fact that

Figure 1. Information exchange on candidate blogs, excluding Tom Harris. ($n = 470$ posts)

ten of the 43 blogs did not allow public comment. Amongst those blogs that did permit responses, the readers had very little to say. On average, each candidate blog post received less than one (0.6) comment, with the largest proportion (26.6%) of these being messages of support for the candidate or their party. This gave the impression that most blog readers were either personal friends of the candidates, or perhaps party members or activists. And while a small number of readers took the opportunity to ask the candidates a direct question, or to make critical comments, these tended to be ignored.

Figure 1 illustrates the pattern of information exchange that took place on the candidates' blogs. As can be seen, the largest proportion (59.6%) were *Primary Broadcast* posts by the candidate, where they gave their personal thoughts on policy issues, campaign events, media coverage of the election, etc. A small proportion (8.7%) consisted of *Primary Broadcast* posts by the electorate, where blog readers expressed their own opinions on policy and election events. Just under 6% of posts were *Secondary Broadcast* posts by the candidates, where they had obtained information and stories from other sources (e.g., online newspapers or other political websites and blogs) and had passed these on to their own readership.

Two-way *Engagement and Dialogue* between candidates and voters – where candidates answered a

question, or responded to a criticism or message of support – accounted for just 14.5% of the overall traffic. While 7.2% of the posts were what might be termed '*Unreciprocated*' *Engagement*, where blog readers attempted to engage with the candidates, but found themselves being ignored. Some of the candidates' posts led to debate *amongst* the blog readers, but this accounted for just 2.3% of the overall traffic. The general picture of the candidate blogosphere in Scotland, then, was of a largely one-way flow of information from the politicians to the electorate. In many respects, this is in line with Francoli and Ward's (2008) concept of political blogs being "21st century soapboxes," when they concluded that

many political blogs look more like the traditional soapbox and megaphone used in town square meetings – where most people ignore the speaker and walk on by, a few people stop, and some shout abuse but few actually listen or debate.

The candidates in Scotland did, however, include one exceptional blogger, the Labour candidate, Tom Harris. Harris has been an MP since 2001, and a blogger for several years; and in that time his blog (Harris 2010a) has attracted a large and faithful following (Bowditch 2009). Despite having offered prac-

tical advice to other political bloggers (Harris 2010b), his own posts have occasionally caused considerable controversy (e.g., Prince 2008; Bowditch 2009). During the 2010 campaign, Harris made 57 blog posts, around eight times the average output of the other candidates, with one-third of his posts being comments on, or criticisms of, the opposition parties and their policies.

Harris also made another 57 posts, in response to his readers' comments. Indeed, each of his posts received an average of 18 comments, thirty times that of the other candidates. Unlike the other candidate blogs, where public comments were largely of a supportive nature seemingly posted by friends and acquaintances, the readers' posts on the Harris blog were very much a mixture of concurring and opposing views. Indeed, it became clear that his readership came from all parts of the UK, and beyond, and from all parts of the political spectrum. Harris's posts also led to significantly more debate amongst his readers (15% of the total traffic on his blog) than that occurring on the other candidates' blogs. The current authors felt, therefore, that the Harris approach might be cited as an exemplar of the ways in which political blogs can enable and encourage more meaningful online engagement with and amongst the electorate. However, shortly after the election Harris gave up blogging, an event considered newsworthy in its own right (BBC News 2010) and one lamented by other political commentators and bloggers (Dale 2010; Massie 2010). In his final posts, Harris described his blog as having become a "burden", which was having a "negative effect" on his "personal, family and political life." He believed that he had started posting comments "simply for the sake of being confrontational" and effectively provoking much of the public response described above.

The demise of the Harris blog was followed closely by that of the influential Conservative blogger Iain Dale, prompting some to forecast that we were witnessing the death of political blogging in the UK (Wheeler 2010). Dale (2011) himself recently argued that the influence of *individual* bloggers is waning, and, at the time of writing (July 2011) has launched a new "mega-blog" (www.iaindale.com) which will involve around 90 writers and "retired bloggers", including Tom Harris. It will be interesting to see if Harris now adopts a different, less provocative approach to blogging, and if the same level of interaction with his readership is maintained.

