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Graeme Baxter and Rita Marcella

Do Online Election Campaigns Sway the Vote? A Study of the 2011 Scottish Parliamentary Election

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 Scottish Parliament in 2011, and which compared this to the situation encountered during the 2010 UK General Election campaign. During the five-week period preceding the election date of May 5, 2011, the content of 203 Facebook pages, 152 Twitter accounts, and 66 blogs was analysed in order to identify the ways in which political actors provided information to, and interacted with, potential voters. The study found that social media, as in 2010, 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. Although the average number of friends and followers of politicians' social media sites had risen since 2010, there was evidence to suggest that the general public was less interested in engaging with these sites, by posting comments or entering into any online debates. The paper questions the assertion of the victorious party, the Scottish National Party, that the 2011 Scottish election was the "first European election where online has swayed the vote," and concludes by considering what implications these patterns of information provision and communication might have for those candidates who were successfully elected to the Scottish Parliament.

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Introduction and Background

The 2010 UK General Election was a disappointing one for the Scottish National Party (SNP), which won only six of the 59 constituency seats in Scotland (far short of its tar-

get of 20) and achieved just a 19.9% share of the Scottish vote. Just 12 months later, though, the SNP swept to power in the 2011 Scottish Parliament election, winning 69 of the 129 available seats with a 45.4% share of the constituency votes and a 44% share of the regional vote, thus becoming the first ever Scottish administration with a clear working majority. As *The Scotsman* newspaper pointed out, this was "an achievement unprecedented in modern Scottish politics" (*The Scotsman* 2011), for the Scottish Parliament electoral system had been designed specifically to prevent one party winning an outright majority, with its proportional, regional votes approach intended to balance out any gains made from the first-past-the-post constituency seats.

In the aftermath of its victory, the SNP highlighted the crucial role played by its digital campaign, which included the use of a bespoke voter database called Activate, and a new platform, NationBuilder, which integrated Facebook and Twitter with the party's snp.org website. Prospective parliamentary candidates (including existing Scottish Government Cabinet Secretaries) and party activists were encouraged to use these tools to identify, contact, and interact with potential voters online, and combine this with more traditional face-to-face electioneering work on the street and on the doorstep. The party also encouraged its online candidates and activists to adopt an optimistic, positive tone throughout, in contrast to the perceived negative campaigning approaches of its opponents. Consequently, the SNP claimed that the 2011 Scottish Parliament campaign was the "first European election where online has swayed the vote" (Gordon 2011), and that its digital strategy would now be the "model for political parties all over the world" (Wade 2011).

Looking beyond this rhetoric, was the public face of the SNP's online campaign in 2011 – particularly on social media – really that different from, and more influential than, the party's efforts just twelve months earlier? After all, a study conducted by the current authors had revealed that the SNP, and other political actors in Scotland, had tended to use social media in rather bland and superficial ways during the 2010 General Election campaign (Baxter and Marcella 2012). Blogs, Facebook, and Twitter were used primarily for the one-way flow of information from parties and candidates to the electorate: there was little

two-way engagement with potential voters, and a general reluctance to respond to policy questions or critical comments. The information provided was frequently lacking in meaningful policy commentary, and the friends and followers on the sites appeared to be largely family, friends and personal acquaintances of the candidates, or party members or activists. Did the 2011 campaign really see such a seismic shift in the extent and nature of politicians' social media use that might truly have affected the wider Scottish public's democratic choice?

If the SNP's assertions are to be believed, then they are also at odds with the views of those commentators who claim that the Internet is unlikely to ever be a truly revolutionary campaign tool in the UK. As Ward and Vedel (2006) observe, in discussing the growing body of international literature on the political impact of the Internet, the early contributions, from the mid- to late-1990s, heralded a general wave of enthusiasm from "mobilisation" or "equalisation" theorists who predicted that the Internet would facilitate a more participatory style of politics, drawing more people into the democratic process and bringing politicians and the electorate closer together. This was followed closely by a second wave of more sceptical voices: "reinforcement" or "normalisation" theorists who argued that the Internet simply reflected and reinforced existing patterns of offline political behaviour. Although renewed optimism has emerged more recently, particularly as a result of Barack Obama's effective use of new Web 2.0 technologies in his US presidential campaigns (e.g. Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez 2011), some observers believe that such success could never be replicated in Britain. For example, following the 2010 UK General Election, which had been predicted by many observers to be one on which social media would have a significant impact (e.g. Swaine 2010), Williamson (2010a) concluded that "it is time to put aside the idea of an 'internet election'." He argued that, although digital media can play an increasingly important role in UK elections, particularly as management tools with which parties organise and coordinate their candidates and activists, the party-centred nature of British politics does not really lend itself to online campaigns that capture the imagination of the general public. He contrasts this with the campaign culture in the US, where the more personality-led approach provides a powerful means of mobilising public support and raising campaign funds online (Williamson 2010b).

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 during the 2011 Scottish Parliament 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, and compare this with the situation encountered during the 2010 UK General Election;
- analyse the nature of the information provision and exchange that took place on these sites, again comparing this with the 2010 campaign;
- investigate those individual candidates who stood in both campaigns, to establish if election failure in 2010 had had any obvious impact on their adoption and use of social media during the 2011 contest; and
- explore the SNP's claims that its digital campaign had played a significant role in the party's election success.

This research formed part of an ongoing series of investigations by the authors examining the use of the Internet by political actors during parliamentary elections in Scotland. It also complemented a user information behaviour study conducted during the 2011 Scottish Parliament campaign, where 64 citizens of Aberdeen, in North-east Scotland, were observed and questioned as they searched for, browsed, and used information on the websites and social media sites of parties and candidates (Baxter *et al.* 2013). That associated user study will also be discussed throughout this paper.

Methodology

In order to enable a meaningful comparison, the research was conducted along lines identical to those in the authors' 2010 campaign study. It consisted of two elements, the major one being an analysis of the content of the social media sites belonging to the parties and candidates standing in the 73 constituency and 56 regional seats in the 2011 Scottish Parliament election. It focused on those social media – blogs, Facebook, and Twitter – with largely textual content, rather than on photo or video sharing sites such as Flickr and YouTube. The content analysis covered the five-week period preceding the polling date of May 5, 2011.

As had been the case during the 2010 election, the political parties' websites generally provided prominent, direct links to their social media sites, where these existed. From these, it was established that half (12 of 23) of the competing parties had either a Facebook or Twitter presence, with six operating both types of media. This represented a slight increase in uptake from the 2010 election, when 7 of the 20 parties were using Facebook or Twitter. The parties using social media ranged from the four major ones that have traditionally dominated the Scottish politi-

