Policy debate in the age of social media: the Australian experience

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is the product of my own independent research. It contains no material which has been accepted for any other degree or diploma, or any copy or paraphrase of another person’s material except where due acknowledgement is given.

Tanja Porter

7 December 2016
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Public distrust and dissatisfaction with mainstream politics is a concern for many Western democracies. Governments have set great store in the potential for social media to reverse citizens’ retreat from politics and restore public confidence in policy making. According to the Australian government, the open and participatory character of social media will bring a diversity of citizens’ experiences into policy debates, enriching deliberation on policy solutions, and drive greater responsiveness and accountability from government and the political elite. This thesis investigates the extent to which social media is delivering on these expectations.

Departing from the positivist assumptions and quantitative techniques that dominate research about social media in Australian politics, this thesis foregrounds the political context and policy dynamics within which social media is adopted. It examines how and with what strategic aims social media has been deployed by policy actors in three contemporary cases of public policy debate in Australia. These are: (i) the introduction of ‘lock-out’ laws and mandatory sentencing in response to alcohol-fuelled violence in Sydney; (ii) the decision to overhaul arrangements to support disabled Australians, as manifest in the National Disability Insurance Scheme and (iii) the level of personal control over end of life choices and attempts to legislate for voluntary euthanasia. Each of these debates is illustrative of the constant contest between policy actors over the role of contemporary government and the scope of citizen responsibilities and each therefore offer rich empirical insights into the ways social media may be influencing established democratic relations.

With insights derived from elite actor communications, policy analysis and digital ethnography, the thesis finds social media being used by policy actors across the political spectrum in highly targeted strategies that both open new and compound existing channels to influence policy debate. For citizens and civil society, social media is facilitating a groundswell of personalised story-telling and mobilisation, while for government and formal political actors, social media enables more precise targeting and wider circulation of political messaging. Although the impact of this activity on policy
outcomes is highly contingent on the policy relationships at play, the use of social media is largely consistent with government expectations.

To assess whether the case evidence points to deepening democratic relationships, as is the express aim of government policy, the thesis draws on concepts from critical theory, namely Jurgen Habermas’ ‘public sphere’ and the normative framework it provides for political deliberation. When the evidence is viewed through this lens, it is apparent that social media also has various deleterious effects. For instance, it tends to amplify what Habermas called the ‘raw’ discourses of our private domain in the public sphere, therein weakening the independence and public-mindedness that underscores the legitimacy of public opinion. The thesis concludes that, rather than contributing wholly positively to citizens’ deliberative capacity, social media accentuates long running trends that contribute to the democratic deficit. The juxtaposition of these two conclusions about the impact of social media paves the way for a discussion that provides a modest but significant contribution to the existing scholarship.
# Table of Contents

Declaration ............................................................................................................................. iii
Acknowledgements ................................................................................................................. v
Abstract ................................................................................................................................. vi
Table of Contents .................................................................................................................. ix
List of Images ......................................................................................................................... xiii

**Introduction** ....................................................................................................................... 1
  Overview of the thesis ............................................................................................................ 4
  Participation, policy and social media .................................................................................. 5
  Existing research .................................................................................................................... 9
  Research objectives and questions ...................................................................................... 10
  The empirical focus: three case studies ............................................................................. 11
  Methods and analytical tools .............................................................................................. 13
  Thesis findings ..................................................................................................................... 15
  Contribution ........................................................................................................................ 17

**Chapter One: Background** .............................................................................................. 19
  Liberal democracy in crisis? ............................................................................................... 21
  The social media solution ................................................................................................. 24
    The economic logic of Gov 2.0 ....................................................................................... 26
    Horizontal engagement: social media and citizens working together ......................... 28
    Vertical engagement: social media and citizens working with government ................. 29
  Political legitimacy and the ‘public sphere’ ..................................................................... 32

**Chapter Two: literature review and critique** ................................................................. 37
  Part A: Literature Review .................................................................................................. 38
    Social media and government ....................................................................................... 41
    Social media during elections ....................................................................................... 44
    Social media and political leaders ............................................................................... 47
    Social media and offline activity ................................................................................... 49
  Part B: Limitations of the literature ................................................................................... 51
  Summary .............................................................................................................................. 54

**Chapter Three: analytical framework and research methodology** ......................... 55
  Part A: Analytical framework ............................................................................................ 57
Case Study Two: social media and disability reform

Overview ........................................................................................................................................ 57
Critical theory and social media ................................................................................................. 57
Critical theory and public engagement ....................................................................................... 58
Critical theory and democracy: the public sphere ........................................................................ 59
Part B: Research approach ............................................................................................................. 62
Political ethnography ..................................................................................................................... 62
Case studies and interpretative policy analysis .............................................................................. 64
Part C: Research strategy ................................................................................................................ 64
The case studies ............................................................................................................................... 65
Organising the evidence: the multi-streams model ........................................................................ 66
Sources and the collection of evidence ........................................................................................... 69
Summary .......................................................................................................................................... 70

Case Study One: Social media and Sydney’s ‘one-punch’ laws .............. 71

Overview .......................................................................................................................................... 74
Background: Australian policy narratives ......................................................................................... 74
Multi-streams .................................................................................................................................... 76
Politics stream ................................................................................................................................ 76
Politics: pressure on the Premier .................................................................................................... 76
Politics: the profile of the victims’ families ...................................................................................... 79
Politics: the hotel and liquor lobby .................................................................................................. 81
Policy stream ..................................................................................................................................... 82
Policy: framing public perceptions of alcohol .................................................................................. 83
Policy: Citizens’ Jury ......................................................................................................................... 86
Problem stream ............................................................................................................................... 88
Problem: one-punch assaults as focusing events ......................................................................... 89
Problem: Routine indicators - assaults on the decline ................................................................. 91
Observations ...................................................................................................................................... 92
Epilogue ............................................................................................................................................. 96

Case Study Two: social media and disability reform ......................... 101

Overview .......................................................................................................................................... 103
Background: disability policy narratives ......................................................................................... 104
Multi-streams .................................................................................................................................... 107
Politics stream ................................................................................................................................ 107
Politics: personal ambitions ............................................................................................................. 107
Politics: mobilisation by disability organisations ......................................................................... 108
Policy stream ..................................................................................................................................... 111
Policy: ‘consumer choice’ ............................................................................................................... 112
Policy: ‘reasonable and necessary’ ................................................................. 112
Problem stream ......................................................................................... 115
Problem: indicators from government ......................................................... 115
Problem: community indicators ................................................................. 115
Observations .............................................................................................. 119
Epilogue ...................................................................................................... 122

Case Study Three: Social media and the voluntary euthanasia debate 125
Overview ..................................................................................................... 126
Terminology and key arguments ................................................................ 127
Terminology ............................................................................................... 127
Sanctity of human life and the autonomy of the individual ....................... 128
Responsibility to the vulnerable ................................................................. 129
Multi-streams .............................................................................................. 130
Politics stream .......................................................................................... 130
Politics: Social media and parliamentary activity ....................................... 131
Politics: Voting on conscience .................................................................... 134
Policy stream .............................................................................................. 136
Policy: the scope of palliative care ............................................................ 136
Policy: the implications of the euthanasia’s illegality .................................. 140
Problem stream .......................................................................................... 141
Problem: Focusing events from the media .................................................. 141
Problem: Public conversations about dying ............................................... 145
Observations .............................................................................................. 148
Epilogue ...................................................................................................... 150

Chapter Seven: Findings and discussion ............................................... 153
Overview ..................................................................................................... 155
Part A: Findings from the case studies ......................................................... 155
Horizontal engagement (communication between citizens) ...................... 156
Vertical engagement (reciprocal communication between citizens and government) ... 159
Part B: Discussion ...................................................................................... 162
Summary ..................................................................................................... 171

Conclusion .................................................................................................. 173
Relevance ................................................................................................... 177
Objectives .................................................................................................. 180
Limitations .................................................................................................. 181
Contribution ............................................................................................................................ 181
Directions for further research .............................................................................................. 183
Appendix One: Interviewees ............................................................................................... 187
Bibliography .......................................................................................................................... 189
List of Images

Image 1: #Indigenousdads example 1................................................................. 3
Image 2: #Indigenousdads example 2................................................................. 3
Image 3: Bill Leak’s cartoon in The Australian .................................................. 3
Image 4: Word clouds for the Gov 2.0 policy statements (Henman 2013, p. 1405) .... 42
Image 5: Word cloud representing Australian politicians tweets (Grant et al. 2010). 48
Image 6: A dialectical view of media and society (Fuchs 2013, p. 202).................. 58
Image 7: Diagram of the public sphere framework ............................................. 61
Image 8: Daily Telegraph front-page on the sentencing on Kieran Loveridge .......... 77
Image 9: e-petition on Facebook created by the Kelly family ................................ 81
Image 10: NAAPA campaign on alcohol and the NSW election............................ 85
Image 11: FARE/NAAPA blog DrinkTank .......................................................... 85
Image 12: Shaun McNeil – in SMH 21 January 2013, taken from Facebook ........... 89
Image 13: Shaun McNeil - in the SMH 3 January 2013 taken from Facebook .......... 89
Image 14: NSW Government ‘one-punch’ social media campaign ......................... 90
Image 15: FARE retort on social media to #keepsydneyopen ............................... 96
Image 16: Mike Baird on ‘lock out’ laws on Facebook......................................... 98
Image 17: Prime Minister Gillard and the EveryAustralianCounts campaign .......... 110
Image 18: Malcolm Turnbull and the EveryAustralianCounts campaign ................. 110
Image 19: Bang the Table’s approach to consultation about the NDIS.................... 116
Image 20: NDIA Facebook page ........................................................................ 117
Image 21: PWD’s online call for participation in the Citizens’ Jury ......................... 118
Image 22: Grassroots Facebook page ................................................................... 122
Image 23: Blog platform of EveryAustralianCounts............................................ 123
Image 24: EveryAustralianCounts campaign regarding the NDIA Board ............... 124
Image 25: The Australian Christian Lobby (ACL) web platform ‘Make A Stand’ ....... 132
Image 26: Palliverse Twitterchat (Feb and October 2016) ..................................... 139
Image 27: Excerpt from Peter Shaw’s blog about contact with Prime Minister Tony Abbott 142
Image 28: The Age newspaper’s Facebook entry about the Shaws. ....................... 144
Image 29: Facebook screenshot from Groundswell ............................................ 146
Image 30: Facebook screenshot from a Death Cafe ............................................. 147
Image 31: Dying for Choice website .................................................................... 149
Image 32: Be the Bill social media campaign, Go Gentle Australia ............ 151
Image 33: protests rally around ‘KeepSydneyOpen’ ........................................... 158
Image 34: protester poster with #casinomike ..................................................... 158
Image 36: Jim Beam alcohol promotion on Facebook.......................................... 169
Image 37: Twitter support for Bill Leak ............................................................. 177
Introduction

A common concern in Western democracies is that public confidence in government is declining, and that citizens’ commitment to engage in democratic processes, so necessary to the durability of democracy, has weakened. Evidence of a ‘legitimacy crisis’ or ‘democratic deficit’ is widespread: declining levels of participation in elections and in membership of political parties, dissatisfaction with governments and distrust of political leaders, for instance (Marsh and Miller 2012; Ginsborg 2008; Couldry 2015). The arrival of new information and communication technologies – radio, television, telephony and the internet – has historically prompted intense speculation and high expectations that they might radically change the way citizens engage with their political world. In this context, in the past decade all western governments and key international bodies have put great store in the potential of social media to reconnect citizens with government and democracy.

Mirroring the assertions made in the Open Government Directive (US Government 2009), Government 2.0 and Access to Information (Canada 2010), Web 2.0 in Government (European Commission 2008), the Australian government came to view social media as an integral part of efforts to bring citizens and government into closer collaboration, and provide opportunities for citizens to engage directly in policy making and service design. In its 2010 paper Engage: Getting on with Government 2.0, the government asserted that “using technologies to increase citizen engagement and collaboration in making policy and providing service will help achieve a more consultative, participatory and transparent government” (Australian Government 2010, p. x.v). The appeal of social media to governments is it’s purportedly ‘participatory architecture’ which enables citizens to ‘talk back’ to government, and to work with other citizens to ensure that government and its institutions respond to and reflect public expectations.

A decade on from its introduction to government and citizens, social media is a common feature of the repertoire of engagements by both formal and informal actors in political communication across a broad spectrum of policy debates in Australia. It is used by actors of all political hues to mobilize citizens – for instance via ‘flash-mobs’ on the street,
petitioning online, a proliferation of Facebook- or Twitter-enabled lobby groups—
around policy debates. For example, in the past 12 months alone, social media has
featured prominently in debates about the need to remove children from offshore
immigration detention (#letthemstay); the case to introduce marriage equality
(#loveislove); or to increase government support for the mental health of returned
servicemen (#pushupchallenge). Furthermore, social media has made it possible for
citizens to connect directly with their political representatives. For instance, the ACT
government is one of several state governments to hold Twitter cabinet meetings, or
‘have your say’ forums, in which residents tweet questions to (and receive answers from)
their local representatives. In relation to service delivery there are numerous instances
of civil society groups creating social media channels to enable citizens to
instantaneously share their experiences, such as waiting times in emergency
departments in hospital or the standards of road maintenance in their neighborhood,
with other citizens or directly to government bureaucrats and political representatives.

To expand upon just one example of social media’s capacity to amplify citizen voice, in
the first week of August 2016, photos of indigenous Australian men and their children
went ‘viral’ across Twitter and Facebook. Tagged #indigenousdads, the photos showed
indigenous families doing everyday things like celebrating university graduation,
camping, fishing and playing sport (see Image 1 and 2). Each post was a personal
contribution to an impromptu campaign initiated by indigenous activist Dameyon
Bonson in response to a cartoon by Bill Leak published in The Australian on National
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children’s Day.
The cartoon (Image 3) depicted a policeman handing a boy to his father and instructing him to talk to his son about personal responsibility. The father, beer can in hand, responds “Righto, what’s his name then?” The cartoon was published a week after the ABC’s *Four Corners* reported on the use of physical restraints and tear gas, as well as long periods of solitary confinement and beatings of children on remand in the Northern Territory’s Don Dale Youth Detention Centre.

The cartoonist claimed that his aim was to trigger public debate about the responsibilities of indigenous parents for the disproportionately high rates of detention of indigenous children across Australia. The cartoon angered many indigenous and non-indigenous Australians, and was condemned by Senators and Members of Parliament,
national sports celebrities, as perpetuating racial stereotypes. Social media provided a platform from which indigenous fathers could express this. The Chairman of the NSW Aboriginal Land Council, Roy Ah-See remarked that social media made it possible for the Aboriginal fathers to “show that they are real and are having the final say in response to the racist cartoon” (Roy Ah-See 2016). By offering a low cost medium suited to personal contributions the campaign proved to be popular. In the face of this, Bill Leak was prompted to describe his critics as "sanctimonious Tweety Birds having a tantrum" (Choahan 2016). In themes that will be picked up later in the thesis, the cartoon became the focal point of a broader political debate, much of it played out on social media, about the efficacy of Section 18C of the *Racial Discrimination Act* (1975).