Candidate Twitter sites

The 76 candidates on Twitter sent a total of 6,181 tweets during the campaign. Of these, the largest proportion (19.6%, or 1,212 tweets) were not original thoughts or comments; they were 'retweets', where the candidates had read a comment made, or a link provided, by someone else on Twitter, and then forwarded it to their own followers. Generally, these tended to be posts that either praised the candidate's party or criticised the opposition. The most obvious example was of a tweet sent by the actor, writer and broadcaster, Stephen Fry. On 22 April, Fry wrote: "Frankly I'm tempted to vote Lib Dem now. If we let the Telegraph and Mail win, well, freedom and Britain die" (Fry 2010). This caused considerable excitement amongst the Liberal Democrat candidates in Scotland (and, presumably, the rest of the UK), who proceeded to retweet this to their own followers. As a result, Fry's post reappeared throughout the Scottish political 'Twittersphere' on numerous occasions over the next few days.

Just over 15% of the posts related to the candidates' personal campaign activities, and an illustrative sample of these appear below, together with an indication of each candidate's party. The most obvious feature of these posts is that they are all incredibly positive and optimistic. For the candidate on Twitter, it would seem, the sun is forever shining and the electorate is always receptive to their campaign message. Without wishing to sound cynical, the present authors suspect that the response from the Scottish public was not universally positive. With this in mind, the list below includes an indication of whether or not the candidates eventually won the seat they were contesting, with 'W' indicating a win and 'L' a loss. As can be seen, just two of the eight were successful, suggesting that a good deal of political spin was present in their Twitter offerings.

- "A cracking day in Montrose, good response on the high street" (Con L)
- "Fantastic hustings at Kinning Park Community Council last night" (Con L)
- "Voters loving our door to door grassroots campaign" (Lab W)
- "Great day door knocking in Nairn and leafletting in Culloden" (Lab L)
- "The sun is shining, the posters are up and there's a smile on Dunfermline's face" (Lib Dem L)

- “Great debate at Gala sheltered housing this afternoon” (Lib Dem W)
- “We’ve had a wonderful sunny day campaigning in Inverclyde” (SNP L)
- “Fantastic response on the doorsteps of Larkhall last night” (SNP L)

Despite a significant proportion of the candidates’ tweets being dedicated to their campaign activities, there was a reluctance to disclose what issues were raised during these encounters with the electorate. While some posts highlighted issues of importance to potential constituents, such as potholes in local streets, or the effects of supermarkets on small local businesses, these were relatively rare, accounting for just 0.7% of the overall tweets.

When not informing followers about their public appearances, many candidates were keen to let them know about the volume of email correspondence they faced, and a selection of these tweets is provided below. Ironically, the last of these posts, urging readers to “keep them coming”, was from a candidate who was less than responsive to the current authors’ questions sent by email during a covert element of their research (see Baxter, Marcella, and Varfis 2011).

- “This election the number of emails from individuals has gone through the roof. If they were letters they couldn’t be answered in the time” (Con)
- “Only 50 or 60 emails to answer – could be worse. Should only take me till sundown” (Green)
- “Thought I’d take a break from emails and remind myself what sleep feels like!” (Lib Dem)
- “... is responding to emails this morning, some very interesting questions, keep them coming” (Lib Dem)

In this respect, the candidates’ use of Twitter is similar to that of existing MPs, identified by Jackson and Lilleker (2011), with an emphasis on “impression management”, in particular “self-promotion.” The findings are also similar to those of Jackson and Lilleker in that there were relatively few incidences of Twitter being used to attack political opponents, particularly at the constituency level. Indeed, there appeared to be almost an unwritten rule amongst candidates that Twitter should not be used to criticise their direct opponents: while 6.6% of the overall traffic consisted of comments on, or criticisms of, national opponents

(either the opposition parties as a whole, or prominent individuals), just 0.7% of tweets discussed their constituency rivals. However, there was little evidence of what Jackson and Lilleker describe as a virtual “smoking room” – a cross-party Twitter community of politicians who communicate regularly (often informally) with one another. Indeed, in the present study, inter-candidate tweets were rare, comprising a handful of posts exchanged between two candidates, on the subject of science fiction television programmes rather than any political or policy matters.