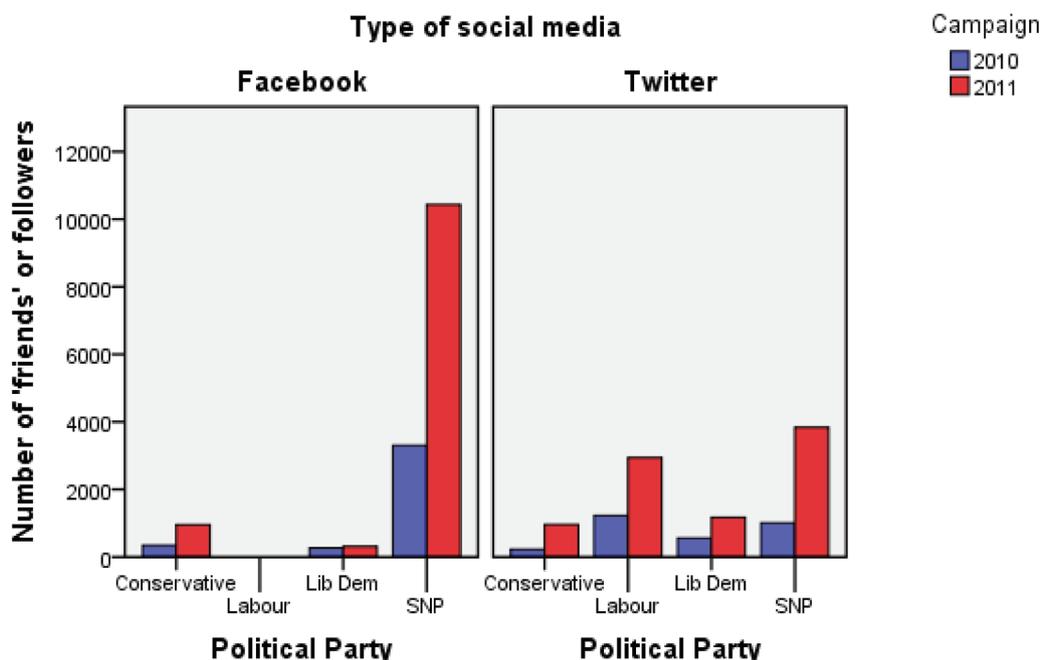


Figure 1: Number of friends and followers on parties' social media sites: comparison of 2010 and 2011 campaigns

cal arena (SNP, Labour, Liberal Democrat, and Conservative), to the minority/fringe parties, some of which had a very narrow policy agenda (e.g., the 'Ban Bankers' Bonus' party). Unsurprisingly, then, the number of Facebook friends or Twitter followers each party had attracted by the 2011 polling day varied dramatically, from the 15 individuals following the All Scotland Pensioners Party's Twitter account to the 10,433 who 'liked' the SNP's Facebook site. As Figure 1 illustrates, most of the social media sites of the major parties had seen a twofold or threefold increase in friends, likers or followers since the 2010 campaign. Figure 1 also shows that the Labour Party continued to be the only major party without a Facebook presence.

In terms of the number of posts made by the parties during the five-week campaign period, these also varied widely. On Twitter, for example, the All Scotland Pensioners Party failed to tweet at all, while the SNP sent out almost 500 messages. On Facebook, meanwhile, the Scottish Green Party was the most prolific user, posting 264 messages on its wall. Where direct comparisons could be made between the 2010 and 2011 elections, it was found that most parties had increased their social media activity; the one exception was the Conservative Party, which effectively halved its Twitter posts during the 2011 campaign.

As was also the case in the 2010 campaign, the parties' websites in 2011 were not particularly helpful in directing users to the social media sites of their individual candi-

dates. To identify such sites, the researchers therefore had to rely on Google searches¹, on using the Facebook and Twitter search engines, and on systematically examining the lists of friends or followers on the parties' social media sites. On completing these searches, it was found that 259 (34.3%) of the 756 candidates² were using at least one of the three types of application; a slight drop proportionately from that encountered during the 2010 campaign, when 36.9% (128) of the 347 candidates had a social media presence. There was, however, a significant difference in the extent to which constituency and regional candidates had adopted social media in 2011. Almost half (48.9%) of the 321 constituency candidates were using such media, compared with less than a quarter (23.4%) of the 435 candidates (largely from the smaller political parties) who appeared only on the regional lists. These differences were

¹ Interestingly, rather than making any efforts to provide direct links to the social media sites of its individual candidates, the SNP advised users to use Google. A post on the party's Facebook site (at www.facebook.com/theSNP) on April 25, 2011 suggested that "you can have a direct conversation with the entire SNP Cabinet on Twitter, as well as the entire campaign team", noting that, to find them, you should "just Google their name and "Twitter", and they should pop up".

² In Scottish Parliament elections, candidates can stand in individual constituencies and/or wider regional lists. Parties can nominate up to 12 candidates in each of the eight electoral regions. In the 2011 campaign, there were 147 constituency-only candidates, 174 individuals who appeared in both constituency and regional lists, and 435 region-only candidates; a total of 756 contestants.

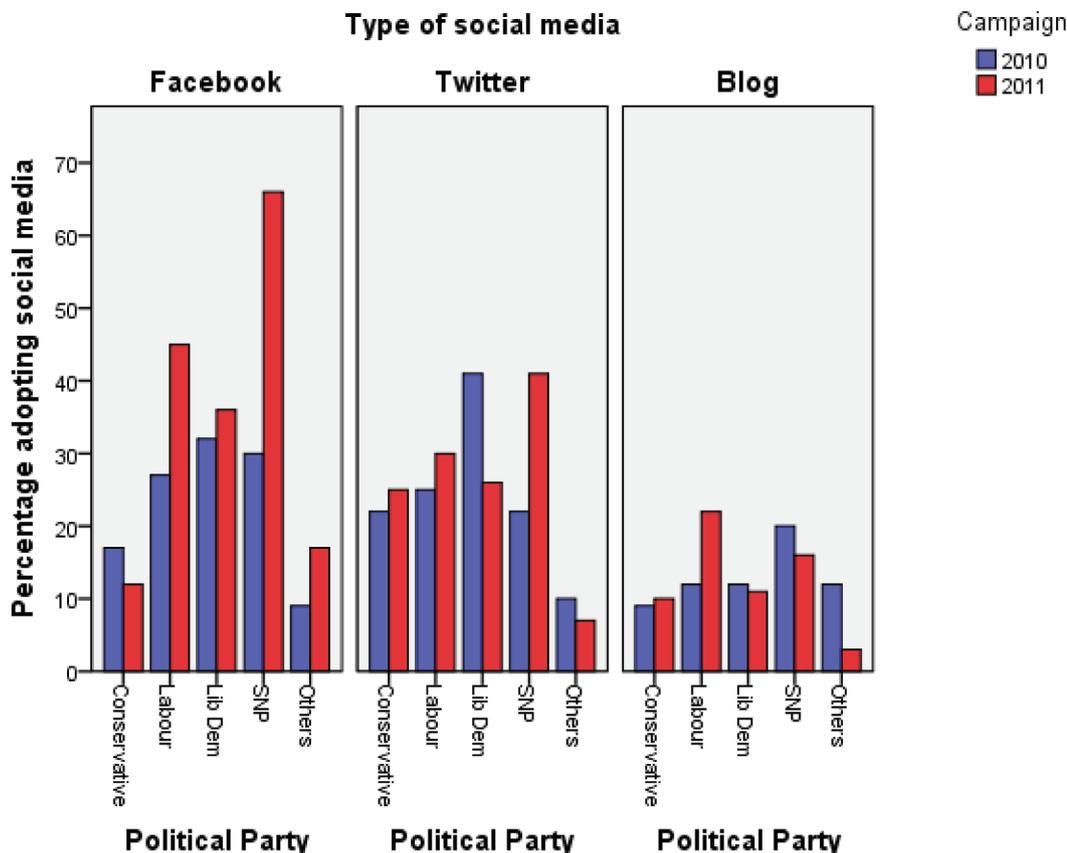


Figure 2: Constituency candidates’ adoption of social media: comparison of 2010 and 2011 campaigns

perhaps unsurprising, for, to put it bluntly, most regional list candidates from the smaller parties were effectively making up the numbers and had little or no chance of electoral success. As had been the situation with UK Members of Parliament (MPs) during the 2010 contest, existing Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) seeking re-election were significantly more likely ($p < 0.05$) to be using social media during the 2011 campaign than those candidates with little or no parliamentary experience.

Facebook was the most popular application in 2011, used by 25.8% of candidates (37.7% of constituency candidates), while 18.8% (28.3% of constituency candidates) operated a Twitter account, and 8.7% (13.7% of constituency candidates) maintained a personal blog. This suggests a slight shift towards the use of Facebook as the preferred social media electioneering tool, for, during the 2010 campaign, Facebook and Twitter had been used by almost identical proportions of candidates (21.0% and 21.9%, respectively).