That social media has opened up new channels for communication about public policy matters in Australia is beyond question. Less clear at this point are the long term impacts of this form of political engagement on Australian democracy.

**Overview of the thesis**

As described in *Chapter One* (on background) government enthusiasm (both in Australia and abroad) about social media coincides with a growing concern that citizens have lost faith in the capacity of democratic systems to deliver in the public interest, and are increasingly disengaged from democratic processes and distrustful of political leadership (Marsh and Miller 2012). Explanations for this ‘democratic deficit’ are many and varied - including, for instance, the structural changes in policy making infrastructure, the growing ‘mediatisation’ of politics, and the ‘hollowing’ effects of neoliberalism’s market logics on politics - the presumption that social media’s open and participatory architecture has remedial, if not curative, potential reverberates through government policy statements.

This thesis is motivated by an interest in the immediate and long term impact of social media on public policy debate in Australia. It looks for this ‘impact’ not through quantitative analysis of hashtag shares or Facebook likes, but by examining three case studies of public policy debate in which social media has featured. Taking its cue from Australian government policy, the research seeks out the kinds of social-mediated
interactions between citizens, and between citizens and government that are expected to arise in these contexts. It looks, for instance, for evidence of citizens using social media to pool their knowledge and work together to develop solutions to policy challenges, and for evidence that the institutions of government, like parliamentary committees, are using social media to facilitate public participation in their inquiries. Importantly, as explained in Chapter Three, this thesis foregrounds the historical, political and economic dynamics that are particular to any given policy topic and examines social media’s contribution therein. Existing scholarship on the nexus between social media and politics in Australia is overwhelmingly focused on narrow foci and evidentiary sources, such as how many people responded to a posting on Facebook on a given topic at a given time. Metrics that report on social media numbers provide insights into the level of interaction by both government and citizens on social media, but they are ill-equipped to provide insights into the benefits or otherwise to citizen-state relationships that flow from this.

**Participation, policy and social media**

In a variety of ways, this thesis uses terms that are current in literature and scholarship on political science and e-democracy scholarship. Three frequently used terms deserve early explanation: participation, policy, and social media.

First, it is a time honored axiom of political theory “that vigorous, engaged conversation on matters of public concern is an essential input for health democracy” (Freelon 2010, p. 1173). Commonly, scholars distinguish between different degrees of participation that reflect differences in power sharing. Pateman (1970), for example, distinguishes between ‘pseudo’ and ‘full’ participation, ranging from ‘feelings of participation’ without substance through to an equal determination of a decision. Similarly, Arnstein (1971) famously described participation as a ladder with ‘rungs’ ascending from manipulation through to delegated power and citizen control. Others view participation not as an ‘offering’ of government, as implied by Pateman and Arnstein’s definitions, but rather as an ever-present possibility in social dynamics. Hajer (2003), for instance, views citizens as political activists on ‘stand by’ who participate once ignited, and that the task
of political actors is to find the trigger that compels citizens to reflect on what they value and motivates them to engage.

Despite consensus on the centrality of public participation to democratic legitimacy, views differ on what form participation should take and how much is desirable (Dalton 2008; Dahlgren 2013, 2015; Petrik 2010). These views are often arrayed between two poles on a continuum, from minimalist/thin to maximalist/thick possibilities (Carpentier 2011; Held 2004). The minimalist position channels public participation through the representative processes, where power is delegated and the role of citizens is largely confined to selecting representatives. With features of both elite and representative models of participation, public opinion is treated as macro, pre-formed aggregations of popular sentiment, rather than a dynamic process of learning, prioritising and consensus building. The maximalist position, on the other hand, advocates more extensive forms of participation in which a heterogeneity of voices are encouraged into formal political settings. Here, democratic processes are considered part of a much larger domain of social activity, and occur in an array of civic spaces. These models, often referred to as deliberative or republican, acknowledge the importance of access to information for decision making, but also of citizens interacting and developing a sense of common interest, sharpening their opinions and resolving conflicts in robust and proactive dialogue (Heywood 1994).

This thesis understands public participation in the context of what Mansbridge and others describe as a ‘deliberative system’ (2012). A deliberative system recognised that participation can occur in many forms, including arguing, demonstrating, expressing and persuading, to articulate and influence debate on political matters. Importantly, it is understood as occurring in specific settings that interrelate and compete in ways that may impact on political decision making beyond the immediate audience or topic of deliberation (Mansbridge et al. 2012, p.4-6). For instance, citizen juries may facilitate informed and focused (albeit micro) public input to new policy and score positively on deliberative standards, while at the same time weaken the impact of other participatory channels such as advocacy organisations (Parkinson 2006). The deliberative systems approach acknowledges that public participation is shaped by ‘structures of opportunity’
or conditions that have a bearing on the outcomes of such engagement (Dahlgren and Alvares 2013; Bickford 1996).

Second, in this thesis the impact of changes in participation (via social media) is assessed in the context of policy debate. Unlike topics of political science that concentrate on particular institutions, such as parliament, or fields of activity, such as voting behaviour, the study of policy takes as its baseline all political activity and institutions: for instance, voting, political culture, social values, political parties, bureaucracies, international forces, local government and citizens (John 2007; Cairney 2012). Policy debate is understood to be the communication and contest by a “complex array of state and societal actors involved in decision making processes” (Howlett 2003, p. 8). As Hendricks (2011) describes, policy debates can provide rich insights into political relationships because they are:

...full of different modes of communication and action; there are power games and manipulative acts of competing groups, various forms of pleading, persuasion and rhetoric from policy entrepreneurs, disruptive outbursts from activists, technocratic inputs from experts and policy elites, all mixed in with bargaining, coalition building, networking and occasional collaboration (p. 17).

Third, social media is the subject of plural definitions, taxonomies and categorisations (Sudulick et al. 2014). One enduring conceptualisation has been to consider the digital world as composed of layers. In The Wealth of Networks, Benkler (2006) describes three: the ‘physical layer’, at the lowest level, encompassing both the infrastructure that facilitates communication (wires, fibre optic cables) and the devices used to access the Internet (mobile devices, computers); second, the ‘logical layer’ which comprises the protocols, software and applications that enable users to transmit information; and third, the ‘content layer’ which comprises the information that is produced and communicated over the Internet. Other Internet theorists have added an application or ‘human practices’ layer that encompasses the tasks people perform on the network, like shopping or listening to music (Zittrain 2008). Of relevance to this thesis is the ‘social layer’ which concerns the way people create, consume and share information online,
and the relationships that coalesce around these activities (Faris and Heacock 2013, p. 3). This thesis focusses on this social layer of social media, with particular interest in its political dimensions.¹

Given the interest in the ‘social layer’ this thesis is not well served by definitions of social media that focus solely on their technical characteristics. For instance, the core of social networking sites like Facebook are web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (Boyd and Ellison 2007, p. 210).

As indicated by the research focus, this thesis is interested in the characteristics of social media and the ways they alter the dynamics of existing political relationships. Key here is the presumption that social media has the potential to empower its users. Terms like ‘user-generated-content’, ‘prosumer’ (Bruns 2009) and ‘co-creator’, which are now common parlance beyond the media sector, capture what some theorists describe as “a paradigm shift” in the way information is produced and circulated (Jenkins 2006 in van Dijck 2009, p.42). Echoing earlier such claims about expanded public broadcast through print and radio, in narratives about Web 2.0 and the ‘social media age’ the central idea is that media audiences are no longer passive recipients but active participants. This underpins claims by governments, theorists and the popular media, that citizens have new leverage to challenge established power relations. For the purposes of this thesis, reference to social media is to these and related potentialities, unless otherwise specified by reference to particular products like Facebook and Twitter.

¹ It is noted that blanket reference to ‘social media’ masks rich functional diversity - such as YouTube for sharing videos, Pinterest for web content curation, and Instagram for sharing pictures – and the strategic choices that inform its adoption. In a political campaign context, for instance, social media can be used for (a) discussing ideas, (b) developing collective identities, (c) mobilizing members, (d) reaching out to new members, (e) trying to get mass media coverage, (f) coordinating onsite during a demonstration. Facebook could service (a) and (b) and Twitter may be serviceable for (c) and (e).
Existing research

The democratic potential of social media has interested political scientists for almost two decades. The literature review focuses on how scholars of Australian politics have approached this subject and the insights this provides for the questions motivating this thesis. Chapter Two, in two parts, canvasses and then critiques this body of literature. Part A reviews two articles that speak directly to the contribution of social media to public engagement and democratic relations (Marsh and McLean 2012; Gruen 2012). It also reviews two articles that critically examine the Australian government’s Gov 2.0 agenda (Chen 2011; Henman 2013). Overall, however, Part A demonstrates that insights that are relevant to this thesis are arrayed across a variety of studies, each of which examine discrete and tangential dimensions of the thesis themes. These include the uptake of social media by Australia’s political leaders (eg., Grant et al. 2010; Loader et al. 2016), and the impact of social media on offline political behaviour (eg., Vromen 2015; Hendrix et al. 2016). The literature review underscores the propensity of existing research to be overwhelmingly reliant on positivist, quantitative methods of study, particularly the trace data generated by Twitter and the results of the Australian Electoral Survey (1997 to 2013).

Part B of Chapter Two discusses the limitations of existing research, and how it may be extended or augmented. It focuses on four inter-related issues, each of which stem from the way social media and public engagement have been conceptualised. For instance, research that spotlights singular social media platforms, such as Twitter and specific political engagements, such as elections, tends to overlook the fact that citizens increasingly move within a hybrid and dynamic media environment and therefore engage in political communication in a variety of formal and informal ways. The chapter argues that to appreciate the long term effects of social media on political engagement the evidence needs to be considered through a different conceptual framework, and with different methodological tools. This call is taken up in Chapter Three.
Research objectives and questions

This thesis has two primary objectives. The first is to extend the assessment of social media to incorporate the context in which it is used. It advocates an approach that does not assume that the political settings in which social media are adopted are immune from relationships informed by power, history and values, or ‘structures of opportunity’ that shape the conditions of participation and thus democracy. As described in Chapter Three (Analytical framework and methods) the thesis recognises that public deliberation occurs not within singular sites, but across a multiplicity of diverse communicative sites, from the informal talk of everyday interactions to the highly structured forums provided by legislative processes (Wright et al. 2016; Mansbridge et al. 2012). Importantly, it recognises that few engagements entail all the idealised aspects of democratic deliberation in isolation, but may together foster inclusive and reflexive discussion on matters of common concern (Ercan et al. 2015, p.2). As described in detail in Chapter Three, this objective is pursued by adopting the case study method, together with research tools from political ethnography.

The second objective of this research is to bring a critical lens to the study of social media’s impact on citizen-state relations. A critical lens sees social phenomena as the result of structural conflicts in the social order, and seeks to explain these conflicts through an understanding of the historical dialectics that may be at play (Fay 1975). The thesis pursues a critical understanding by drawing on the work of Jurgen Habermas of the Frankfurt School of Social Research, specifically his insights into the evolving nature of public discourse and the legitimacy of democratic institutions in late capitalist societies. As will be shown, Habermas’ historical rendition of the ‘public sphere’ provides both a framework and set of norms that are well suited to evaluating the impact of shifts in the ways the public engages with policy information and forms opinion about policy solutions, as well as the formation of political will that is central to a functioning democracy.

The interest of this thesis is not whether social media impacts on the policy process, as surely it does, but rather to examine whether this creates discernible differences in pre-
existing policy making relationships, and to assess their implications. To this end, the thesis has two main questions:

**What is the impact of social media on policy debate in Australia?**

The framework for addressing this question is Australian government policy, articulated mainly in the *Engage: Getting on with Government 2.0* Report. This is the Australian example of a global narrative about the potential of social media, as explained in the Background Chapter (Chapter One). This Report sets out how social media will transform the relationship between citizens and state, and what the outcomes will be.

**Do changes in public policy debate, brought about by social media, assist in addressing the democratic deficit?**

The framework for addressing this question is Habermas’ public sphere, specifically the ways in which social media may impact on the normative conditions of communicative action. This framework was developed through historical and critical study of the nature of public communication and the conditions of political legitimacy.

It is important to note that the terms ‘impact’ and ‘assist’ in the research questions do not mean to imply that this thesis quantitatively tests a causal relationship between social media, public engagement and democratic legitimacy. Rather, through the juxtaposition of the first and second research questions, the thesis aims to provide new insights about the evidence of social media activity in politics in Australia.

**The empirical focus: three case studies**

Three cases of contemporary policy debate in Australia provide the empirical basis of the thesis. Consistent with the research objectives, these cases were selected because a) they represent every day, not elite or unique instances of social media in policy debate, and b) they represent tensions that are perennial to citizen-state relations in liberal democracies like Australia. While social media does not dominate these cases, it is certainly present and when viewed in the context of the other dynamics in policy making,
generates evidence of both the immediate and enduring ways that social media impacts on policy outcomes and political relations.

The first case study (Chapter Four) is a law and order issue that investigates social media activity after a deadly ‘one punch’ assault in Kings Cross, Sydney which culminated 18 months later in the decision by the NSW government to introduce ‘lock-outs’ for entertainment venues in the central business district (CBD) and mandatory prison sentences for assaults involving alcohol. In this case, social media was employed by all the policy actors – the liquor lobby, public health groups, victims’ families, police and politicians – to further their policy preferences, and the public domain was rich with policy solutions. While these social-mediated activities were each successful in their own right, the mainstream media was motivated to amplify the grief of the victims’ families, expressed through social media channels, and created extraordinary pressure on political decision makers to demonstrate a tough law and order response. This not only directed public debate away from policy ideas that worked in the broader public interest, but also resulted in a policy response from the NSW Parliament that was favoured by the liquor lobby. As a law and order matter, in this case social media helped to solidify, rather than challenge, the influence of established interests in public policy debate.

The second case study (Chapter Five) examines a social policy reform, specifically the role of social media in the introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), the largest investment in social support since Medicare. The NDIS addressed calls from disability advocates and carers for urgent investment in disability support, and radically reformed the system by introducing individualized care plans that are serviced through the competitive market, not directly by government. This case study highlights the unique capability of social media to capture personal stories, and how these stories can be strategically used by policy actors to build critical momentum for policy reform. While powerful triggers for change, in the context of long running claims for equal rights and opportunities in society, storytelling can also gloss over fundamental differences in support needs and contribute to unrealistic expectations of what policy reform can really deliver to people with disabilities. Yet, this case also highlights how the networking capabilities of social media provided many NDIS clients, struggling with the disjunct
between policy promise and service reality, a channel through which to both air their frustrations and mobilise action.