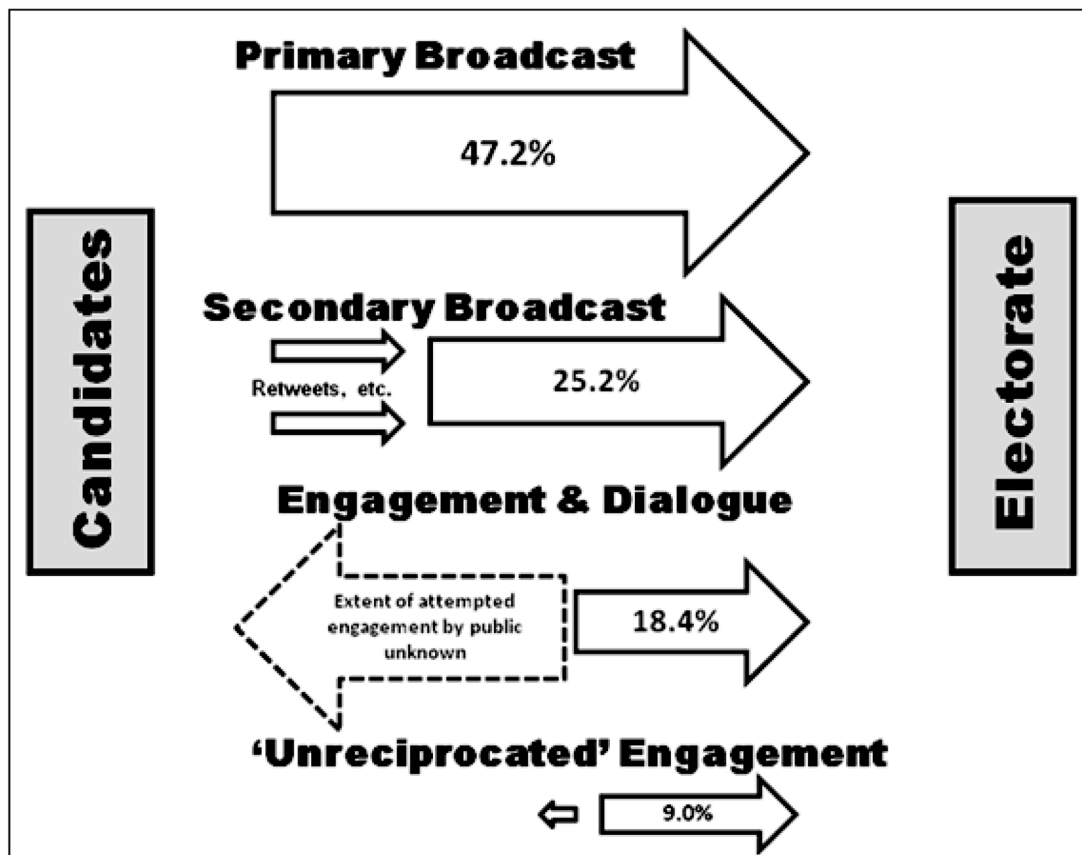
With regard to direct interaction with followers, there were examples of candidates responding to questions (6.3% of tweets) or to supportive comments and other pleasantries (5.1%), but far fewer responses to personal criticisms (1.4%) or to attacks on the candidates’ parties (0.7%). Readers familiar with the structure of Twitter will appreciate that it was difficult to identify cases where candidates may have been sent direct questions or criticisms but had chosen to ignore them; therefore the true extent of the candidates’ responsiveness could not be established. Certainly, during the covert element of the 2010 election study (see Baxter, Marcella, and Varfis 2011), none of the 30 questions sent to candidates by Twitter was answered, and the current authors suspect that this lack of response was not uncommon.

A small sample of candidate responses to questions and criticisms is provided below, including one case which illustrates the difficulties in providing a meaningful reply within Twitter’s 140-character limit. While there was some evidence of ‘industrial’ language and misplaced humour, on the part of both candidates and the public, the postings were largely polite and respectful. The notable exception was the final example below, where the exchange between a UK Independence Party (UKIP) candidate and one follower subsequently degenerated into an increasingly offensive dialogue.

Q: “Why did you not vote against the TERRIBLE Digital Economy Bill? V. disappointing.”

A: “was 400 miles away in constituency – can’t be 2 places at once, sad that Lab/Con did deal to pass it despite LDs voting against” (Lib Dem candidate)

Q: “why should i vote labour still undecided... one reason?”