Figure 2 compares the adoption of the three types of social media by the various parties’ constituency candidates during the two campaigns. As can be seen, while the Liberal Democrat candidates had appeared the most will-

ing to adopt social media (particularly Twitter) in 2010, by 2011 the SNP had the greatest online presence, with 65.8% of its constituency candidates using Facebook, and 41.1% having a Twitter account. The Labour candidates, meanwhile, appeared to be the most enthusiastic bloggers in 2011, with just over one-fifth (21.9%) of their constituency candidates having a personal blog. As had been the case in 2010, the most reluctant adopters of social media amongst the major parties were the Conservative candidates, with one-quarter (24.7%) using Twitter and just 12.3% having a Facebook page. Indeed, the report of a post-2010 election commission established by the Scottish Conservatives had noted “a widespread acceptance across the Party that the advantages of electronic communications and ‘new media’ are not being utilised in campaigning, communications and the Party’s operations overall” (Scottish Conservatives 2010 Commission 2010, 35). Despite this, it would appear that little change had occurred within the party in the intervening 12 months.

The number of friends and followers each candidate had attracted in 2011 varied considerably. On Facebook, one Green Party hopeful had only three friends by polling day, while the prominent UK Independence Party

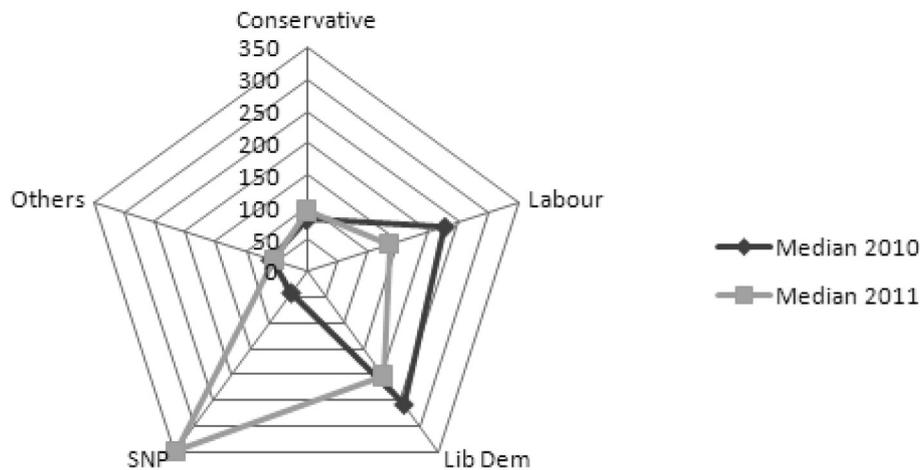


Figure 3: Median number of candidates' Twitter followers, by party: comparison of 2010 and 2011 campaigns

candidate, Lord Christopher Monckton, had almost 6,300. Similarly, the number of Twitter followers ranged from the two people following another Green Party candidate, to the near 27,000 following the controversial Respect Party politician, George Galloway. Back in 2010, the Labour and Liberal Democrat candidates had, on average, attained a larger social media following than those from the other major parties. However, 2011 saw the average followings of Labour and Liberal Democrat candidates fall, while those of Conservative candidates showed a slight increase, and those of SNP contestants rose significantly. This general pattern is illustrated in Figure 3, which compares the median number of candidates' Twitter followers, by party, at the conclusion of the two campaigns.

In line with the 2010 campaign, the number of social media posts made by candidates in 2011 also varied dramatically. At one end of the extreme, one Conservative candidate sent 1,449 tweets over the five-week campaign period. In sharp contrast, exactly one-third of the 66 candidates with a blog failed to make any posts during the campaign, while no activity took place on 18 of the candidate Facebook sites and in 15 of the Twitter accounts. These inactive candidates came from across all competing parties. Overall, when compared with the 2010 study, the average number of Facebook campaign wall posts made by each candidate in 2011 had risen slightly, from 20 to 27; while the average number of candidate tweets had increased from 81 to 99. The average number of blog posts per candidate remained virtually the same (seven in 2010, six in 2011).

In the current authors' associated user information behaviour study, it is fair to say that voters were bemused

by those candidates' social media sites in which the content remained static throughout the crucial campaign period. As one participant asked succinctly, "Why have it?" Indeed, it is possible that the number of inactive candidates on Facebook may have been even greater during the 2011 campaign, for a significant proportion (64; 32.8%) of the 195 contestants with a Facebook presence (again from across all parties) had made their walls private, accessible only to confirmed friends of the candidates. Twelve months earlier, just three of the 73 candidates on Facebook had made use of such privacy settings. This, the current authors believe, indicates a disappointing trend, where only those voters already known to the candidates, or who are willing to publicly display their allegiance to the candidates and their parties by becoming a friend, can gain access to any political or policy information or comment made by their potential elected representatives.

In 2011, two of the 142 candidates on Twitter had also protected their Tweets, rendering them inaccessible to unapproved followers. Interestingly, one of these individuals, a Conservative candidate who had stood unsuccessfully in two previous parliamentary elections, appeared not to have learned any lessons from the online *faux pas* of other political figures, for, just a few months earlier, he created considerable controversy when he used his Twitter account to make some ill-judged remarks about carers (Whitaker 2010). Consequently, any political utterings he made during the campaign period would have been read by only a few dozen approved confidants, rather than the wider Scottish electorate — hardly an approach likely to garner additional votes.

Excluding the private walls, protected tweets, and dormant sites, the content of 134 Twitter accounts, 120 Facebook pages, and 44 blogs, from the five weeks preceding the polling date of May 5, 2011, was captured electronically for subsequent analysis. While the number of online sites and packages designed to archive and analyse social media traffic continues to grow (e.g., Tweetdoc at www.tweetdoc.org, and Tweet Archivist at www.tweetarchivist.com), none has yet been found that meets the specific needs of this type of research. With this in mind, the simple copy-and-paste approach from the 2010 study (Baxter and Marcella 2012) was used again, where all posts (blog entries, tweets, and Facebook wall posts) were copied and pasted into MS Word documents, read systematically, and then coded based on the main thrust of their content. The coded content was then enumerated manually on coding sheets, using the five-bar gate method, and the resultant data input to, and analysed in, SPSS for Windows. The main results of these analyses will be discussed in the sections that follow.

The total number of posts captured and analysed in 2011 (over 23,000) was double that in the 2010 study (11,700), largely because of the far greater number of individual candidates who participate in Scottish Parliamentary elections than in UK General Elections. This meant, of course, that the comprehensive, largely manual method employed was twice as time-consuming as in the 2010 campaign. If this study is replicated during future Scottish Parliamentary elections, then the analysis of a representative sample of candidate sites might be more appropriate and manageable, particularly if social media become adopted more widely by campaign contestants.

The second, more minor element of the 2011 study involved a series of questions, on campaign and policy issues, directed at the social media sites of individual candidates. In making these enquiries, the research team sought to measure the speed at which candidates responded, as well as any efforts made to create an ongoing relationship with potential voters. Here, an element of covert research was used, where the researchers, although using their real names, created special Twitter accounts and modified an existing personal Facebook site, to conceal their geographic location (and, therefore, their parliamentary constituency) and to disguise the fact that they were academic researchers. This was done to ensure that the candidates' behaviour remained normal and consistent, in terms of responding to questions from the electorate. A similar exercise during the 2010 campaign study had met with mixed results: four of eight questions sent by Facebook were answered, while all 30 enquiries sent using Twitter were ignored completely. In 2011, one question, on the issues

being raised by voters on the doorstep, was sent to 20 candidates on Twitter, with six (30%) responding. Efforts to send questions using Facebook, though, were hampered by the fact that half (97) of the 195 candidate Facebook sites did not permit visitors to send a direct message to the candidate without first joining or liking the site. In addition, after successfully sending a question (on public confusion over the alternative vote process³) to 51 candidates, the researchers found themselves suspended by Facebook for "engaging in behaviour that may be considered annoying or abusive by other users". Nevertheless, the research team received replies from 18 (35%) of the 51 candidates, and their responses, plus those to the Twitter enquiries, will be discussed further below.