The third case study (Chapter Six) examines a so-called ‘morality issue’ that at heart questions how far it is acceptable for the state to intrude on the decisions of the individual. It investigates the role of social media in the debate to decriminalize voluntary euthanasia. Since 1996, there have been at least 29 attempts before state and federal parliaments to make assisted dying legal, all of which have been decided on a conscience vote and defeated. Public polling, high levels of engagement with parliamentary committee processes, and a groundswell of interest in de-institutionalising the experience of dying all point to public demand for greater debate about this issue. Like the other two case studies, social media is being used to drive the campaign activities of different policy actors, from advocates like Andrew Denton and Dying With Dignity to detractors like the Catholic Church and their affiliated groups. Leveraging deep and well organised networks with close connections to political decision-makers, the social media reach of those who oppose voluntary euthanasia is formidable. However, beyond the seemingly intractable debate in formal political circles, social media is being utilised by emerging citizens groups to generate public conversations about the management of death and dying outside of institutional settings.

These grounded case studies contain historical, economic and institutional elements and are populated by politicians, social groups, corporate interests and individual entrepreneurs. Whilst complicated, they each confirm that singular approaches to the study of policy deliberation and the role of social media would only provide limited insights or partial conclusions to the questions being examined.

Methods and analytical tools

The concepts and methods selected to support the empirical dimensions of this thesis each seek to accommodate complexity, critique and discovery, rather than assume and then test linear trajectories or causal relations between the research subjects. As detailed in Chapter Three, the research is guided by three research methods. First, it
draws analytical tools from critical theory in general, and Habermas’ public sphere framework in particular. As discussed in Chapter One the origins of this framework helps to appreciate some of the deeper structural faults in modern capitalism that speak directly to the legitimacy crisis faced by liberal democracy. For methodological purposes, the framework also provides instruction on the normative conditions of the public sphere that support effective public deliberation, befitting public interest needs. These conditions include ‘independence’ from the influence of political actors, market forces and special interest groups, and ‘reflexivity’ in that participants can freely and equally participate in the rational, deliberative weighing of issues of concern to all citizens (Friedland et al. 2006). Given these conditions are difficult to find in reality, scholars refer to Habermas’ framework as an ‘ideal’ or ‘regulatory’ type that helps to evaluate realities against ‘what ought to be’ in our democratic imaginings (Mansbridge et al. 2012). It provides the thesis with analytical tools for assessing the evidence of social media in the policy case studies against the government’s ambitions for democratic revival more broadly.

Second, the thesis is guided by the methods of political ethnography. Political ethnography brings together two concepts: political science, which is understood as the study of power and the structures, institutions, movements and social identities that both maintain and challenge it (Baiocchi and Connor 2008) and ethnography, which is “the close-up, on the ground observation of people and institutions in real time” (Wacquant 2003, p.5 in Auyero 2006, p. 258). Applied to social media, the ethnographic approach involves being part of the ‘digital crowd’ that policy actors engage with and seek to influence through blogs, Facebook groups, discussion forums, and so on. This approach has recently attracted the interest of social media scholars because it provides the freedom to track topics as they move through the increasingly fluid mediated worlds, including into ‘third spaces’ that are often overlooked by political scientists. As Charles Tilly (2006) describes, political ethnography provides privileged access to the processes, causes and effects of broader political processes.

Thirdly, the field work for this thesis is focused on cases studies which will be populated with data from three sources: insights and experiences of the policy actors’, gained
through in-depth interviews; analysis of public information in policy debate, such as submissions to parliamentary committees, daily media commentary, politicians speeches, government research; and tracking the social media activity generated by policy actors, including blog postings, discussion threads, Facebook and Twitter commentary, and petitions. To systematically organise this data across three case studies, the thesis is guided by the ‘multi-streams model’ developed by John Kingdon in the 1980s (Kingdon 1984). This model categorises the influences on a political agenda in terms of whether they come from the policy, problem or political fields of influence. This model has been applied and refined through application in over 300 policy cases (Beland and Howlett 2016, p. 223).

**Thesis findings**

Reflecting on the evidence from the three case studies, Chapter Seven returns to discuss the two research questions. On the question of social media’s impact on policy debate, the case studies provide ample, although uneven, evidence of the kind the architects of Engage: Gov 2.0 would expect. Through evidence of Twitterchats, e-petitions, community sector blogs and grassroots Facebook communities, social media enhances horizontal engagement. It increases the capture and circulation of citizens’ insights and personal experiences in relation to policy matters; can facilitate offline political mobilisation and citizens’ collaboration outside of government; and supports the standing of organised civil society in policy deliberation. In regards to vertical engagement the evidence of heightened levels of engagement and collaboration with citizens is less compelling. The cases suggest that political institutions make limited use of social media, and that which is evident is largely to promote existing government policy positions, and to extend and target the reach of public information campaigns. There is evidence of increased use of social media by politicians, however principally for self-promotion. Some elements of organised civil society have been able to amplify the effects of their public and political engagement, but for the most part, the stimulation
via social media in horizontal relations on policy matters appears to be largely offset by efforts in the political domain to strategically manage their relations with citizens.2

On the question of the implications of these findings, particularly whether social media can restore public confidence in democratic processes, Chapter Seven argues that social media accentuates existing and well documented trends in modern politics that have largely corrosive effects on democracy. Viewed through the lens of Habermas’ public sphere, and with the aid of insights from Richard Sennett (1974) and Hannah Arendt (1958; 1970) three instances of this are highlighted. The first focuses on the private domain and argues that social media amplifies the raw and unfiltered discourses of the private domain, and that this encourages the ‘sentimentalisation’ of citizen contributions to public policy debate. The second focuses on the political domain and argues that social media contributes to a shift in governance as an exercise in ‘information management’ as well as to the trend recently labelled the ‘intimitisation’ of citizens’ perception of political actors. The third focuses on the public sphere and argues that despite enhanced citizen activity in relation to policy debate – as evidenced in the findings - social media is also being used by powerful, well established political and corporate interests to influence the choice of policy outcomes.

Rather than contributing positively to the independence and deliberative capacity of the public sphere, that is, the normative conditions that favour democracy, the thesis concludes that the effect of social media is to accentuate long running trends that have been attributed to citizens’ retreat from politics. These trends, which are associated with neoliberalism, include the corrosive effects of a media rationality in politics, which includes the rise of celebrity politics, and the displacement of public interest considerations such as social norms and social justice, from policy debate by market logics and the prioritisation of private, individual concerns. It is argued that social media advances the deleterious impacts of neoliberalism on political culture.

2 Australia’s experience is confirmed by a recent OECD (2014) study of social media use by governments which found that political leaders on average have four times more followers on Twitter than a government department. Consistent with this thesis, the study also found that few governments genuinely leverage social media to involve citizens in policy processes or the re-design of public service delivery.
Contribution

This thesis makes three contributions. First, it offers and tests an approach to evaluating the impact of social media that has not been previously undertaken and which, it is argued, may result in a more nuanced and critical insights into the shifting nature of public engagement in politics today. This is important because the promise that social media will mend the disjuncture between citizens and political institutions continues to appear in policy pronouncements from governments and international organisations around the world.

Second, while there is rich speculation in scholarship about whether or not new technologies improve citizen engagement with politics, how these technologies interface with the policy process – as defined earlier, the core of politics - is largely unexplored (Galderaro 2013). Little has changed since Hood and Margetts argued almost a decade ago that “it is time for the relationship between the Internet and policy to emerge from the ghetto and to develop new theories and hypothesis of contemporary public policy” (2007, p.18). This research may make a modest contribution to this wider ambition.

Third, the evidence presented in this thesis confirms that social media will increasingly feature in political communication and mobilisation in Australia, yet in dynamic and unpredictable ways. Political scientists need to be dazzled less by the new banks of empirical source material – big data – available for statistical manipulation, and instead critically engage with the implications and outcomes of this phenomena on broader political relations. It is naïve to assume that all social media activity is good for democracy. Indeed, as Charles Tilly has famously argued, the processes of democratisation are fragile and can easily go into reverse (2006).
Chapter One: Background

Abundant information, connectivity, and time are just the technical ingredients needed to foster an explosion of civic activity; it helps that the Internet is a ‘lean forward’ medium full of invitations to join, participate and create your own content, compared to the ‘lean back’ media of television, radio and newsprint.

Micah Sifry, Wiki-leaks and the Age of Transparency (2011)

Australian politicians and governments have enthusiastically speculated about what social media will bring to political affairs. In his inaugural Light on the Hill address in 2014, Senator John Faulkner argued that politics “needs to be based on the way people today organise, communicate and participate – not on the ways that their grandparents did.” Describing social media as more immediate and interactive, Faulkner (2014) argued their pervasiveness has “profoundly changed our ideas of community and our expectation of what community – and political – involvement looks like”. According to Faulkner, this change presented a much needed opportunity to address “the widespread contempt for the practice of politics” and the reality that “too many Australians have come to see our parliaments, our governments, our political parties, and our politicians, as practising not politics but its opposite: a values-free competition for office and the spoils it can deliver” (Faulkner 2014). Social media would reconnect political representatives with citizens, and restore the Australian public’s confidence “that the votes they cast influence the future direction of our country” (Faulkner 2014).

The Australian government’s enthusiasm for social media began in the late 2000s when the newly elected Rudd Labor government instigated a suite of reviews aimed at identifying opportunities for public sector reform. These included the Review of National Innovation System (Cutler Review) in 2008, the Review of Australian Government’s Use of ICT (Gershon Review) in 2008, and the Review of Public Sector Administration (Moran Review) in 2009. In this context, a taskforce was established charged with advising government on those policies and practices that would promote greater information disclosure, digital innovation, and public engagement across the public sector. The
taskforce’s report was entitled *Engage: Getting on with Government 2.0* (hereafter *Engage: Gov 2.0*) and delivered to the Minister for Finance and Deregulation and the Special Minister of State in 2009, along with a suite of recommendations that were accepted by the government in early 2010. The taskforce’s blueprint for reform was intended to open the public sector to greater levels of transparency, and to promote engagement with the public. The adoption of Web 2.0 technologies sought to achieve the former; as well as to produce collaborative outcomes, and the release of public sector information. It stated that the use of these new collaborative technologies “offers an unprecedented opportunity to achieve more open, accountable, responsive and efficient government” (2009, p. x) and make “our democracy more participatory and informed” (p. xi).

This chapter narrates the interconnection of social media and public engagement in the process of democratic renewal in Australia. First, it describes concerns about the ‘poor health’ of Australian democracy as evidenced by a range of indices that show falling levels of public participation in formal political processes, coupled with high levels of cynicism about politics and government generally (Marsh and McLean 2012; Mulgan 1994). It also outlines the explanations political scientists commonly give as to why this ‘democratic deficit’ has come about, particularly post-World War II.

Second, the chapter explains how the Australian government has presumed that social media would work toward correcting this ‘democratic deficit’. *Engage: Gov 2.0* is one of several policy statements in which much sought after remedies are pinned to the transformative effects of social media. It advances the idea that social media improves citizens’ capacity to work collaboratively – with their peers and with government – to resolve policy challenges, as well as to improve the responsiveness of public services to citizens’ demands, and foster greater political accountability.

Third, the chapter highlights how the broader themes of democratic legitimacy and public engagement have been well traversed by political science, and were of particular interest to scholars associated with the New School of Social Research, also known as the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory. The chapter concludes with the introduction of Jurgen Habermas’ explanation of the historical development (and demise) of the ‘public
sphere.’ This is a helpful rubric by which the implications of social media use in policy debate on the ‘democratic deficit’ may be assessed. Chapter Three focuses on the analytical framework and methods used in the thesis, and contains a detailed discussion of the normative dimensions of the ‘public sphere’.

Liberal democracy in crisis?

During the last quarter of the twentieth century there has been growing evidence that support for established political norms is declining (Dahlgren 2013; Hay 2007). Ginsborg describes this as “one of those strange and unexpected twists of history” in that democracy has acquired majority status around the world, yet liberal democracy was in “profound crisis” (2008, p. 26). While conditions vary between countries, liberal democracies are said either to be plagued by an atmosphere of ‘anti-politics’ (Mulgan 1994) or struggling to address a range of ‘democratic deficits’ (Dahlgren 2001).

In Australia, evidence of this malaise is stark. McAllister and Wanna argue “Australians have become increasingly critical of their political system and its capacity to deliver” (2001, p. 11). Voter turnout is declining (Martin 2013), as is membership of political parties (Marsh and Miller 2012; Gauja 2015). Regard for the honesty of politicians is low (Leigh 2002) and trust in government has steadily declined (McAllister 2011; Leigh 2002). Moreover, there has been a loss of public confidence in the capabilities of democratic institutions more generally (Cox 2003; ANU Poll 2012). It is arguable that apathy and cynicism are inherent to the Australian political culture. Opinion polling since 1969 has confirmed Senator Faulkner’s concern that large portions of the population believe politics is “run by a few big interests” and that people in government “usually look after themselves” (Goot 2002, p. 17-19).

The rise of public dissatisfaction with, and disengagement from, political practices in Australia may be attributed to three sets of dynamics. Borrowing from Marsh and Miller (2012), the first set of dynamics is marked by a shift brought about by the increased diversification of the Australian population post-World War II, and the subsequent rise of interest groups and social movements in the 1960s. Prior to this social pluralisation, two mass-based and programmatic political parties had successfully mobilised public
loyalty and engagement in alternative visions of Australia’s future. Against the backdrop of a social democratic state, high levels of party membership and identification stimulated top-down, yet collectivist, interest and identity formation. The pluralisation of political identities underway since the 1960s, which Marsh and Miller (2012) describe as “a bottom-up surge”, saw the power to set agendas shift in favour of social movements that mobilised citizens around identity and rights politics (e.g. women’s, gay and indigenous rights, and environmental issues). Thus, the two major political parties increasingly assumed a brokerage role between citizens and the political infrastructure by engaging with umbrella organisations around these policy causes.

The media is the focus of the second set of dynamics, and is commonly linked to a generalised public disaffection with politics. Some scholars argue that the increasing power of the media in determining what is of political interest, and deserving of public attention, is to the overall detriment of democratic institutions (Dahlgren and Alverse 2013; Tanner 2011). Faced with the magnitude of this power, political practitioners have adopted a ‘media rationality’ in which the emphasis in political reporting is on theatrics, celebrity and personalities, rather than on institutions, structures and ideas, and where policy debates become framed around conflicts, and deviations from the norm (Hajer 2009; Bennett and Entman 2001). The force of this dynamic is widely accepted by Australian politicians, and exemplified by former federal Labor leader Mark Latham thus:

> The major media outlets, with their reliance on conflict-based reporting and infotainment, need to create new issues and controversies to maintain their commercial viability … When no issues exist, politicians have an interest in manufacturing them, creating an artificial sense of crisis … The media, with its propensity for exaggeration and hysteria, is happy to play along (2007, in Tanner 2011, p. 43).

The third set of dynamics relates to the impact of neoliberalism on how citizens experience and engage with politics. These comprise a large and diverse body of research concerning the democratic deficits besetting advanced capitalist democracies
Background

(Dahlgren 2013; Harvey 2005; Couldry 2015). The literature details how neoliberalism moved beyond the confines of macro-economic liberalisation policies in the 1980s, how it washed through public sector reforms, and how it became ideologically embedded in both governance and political culture (Larner 2000; Harvey 2005; Newman 2014).