Figure 2. Information exchange on candidate Twitter sites. ($n = 6,181$ posts)

A: "If u live in South you'll get a great MP. The right decisions to keep the economy growing and stable" (Labour candidate)

Q: "in 140 characters or less. Why should me and family vote for you"

A: "Had dozens of goes at your challenge. Can't do it. Can't reduce such important issues to 140 letters. Sorry." (Labour candidate)

Citizen: "Take your race hate and stuff. I do hope you lose your deposit. Scum like you should be locked up."

Candidate: "whats racist about less tax, taking low income peeps out of tax. abolishing the tax on the dead u would call in Inheritance tax [sic]" (UKIP candidate)

Figure 2 illustrates the overall pattern of information exchange on the candidates' Twitter sites. As can be

seen, there was a predominantly one-way flow of information from the candidates to their followers, with 72.4% of tweets showing the candidates in broadcast mode, and just 18.4% of posts being direct responses to questions, criticisms or messages of support. There was also an element of Unreciprocated Engagement on the part of the candidates: many of them followed various well-known journalists, political commentators, comedians and other 'celebrities' on Twitter, and would sometimes respond to these celebrities' tweets in an apparent effort to begin a dialogue. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the number of people following these public figures on Twitter, the candidates' efforts were largely ignored.

Party Twitter sites

The one-way pattern of information exchange was even more apparent throughout the five party Twitter sites, where 95.9% of the 857 party tweets were broadcast-type posts. The largest proportion (25%)

of these messages concerned campaign events taking place across Scotland, while 20.9% were links to stories and features on the parties' websites. A further 18.4% of the posts were (usually critical) comments on their political opponents. The parties appeared even more reluctant than the candidates to enter into two-way engagement with their followers, with just 1.2% of tweets being responses to questions or criticisms. Again, though, the extent to which parties were ignoring the electorate's efforts to engage is unclear.

The impact of televised debates on candidates' and parties' Twitter traffic

For the first time ever during a UK General Election, the 2010 campaign featured three American-style, live television debates between the three main UK party leaders (the SNP was excluded from these debates). Scottish viewers could watch a further three debates featuring senior party figures from the four main parties in Scotland (i.e., including the SNP). A significant proportion of the Twitter traffic described above took place during, or in the immediate aftermath of, these broadcasts. Indeed, 31.9% of the candidates' tweets and 12.3% of the parties' posts related specifically to these six debates. The nature of the content of these tweets varied widely, from those making serious points about the policy issues under debate, to frivolous posts poking fun at the leaders' sartorial efforts. In many respects, then, the more traditional medium of television was the driver behind much of what was taking place on the new medium of Twitter, a phenomenon also identified by Newman (2010).

Candidate Facebook sites

As Tables 1 and 2 illustrate, 73 candidates were using Facebook during the election campaign. While most of these sites were operated solely by the candidates, some were administered by a small team of individuals, including the candidate, their election agent, and/or some party activists. None of the 73 candidates allowed users to post comments on their Facebook wall without first showing explicit support for the candidate by joining or 'liking' the site. Furthermore, just 13 of the sites allowed users to send a private message to the candidate. Thus, any potential voter hop-

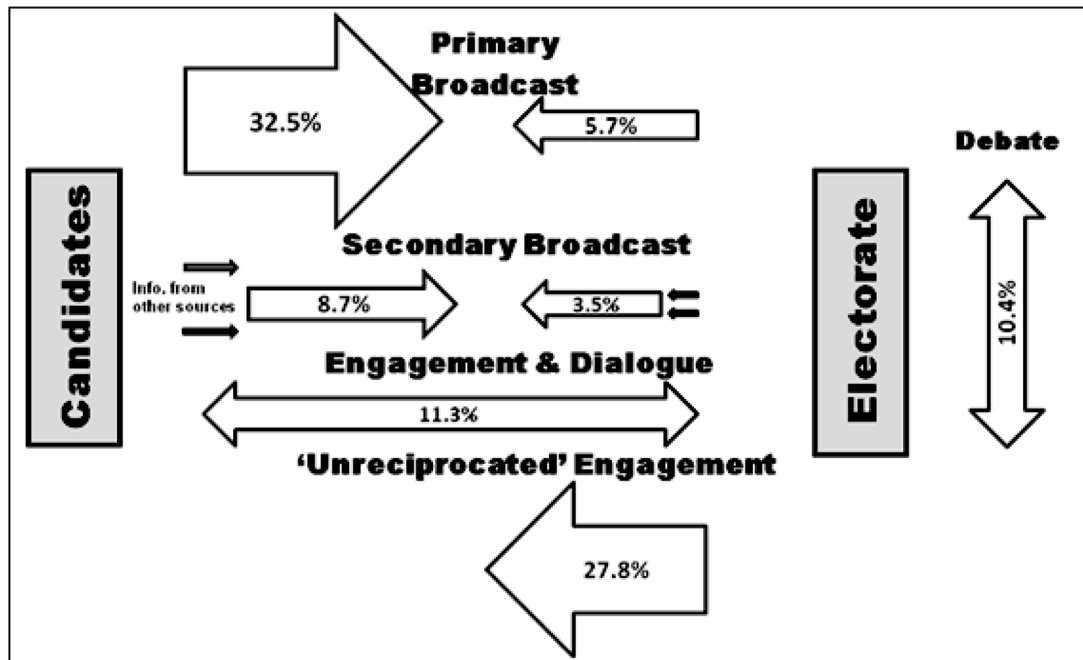
ing to engage with candidates via Facebook, but not wishing to publicly display any political allegiance, would have found it incredibly difficult to do so.