Content Analysis of Party and Candidate Social Media Sites

Candidate Twitter Accounts

The 140 candidates with unprotected Twitter accounts sent a total of 13,900 tweets during the five-week campaign period. As Figure 4 illustrates, almost one-third (31.6%) of these posts saw the candidates in what the current authors describe as Primary Broadcast mode, where they provided their followers with their personal thoughts and comments on a wide range of issues, from world events, such as the death of Osama Bin Laden, to local press coverage of the election campaign. The largest proportion of these Primary Broadcast tweets (comprising 11.3% of the total posts) related to the candidates' personal campaign activities; where, for example, they discussed their experiences on voters' doorsteps or at hustings events, or where they highlighted their media appearances. As had been the case in the 2010 election, these posts were almost universally (and unrealistically) positive and optimistic: even those candidates who were resoundingly defeated on polling day had claimed throughout the campaign that the electorate was warmly responsive to their political message. A very small number of candidates did, however, introduce an element of self-irony in these posts:

Good door knocking session in Kincorth tonight. (But would you ever expect a candidate to tweet about a bad session?)

³ On the day of the Scottish Parliament election, May 5, 2011, a UK-wide Alternative Vote referendum was also taking place, on whether or not to change the method of electing MPs to the UK Parliament.

Really good eve-of-poll response on the doors tonight. I know candidates never say anything but that. CS&R [the constituency of Caithness, Sutherland & Ross] looking like being interesting.

As was the case in 2010, there was a real reluctance amongst the 2011 candidates to reveal what issues were being raised by the electorate during these encounters. Just 0.4% of the overall tweets (a drop from 0.7% in 2010) were devoted to local issues of prime concern to their potential constituents, such as transport services or the closure of recreational facilities. Similarly, only 2.1% of posts (a slight increase from 1.6% in 2010) provided personal comment on national policy matters, such as education and health:

“Out campaigning in #stmargaretshope this morning and now in #Kirkwall - great discussions on #ferries and #underfunding” (Conservative candidate)

“Kinning Park community is still angry about the council closing their community hall. “That hall was ours!” Strong case for the common good.” (Green candidate)

“Visiting the day centre in East Linton, the users were very clear there needed to be ‘joined up thinking’ between health and social care” (Liberal Democrat candidate)

In fact, in 2011, candidates were almost twice as likely (4.2% of the overall traffic) to send tweets relating to their home life and domestic activities, or to non-political matters such as science fiction television series or the latest sports results. In the associated user study, participants were critical of this lack of policy information, particularly on local issues, noting also that pertinent policy comment can get lost amidst the candidates’ more personal posts.

Participants in the user study were also less than impressed with examples of negative campaigning, where the candidates appeared to focus on criticising their opponents rather than positively promoting their own political ideals. However, when compared with the 2010 campaign, candidates’ personal criticisms of their rivals on Twitter had actually decreased proportionately, with just 0.5% of posts passing judgement on their direct, constituency opponents, and 2.7% being critical of opposition parties as a whole or of prominent individuals from these parties. It should also be noted that, while the SNP laid claim to having run the most positive election campaign (Wade 2011), its candidates did, in fact, send a larger proportion of negative tweets (5.4% of SNP candidate posts) than those from the other major parties. These tended to be aimed at the Labour Party, and were accompanied by hashtags such as #labourfail or #labourlies. One notorious campaign epi-

sode, in which the Labour leader, Iain Gray, sought refuge in a sandwich shop after being confronted by a group protesting against spending cuts, was the subject of many of the SNP candidates’ more barbed comments.

Another third (30.8%) of the overall Twitter traffic consisted of what the current authors call Secondary Broadcast posts. This is where candidates re-tweeted others’ comments or links (25.1% of posts), or where they provided direct links to various online political or news sites (5.7%). These tended to be posts that either praised the candidate’s party or were critical of the opposition; and while their origins were many and various, they were generally from local, regional and national news sources, political parties, other candidates and activists, journalists and political commentators, opinion pollsters, or think tanks.

With regard to dialogue with followers, the overall level of candidates’ engagement in 2011 (17.2% of total tweets) fell slightly from that in 2010 (18.4%); although the Labour Party candidates’ engagement levels dropped dramatically, from 36% of their tweets in 2010 to 20.3% in 2011. Most of the interaction was based around candidates replying to supportive comments or pleasantries from family, friends and colleagues (8.3% of total tweets); while just over 5% of the posts involved candidates responding to followers’ general policy comments. Far less common were responses to personal attacks (0.4%) or criticisms of the candidates’ parties (0.7%). And while the researchers’ covert Twitter questions in 2011 obtained a more favourable response than twelve months earlier, overall the candidates appeared less responsive to questions (2.8% of total tweets) than in 2010 (6.3%). On this point, the SNP had highlighted engagement with the public as being a key element of its 2011 digital strategy (Macdonell 2011); and while there were some individuals from the party who regularly interacted with potential voters on Twitter (most notably the Deputy First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon), overall its candidates were proportionately the least interactive of those from the major parties (see Figure 4).

In the 2011 campaign, there was some evidence of the development of a Scottish version of what Jackson and Lilleker (2011) describe as a virtual “smoking room” – a Twitter community of politicians who communicate regularly with each other. Indeed, 3.6% of the overall candidate Twitter traffic was directed at other candidates; this compares with just a handful of posts exchanged between two candidates in 2010. While most of these tweets were sent between candidates from the same parties, there were also several cross-party exchanges between rivals, which, on the whole, were friendly and well-mannered.