Neoliberalism is associated with the rise to prominence of conservative think-tanks and, together with strategies for economic liberalisation, the shaping of public policies around perceptions of ‘choice’ and ‘crisis’, and contracted expectations of the state (Marsh and McLean 2012). Others highlight how, under neoliberal policies, power has increasingly shifted from publicly-accountable political systems, to private sector institutions and their proxies. The result of this has been to diminish or denude the political realm of public interest agenda items, and meaningful opportunities for debate (Dahlgren 2013; Couldry 2015). As Dahlgren and Alvares argued, one consequence of neoliberalism’s pervasive market logic is that “discussion about norms, values and justice are undercut” or displaced by consumerist language (2013, p. 49). For citizens, the result is a drastically foreshortened democratic experience, and a tendency to withdraw from democratic processes and institutions entirely.

Globalisation has decreased the margins of manoeuvrability for governments, limiting what can be accomplished – or delivered – through the democratic system. As Juris described, “governments no longer have the credibility to promote real change. They have created a system in which transformation can no longer come through the state” (in Couldry 2009, p. 6). Whether due to ideology or efficacy, when governments are unable to correct the limits of the market and produce public goods, they begin to lose the legitimacy and authority on which effective governance depends. Under these conditions the ‘democratic deficit’ is compounded because citizens believe that their ‘voices’ are not being ‘listened to’ by those with the authority to act, and begin to sense that democracy has become a false or managed consensus (Bickford 1996).

In summary, the ‘democratic deficit’ is attributed to a number of dynamics, which citizens experience concurrently. Not only has the infrastructure that once linked the formal political system with the public been dramatically weakened, the corporate motivations of the media do not sustain complex, high-quality public discourse around
policy priorities (Marsh and McLean 2012). Furthermore, the shift from the public to the private sector that occurs under neoliberalism has eroded the foundation of social solidarities, and foreclosed opportunities for debate about public interest concerns. These dynamics have caused the public to retreat from the institutions and practices of politics, just as the combined effects of globalisation have fuelled high levels of dissatisfaction over what politics can deliver.

In this context, a narrative around the open and participatory potential of social media has taken root, encouraged by an industry of internet entrepreneurs.

The social media solution

The Australian government’s enthusiasm for social media began in the late 2000s when the newly elected Labor government instigated a suite of reviews aimed at identifying opportunities for public sector reform. After a decade of administration under the Howard government, the desire to launch a program of review was in some respects expected (Lindquist 2010). However, it is important to recall that these initiatives also closely followed the Global Financial Crisis of 2008, an event that placed enormous strain on the Australian economy and prompted thinking about the future scope of government. At this time, scholarly attention in Australia and abroad turned to what lay beyond New Public Management, and towards a ‘new synthesis’ for tackling societies’ ‘wicked’ policy challenges (Bourgon 2011; Margetts 2010).

Echoing other governments,³ Australia advanced a narrative in which enhanced citizen engagement was the key to public sector reform and democratic renewal. Ahead of the Game: Blueprint for Reform opened with the claim that “Australia faces unprecedented challenges ... and seemingly intractable social problems ... [and] new ways of thinking about engagement with citizens are required” (2010, 1). Likewise, in 2010 the Public Service Commission released Empowering Change: Fostering Innovation in the Australian Public Service. It stressed that “new technologies are creating opportunities

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for government to improve the services it offers to citizens” and that “collaboration with the public, industry, academia and other governments will be needed to identify the best solutions” (2010, p. ix). In a similar vein, Engage: Gov 2.0 (2009) argued that government needed to “cultivate and harness the enthusiasm of citizens, letting them more fully contribute to their wellbeing and that of their community” (p. xii). As for the Australian government, its agencies needed to “recognise that the more open and connected techniques of communication and knowledge sharing should fuel innovation in the search for new responses to the difficult policy challenges of a complex, networked world” (2009, p. 28).

Social media was particularly ripe for discursive construction of this kind. In the early 1990s, two technical developments – known in shorthand as the ‘participatory web’ and ‘open-source’ – were popularised by digital enthusiasts and policy entrepreneurs as having democratic potential. Prior to the current generation of online networking tools (known as Web 2.0), the architecture of the internet (known retrospectively as Web 1.0) was limited to a ‘one to many’ or ‘hub and spoke’ method of producing and distributing information (O’Reilly 2005). Under this model, Internet users were passive consumers of information produced by those with the resources or means to do so, namely government, business, the media, and special interest groups. In contrast, Web 2.0 is built on a ‘distributed architecture’ with multi-directional connections that enable Internet users, with little or no technical programming knowledge, to create and distribute information across their chosen networks: a ‘many to many’ relationship (Benkler 2006; Bertot et al. 2011). This architecture underpins such assertions as “Web 1.0 connects computers, while Web 2.0 connects people” (Boikos et al. 2014, p. 407), and phrases like ‘user-generated content’ and the ‘participatory web’ (Fox and Madden 2006).

The ‘open source movement’ also influenced government’s expectations about social media. Open source projects reverse the proprietary protocols of computer programming in that they don’t ‘lock’ (technically and by copyright) the code underpinning software programs, so that users can modify or build new software
products from them (Hindman 2007). This means that anyone is free to use, copy and change the technical code as long as it is further shared (Tkacz 2012). Applied to politics, theorists proclaimed the virtues of ‘open source politics’ (Lessig 2003) and ‘open source democracy’ (Rushkoff 2003 in Tkacz 2012, p. 397). Joe Trippi, open source programmer and campaign manager for US Presidential hopeful Howard Dean in 2004, was key to popularising this vision. Trippi mused:

I always wondered how you could take that same collaboration that occurs in Linux and open source and apply it in politics ... What would happen if there was a way to do that and engage everybody in a presidential campaign? (in Hindman 2007, p. 189).

Less than a decade later, international finance, governance and development agencies, as well as governments around the world, were championing ‘open government’ and investing in Web 2.0 initiatives that promised greater citizen engagement, public sector innovation and political accountability. Consistent with this trend, Engage: Gov 2.0 claimed that the use of new Web 2.0 technologies by government “offered an unprecedented opportunity to achieve more open, accountable, responsive, and efficient government” (2009, p. x).

The economic logic of Gov 2.0

Engage: Gov 2.0 described Web 2.0 platforms such as blogs, and social networking platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, as public goods in that they were freely available without exclusion, and one person’s enjoyment of them did not hamper that of others. It argued that the production of value that occurs through Web 2.0 technologies as a ‘striking paradox’ because “by design, the internet imposes no gatekeepers between those in the network, and accordingly none between the creators of value and users” (2009, p. 17). The paradox referred to in Engage: Gov 2.0 lay in the fact that “although in a basic sense governments face the best economic incentives to build the public goods of Web 2.0 their internal culture is inimical to doing so” (2009, p. 17). While conceding that “it is difficult to put an economic value on these phenomena”, governments believed that “Web 2.0 is reconfiguring the world, driven by individuals
and groups with a thirst for information and innovation, and a powerful desire to engage on their own terms” (2009, p. 4).

Web 2.0 platforms typically involve interactions in ‘granular’ form. That is, the network architecture distributes content such that large tasks can be disaggregated and decentralised, and thus facilitate the engagement of a wide array of people (Bruns 2008, p. 366). As Chadwick explained, this means that “... informational public goods may be disaggregated into tasks of varying magnitude, around which people are able to mobilise in the pursuit of individual and collective goals” (2012, p. 40). Granularity makes it possible for people to make small scale contributions, such as sharing an article, making a comment, clicking a petition, or sending an image. This lowers the threshold to contributing information and participating in the public domain (Flew and Young 2006). In Engage: Gov 2.0, because “Web 2.0 evolved from the thousands of experiments in building value on the web”, it had a culture suited to capturing “extraordinary possibilities” (2009, p. 17).

For Engage: Gov 2.0, Web 2.0’s participatory architecture made it possible to harness the public’s ‘intrinsic motivation’. Citing a software programmer involved in the open source movement, the report linked social media with ‘fun’ modes of working: “Fun is therefore a sign of peak efficiency. Painful development environments waste labour and creativity; they extract huge hidden costs in time, money and opportunity.” It was also argued that social media attracted people who self-organise around an issue and, because these people were likely to have a particular expertise, they would complement governments’ resources. The report provided the example of welfare reform in the UK that gave people with disabilities control of the financial assistance they receive, “allowing them to invest resources to reflect their better knowledge of their needs and context” (2009, p. 34). Arguing that this “can be taken further”, it suggested that the best contributors to policy debate online should be afforded greater recognition and respect and, in turn, greater opportunities to contribute “in the way that salaried public servants are offered promotions” (2009, p. 34). Similarly, it reasoned that public servants with a creative idea should have the freedom to try it out and, through this
process, “create some of the organic possibilities and associations typical of the undirected spontaneous activity of markets and civil society” (2009, p. 35).

The following sections discuss these ‘value propositions’ about social media that underpin governments’ assertions concerning the transformative impact of social media on relationships between citizens and their peers, and between citizens and the state, ultimately towards positive democratic ends.

**Horizontal engagement: social media and citizens working together**

*Engage: Gov 2.0* assumed that social media would enhance citizens’ capacity to work together to achieve common goals. It stated that “the use of the Internet as a platform for collaboration is already transforming our economy and our lives. Citizens are being empowered to express themselves, organise and collaborate in myriad new ways” (2009, p. xii). The following section outlines how government policy anticipated that this will occur and why it assumed such platforms would have a positive impact on democratic relations.

The notion of ‘social capital’ provided the premise that social media enhanced the capacity of citizens to collaborate (Dahlgren 2013; Rheingold 1992). Indeed, as a technology that appears to promote social networking, some argued that “there has to be a natural affinity between the Internet and social capital” (Flew 2005, p. 76). Social capital has been described as the “glue that holds together communities” and supports the assumption that there are intangible, largely positive resources that flow from being part of a social group, such as trust and reciprocity (MacTier 2008; Putnam 1995). Social media lowers the threshold for regular interaction among geographically and socially diverse groups of people (via blogs, chat rooms, photo sharing sites), and so it was presumed to strengthen social ties and social connectedness (Agre 2002; Resnick 2002). Such was potentially could be good for democracy because participating in civic pursuits enhances people’s ability to look beyond their own self-interest and participate in deliberation around common priorities (Johannessen 2012; Dalton and Kittilson 2012).

For the Australian government, Web 2.0 technologies facilitated connections between
“people who may be unknown to each other but who bring some particular kind of knowledge – whether it is local, ephemeral or technical – to the solving of some problem” (2009, p. 18). To illustrate this point, Engage: Gov 2.0 cited the experience of a cancer patient who could find others in the same predicament and share information about drug reactions, doctors and specialists, in addition to gaining mutual support (2009, p. 3). This kind of collaboration was expressed elsewhere in Engage: Gov 2.0 as the capacity to ‘organise without organisations’ – a phrase borrowed directly from Internet pioneer Clay Shirky and his seminal text Here Comes Everyone: The Power of Organising without Organisation (2008):

Web 2.0 tools enable people of like mind and purpose to locate each other, and to work towards common goals. Where this works well, Web 2.0 can potentially lower costs, increase flexibility, improve quality and also the satisfaction of those performing useful tasks. This vastly increases the extent to which we can have ‘organisation without organisations’ (Australian Government, 2009, p. 29).

Social media is also generally associated with enabling people to tap into networks that operate outside established hierarchies, and in a politically ‘flattened’ (i.e. non-hierarchical, egalitarian) space. Charles Leadbeater, advisor to former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, advanced the idea that this will lead to “unparalleled social creativity ... and a collective intelligence on a scale never before possible” (2008, p. 3; see also Linders 2012). Other enthusiasts like Yochai Benkler of Harvard University have popularised the idea that networking technologies tap into the informal sector of society where people share information and resources with each other on a voluntary basis, motivated by non-market values like charity and solidarity (2006).

**Vertical engagement: social media and citizens working with government**

The Australian government’s social media policy has also advanced the idea that these technologies offer a “more inclusive and a truer collaboration between the apparatus of the state and its citizens” (2009, p. x). Engage: Gov 2.0 argued that engaging with citizens through online tools “vastly increases the range, type and mix of expertise on which complex and challenging decision processes can draw”, and that this is particularly
useful “where issues are complex, contentious or involve conflicting values and assumptions” (2009, p. 31). Similarly, blogs, wikis and social networks were associated with communities of interest rapidly forming around people with local knowledge and technical expertise. Blogs, for instance, which allow anyone to publish their thoughts globally, enable “the rapid identification of those with the knowledge to speak authoritatively on a subject” (2009, p. 3).

Elaborating on these ideas, Engage: Gov 2.0 cited the work of Professor Beth Noveck, Deputy Chief Information Officer in the administration of US President Barack Obama between 2009 and 2011, and subsequently Special Advisor on Open Government to UK Prime Minister David Cameron. In her seminal book, Wiki-government (2008), Noveck argued that social networking technologies make policy development “simultaneously more democratic and more expert” because “ordinary people, regardless of institutional affiliation or professional status, possess information – serious, expert, fact-based, scientific information – to enhance decision making” (2008, p. 32). She conceived of new networking technologies as ‘civic software’ that provided the following opportunities:

Scientists who currently give their time to review grant applications might be just as willing to contribute their knowledge to decision making about the environment, transport, nuclear power and agriculture. Frequent travellers have useful information to share with homeland security officials about how to best organise security at airports. Economists, business people and lawyers know a great deal about financial markets, securities and consumer protection (2008, p. 41).

Engage: Gov 2.0 also presumed that social networking platforms could enable citizens to “directly collaborate in their own governance” (2009, p. 1). The report highlighted how Web 2.0 has enabled firms to enlist their customers as co-producers in the processes of research, design, and production. It described this as giving customers a ‘voice’, and suggested that governments could likewise collaborate with citizens to improve policy research and advice, the design and delivery of public services, and the continuous improvement of regulation (2009, p. 30). Described as ‘co-creation’ or
‘co-production’, Web 2.0 tools were thought to make this possible “on an unprecedented scale” (Linders 2012, p. 446). Again, Leadbeater argued that digital networking tools invited a ‘culture of collaboration’ and that for government, “a public sector which treats people as consumers – even well treated ones – will miss the dimension of participation that is at the heart of the most successful organisational models emerging from the interactive, two-way Internet” (2007, n.p).

Governments have also imagined that social media’s granularity, coupled with their own efforts to release public sector information in useable forms, would enable citizens and civil society groups to adopt monitoring and oversight roles. This would entail shifting auditing and reporting functions to the broad public, and receiving services, solutions, observations, and reviews from first hand or immediate intelligence (Fung 2013; Margetts 2010). Engage: Gov 2.0 suggested that community organisations were “often the prime movers of improved democratic engagement” (p. 74), and provided examples of non-government actors in other countries using Web 2.0 platforms to publish the spending and lobbying activities of political representatives, while comparing these against commitments made on the public record (e.g. MySociety.org, SunlightFoundation.org, and TheyWorkforYou.org). The use of social media to invite the public to participate in online information tasks is well-established, with opportunities to report on the cleanliness of a restaurant, and provide feedback on services like street cleaning, policing, teacher quality and hospital emergency waiting times now being commonplace (Fung and Wright 2001; Bovaird and Loeffler 2012). Engage: Gov 2.0 included local examples of museums and libraries inviting the public to correct records, such as the names and next of kin in ANZAC records (p. 46).