Of the 1,391 wall posts made by the candidates, the largest proportion (29.6%) discussed their personal campaign activities. As was the case with the Twitter posts, these were largely self-promotional in nature, letting their readers know how active they were on the campaign trail and suggesting that they were receiving an overwhelmingly positive response from the electorate. Again, though, they were reluctant to discuss local policy issues, with just 2.1% of posts highlighting potential constituents' concerns.

Almost a quarter (23.6%) of the candidates' posts were links to, or feeds from, the candidates' websites, blogs or Twitter pages, resulting in considerable duplication of content across the three social media applications studied here; while 14.9% were links to other political or current affairs websites. Compared with their Twitter posts, the candidates appeared even more reluctant to use Facebook to criticise their national opponents publicly (1.2% of posts) or their direct constituency rivals (just two posts).

With regard to the public response to these posts, on average each candidate received a relatively modest 22.5 messages on their Facebook wall during the campaign. Unsurprisingly, given that the ability to post messages was restricted to 'friends' and 'likers' of the candidates, over half (54.9%) of these posts were messages of support, many of them clearly from family members and close personal friends. There was, however, some evidence of 'trolls' – individuals who were not supporters of particular candidates but who had joined their Facebook sites in order to mischievously post critical and sometimes abusive comments. For example, one Conservative's site was targeted by a 'troll' who, although ignored by the candidate, caused considerable consternation amongst the politician's friends and supporters before leaving the site two days after the election with the farewell message, "OK folks I'm outa here. Thanks for the debates. I hope I wasn't too much of a pain and no hard feelings ..."

As was the case with Twitter, candidates were unwilling to respond to questions or criticisms, however constructive, posted on their Facebook walls. As Figure 3 shows, over a quarter (27.8%) of the overall Facebook traffic consisted of voters' unsuccessful efforts to engage with candidates. There was also evidence to suggest that some candidates had deleted

Figure 3. Information exchange on candidate Facebook walls. ($n = 2,966$ posts)

particularly 'awkward' (or potentially libellous) questions and comments (in the examples below, real names have been replaced by XXX):

"did you delete my comment XXX? it wasnt rude, or offensive [sic] in any way, well i suppose that speaks volumes about the kind of democracy in place in Aberdeen"

"is XXX deleting Facebook Wall Posts that he doesn't agree with (e.g. suggesting that a post box would make a better MP) against the principles of free speech?"

"Some on here asked about donations from a London based company own [sic] by XXX this question has been deleted from this page. What's the secret?"

Figure 3 also indicates that 10.4% of the posts on the candidate Facebook sites consisted of debate between members of the public; and although the typical Facebook wall generally allows for such exchanges, 17 of the 73 candidates also enabled the Discussions feature on their sites, in an effort to initiate more interaction. This, though, had met with minimal suc-

cess. For example, one SNP candidate with 128 Facebook 'friends' wrote:

There are many of you out there who I have never met, from Katie in Kelso, to Kitty in Hawick or Kevin in Coldstream. Do you have any questions you would like me to (try to!) answer?

Unfortunately, this appeal, posted under the optimistic heading of "Let's start a conversation..." received just one response.