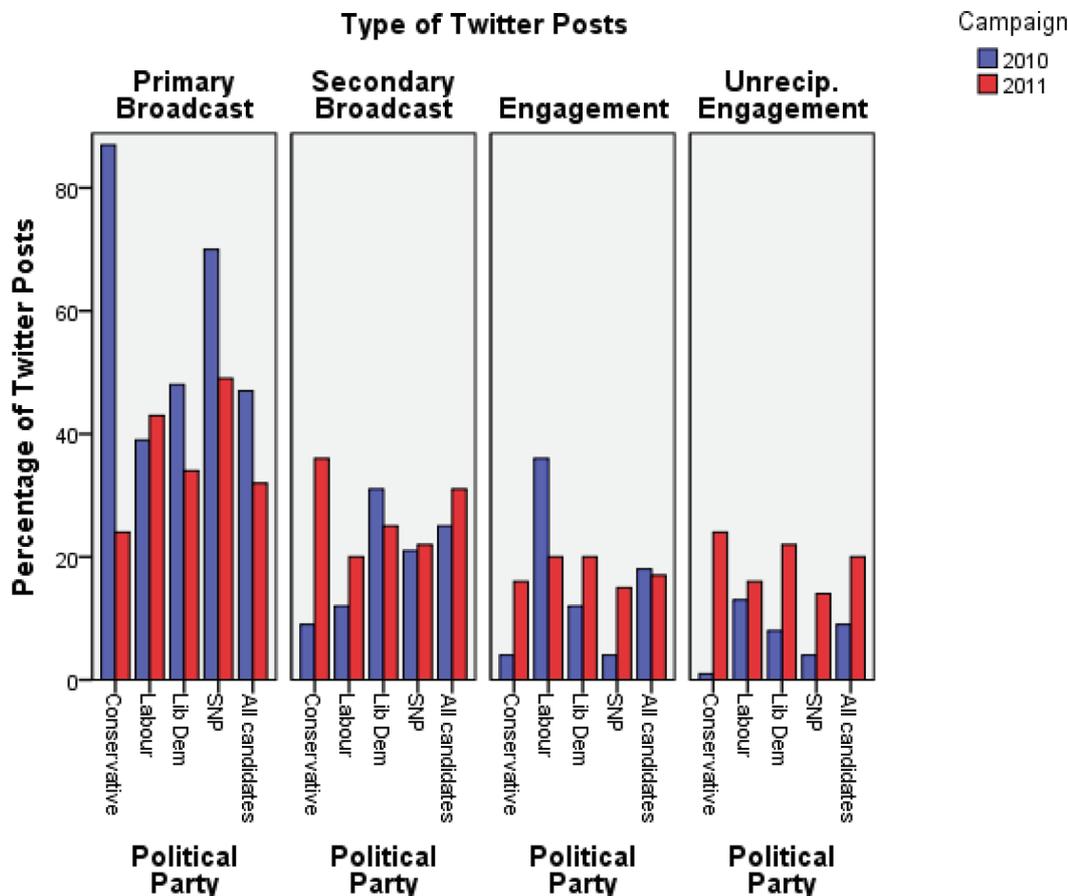


Figure 4: Candidates' Twitter post types, by party: comparison of 2010 and 2011 campaigns

In the 2010 UK General Election campaign, the broadcast of American-style, television debates, featuring senior figures from the major political parties, had a significant impact on the extent and the nature of the traffic on Scottish political actors' Twitter sites. This was particularly the case with three live debates between the leaders of the three main UK-wide parties (i.e. excluding the SNP), which were the subject of almost 15% of the tweets sent by the parties and candidates in Scotland. Less influential in 2010 were three debates broadcast only in Scotland, which featured senior Scottish figures from the four main parties (i.e. including the SNP), and which were discussed in only 2.2% of the overall Twitter traffic. During the 2011 Scottish Parliamentary campaign, another three debates took place, involving senior figures in Scotland. These were broadcast only in Scotland, in non-peak time viewing slots, and appeared to have a similar limited impact on the Scottish political Twittersphere, being the subject of just 3.1% of parties' and candidates' tweets.

As Figure 4 shows, the 2011 campaign saw significant growth in what the current authors describe as Unrecipro-

cated Engagement, from 9% of overall candidate tweets in 2010, to 20.2% one year later. As had been the case in 2010, many of the 2011 candidates followed various well-known journalists, political commentators, satirical comedians, sportsmen and women, and other celebrities on Twitter, and would sometimes respond to these individuals' tweets in an apparent effort to begin a dialogue. As had also been the case in 2010, however, the candidates' efforts at celebrity engagement in 2011 were largely ignored. Interestingly, though, the 2011 campaign also saw several candidates attempt to engage more frequently with non-celebrity tweeters (mostly activists and supporters of opposing parties) than in 2010. Their efforts suggest that they were monitoring Twitter traffic (including the use of trending hashtags) for mentions of themselves, their party, or of the Scottish Parliament election in general, and then responding to these in an effort to initiate some form of online conversation. Again, however, these efforts were largely in vain, as most of the candidates' tweets were not reciprocated. A major factor here may have been the tone used by the candidates. For example, one Con-

servative contestant (incidentally, the most active tweeter during the campaign) appeared to have adopted the tactic of responding in a manner designed more to irritate and provoke an argument rather than encourage a reasoned online debate:

Labour activist: “Celebrated my 1-year anniversary of Labour membership last night by stuffing and sorting envelopes for an election mailing”

Conservative candidate: “you joined just as they got kicked out of office for bankrupting the country? Clearly not a glory hunter!”

SNP activist: “Best comment overheard so far today “everbody [sic] I know is voting SNP because they are doing a good job” #bothvotesSNP #sp11”

Conservative candidate: “then you left the SNP office and got out on the doorsteps & met some “real” people...”

Lib Dem candidate: “So. Wet. Trying to stop the letters I’m delivering turning to paper mâché.”

Conservative candidate: “paper mâché is to [sic] good for them...”

Party Twitter Accounts

The largely one-way flow of information from politicians to the electorate on Twitter was even more apparent throughout the nine active party sites, where 83.4% of the 1,728 tweets were broadcast-type posts, with the largest proportion of these (23.8%) being links to news stories and policy documents on the parties’ websites. Compared with the 2010 campaign, the parties appeared to have adopted a more positive tone on Twitter in 2011, with just 3.8% of tweets (down from 18.4% in 2010) comprising critical comments on their political opponents. Of the major parties, the Labour Party was the most attack-minded (13.8% of its posts), while the Conservatives (4.3%) and the SNP (4.5%) had the least negative approaches.

The parties also appeared more willing than in 2010 to engage with voters: in 2011, 9.9% of posts were responses to messages of support, questions or critical comments, compared with just 1.4% in 2010. The Scottish Green Party was by far the most responsive, with almost one-third (31.5%) of its 419 tweets contributing towards some form of two-way engagement, including 10.3% being answers to voters’ questions:

Q: “What is the GP policy on Scottish water then?”

A: “Keep it in public ownership, and enable it to invest in renewables on its land.”

Q: “Pls help me settle a discussion at work: Are the Scottish Greens seeking a referendum on independence for Scotland?”

A: “We support a constitutional convention leading to a referendum, yes.”

The Green Party also appeared the most likely to monitor Twitter conversations and trends, with a view to attempting to initiate a dialogue with the original poster(s). Like the candidates’ efforts described above, most were ignored. Indeed, one-fifth (19.6%) of the Green Party’s tweets, like the first example below, were Unreciprocated Engagement-type posts. Occasionally, though, its efforts were rewarded when the original poster would ‘bite’, perhaps due to the non-confrontational tone adopted by the party. For example, the second attempt illustrated below resulted in a 20-tweet conversation on the constitutional issues of devolution and independence.

Original poster: “Still trying to decide which way to vote [i.e. in Alternative Vote referendum]. Probably yes.... But #sp11 - still undecided.”

Green Party: “Time to pounce on a floating voter.. any questions for us?”

Original poster: “I know expecting politicians to come round to ask what we will do during an election is so 20th century but some of us appreciate it #sp11”

Green Party: “What will you do during this election? #sp11”

Candidate Facebook Sites

During the five-week campaign in 2011, the 131 candidates who had made their Facebook walls freely accessible posted a total of 3,476 messages. Figure 5 provides a general overview of the nature of these messages, and compares them with those posted during the 2010 election. As can be seen, in both elections the focus was on the one-way broadcast of information to the electorate. In 2011, 86.5% of posts were broadcast-type messages (down only slightly from 87.9% in 2010) and, of these, the largest proportion (22.9%) were links to, or feeds from, the candidates’ personal websites, blogs, Twitter accounts, or other video or photo sharing applications, such as YouTube and yfrog.