In their eagerness to embrace the potential of new digital technologies, government policy makers have tended to believe, perhaps naively, that social media offers a means whereby the decline in democratic relations might be reversed. This might be achieved by enabling the voices of ever more citizens to be heard, for information relating to the most pressing issues in public discourse to be brought to government’s attention, and for activities within the political domain to be more closely scrutinised and understood.
As an antidote to elite-driven politics, social media can not only communicate the citizenry’s preferences more clearly and more immediately where needed, but also allow collaboration with government, free from interference by corporations, political parties, and lobby groups, so restoring the authenticity of the citizenry’s connection to politics (Dahlberg 2011; Hindman 2007).

**Political legitimacy and the ‘public sphere’**

Public political engagement and the legitimacy of democratic institutions in late capitalist societies was of particular interest to the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School in the post-World War Two period. Political theorist Hannah Arendt, for instance, argued that political institutions were manifestations of public power and could “petrify and decay as soon as the living power of the people ceases to uphold them” (1970, p. 41 in Flynn 2004, p. 435). Habermas, likewise, asserted that “all political power derives from the communicative power of citizens” (1996, p.170). For Habermas, public disengagement from democratic institutions was a reflection of longer-term structural transformations in society that were closely linked to the conditions created by advanced capitalism. He demonstrated this in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1991), in which he traced the emergence of ‘public opinion’ from sixteenth century Europe to the present day.

Beginning the story in feudal times, Habermas observed that the ‘public realm’ was not a sphere of debate among citizenry, rather more a ‘stage’ where the aristocracy and nobility played out the symbolic dramas of majesty before their vassals. The interface between the political authority of the nobility on the one hand, and the people on the other, was primarily performative: oral, theatrical and immediate (Goode 2005, p.4). This period is also associated with early colonial expansion and the consequent increase in trade, finance capitalism, and bureaucratic institutions to administer it all. This required an expanded network of communications between the merchant class and the institutions of the state (Held 1980). For Habermas, a communicative sphere emerged in the late seventeenth century that filtered and interpreted the news conveyed in this correspondence, and circulated the increasing volume of royal proclamations about
Background

taxes, commodity prices, sea faring administration, and trade negotiations (Calhoun 1992). This sphere was distinct from both the ‘representative publicity’ of the ruler and the noble estates, on the one hand, and the private concerns and economic motivations of domestic life, on the other (Habermas 1989, p.24).

Moving into the eighteenth century, Habermas observed an institutional basis emerging that supported the growth of the ‘public sphere’. The early British middle-class met in the newly-emergent and multitudinous coffee houses and clubs across London to discuss the ‘news’ in circulation, forming circles of discussion about affairs of politics that the church and political authorities of the nobility had traditionally monopolised (Outhwaite 1994, p.8). Setting aside the exclusive and elite nature of these groups, the crucial point that this analysis highlighted was a mutual willingness to consider what was in their collective interest, the neutralisation of traditional sources of power, and the development of ‘public opinion’ that reflected truth and reason (Goode 2005). Habermas saw the interactions in this ‘public sphere’ as embodying, albeit imperfectly, the Enlightenment goals of rational thinking, argument and reason (Dahlgren 2001).

As he tracked the narrative into the nineteenth century, Habermas observed a number of structural shifts in society that impacted on the ‘public sphere’. First, the growth of organised capitalism and industrialisation ushered in new class configurations, including managerialism and unionisation, which eclipsed the historical binary between property owner and waged labourer. This gave rise to the use of the newspaper as a means to communicate political positions, increasingly politicising debate in the ‘public sphere’ (Held 1980, p.261). Second, the social impact of advancing industrial capitalism was such that the state took on a concern for the health and welfare of citizens, and through its bureaucracies, reached into the private domain, so eroding the authority of the family in the provision of social services, income support, and associated needs. Third, the spread of literacy made it possible for the voices of previously unheard citizens, namely the working class and women, to organise and join in public debate (Goode 2005). Under these pressures, the ‘public sphere’ changed from being an ideal space for collective deliberation, bracketed from, and critical of, political and private
power, to a site for the presentation and negotiation of organised and ‘functional’ interests (professions, classes, unions, parties). Habermas observed:

The process of the politically relevant exercise and equilibration of power now takes place directly between private bureaucracies, special interest associations, parties and public administration. The public as such is included only sporadically in this circuit of power, and even then it is brought in only to contribute its acclamation (1989, p. 176).

The ‘public sphere’ continued to transform in the twentieth century in what Habermas described as ‘re-feudalisation’. As powerful corporations came to control and manipulate the media and state, private interests assumed direct political functions. In addition, the state began to play a more fundamental role in private life, eroding distinctions between state and civil societies, and between the ‘public sphere’ and the private domain. For Habermas, “welfare state capitalism and mass democracy” were key to the transformation of the ‘public sphere’ from one of rational debate on common interests, to one dominated by manipulative consumption and passivity. Public opinion shifted from rational consensus emerging from debate, discussion and reflection, to the manufactured opinion of polls and media experts, with citizens merely on-lookers of a “media spectacle” (Kellner 2014, p. 25).

Habermas noted that the political domain was increasingly fractured, particularly as political representatives acted as agents of parties. Instead of joining constituents in rational critical debate, they were motivated by gaining the support of special interest groups, principally by offering to represent those interests in bargaining. Parliamentary debate became increasingly stage-managed, while public debate became more administered, and carried on through artificial constructs such as focus groups, public polling, and citizens’ juries. The media increasingly became a vehicle for publicity and public relations work, rather than one of informed critical dialogue and public opinion formation (Held 1980, p. 261-262). Furthermore, as an inherently commercial endeavour, the media is focused on generating saleable products, and tending to favour the immediacy and intimacy of human interest stories over complex policy debates.
In the 1990s, Habermas examined what the rise of ‘network society’, as espoused by Manuel Castells (2006) and others, meant for the ‘public sphere’. In *Between Facts and Norms* (1996) and again in an address to the International Communication Association (2006), Habermas shifted away from the Grand Systems Theory, and adopted the metaphors of liquid flows. He observed an increased ‘fluidity’ in the nature of communication, in traditional hierarchical institutions, and in markets that underpin the ‘public sphere’ system. Habermas argued that players in the ‘public sphere’ could be classified in terms of the power or ‘capital’ they have at their disposal. Those with a high level of organisational and material resource – the political elite, representatives of professions, and special interest groups – can negotiate privileged access to the media, and turn their power into political muscle. For Habermas, technologies of mass communication have extended the power of the media to determine what the public knows about public issues, and that the ‘public sphere’ has become a space for the ‘construction’ of public opinion by the media (2006, p. 419).

In the final analysis, Habermas concluded that political communication produced by the media “goes against the grain of the normative requirements of deliberative politics” (2006 p. 240). However, he remained committed to the ‘public sphere’ model of public deliberation, arguing that “it enables us to read the contradicting data as indicators of contingent constraints that deserve serious inquiry” (2006, p. 420). In other words, it remains a useful ‘ideal type’ for analytical purposes. This thesis will use the contested and evolving notion of the ‘public sphere’ to help understand the significance of social media in the three case studies. Chapter Two considers how political scientists have examined government assertions about social media and its benefits for citizens in Australia.
Chapter Two: literature review and critique

*If broadcast media brought us broadcast politics, then participatory media will bring us participatory politics.*

Jimmy Wales, Founder of Wikipedia, 4 July 2006

The previous chapter explored the narrative that has developed about the democratic potential of social media, espoused by Western governments and politicians alike. In Australia, recalling Senator Faulkner’s words, social media is seen to have “profoundly changed our ideas of community and our expectation of what community – and political – involvement looks like” (2014). As noted in Chapter One, the *Engage: Gov 2.0* Report (2009) outlined the expectations of the Australian government. It argued that the open and participatory character of social media has introduced new channels for information flow and communication both between government and citizens. It is posited that this will enhance citizens’ participation in political decision making, increase their capacity to source and share information, and work together on public priorities. Faulkner’s (2014) enthusiasm for social media was predicated on a concern about “the widespread contempt for the practice of politics.” As we saw, the Australian government also linked social media with re-establishing citizens’ trust in politics by “making our democracy more participatory and informed” (2009, p. xi).

This chapter - in two parts - explores how political science has examined these claims, specifically the relationship between social media and public engagement in policy making, and between public engagement and improved democratic relationships in Australia. Through the processes of review and critique, it will become clear how the thesis makes an original contribution that expands the dimensions of existing scholarship.

Part A (Literature Review) begins by examining two articles that speak directly to the contribution of social media to public political engagement and democratic relations in
Australia (Marsh and McLean 2012; Gruen 2012). Both articles raise relevant theoretical considerations, and are indicative of a ‘reflective turn’ in studies of social media and politics. They employ new conceptual tools to examine the conditions under which social media could meet expectations. The scope for these conclusions to be empirically tested and elaborated is clear. Following this, Part A reviews the contribution made by two articles that critically examine the Gov 2.0 agenda, and expose the origins of its presumptions (Chen 2011; Henman 2013). Overall, however, this part shows that insights that are relevant to this thesis are arrayed across a variety of studies, each of which examine discrete and tangential dimensions of those themes under examination. These include the uptake of social media by Australia’s political leaders (e.g. Grant et al. 2010; Loader et al. 2016), and the impact of social media on offline political behaviour (e.g. Vromen 2015; Hendrix et al. 2016). Furthermore, the research is overwhelmingly reliant on positivist, quantitative methods of study, particularly the trace data generated by Twitter use, and the results of the Australian Electoral Survey (1997 to 2013). The first part of this chapter systematically examines this literature.

Part B (Limitations and Extensions) examines the limitations of existing research in light of the thesis questions, and how it might be extended or augmented. It focuses on four inter-related issues, each of which stem from the way social media and public engagement are conceptualised. For instance, research that spotlights singular social media platforms (like Twitter) and specific political fora or events (like elections) tends to overlook the fact that citizens increasingly move within a hybrid, multi-faceted and dynamic media environment. Moreover, they communicate and form views about political matters in a variety of informal spaces. This part shows that – with some notable exceptions – the existing literature tends to accept uncritically, rather than interrogate, those presumptions that underpin the official government policy narrative about the democratic potential of social media.

**Part A: Literature Review**

Scholarship concerning the impact of social media on public policy debate in Australia tends to be pursued through four discrete domains: social media and government; social
Literature Review

media in elections; use of social media by political leaders; and social media and offline activity. This research, its methods and findings and insights in relation to the research questions driving this thesis are discussed in this Part.

Two scholarly articles are exceptional however, in that they reach across a broader terrain, and consider a similar set of themes and concerns as those that motivate this thesis: Why the Political System Needs New Media (Marsh and McLean 2012) and Beyond Vox Pop Democracy: Democratic Deliberation and Leadership in the Age of the Internet (Gruen 2012). While arriving at different conclusions, both articles are framed by a concern for public cynicism and dissatisfaction with politics, and critically examine the conditions under which social media could strengthen or further erode democratic relations.

Ian Marsh and Sam McLean’s (2012) principle argument is that social media, in conjunction with structural changes to formal policy making processes, can create opportunities to renew the engagement of Australian citizens in the formal political process. For these scholars, this potential can be realised by harnessing two aspects of social media. First, they argue that engagement with social media can be expressive (that is, immediate, emotive) and deliberative (that is, debated, considered). The latter is obviously preferred, and community organisers and social movement organisations can assist citizens to elevate the quality of their engagement from the expressive to the deliberative, and thus experience deeper political engagement. Second, they argue that participation via new media can be creating and curating. It is argued that the vast majority of citizens are not creators, rather they consume information and curate it for others in their networks. While acknowledging the danger to public discourse of ‘filter bubbles’ – which have the effect of tailoring media content to suit pre-existing interests - Marsh and McLean argue that curating content is a way of getting groups of like-minded and motivated citizens to mobilise around issues on the political agenda. These conceptual distinctions arise from a thorough reflection on Australia’s party infrastructure of old, and a juxtaposing of these processes with the structural changes that occurred during the 1970s, when the community networking capacities of social
movements developed. The authors offer a menu of possibilities through which social media can have the effect of reasserting the importance of citizen dialogue in the policy process. The menu includes structural changes such as opening departmental and parliamentary committee submissions to online input before individual parties’ positions are determined, and partisan advantage becomes the primary consideration.

Nicholas Gruen was chairman of the taskforce that produced the *Engage: Gov 2.0* report for the Australian government in 2009. While his subsequent article (2012) does not make an empirical contribution, it explores the policy assertions of Gov 2.0 with the aid of political theory. Focusing on the nature of political leadership in the social media era, Gruen argues that citizens are distracted by the “alarms and excursions” of *vox pop* democracy, and that powerful interests obfuscate public perception of issues to advantage themselves (2012, p. 102). For Gruen, Web 2.0 “tempts us to imagine the internet disintermediating existing elites – like party bosses, media empires and business interests more generally – making politics more democratic” (2012, p. 107). However, for Gruen, politics involves much more than simply aggregating the people’s viewpoints; it also involves deciding *what ought to be*. Aided by the insights of Joseph Schumpeter (1943), Gruen argues that it is the role of elites to bring this (‘what ought to be’) into existence, and to provide the leadership necessary to get things done. According to Gruen, the potential of new technologies like Web 2.0 lies in supporting greater use of consensus conferences, like citizens’ juries, that can deliberate on matters away from the sensationalism of the media. Digital tools can support these small-scale deliberations by lowering the transaction costs for those participating, and “increase the efficiency, and more excitingly, the depth with which deliberation took place” (2012, p. 117).

As will be demonstrated, while each of these scholarly contributions introduce new ways of conceptualising the impact of social media on political processes, they nevertheless reaffirm the need for empirical research, to test and further extrapolate their conceptual insights.
Social media and government

Only a handful of studies have examined the Australian government’s Gov 2.0 agenda and its presumptions as described in Chapter One. While this may reflect the recent appearance of the report, and the rapid pace of policy change in response to dynamic technological developments, it is still nonetheless surprising. Gov 2.0 reaches beyond the largely instrumental concerns of the earlier e-government agenda, and makes bold assertions about the democratic gains that new technologies will bring. Three studies are examined here, two of which critically examine the Australian government’s narrative on social media’s contribution to democratic relations.