Party Facebook sites

As Table 3 illustrated, there was relatively little activity on the party Facebook sites, with a total of just 88 posts being made by the five parties. Most party posts were either links to other party websites (29.5%), links to other political or news sites (28.4%), or uploaded campaign photos, posters or leaflets (23.9%). These posts amassed a total of just 62 public comments, many of which either discussed national events, provided links to other websites, or were messages of support. And while a very small number of questions were asked and criticisms made, these were all

ignored: no direct, party-electorate interaction took place on Facebook.

Conclusions and further research

The findings of this study suggest that Scottish political actors appeared relatively keen to be seen using new social media during the 2010 UK General Election campaign, with 35% of parties and 37% of candidates adopting Twitter, Facebook and/or blogs for electioneering purposes. Of the four leading parties, however, the Conservatives were less willing to embrace these new technologies, a fact acknowledged by a post-election commission established by the party (Scottish Conservatives 2010 Commission 2010).

The current authors believe that the figures presented in this paper provide a helpful way of illustrating and understanding the nature of the communication process in online electioneering. They indicate that social media were used primarily for the one-way provision of information to the electorate. Throughout the campaign, parties and candidates remained very much in broadcast mode, with relatively little two-way interaction with Scottish voters. This is in line with a UK-wide 'post-mortem' of the election by Williamson (2010b), who, discussing Facebook, noted that, "all too often it seems that our would-be representatives followed the bad habits of their predecessors, using it more for editorials than for engagement." As a recent survey by the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA 2010) suggested that 36% of the Scottish public would welcome more opportunities to interact online with politicians and parties, these patterns of information exchange are unfortunate and unlikely to encourage an already apathetic and cynical electorate to participate more fully in the political process.

The lack of online interaction can be attributed to four interrelated factors. First, throughout the social media applications, but particularly on Facebook and Twitter, there was a lack of meaningful policy comment by the politicians, which might then act as a starting point for informed, online debate. During the 2010 campaign, many candidates appeared more interested in discussing the weather than any important national and local issues being raised by voters.

Second, the manner in which the parties' and candidates' posts were written did not appear to overly enthuse the Scottish citizenry, reflected in the low

number of public comments made across the social media studied. There were, of course, a small number of exceptions where public participation was more extensive, suggesting that, just as there is an art to being a Churchillian orator, then the use of social media to inspire and encourage online political engagement requires certain literary skills. Yet, as the Tom Harris example illustrates, maintaining a publicly popular social media presence in the political sphere can come at a cost, both personal and professional. Perhaps, then, more of a balance needs to be struck, between an openness and a writing style that connects with readers, and an approach that is not unnecessarily provocative.

Third, with the exception of the sites of the more prominent candidates (mostly current MPs seeking re-election), the followers, 'friends' and 'likers' each one had attracted were relatively modest in number and appeared to be largely family, friends and associates of the contestants, and/or party supporters, members and activists. This gave something of an exclusive, 'closed-shop' feel to many of the sites, an impression exacerbated by the fact that the vast majority of Facebook pages did not permit visitors to post comments and questions without first publicly displaying allegiance with the candidate or party. The political actors in Scotland, therefore, appeared to be largely 'preaching to the converted', rather than providing opportunities for objective, critical, online debate on policy issues with the wider electorate.

Fourth, even amongst those political actors reaching a wider, less partisan audience, there was a reluctance to respond to 'difficult' questions and critical comments. Possibly influenced by previous high-profile, online *faux pas* by politicians and other public figures, many chose instead to ignore them completely. While it is understandable that prospective politicians might feel nervous about writing a response that could potentially harm their election chances, it might be argued that the alternative tactic employed, that of doing nothing, will also have a detrimental effect on their political aspirations.

A post-election analysis using the chi-square test and the phi measure of association revealed that, statistically, there was an association between election success in Scotland and Twitter use, with successful candidates being more likely ($p < 0.05$) than unsuccessful contestants to have used the application; although this association was relatively weak ($\phi = 0.149$). However, given the candidates' generally

modest followings, and the often bland and superficial ways in which the application was used during the campaign, it would be difficult to attribute any causal relationship between the two variables. Indeed, the 2010 General Election in Scotland was far from being the "social media election" predicted by many. As other observers (e.g., Newman 2010; Williamson 2010b) have also suggested, television was probably the real 'killer app' of the campaign, particularly during the leaders' debates, and far more influential than any online media in shaping public opinion.