One-fifth (20.9%) of candidates’ posts discussed their personal campaign activities; down from 29.6% in 2010. As with the Twitter traffic, these tended to portray the typical Scottish town or village as being bathed in sunshine

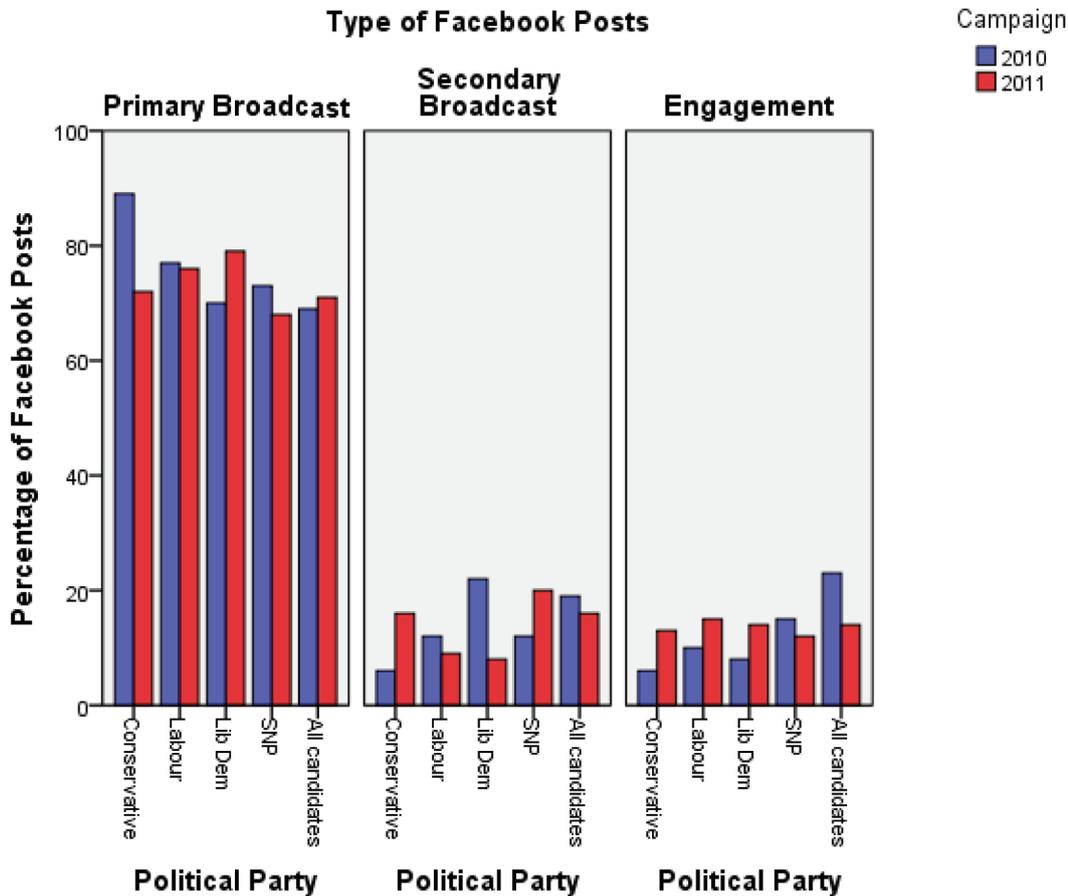


Figure 5: Candidates' Facebook wall post types, by party: comparison of 2010 and 2011 campaigns

and full of citizens eager to receive the candidate's political message. Again, though, the politicians were loath to mention what topics were being raised by voters when out on the campaign trail, with just 1% of posts (down from 2.1% in 2010) covering local policy issues. And, as had also been the case in 2010, candidates appeared more reluctant to criticise their opponents on Facebook than on Twitter, with just 0.3% of posts discussing constituency rivals and 1.3% containing criticisms of nationally-known political figures.

Just over 13% of posts (almost twice the proportion than in 2010) consisted solely of photographs of candidates and their teams canvassing for votes; for example, shaking hands, dispensing election literature, or posing in hard hats on construction sites. Meanwhile, one SNP candidate posted over 50 photographs of her campaign posters displayed in windows across Glasgow. Despite their proliferation, however, images such as these failed to impress the participants in the current authors' complementary user study, where they were described as "rub-bish" and "boring".

Indeed, there was some evidence to suggest that voters' interest in actively engaging with candidates' Facebook sites had waned slightly since the 2010 election. Although the average number of friends on these pages had grown marginally, from 310 to 318, the already modest average of 22.5 public posts per candidate site decreased to 21 in 2011. And the levels of exchange and debate *between* members of the public also dropped markedly, from 19.6% of posts in 2010 to 10.8% one year later. Meanwhile, eighteen of the candidates had enabled the Discussions feature on their Facebook sites, and had attempted to initiate debate on a range of subjects, from alcohol pricing to wind farms. These efforts met with minimal success, with most (12) being ignored completely, and the others prompting a handful of posts at most. A typical example was that of one SNP candidate who urged his readers to "Tell me what you are thinking!", only to be met with complete online silence. Interestingly, during the associated user study, when participants discussed online engagement between politicians and voters, they tended to express disappointment with the current levels of visible debate on the social

media sites of parties and candidates, yet were themselves reluctant to enter into any form of public dialogue with political actors or other voters.

As the ability to post messages on all but two Facebook sites was restricted to confirmed friends of the candidates, it was unsurprising to find that over half (54%) of the public posts were goodwill messages from acquaintances and supporters. Voters' criticisms of candidates or of their parties were rare, comprising just 0.8% and 0.9% of the public posts respectively; although candidates did appear more willing to respond publicly to these than in 2010. Interestingly, the most intense personal attacks took place on one of the two candidate sites with no restrictions on posting messages. Here, a Liberal Democrat contestant was the subject of several defamatory posts, from an individual later described by the candidate as a "full-blown nutter".

And while the number of voters' questions asked via the Facebook walls remained relatively small (excluding the researchers' covert queries, just 95 questions were asked across the 131 sites), the candidates' response rates to these questions did increase proportionately in 2011, from 36.9% to 61.7%. The answers provided, however, tended to be very brief and provided little evidence of any real desire to engage further with the enquirers.

Party Facebook Sites

In 2011, seven of the competing parties were operating a Facebook site, posting a combined total of 717 messages. The vast majority (93.4%) of these posts saw the parties in one-way, broadcast mode, with 73.1% simply providing links to, or feeds from, other party and political sites. Although it marked an improvement from 2010, when *no* party-electorate interaction took place on Facebook, just 6.6% of the parties' posts consisted of some form of direct engagement between the site administrators and users. The extent to which this dialogue took place, however, varied between parties: public posts were ignored completely by the British National Party, the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats, and Solidarity; there was only minimal engagement by Ban Bankers' Bonuses and the SNP; while, as was the case on Twitter, the Green Party was the most interactive, with 13.3% of its posts being in response to voters' comments and questions.

Back in 2010, just 62 public posts were made across the five party Facebook sites. In 2011, however, 1,356 public posts were made across seven sites, with the majority (1,105) occurring on the SNP site. This is probably reflective of the vast increase in Facebook friends enjoyed by the

party in the intervening 12 months (see Figure 1). Almost one-third (31.3%) of the public posts on the SNP site were messages of support for the party; while 15.7% discussed matters of national policy. Just under half (47.1%) of the public posts on the SNP Facebook site were exchanged *between* site users, and were often displays of political solidarity rather than contributions to any debate. Indeed, posters on the SNP site frequently adopted a rather exclusivist tone, where any site user not in full support of the party and its policies was made to feel decidedly unwelcome:

"Why are you on here? You obviously don't agree with the majority of people posting."

"I take it you don't like the SNP. Then don't sign up to this forum."

"Get off if you dont [sic] support SNP"

The SNP Facebook wall was also the home of the most vitriolic exchanges identified during the research, prompted in part by the presence of 'trolls' who appeared to have joined the site primarily to mischievously post critical and abusive comments. While the site administrators (all party officials) banned the worst culprits "for using bad language and antagonising others who are looking to have a constructive dialogue", they made little effort themselves to enter into any dialogue with other, seemingly genuine site visitors, with most policy questions and constructive criticisms being ignored completely.