The most recent is research by Helen Liu (2016) who examines the use of a wiki platform to facilitate public engagement in the planning stages of a specific Victorian state government initiative called Future Melbourne. Future Melbourne (2007-2009) is a 10-year strategic plan for the City of Melbourne, the development of which involved public fora, round table discussions and, in the later stages, a wiki platform that allowed the public to edit, discuss and share ideas online about the draft City Plan over a one-month period. Liu’s research aimed to determine whether digital tools that are open to the public attract either a diversity of contributions, or are dominated by a few. It examined empirically whether or not the ideas submitted to the wiki platform came from a significant cross-section of the user-base. Analysing the profile data of the 7000 unique visits and 3459 edits, Liu found that 131 participants contributed several hundred edits, and that the top 17 participants contributed nearly 90 per cent of the content. Furthermore, Liu’s research revealed that approximately 80 per cent of the edits were made by government officials or contractors to the City of Melbourne. Given this disproportionate input of a small and elite user-base, and the elevation of their ideas over others, Liu concluded that open, crowd-based platforms need to be actively

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4 Advances in Australia’s e-government program attracted a small cluster of research in 2007/2008 (eg., Dunleavy et al. 2008). This research concerned Australia’s comparative international performance in terms of uptake and innovation in transferring government business and back-end processes to the Internet. Now nearly a decade old, and of the pre-social media age, this literature is not explored here because it is of limited direct relevance to this thesis.
managed by government, and that the capacity for the public to participate in a sustained and meaningful way has yet to be developed.

The first of the studies to bring a critical perspective to governments assertions about social media is found in Paul Henman’s effort to apply a “Foucauldian inspired governmentality analysis” to the Gov 2.0 agenda (2003, p. 1400). Henman describes governmentality analysis as revealing the particular ways in which government is made thinkable and actionable, how certain domains are problematised, and how subjects and behaviours are imagined (2013, p. 1398-1401). Henman translates the Gov 2.0 policy statements (of eight different governments, including Australia’s) into ‘word clouds’ and tables of word frequency. As the images below show, words clouds are visual depictions of the word content of a text, with key words appearing bigger and bolder than others. Henman uses the results to identify overall goals (‘efficiency’, ‘effectiveness’, ‘democracy’), subjects (‘government’ ‘state’ ‘politicians’) and operational focus (‘data’, ‘information’, ‘management’) of the Gov 2.0 agenda.

Henman finds that the emphasis on ‘openness’ and ‘interaction’, which he argues comes directly from the marketing of Web 2.0, has replaced the ‘efficiency’ discourse of earlier e-government policies, yet the focus on citizens and services remains. Further reflecting the Foucauldian perspective, Henman argues that the Gov 2.0 statements promote the engaged individual as an agent of their own destiny, achieved through actively using government information and co-constituting their usage of government services, ideally in conjunction with other citizens through new communities of interest, or self-help fora. Henman notes in conclusion that business and corporations are invisible in Gov 2.0
statements, and questions what their role will be in the new “techno-utopia” of direct and unmediated state-citizen relations.

Peter Chen (2011, 2013, and 2015) also offers a critical perspective on the Australian government’s social media agenda. In an address to the Australian Parliamentary Library in 2011 Chen argued that Gov 2.0 is underpinned by a model of the liberal state that is rooted in American political culture. For Chen this is evident in at least three of Gov 2.0’s conceptions. First, the rights of citizenship accrue to those who are engaged and informed and can act on their own needs, not through services provided by the state to citizens. Second, that government is ‘a platform’. It is a neutral space in which civic action can be undertaken, but is neither a distributor of public resources nor regulator of civic activity. Third, that market based mechanisms should create public goods, and that the negative externalities of free markets are individual and private matters, not for the state and public sector to remedy. Chen argued that these fundamental yet subtle shifts in the foundations of citizen-government relations are entirely consistent with the neoliberal premise that activated and informed citizens should act upon their needs without state interference (Chen 2011).

The works of Liu, Henman and Chen signal the beginning of efforts by scholars to go beyond merely a ‘review’ of government policy pronouncements and to search for theoretical frameworks through which government’s social media agenda may be critically examined. This is particularly so in respect of the core presumptions that suggest deeper, more meaningful connections between citizens and government will flow from the uptake of social media. In contrast to the expectations of the Engage: Gov 2.0 report, Lui’s research (2016) suggests that asymmetries can emerge as a result of open consultation online, and that government needs to proactively facilitate participation online, and not leave it to the ‘wisdom of the crowd’. Both Henman (2013) and Chen (2011) point to subtle shifts in the role of citizens and the responsibilities of government within the Gov 2.0 narrative. As described in Chapter One, these shifts are characteristic of a broader neoliberal project that has seen the capabilities and obligations of government increasingly defined in relation to the market, and the
comparative erosion of citizen capabilities to engage meaningfully in establishing and articulating to government public interest priorities.

**Social media during elections**

The topic of elections and election campaigning has attracted the greatest volume of research about the impact of social media in Australian politics (e.g. Macnamara 2008; Macnamara and Kenning 2011, 2012, 2014; Young 2011; Gibson and McAllister 2008; Flew and Wilson 2008; Burgess and Bruns 2012; Howell and Da Silva 2010; Chen 2010, 2013, 2015). Scholars who have observed Australian elections over time suggest that two events piqued the interest of politicians (and commentators) in the potential of social media. First, the success of the Australian Labor Party’s campaign to popularise its (then) new leader, Kevin Rudd in 2007 by using the “Kevin07” brand. That involved Facebook, Twitter and MySpace (Burgess and Bruns 2012; Highfield and Bruns 2015). Second, the July 2010 leadership coup when Rudd – an elected Prime Minister in his first term – was deposed by his deputy, Julia Gillard. The rapid pace at which these events unfolded meant that the mainstream media was unable to cover the events as quickly as journalists using Twitter. Highfield and Bruns (2015) argue that this underscored the emerging importance of Twitter on the Australian political and media landscape. The following section describes the findings of research on the effects of social media during the 2007, 2010, 2013 and 2016 Australian elections.

Macnamara and Kenning have systematically documented the uptake of social media by state politicians during election campaigns in 2011 (New South Wales), 2012 (Queensland), and 2014 (Victoria). In the 2007 federal election, of the 226 incumbent politicians, only 6.6 per cent had a blog, 3.5 per cent had a Facebook site, and 3.1 per cent created podcasts (2011, p. 2). In the 2010 election, however, candidates’ use of social media more than doubled, with the largest increase being in the adoption of

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5 Before social media was available, a number of Australian scholars investigated the impact of the Internet on politics, particularly elections and political parties (e.g., Gibson and Ward 2000, 2002; Gibson and McAllister 2003; Forrest and Marks 1999). This research provides background information that may be relevant to understanding the uptake of social media in Australian politics, such as which parties developed websites first. However, as it is now over 15 years old, this research has been superseded by more relevant literature (some of it by these same scholars) to this thesis.
Twitter (up 45 per cent from 2007). During the three weeks of the 2010 election campaign, Malcolm Turnbull was the most prolific Twitter user (439 tweets), while Julia Gillard was the most active Facebook user, attracting over 60,000 likes (Macnamara and Kenning 2012). In the 2013 election campaign, the number of social media sites used by federal politicians increased by 67 per cent over 2010 figures. Image posting sites like Flickr and YouTube were the fastest growing forms of social media used by politicians, with Facebook, YouTube and Twitter remaining the most popular overall (Macnamara and Kenning 2014).

In concluding that Twitter is the most favoured medium for political discussion in Australia, scholars have argued that common hashtags like #ausvotes provide a window into which Australian politics may be observed (Highfield and Bruns 2015). Burgess and Bruns (2012) monitored #ausvotes during the 2010 election (17 July to 24 August 2010) to identify themes raised by Twitter users and their impact on the wider media ecology. They collected 415,009 tweets, representing 37,000 unique Twitter users (0.26 per cent of the total voting public) (2012, p. 387-388). Coding of these tweets identified that national broadband policy and proposed legislation to introduce a compulsory Internet filter were the most common themes, leading the researchers to conclude that people active on Twitter at election time have a strong interest in parties’ IT policies. Consistent with international experience, the use of the main election hashtag increases during the campaign period, with spikes coinciding with major events, like a televised debate, and live coverage of the count on election day. Studies of the hour by hour tweeting on election day show, unsurprisingly, that activity peaks at the end of polling and the start of analysis, and that the content of tweets shifts from individual reflection on the experience of voting (and the quality of the sausage sizzle) to general, analytical commentary with a national focus (Highfield and Bruns 2015).

Attempts have been made to ascertain the relationship between new technologies and political outcomes. Gibson and McAllister (2011, 2014) attempted this by using the longitudinal data provided by the Australian Electoral Survey (AES) in 2001, 2007 and 2010. The Electoral Survey is a national post-election survey (conducted since 1987) that involves a mail out to a random selection of voters drawn by the Electoral Commission.
Using responses to survey questions about internet use, such as ‘Did you make use of the internet at all to get news or information about the federal election?’ and political knowledge, such as ‘How often do Senate elections occur?’ it was found that internet use is positively correlated with an individual’s level of political awareness. Gibson and McAllister (2014) argue that while internet access is expanding, consumption of political information online is narrowing among a younger, better educated and politically interested group. These asymmetries indicate that internet is reinforcing a cohort that is already advantaged in relation to politics, whereas it is yet to remedy disengagement due to lack of education, interest and technical capability.

At time of writing, thorough-going assessments of social media and the election in July 2016 have not yet emerged, however academic blogs and news articles have made some preliminary observations. Bruns (2016) for instance, tracked the tweets directed at or posted by the candidates. This demonstrated that tweeting activity tends to mirror the issues covered in the mainstream press. Over the last two weeks of the election period for instance, most discussions were health-related, triggered by Labor’s messaging around Medicare, or about the economic credentials of the two major parties, triggered by Brexit and concerns about what this could mean for Australia. Tweeting activity also showed that the accounts of Labor Party candidates were more active than those of the Coalition, however much of the discussion focused on Coalition policies. Reece (2016) observed that political parties increasingly prioritise direct one-to-one contact with voters through social media, emails, phone calls and door-knocking. Accordingly, the Liberal Party harnessed the power of popular Chinese-language social media platform WeChat to reach voters in the ethnically diverse seat of Chisholm in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne; the Greens used Grindr, the world’s largest gay social network app, to reach voters in the Victorian seats of Batman and Higgins. Reece claims that “Facebook remains the king of social media in Australia”, and points to data collated by the social media tracking tool CrowdTangle to show that, over the eight-week campaign, Labor’s Facebook page had 708,152 interactions on its page, while the Liberal Party’s page had 341,520.
In summary, since the election of 2010, the use of new media has gone from being a novelty to an important, although not yet predominant, aspect of political communication in the electoral process (Chen 2015, p. 81). Research provides a clear quantitative picture of Twitter during specific times in the political cycle, namely: when and how often it is used in election campaigns, who uses it comparative to others during election campaigns, and what topics are raised. Research also suggests that social media is reproducing and perhaps deepening existing participation biases in Australian politics.

**Social media and political leaders**

The uptake of social media by Australia’s political representatives outside of election campaigns has been examined by handful of scholars (Grant, Moon and Grant 2010; Loader et al. 2016; Wilson 2014; Bussy and Paterson 2012). These studies are principally interested in assessing politicians’ use of Twitter, and analysing the data generated by hashtags, with a view to identifying the implications for political communication in Australian politics. Two studies illustrate this.

Grant and others (2010) examined the use of Twitter by Australian politicians, specifically who is tweeting what and how often. Gathering the numerical and descriptive content from 152 politicians Twitter accounts (188,122 tweets) as well as from 377 citizens Twitter accounts over a ten month period, the research categorised this data into four basic types of communication: broadcast, broadcast mention, reply and retweet. The study found that politicians tweet significantly more often than Australian citizens, but that politician’s tweets are to broadcast rather than to reply or retweet content. This indicates that Twitter is not used by politicians for discursive purposes. The study found no significant relationship between Twitter use and politician’s age, gender or their political jurisdiction (ie., federal, state or local).

Similarly, researchers have been interested in whether those communication channels which have been established for broadcast rather than deliberative purposes, tend to flow between citizens and politicians in equal measure. In 2010 it was observed that there are ‘Twitter outliers’ in terms of numbers of followers and numbers followed: Kevin Rudd (918,453 followers) and Malcolm Turnbull (18, 720 followers) naturally have
much higher numbers of followers than other politicians, yet follow very few other people, most notably everyday citizens (Grant et al. 2010). Differences across party lines have also been identified. The ALP and the Coalition are largely indistinguishable, however the Greens follow more people than either, and are 25 per cent more likely to retweet the content of other Greens politicians than the other parties (p. 587). Highfield and Bruns (2015) have used Twitter data to show that the total tweeting output by party candidates is considerably less for the Liberal Party than either the ALP or the Greens. During the 2013 election campaign, for instance, the 131 ALP candidates on Twitter were responsible for nearly 17,000 tweets, with the 80 Greens candidates contributing just under 12,000 tweets.

Studies seeking to identify what politicians are tweeting about, and whether they had any impact, have found it “difficult to present a comprehensive and systematic summation” (Grant et al. 2010; Henman 2013). A word-cloud can provide a visualisation of the most common terms of politicians’ tweets over a ten-month period, while frequency of citizens retweeting politicians’ tweets can be used as a proxy of citizens’ endorsement of that politician (Grant et al. 2010).

Bussy and Paterson (2012) take a slightly different approach and compare public tweeting about Queensland Premier Anna Bligh and Prime Minister Julia Gillard during the flooding in Queensland in late 2010/early 2011. The study involved collecting tweets
that contained #qldfloods and mentioned Bligh or Gillard over 20 days at the height of the flood crisis. These tweets (610 in total) were coded according to whether their content suggested the sender thought these leaders were charismatic. The mean score derived for each leader indicated a significant difference in public perception. Bligh was associated with emotional resilience and with generated pride in Queenslanders’ ability to ‘pull together’ in times of crisis, while Gillard was found to have been cold and robotic in her response, which was largely focused on the financial repercussions of the disaster (2012, p. 328-329). The researchers argue that the number of tweets mentioning Anna Bligh became a strong secondary theme in traditional media coverage, and that mainstream outlets drew stories from Twitter, many of which were then recirculated via Twitter to a yet wider audience. It concluded that Twitter channelled the public mood in real time and, in so doing, influenced the priorities of the mainstream news media.

To recap, research examining social media and political leaders has found that politicians primarily use this media to disseminate and broadcast messages (as opposed to engaging in dialogue with citizens). Furthermore politicians are being followed on social media in far greater numbers than those whom they themselves follow. However, research has also found that citizens’ discussion on social media about how politicians are performing, in this instance at a time of crisis, can in turn affect the mainstream media agenda. In the language of the Gov 2.0 agenda, this would suggest that the vertical relationship between citizens and the political domain is ‘top down’ (that is, politicians use social media to broadcast to citizens).