The relationship, if any, between social media use and election success is currently being explored more fully by the current authors, who have continued their series of studies during the 2011 Scottish Parliamentary election campaign. Of the unsuccessful candidates in the 2010 UK General Election, a significant number (145) subsequently stood as candidates for the 2011 Scottish Parliament. With this in mind, the 2011 research has looked more closely at these 145 individuals, to establish if election failure in 2010 had any obvious impact on their use of social media in 2011 in terms of: adopting, retaining or rejecting social media for electioneering; increasing the regularity of posts; being more willing to comment on policy issues; being more responsive to questions and criticisms, etc.

At the party level, too, the electoral impact of social media use is currently being investigated more closely. For example, the SNP had a disappointing 2010 General Election, winning just six of the 59 seats (far short of their target of 20) and attaining a 19.9% share of the vote. Yet, just 12 months later, they swept to power in the Scottish Parliament elections, winning 69 of the 129 seats with a 45.4% share of constituency votes and a 44% share of regional votes, forming the first ever Holyrood administration with a working majority. The party itself believes that the way in which it harnessed social media during the 2011 campaign was an influential factor in this success, claiming it was the "first European election where online has swayed the vote" (Gordon 2011) and asserting that their online strategy will now be the "model for political parties all over the world" (Wade 2011). With this in mind, the current authors will shortly be discussing the SNP's online strategy in more detail with the party's digital team, looking in particular for any direct evidence of how social media activity was translated into votes. It is also planned to explore more fully, with party officials, the other

three main Scottish parties' online approaches during both the 2010 and 2011 campaigns.

The 2011 campaign research has also included a new element, a user information behaviour study. To date, much of the literature on online electoral campaigning (including that by the current authors) has its basis in content analyses of parties' and candidates' websites. Relatively little attention has been paid to the opinions, information needs and information seeking behaviour of the users of these sites. In the UK, some large-scale, quantitative surveys of the public have been conducted, exploring general levels of online political participation (e.g., Gibson, Lusoli, and Ward 2002; Williamson 2010a). In the US, meanwhile, a small number of studies have measured the influence of website interactivity on users' perceptions of (fictional) candidates (Sundar, Kalyanaraman, and Brown 2003), or on their levels of "political information efficacy" (Tedesco 2007). Bearing this lack of user-centred research in mind, a more detailed, qualitative study was conducted during the 2011 Scottish Parliament campaign, where 64 Aberdeen citizens were observed and questioned while they browsed and used various party and candidate websites and social media sites. The main aims of this user study, the analysis of which is currently in progress, were to explore what the ordinary man and woman in the street expect from, and think of, politicians' online offerings; identify the motivations for, and barriers to, public use of campaign sites; and investigate the types of information, tools and technologies the electorate most values when using these sites.

Combined, these studies will aim to identify exemplars of good practice in the use of social media for electioneering purposes, which might then be applicable to online political communication and campaigning more widely. They should provide parliamentarians, policy makers and other political actors with a better understanding of the information needs and behaviour of citizens who wish to engage more fully in digital democratic processes.

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Appendix
Coding sheet for content of candidate Twitter site

CANDIDATE NAME	
PARTY	
CONSTITUENCY	
NUMBER OF CAMPAIGN TWEETS	

COMMENT	
On parliamentary business/procedures	
On local campaign/policy issues	
On personal campaign activities/events	
On national campaign/policy issues	
On national campaign activities/events	
On constituency/election results	
On constituency opponents	
On national opponents	
On own party leaders/figures	
On press/media coverage of election	
On other political/current affairs issues	
On non-political events (sport, celebrities, etc.)	
On personal/domestic/family activities	
LINKS and FEEDS	
Links to candidate's other sites	
Feeds from candidate's other sites	
Links to party sites	
Links to other political/news sites	
Links to non-political/news sites	
RESPONSES and REPLIES	
Responding to personal attacks	
Responding to attacks on party	
Responding to general policy comments	
Responding to supportive comments	
Responding to questions	
Responding to 'non-personal' Tweets	
RETWEETS	
Retweets of others' comments	
Retweets of others' links	
OTHERS (Tests, errors, etc)	

Traffic during 3 national TV debates	
Traffic during Scottish TV debate	

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