Candidate Blogs

As mentioned above, the traffic on candidate blogs during the five-week campaign was relatively low, with one-third of the 66 bloggers failing to post at all, and the others averaging only six posts each; a slight drop from seven in 2010. Of the total blog entries, the largest proportion (28.1%) consisted of candidates offering their (often detailed) thoughts on a range of national policy issues, from animal welfare to carbon emission targets, and from cancer research to policing. Almost as many posts (26.4%) discussed the candidates' personal campaign activities, such as door-to-door canvassing or visiting local businesses, and were frequently accompanied by photographs of the same. Meanwhile, local issues, ranging from the lack of respite services in East Lothian to proposed improvements to the Glasgow subway system, were the subject of 13% of posts. Readers' responses to these posts, however, were lacking, due at least in part to the fact that eight of the

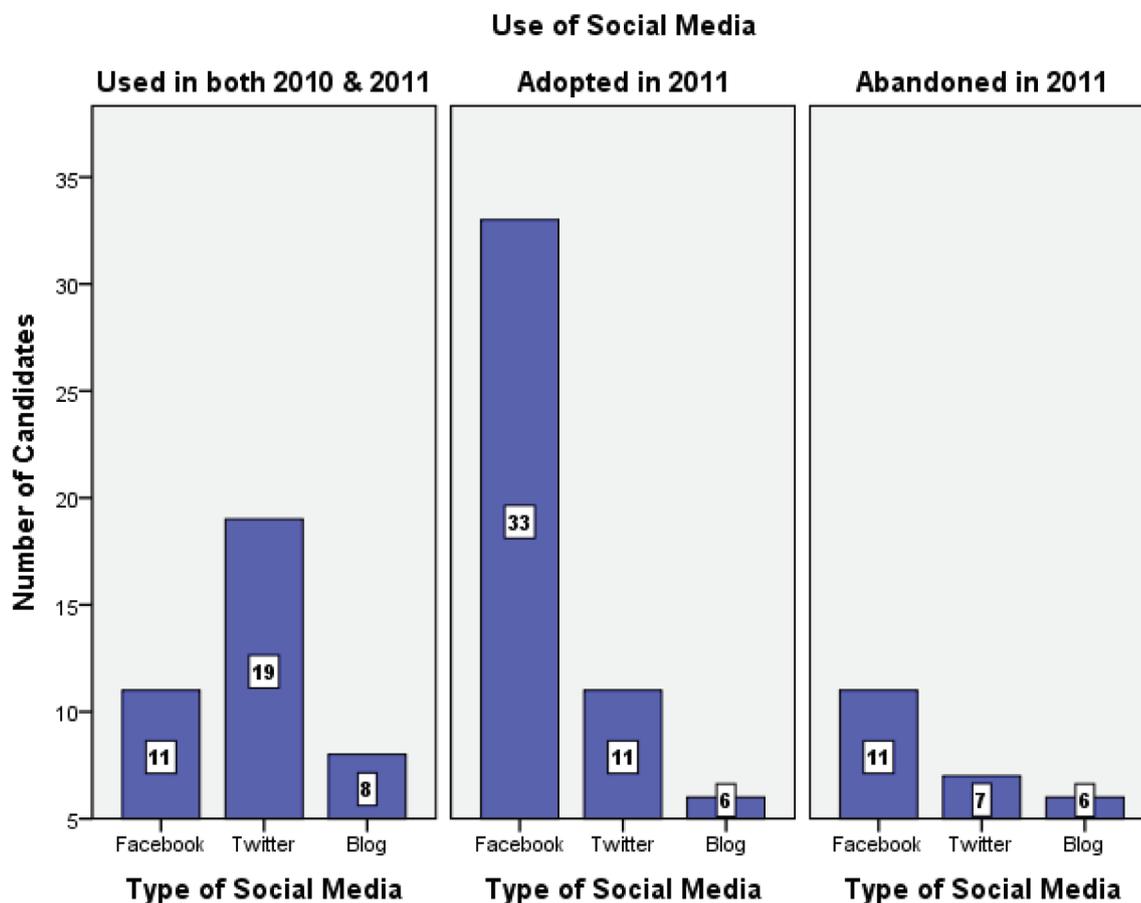


Figure 6: Candidates standing in both 2010 and 2011 campaigns: comparison of social media use in each campaign

blogs did not permit responses, and that a further three candidates had blocked the commenting facility on specific blog posts. Indeed, on average, each candidate blog post received less than one (0.3) comment, down from 0.6 in 2010. An additional factor here may have been the fact that one-third of the blogs (up from one-quarter in 2010) contained posts that described the candidate in the third person, in an impersonal, press-release style perhaps less likely to engage the reader. Of the public’s posts, 20% were supportive messages, and 19.2% were criticisms of opposing parties and figures, giving the impression that most blog readers were friends and supporters of the candidate and their party. Criticisms were rare and, as had been the case in 2010, were largely ignored by the candidates. Indeed, just 3.1% of the candidates’ overall posts in 2011 were in response to readers’ comments, resulting in an even greater one-way flow of information from politicians to the electorate than in 2010.

Comparison of Social Media Use by Candidates Who Stood in Both Elections

In making the above comparisons between candidates’ use of social media during the two elections, the researchers were mindful that, for the most part, they were discussing two discrete groups of individuals. However, amongst the 347 candidates standing in 2010, and the 756 contestants in 2011, there was a significant body of 145 individuals who competed in both campaigns. With this in mind, this research also paid specific attention to these candidates (31 Liberal Democrat, 20 Conservative, 20 SNP, eight Labour, and 66 from other parties), with a view to establishing if election failure in 2010 had had any obvious impact on the extent and nature of their social media use twelve months later. Figure 6 provides an overview of the use of social media within this group of 145 individuals during the two campaigns.

Twenty-one candidates who had one or more forms of social media presence in 2010 had abandoned these by 2011; these consisted of 11 Facebook pages, seven Twitter accounts and six blogs. None of these candidates had appeared particularly enthusiastic users in 2010: eight had failed to post any messages during the campaign, while the frequencies of the others' posts were generally below the average of the online candidates as a whole. But there was no evidence of these candidates having encountered any online abuse, or having been the subject of any controversy during the 2010 election, which might have dissuaded them from continuing online in 2011.

In contrast, 42 candidates who had no social media presence in 2010, had chosen to use one or more types in 2011, in the form of 33 Facebook pages, 11 Twitter accounts and six blogs. On Facebook, half (16) of the candidates had adopted a cautious approach, making their walls accessible only to confirmed friends. Otherwise, the patterns of use of these new adopters were similar to that of the online 2011 candidate body as a whole.

A small core of 27 candidates had maintained one or more forms of social media presence throughout both elections, with 19 operating a Twitter account, 11 having a Facebook page, and eight keeping a blog. In terms of public access to these sites, the only significant change was that of one Conservative candidate (discussed above) moving to protect his tweets. With regard to the frequency of campaign posts, the picture was mixed: all eight bloggers reduced their posts dramatically, from an average of 12 down to two; the average number of Facebook wall posts fell from 31 to 21; while, on Twitter, half of the candidates increased their traffic and the other half became less active. The most notable change on Twitter was that of another Conservative candidate (also discussed earlier) who sent just 13 tweets in 2010, but over 1,400 messages twelve months later. Indeed, in response to a follower's observation that the candidate's website was lacking in currency, he noted, "yeah, there is a lot of stuff still from last years [sic] campaign. This year I'm using twitter much more - it's more effective". This perceived effectiveness had no obvious impact on his election performance: in 2010, he finished third of nine contestants with a 15% share of his constituency vote; while twelve months later he finished last of four candidates, again with a 15% share of the vote.

Amongst the group of 27 candidates using social media in both 2010 and 2011 (of whom five were eventually elected in 2011, four of them through the regional list system), there were few marked differences in the nature of their information dissemination and exchange during the two campaigns. While levels of direct public engagement (largely in response to supportive messages) increased

slightly in 2011, as did efforts to interact with celebrities and other strangers, the one-way broadcast of information to their 'friends' and followers remained the primary tactic online.