**Social media and offline activity**

Whether political activity through social media – such as signing a petition or liking the Facebook page of politician – affects peoples’ offline political behaviour in Australia has attracted a small body of scholarship, two examples of which are described below. These studies offer a different conceptualisation of ‘political participation’ than the studies outlined above, yet remain reliant on a narrow field of data upon which to base their findings.
Gibson and McAllister (2013) examined the relationship between online social networking and social capital, specifically whether engaging with others through mediated social networks (bonding capital) improves participation in democratic politics more generally (bridging capital). ‘Political participation’ was measured through the following metrics: having contacted a politician, taken part in a protest, signed a petition, or worked with others who share the same concern. Using the responses of 1,873 participants in the Australian Electoral Survey (2007), a regression analysis revealed that online social interaction with family and friends strengthened bonding capital, and “does appear to act as a stimulus to real world participation” (2007, p. 30). However, the same does not hold true for engagement in looser, less heterogeneous interactions online (2007, p. 30). For Gibson and McAllister, this challenges the contention that bridging networks commonly found online foster the type of community and social connections that trigger offline political participation. Likewise, Dalton and Kittilson’s 2012 study of social media and levels of political engagement, again using data from the Australian Electoral Survey of 2007, found a statistically significant relationship between online activity, and direct forms of political action such as signing a petition or contacting a politician. Furthermore, when controlling for a range of social indicators like age, education, ethnicity and level of political interest, the relationship between online activity and political participation remained constant. These scholars concluded that “social activity online carries the same benefits in inculcating skills and norms leading to political activity as spending an evening with a bowling league or choir group” (2012, p. 24).

A small number of political scientists have also examined the role of social media on the campaigning efforts of civil society groups in Australia. Most recently, Hendriks considered the Facebook activity of rival campaign groups in the fight against coal seam gas exploration in New South Wales (2016). Through the use of dramaturgical concepts like scripting and staging, the research found that Facebook performances are multisensory, staged to appear personal, and tightly scripted. Although these characteristics may serve an important solidarity function among like-minded individuals and groups, they leave limited space or tolerance for counter-scripts.
Hendriks concluded that social media platforms are transforming the way publics form and meet, but their capacity to bridge opposing viewpoints on divisive issues remains limited.

In summary, research specific to the issues explored in this thesis - namely, whether social media makes a positive contribution to public engagement in policy debate, and can restore public connection with democracy in Australia in the longer term – may be empirically, and critically, extended. With the exception of the insights offered by Henman (2012) and Chen (2011), studies of social media in Australian political life tend to take for granted the presumptions about the positive contributions of social media inherent in government policy. This is not to neglect or discount the significance of what existing research has found, including that politicians are increasingly using social media, but not to engage in open dialogue with citizens. Furthermore, citizens are adopting these new channels to communicate their views about (and to) government, yet these citizens tend to be those who are already engaging and expressive, both online and offline, about their political views. However, through conceptual and methodological choices, scholarship has not yet examined the wider implications of these trends for citizen engagement in politics, the policy choices made by governments, or the changing nature of citizen-state relationships in modern democracies. This is explored further in Part B.

**Part B: Limitations of the literature**

This part argues that existing scholarship on the impact of social media to Australian political relations is limited in four ways. These limitations are inter-related and all stem from the way that the nexus between social media, political engagement, and democratic relations has been conceptualised and empirically examined.

First, elite and formal instances of politics, like elections and party activity, are favoured sites of study in existing scholarship. While undoubtedly important, privileging formal sites of political engagement and the activities of political elites gives an incomplete and distorted picture of citizens’ experience of social-mediated engagement (Graham 2010 in Wright 2011, p. 254). A growing number of scholars argue that research needs to
reflect that social media is embedded in citizens’ lives in mundane, yet multifaceted and ever changing ways (Couldry 2016; Gray 2015; Brabham 2015). Papacharissi argues that today’s media environment “melds and blurs traditional boundaries among media, and among audiences of different media, audiences and publics, citizens and consumers, consumers and producers” (2010, p. 52). What is needed, some argue, is a shift to focus on public activity in the ‘proto-political’ (Dahlgren 2009) or the ‘third spaces’ of everyday political talk (Wright et al. 2015). In other words, an examination of the role of social media in informal sites where political talk is not the primary aim, but emerges within citizens’ conversations. It is in these spaces that citizens construct political identities, achieve understanding, and sow the seeds of the agenda for the public sphere. So it is here that research should focus on the contribution and impact of social media on politics (Wright 2011; Graham et al. 2016).

Second and relatedly, today citizens experience social media as part of a broader media ecology, not as a singular product like Twitter. The UK government describes this ecology as ‘poly-mediated’ in which the media is multifaceted, and used by people in strategic ways to suit highly fluid communicative needs and relationships (UK Government 2014; Madianou 2015). Others describe this as a ‘hybrid media system’ in which both competing and complementary logics of older and newer media constantly interact to shape the flow of information in people’s lives (Chadwick 2015). As Wright explains, this requires research that appreciates that “people don’t discuss politics in one place or using one technology” (2011, p. 254). Research needs to move beyond analogue logic and find ways to accommodation the fact that social media and politics interact in complex and dynamic ways.

Third, much research unquestioningly embraces the ‘big data’ generated by social media as a source of insight into political phenomena. As is common across the social sciences, quantitative research looks to maximise advances in statistical techniques and access to low cost and readily available cloud-based storage space and computer processing power (Felt 2016; Puschmann and Burgess 2013). Boyd and Crawford argue that the ‘big data gold rush’ is premised on the widespread belief that large data sets offer insights
that were previously impossible, at the same time as imbuing research with an aura of truth and accuracy (2012, p. 663). Data from social networking sites has a special attraction because it makes more social spaces quantifiable, and renders the content of the interactions among individuals accessible (Bruns 2012). However, while persuasively large in quantum and easily accessible, relying on approximations of political communication and connection (likes, tweets, shares) overlooks other relevant indicators of political participation that leave little digital detritus behind (Gray 2015, p. 2). For instance, by necessity, the use of big data involves relying on data retrieved at a particular point in time; this means that the research is focused on specific, narrowly defined events, such as the final hours of an election day or a leadership spill, and not within the context that explains the occurrence of such events. Likewise, word clouds represent only the frequency of given words, and this can result in social media content being taken out of context and stripped of its narrative.

Fourth, the literature uncritically takes for granted the terms of the democratic relationship underpinning contemporary government policy, namely a liberal-individualist conception of citizenship. Research focuses on the opportunities social media affords to rational individuals to have their particular interests realised through the political system (Dahlberg 2011). As we have seen, among other things, social media is celebrated for lowering the threshold for individuals to register their choices through e-voting, web-feedback forms, Twitter comments, Facebook likes, e-petitions, and so on. Couched in an “empowerment discourse,” democratic community is treated as equivalent to the aggregation of the instrumentally motivated interactions of individual utility maximisers (Fuchs 2009, p. 18). The contribution of social media in this conception is to free these individuals from the repressive effects of centralised media communication, as well as from the interference of state, corporate, and political interests that are thought to corrupt the individual-representative relationship (Fenton and Barassi 2011). This elides the essential nature of politics; it promotes the view that democratic renewal requires transcending political relationships, and that state-centred approaches are both outdated and antithetical to the digital world (Dahlberg 2010, p. 348).
In summary, there are at least four ways in which existing research could be augmented. First, by looking more broadly for political sites and spaces for evidence of citizens’ political participation. Second, by focusing on social media within a media ecology characterised by strategic choices about engagement with different technologies, seamlessly across both online and offline settings. Third, by moving away from, or complementing, methods that require extracting social media data from the settings in which they were supplied or intended by political actors. Fourth, by critically examining the ways in which the political impacts of social media may be reproducing, or counteracting, major historical trends and contemporary conditions that underpin the ‘democratic deficit’ and crisis of legitimacy much remarked upon in post-World War Two scholarship.

Summary

In two parts, this chapter reviews and critiques scholarship germane to the central issues of the thesis. It finds only limited, albeit growing literature examining the conditions under which social media could redress citizens’ deep cynicism and dissatisfaction with mainstream politics. Further, it demonstrates that the themes are found across a variety of fields – government, elections, political representatives, social capital and social movements – and that this is largely limited to singular social media platforms, particularly Twitter, in isolated forms of political communication and engagements. These include signing an e-petition, or commenting on the character of a leader. In critique, this chapter highlights four limitations of this research, and the principles for remediating them. The following chapter on analytical tools and research methods sets out how this thesis attempts to advance such an approach.
Chapter Three: analytical framework and research methodology

I think we often speak as if there is a completed project called ‘democracy’ and there is another completed project called ‘the internet’ and we ask ‘what will this thing called the internet do to this thing called democracy?’ Both of these are in a state of evolution. We haven’t got a completed democracy; we haven’t got a completed internet.

Professor Stephen Coleman, Oxford Internet Institute

The previous chapter highlighted some of the limitations of existing inquiry into the relationship between social media, public engagement, and democracy in the Australian context. It argued that this research has been constrained by an overly-narrow conceptualisation of both social media and public engagement. As Auyero has observed of political science generally, in social media research “the texture of political life and the plight of political actors have been cast into the shadows created by the unnecessary and deleterious over-reliance on quantitative methods” (2006, p. 258). Chapter Two concluded that research on Australia’s experience of social media in political life would benefit from an ‘interpretative turn’: a turn away from seemingly value-free attempts to deduce political insights from samples of trace data from social media’s traffic, and toward an approach that interprets social media within broader political settings, and incorporates the perceptions of political actors as to the impact and repercussions of social media. This chapter describes - in three parts - how the thesis attempts such a turn.

Part A describes the analytical framework that supports the thesis. This includes concepts from the critical theory tradition that aid in reconceptualising the relationship between social media, public engagement and politics. Part A also focuses, in particular, on the normative dimensions of Habermas’ ‘public sphere’ and the role this concept plays in how Habermas sees critical and informed public opinion about policy choices being generated, and how this process underpins democratic legitimacy. It is important
to recognise that for Habermas, the ‘public sphere’ was not static or a given, but rather dynamic and socially constructed - “an accomplishment, to be defended and in need of extension” (Dahlgren 2001, p. 42). These concepts facilitate a critical assessment of the evidence arising from the thesis’ field work, and will be considered fully in Chapter Seven.

Part B describes the two research methods selected for the thesis: political ethnography and interpretative case studies. Political ethnography combines the study of politics (of power in the structures, institutions and movements that make up democracy) with the ethnographic method of observing or participating in ‘real-life’ phenomena. This approach encourages discovery by enabling the researcher to be responsive to the issues as they present themselves, which in this case includes tracing issues as they move between the online and offline world (Spitulnik and Peterson 2012). The case study method is frequently juxtaposed with positivistic approaches. The method’s principal strength is its capacity to highlight the multivariate, dynamic and socially embedded nature of policy activity, and to embrace history and context as important explanatory variables (Yin 2009).

Part C outlines the practicalities of the research. It describes three case studies that have been selected for exploration of the impact of social media on public engagement. First, the introduction of ‘lock-out’ laws and mandatory sentencing in response to ‘one-punch’ assaults in Kings Cross, Sydney. Second, the decision to shift disability support to individual care plans under the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). Third, the debate over whether to legalise voluntary euthanasia. This Part also describes the data collection methods, and the tools that will be used to ensure consistent, systematic organisation of the data across the three case studies.

The case for an ‘interpretative turn’ in Australia’s political science scholarship was recently made by Boswell and Corbett (2014). They argued that “what the evidence says, how citizens should be involved, what open government means and entails...must be subject to the interpretation of the actors involved” (p. 291). For these scholars, interpretative methods elicit deeper understandings of the subjective perspectives and
experiences of political phenomena, and can thus generate plausible accounts of the causal mechanisms that underpin social actions. The concepts and methods selected for the thesis together support the discovery of political context and policy complexity, therefore providing a remedy for the linear notions of causality characteristic of existing quantitative studies.

Part A: Analytical framework

Social science informed by the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School has a number of characteristics (Fay 1975). First, this body of work takes the view that the actions people perform are influenced by social conditions over which they have limited control, and that a great deal of what people do to each other is not the result of conscious knowledge or choice. Critical social science attempts to uncover the systems of social relationships, past and present, which condition both these actions and their consequences. Second, critical social science recognises that social theory is interconnected with social practise, and rejects the argument that academia and science should and can be value-free (Fuchs 2014, p. 17). Third, critical social science understands the world through contradictions, or tensions, that are the source of social dynamics (Fuchs 2014). Described as dialectics, this means that one state of being can only exist in opposition to another (Fuchs 2014; Connerton 1976). Stripped back to its basic premises, critical theory encourages critique – “an activity or unveiling, or debunking” (Connerton 1976, p. 17).

Critical theory and social media

Critical theory encourages a dialectical understanding of technology. According to Fuchs (2014) this allows us to question and provide alternatives to technological determinism, and to understand social media as a social construct, created by human activity rather than standing somehow outside of human activity, and to appreciate how these constructions impact or act back upon human activity (Mosco 2004; Fuchs 2014). As depicted in the diagram below, a dialectical approach recognises that technology is conditioned but not determined by society, and vice versa, and can have multiple effects that stand in contradiction with one another. This approach accepts that social media’s
potential is based on how social agency, history and structures of political and economic interest, shape the design and usage of this technology, and that this may be an ambivalent process of development, suspended between different possibilities (Feenberg 2002, p.15).

Image 6: A dialectical view of media and society (Fuchs 2013, p. 202)

**Critical theory and public engagement**

Critical theorists regard the democratic landscape as one of power struggles that involve a complex interaction of entities and sites of contestation that accomplish political ends (Mansbridge et al. 2012; Drysek 2009). Mansbridge and others argue that to capture this reality, we need to view public engagement as occurring within a ‘deliberative system’: *deliberative* in that political conflict and problem solving usually involves communication, including arguing, demonstrating, expressing and persuading; and a *system* because this communication occurs in specific settings that interrelate in ways that can impact on social phenomena – including collective notions such as ‘democracy’ – well beyond the immediate arena of deliberative contest (2012, p.4-6). For instance, citizens’ juries may facilitate informed and focused (albeit micro) public input to new policy and score positively on deliberative standards, but may at the same time weaken the role of advocacy organisations and privilege government officials as the source of policy expertise (Parkinson 2006).
Broadening the vista of public engagement in this way has at least three advantages. First, it introduces into the analysis the contextual issues that shape the possibilities and the outcomes of deliberation. For instance, a technological innovation may indeed bolster public input to parliamentary consideration of a policy issue, but the analysis of this apparent success would need to examine other factors, such as budgetary constraints around policy commitments that may serve to countervail or nullify the effects of enhanced public input. Second, a deliberative system approach recognises that parliamentary institutions are the ultimate decision makers in a polity, and thus are central to resolving collective action problems and creating spaces for public deliberation. But informal sites of political talk are also essential (Mansbridge 2012, p.9-10). As Kim and Kim remind us,

...through everyday talk, citizens construct their identities, achieve mutual understanding, produce public reason, form considered opinions, and produce rules and resources for deliberative democracy (2008, p. 51).

This approach recognises that latent forms of participation are important to the “micro-dynamics of democracy”, and can be politically significant even if they do not have immediate political ends (Dahlberg 2006, p. 282). Finally, the systemic approach acknowledges the role of the media in connecting parts of the deliberative society, and its importance in informing citizens of parliamentary debate, the intentions of government, and the experiences of other citizens. It recognises that commercial motivations of the media can, and do routinely, distort the deliberative system, yet that democracy could not function without a media to transmit reliable and useful information, and help citizens interpret and make connections between information and policies.