Conclusions

The findings of this study suggest that, in the 2011 Scottish Parliamentary election campaign, political actors in Scotland appeared keener to be seen using social media than in the UK Parliament contest the previous year, with 52% of parties and 49% of constituency candidates having adopted Twitter, Facebook and/or blogs for electioneering purposes. Of the candidates from the four leading parties, however, the Conservatives remained the least willing to embrace these new technologies. The research also suggests a shift towards Facebook as the more popular campaigning tool. Yet, perhaps influenced by the previous negative online experiences of other political and public figures, fully one-third of the candidates on Facebook had made their walls private, accessible only to known, approved readers, rather than the wider electorate.

While the general frequency of candidates' blog posts remained constant, the typical number of Facebook wall posts and tweets sent by politicians increased slightly during the 2011 campaign. The 2011 election also saw the online friends and followers of parties and candidates increase in number, with the SNP being the main beneficiaries.

Although the traffic on, and the apparent public interest in, these social media sites had risen since the 2010 UK campaign, the nature of the information provision and exchange on the sites remained virtually the same. The majority of parties and candidates functioned largely in broadcast mode, with social media being used primarily for the one-way provision of information to voters. Two-way interaction with the electorate was still lacking, with just 15.3% of the political actors' posts being made in response to voters' questions, criticisms or messages of support. There was also some evidence to suggest that the general public's interest in engaging with political social media sites was waning: with the exception of the SNP's Facebook site, which saw a dramatic rise in public posts, the average number of public comments left on blogs and Facebook walls had fallen since 2010.

The most notable difference from the 2010 campaign was the apparent monitoring of Twitter traffic for any references to the Scottish Parliament election, and the political actors' increased attempts to engage with the original

senders of these tweets. As has been seen, though, these efforts met with minimal success, possibly due to the confrontational tone used by a number of the candidates and party officials.

Indeed, this research and the complementary user study have revealed the dichotomy that appears to exist between the online approaches of the political actors and the information needs of voters. For example, the participants in the user study expressed an explicit need for information relating to local constituency issues, yet candidates' personal policy commentary on local issues was lacking, or difficult to find. As had been the case twelve months earlier, prospective parliamentarians appeared more interested in discussing the weather when out on the campaign trail, rather than the issues being raised by their potential constituents. User study participants also expressed a wish to see regular, up-to-date posts from politicians during the critical campaign period, but, of the publicly accessible candidate sites, 16% remained dormant throughout the five weeks, and a further 14% of sites each contained less than five campaign posts.

Perhaps in an effort to portray their 'human side', the politicians appeared anxious to share details of their personal and domestic lives, ranging from their musical tastes to their favourite cafés and restaurants. The user study participants, on the other hand, felt that the provision of such "trivia" was unnecessary, and preferred to read less inconsequential content. As one voter said, "I'm only interested in what he's got to say politically. I'm not interested in any of that other stuff."

The number of photographs of campaign events and activities posted on parties' and candidates' Facebook walls had increased fivefold since 2010, but the user study participants found these decidedly uninteresting. Respondents in the user study also expressed a desire to see more online engagement taking place between voters and their prospective representatives, yet, as we have seen, most Scottish political actors continued to avoid such interaction. Indeed, it is fair to say that, overall, the participants in the user behaviour study were unimpressed with the campaign social media sites examined, with "puerile", "shallow" and "superficial" being amongst the terms used to describe the politicians' efforts.

As had been the case with the present authors' study of social media use during the 2010 UK Parliament campaign (Baxter and Marcella 2012), a post-election analysis using the chi-square test and the phi measure of association revealed that, statistically, there was an association between social media use and success in the 2011 Scottish Parliamentary election. Successful constituency candidates were more likely ($p < 0.05$) than unsuccessful con-

testants to have used Facebook, Twitter, or blogs during the campaign, although this association was relatively weak ($\phi = 0.138$). Given the modest online followings of the majority of candidates, the significant number of dormant and private pages, and the generally bland ways in which most contestants used social media, the current authors would certainly not attribute any causal relationship between the two variables. Indeed, in the associated user study, there was very little evidence that exposure to campaign sites had influenced the participants' voting intentions. Of the 64 respondents, one indicated that the Green Party's online offerings had persuaded him to give the party his second, regional list vote; one 40-year-old female suggested that exploring campaign sites had kindled an interest in voting for the first time; while two men who had examined sites belonging to far-right parties each indicated that this had merely reinforced their opinion that they would never consider voting for such parties. For the vast majority (60 of 64), their online sessions had had no effect on their likely vote. Instead, they indicated that their choice would be based on a long-established allegiance to a specific party; or that more traditional information sources, particularly print and broadcast media, coupled with long-established campaign techniques, such as leaflet deliveries and door knocking, would continue to play a more influential role.

So, what of the SNP's assertion that its online campaign had "swayed the vote"? While it is acknowledged that certain elements of the SNP's digital strategy, such as its voter database, will have played a crucial role in informing and organising the party's activists during what was an unprecedented election victory, the current authors would question the impact of the public face of the SNP's online campaign, more specifically the party's and candidates' social media sites. While the SNP and its candidates may have had the greatest online presence, and the largest followings, the nature of its information content and communication was little different from those of the other parties. Indeed, while the SNP put great stock in the positivity of its online campaign (Wade 2011), this study has found that its candidates were, in fact, the most attack-minded of those from the main parties, and that the party's Facebook site was peppered with the most venomous online exchanges. And while the SNP also emphasised how "amazingly powerful" the act of interacting with voters online can be (Macdonell 2011), this research has established that its candidates were the least interactive of those from the major parties, and that there was only minimal engagement with voters on the party's Facebook and Twitter sites. Bearing these points in mind, and in line with other observers (e.g., Barnes 2011; Taylor 2011), the

current authors would argue that a range of other factors were probably far more influential in the SNP's electoral success, including: the perceived charisma of the party's leader, Alex Salmond; a misplaced, and often inept, Labour Party campaign; and the collapse of the Liberal Democrat vote, because of its coalition with the Conservative Party at the UK Government level. The first true Internet election in the UK, we believe, has yet to materialise.

And what are the implications of these findings for those candidates who were successfully elected to the Scottish Parliament? When the Parliament was being established in the late 1990s, an Expert Panel on Information and Communications Technologies (1998) recommended that it should focus upon how new and emerging technologies might assist democratic participation, and the contribution that they could make in enabling greater openness and accessibility. The Panel believed that the Scottish Parliament should "aspire to be an example of best practice in parliamentary information systems." Since then, according to Smith and Webster (2008), new information and communications technologies (ICTs) "have become a cultural norm of contemporary parliamentary life" in the Scottish Parliamentary setting, where MSPs and their assistants use them constantly in order to fulfil their legislative, oversight and representative roles. Smith and Webster found, for example, that the majority of MSPs regard ICTs as essential or very useful in carrying out activities central to their parliamentary activity, such as when 'researching specific issues' (be that when using the services of the parliamentary library, the Scottish Parliament Information Centre, or other unofficial sources), 'making policy statements', 'representing constituents', 'distributing political information' and 'participating in debates'. Smith and Webster's study took place in 2006, before the emergence of Facebook and Twitter, but the potential value of such social media as information provision and communication tools has since become recognised within the Scottish Parliament, where it is acknowledged that they offer "an increased flexibility in the ways MSPs can communicate about their role, to an essentially unlimited (and international) audience", and "can increase the accessibility of MSPs and offer new ways in which to engage constituents, stakeholders and the wider public" (Scottish Parliament Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee 2012). However, as this election campaign study has revealed, those seeking election to the Scottish Parliament largely failed to provide policy information, or engage with potential constituents, via their social media accounts, or made much of their online content publicly inaccessible. With these points in mind, the current authors would suggest that many of the suc-

cessful candidates will have to significantly modify their information provision and communication practices on entering parliament if they are to become fully and effectively integrated into this community of modern, online parliamentarians.

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