**Critical theory and democracy: the public sphere**

In the tradition of the Frankfurt School, Habermas’ critical analysis of the historical development of the ‘public sphere’ highlights how access to and participation in the
‘public sphere’ is, in the ways noted above, highly contingent (Fuchs 2014, p. 183-184). Recall from the historical rendition of the ‘public sphere’ outlined in Chapter One, that the function of the public sphere is to enable citizens to come together to identify and articulate their common (public) interest, and to provide a check on state power which often exerts arbitrary forms of power, rule and domination. In addition to these structural dimensions of the public sphere, Habermas was interested in linguistic philosophy and the relationship between communication and democratisation. This dimension of his work is particularly applicable to the objectives of the thesis.

For Habermas, political legitimacy relies on two forms of popular sovereignty: the political domain with its parliamentary and legal institutions, and the private domain of the everyday citizens. Each of these domains generate distinctive discourses: the political domain generates a ‘strong’ discourse that results in political action, while the private domain generates a ‘weak’ discourse that reflects the diffuse and chaotic conversations of everyday life (Olson 2010). For Habermas, the opinions that form when people talk to one another in a raw, unfiltered way are the source material for ‘public opinion’, while the civil domain of voluntary associations and social movements helps this process by animating the ideas and values of the public, and articulating these for consideration in the public sphere (Chambers and Kopstein 2009, p. 6). Thus, the public sphere provides a framework for political discussion and deliberation, and allows for the circulation of information and opinion, and the formation of political will that is central to a functioning democracy (Maireder and Schlogl 2014, p.688).

Historically, political will formation occurred through the processes of ‘deliberative democracy’ which was cultivated by rational and moral subjects through reflection, argumentation, public reasoning and reaching consensus (Habermas 1992, p. 445). However, public will took on its political potency – which Habermas called a ‘communicative power’ – within the structures of the public sphere. As Habermas described:

...opinions must be given shape in the form of decisions by democratically constituted decision making bodies. The responsibility for practically consequentially decisions must be based in institutions. Discourses do not
govern. They generate a communicative power that cannot take the place of administration but can only influence it (2002, p. 452).

The crucial function of the public sphere is to provide the conditions that support the transformation of ‘weak’ public discourse into public opinion and imbues this with a ‘communicative power’. In order to achieve this the public sphere needs to be (a) independent of the influence of political actors, private motivations, market forces and special interest groups, and (b) ‘reflexive’ in that it facilitates contestable deliberation and reflection between citizens about what is in the common interest (Friedland et al. 2006). As Habermas explains, in the absence of these conditions:

Public opinions that acquire visibility only because of an undeclared infusion of money or organisational power lose their credibility as soon as these sources of social power are made public. Public opinion can be manipulated but neither publicly bought nor publicly blackmailed (1996, p. 364).

Image 7: Diagram of the public sphere framework

If the political domain does not receive and in turn respond to public opinion produced under these two normative conditions, its actors and institutions ‘lose their credibility’.
In summary, in Habermas’ schema, political legitimacy is the product of relations between the political domain and the public sphere, but the quality of these relations is contingent upon on a public sphere in which these two normative conditions are maximised. In Chapter Seven (Findings and Discussion) the case study findings are considered in this framework. Addressed in three steps, the impact of social media is assessed by cascading from the private domain to the political domain to arrive at the public sphere and its capacity for communicative action.

**Part B: Research approach**

This section moves closer to the methodological dimensions of the thesis research. It introduces two approaches - political ethnography and interpretative case studies - that serve as a bridge between the analytical components outlined above and the practicalities of the research.

**Political ethnography**

Political ethnography is a social science research method that brings together two concepts: *political science*, which is the study of the distribution, reproduction and transformation of power, and the structures, institutions, movements and collective identities that both maintain and challenge it (Baiocchi and Connor 2008, p. 140) and *ethnography*, which is “the close-up, on the ground observation of people and institutions in real time” (Wacquant 2003, p.5 in Auyero 2006, p. 258). Its appeal lies in the depth of description it brings to complex and multi-faceted concepts, by historicizing and contextualizing political phenomena, in contrast to reductive techniques of logical positivism that rely on a priori hypothesis and concepts imposed on the study by the researcher (Auyero 2006). Charles Tilly (2006) describes political ethnography as providing privileged access to the processes, causes and effects of broader political processes. Ethnographic studies involve more uncertainty than many political scientists are comfortable with, despite their merits in providing insights into both unanticipated and contingent details about how institutions operate and political decisions are made (McNabb 2004).
Ethnographic studies related to the Internet engage with online behaviour and content directly, but not exclusively. Unlike observing research subjects in offline settings, in online settings the ‘participant-observer’ experiences the online environment the same way that participants routinely experience it, and has the opportunity to follow participants’ engagement with an issue beyond the parameters of a specific geographic space (Garcia 2009). An ethnographical approach to social media involves observing (and if appropriate participating in) activity on social media, such as following blogs, monitoring Facebook exchanges, Twitter accounts and joining discussion groups. Namely, it involves being part of the ‘digital crowd’ as issues criss-cross a range of platforms over time (Postill and Pink 2012, p. 131).

This thesis applies political ethnography to social media activity in relation to public policy. This entails finding and observing social media activity by formal policy actors (e.g. political leaders, government agencies and parliaments) and informal policy actors (e.g. community groups, academics, policy entrepreneurs and individual citizens). It involves tracking the activity of these actors as it transits both back and forth across different forms of media, and back and forth between online and offline forms. For instance, the policy debate about how best to respond to alcohol related crime in Sydney may involve a Town Hall meeting of political leaders, local business, victims’ support groups and community members, all of whom will use different channels to inform their networks of people about the event, some of which will be via one or more platforms of social media, and others not. The Town Hall meeting may form the basis of a discussion paper prepared by a working group of the NSW government agencies, that will be released publically (but not necessarily on social media) by the NSW Parliament, and on social media by individual members of parliament. The availability of this discussion paper may be the subject of social media and traditional media alerts by different policy interests, like the Sydney City Council, Keep Sydney Open, the Crown Casino and the Head of the Emergency Department at Kings Cross Hospital. Ethnographic research allows for social media activity by policy actors (in relation to a policy topic) to be more fully examined in context.
Case studies and interpretative policy analysis

Consistent with the broader ‘interpretative turn’ in social science research, interpretative policy analysis places greater emphasis on ‘meaning’ rather than ‘measurement’ in evaluating social phenomena. Similarly, the case study method is an empirical approach favoured by investigations that engage with contemporary phenomena within their ‘real-life context’ (Yin, 1984, p.13 in McNabb, 2010b, p.237). The principal strengths of the case study method lie in its capacity to: explain the presumed causal links in real-life policy or programmatic interventions that are multivariate and dynamic, and socially embedded; describe the real-life context within which the intervention occurred; illustrate certain topics within the intervention ‘in descriptive mode’; and enlighten situations in which there is no clear or single set of outcomes as a result of the intervention (Yin 2009, p.19-20).

In policy case studies, the interpretative approach enables a closer, situational assessment that encourages the researcher to gain access to events, decisions, stories and discussions, leading to a deeper understanding of the policy environment (Yanow 2007, p. 113-114). It directs researchers toward in-depth communications that uncover how individuals frame policy issues and where these frames come from, and to develop an understanding of the context with which a policy debate takes place, and why it is being framed in particular ways by different actors at that point in time. It also focuses on policy-related texts (e.g. records of parliamentary debate, consultancy reports to government, annual reports, minutes of community meetings, and media coverage) and audio and online sources (e.g. social media activity, oral testimony radio communications, public speeches). This approach encourages reflexivity on the part of the researcher.

Part C: Research strategy

The empirical content of this thesis is drawn from three contemporary cases of public policy debate in Australia. Given the broad scope of inclusions that the deliberative systems lens and ethnographic approaches potentially bring to each case study, the research adopts Kingdon’s multi-streams framework to help systematically organise the
information collected. The three case studies are outlined, before providing a summary of Kingdon’s framework.

**The case studies**

Case studies of Australian public policy debate that could support the research objectives are abundantly available. Namely, they need to a) represent everyday (not elite or one-off) instances of public engagement in public policy debate, and b) represent public policy issues perennial to citizen-state relations in liberal democracies. That is, policy debates that are emblematic of the important, ongoing negotiations between citizens and the State to define (and redefine) the boundaries of their respective rights and responsibilities. Viewing these as highly dynamic negotiations, each case is a source of evidence of social media’s immediate and enduring impact on democratic relations. To limit the scope, cases were selected that were evolving at the time of research and for which it was reasonable to assume access to formal and informal policy actors.

The *first case study* examines one of the perennial policy challenges since white settlement in Australia, namely how to create ‘law and order’ in the context of a society beset with the negative externalities of alcohol consumption. It investigates the use of social media by policy actors after a deadly ‘one-punch’ assault in Kings Cross, Sydney and the extent to which this had an impact on the NSW Parliament’s policy response, namely the decision (in February 2014) to introduce ‘lock-outs’ for licensed premises in the CBD, and mandatory prison sentences for assaults involving alcohol. The 18 months examined in this case study was an intensely active time in media attention to alcohol related violence, and the field of policy actors (public health groups, the liquor lobby, the NSW Police, parliamentarians, regulators, residents and a raft of government agencies) were engaged, with varying levels of social media capability, in shaping public perception of the best policy solutions.

The *second case study* examines the largest overhaul of social policy in Australia since Medicare, and therein the redefinition of societal obligations to care for vulnerable citizens. It investigates the role of social media in the decision to introduce the National
Chapter Three

Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) which marked a significant shift in Australia’s approach to funding and delivering support to people with disability and their carers, and the organisations that support them. Social media was extensively used by government and disability organisations to engage disabled Australians in generating political momentum for reform, and subsequently by all actors in supporting its rollout around the country.

The third case study examines a hotly debated ‘morality issue’, that is, the degree to which the state should intrude into and regulate when and by what means an individual can chose to die. It investigates the role of social media in the debate to decriminalise voluntary euthanasia, which since 1996 has been the subject of approximately 30 acts of legislation before state and federal parliaments. These have all been addressed through a conscience vote and defeated, usually due to opposition from religious influences in politics. Public polling, high levels of public engagement with parliamentary committee processes, and a groundswell of interest in de-institutionalising the end of life experience underscore the appetite for a national debate on this topic.

Organising the evidence: the multi-streams model

Models for describing policy activity are said to be in their ‘second generation’ (John 2013). This generation is distinct from the ‘classic period’ in which political scientists were preoccupied with defining terms and the nature of decision making, and developed theories about rational behavior and policy stages. In contrast, the second generation is ‘synthetic’ in that these earlier theories have been blended with accounts about the influence and transfer of ideas, the historical influence of institutions, the innovations of networks and the power of individual policy actors. Second generation theories seek to accommodate complexity and changeability in the policy process (John 2013). Three frameworks have ‘synthetic’ characteristics: the multi-streams model (Kingdon 1984), punctuated equilibrium (Baumgartner and Jones 1993) and advocacy coalition framework (Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier 1993). Each of these frameworks has strengths and weaknesses in that they emphasise and occlude different dimensions of the policy environment.
John Kingdon’s multi-streams model, which is the subject of his book *Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policies* (1984), stands out as well suited to the objectives of this thesis. Much like the Mansbridge’s ‘deliberative systems lens’, it embraces the political system as a whole, recognizing that policy outcomes arise from the continual interplay of individual agents, ideas, institutions and processes (John 2013, p. 10). Kingdon takes the messiness of the policy process as the base line and assumes that policy making occurs under conditions of ambiguity – that is, a state of having many ways of thinking about the same circumstances, and that this is the source of dynamic, yet often contradictory approaches to policy making. In the US congressional context, Kingdon had observed that the information channels between policy makers are not hierarchical, not to and from superiors and subordinates as expected, but that “ideas, rumors, bits of information, studies, lobbyists’ pleadings - all of these float around the system without any hard and fast communication channels” (1984, p. 77). As time constraints limit the range of alternatives to which decision makers’ attention is given, how policy problems are constructed (framed) determines what gains attention, as well as who pays attention to what and when. As Kingdon argued, “the key to understanding policy change is not where the idea came from but what made it take hold and grow” (1995, p.76). This highlights the discretionary dimension of policy makers’ attendance to policy issues, and that the context can be critical.

Kingdon regards policy formation as the result of the flow of three sets of processes or ‘streams’: problems, policies and politics. **Problems** are public matters requiring attention, for example, budget deficits, environmental disasters, rising medical costs, traffic congestion, homelessness, and so on. Problems come to the attention of formal policy makers in three ways: as statistical indicators which may be monitored routinely or through special studies or commissions; focusing events such as natural disasters, political announcements that capture the attention of the media and; public feedback in the form of complaints, reviews and learning from previously enacted policies, through formal and informal channels. **Policies** are proposals for change based on the accumulation of knowledge and development of interest among specialists in a policy sector. Likened to a ‘primeval soup’, ideas generated by academics, bureaucrats, think
tanks, research bodies and advocates can gain attention when they demonstrate technical feasibility, value acceptability and resource adequacy, and because politicians find their sponsorship expedient (Kingdon 1984, p.172). Political processes, such as electoral events, pressure from interest groups, and perceptions of the public mood influence how the media and other opinion formers define public problems and evaluate the potential solutions. Unlike the policy stream - where consensus occurs largely through processes of persuasion and diffusion - consensus in the political stream reflects bargaining between affected interests and strategic coalitions of support for policy proposals (Kingdon 1995, p. 159). For Kingdon, each of these processes acts as an impetus or a constraint on public policy by putting a proposal on or off the agenda.

Kingdon argued that changes in the policy agenda often reflect the work of a policy entrepreneur who brings the streams together at brief, opportune openings, called policy windows. Entrepreneurs may be in or outside government, in elected or appointed positions, in interest groups or research organisations, or simply motivated individuals. Mintrom and Norman (2009) describe entrepreneurs as “power brokers, coalition enablers, and manipulators of problematic preferences, and unclear technology” (in Zahariadis 2014, p.35). Importantly, successful entrepreneurs have access to policy makers, expertise, an ability to speak for others, negotiating skill, persistence and resources. 6 Policy windows, which Kingdon described as “opportunities for advocates of proposals to push their pet solutions, or to gain public attention to their special problems” (1995, p.165), are opened by compelling problems or by events in the problem stream but draw on offerings from the policy stream, and opportunities in the politics stream to promote shifts in the policy agenda. Although Kingdon does not offer insights into the role of the media in the framing and elevation of ‘problems’ onto the policy agenda, he does observe the fluidity with which issues rise and fall. For example, problems can drop from the public agenda because governments believe that a problem

6 It has been argued that the role of the entrepreneur is less pronounced in Australia, and that disciplined political parties and a permanent non-partisan bureaucracy restrict the scope for policy brokerage, as witnessed by Kingdon in the US Congress (Davis et al. 1993, p.5-6). Nevertheless, Zahardidis argues that the model retains currency because “institutions matter…but their importance is tempered considerably by individuals, timing and context” (2007, p. 84).
has been solved, or consider it too intractable to warrant expenditure of political capital. Budgets can also have a constraining or enabling effect, with governments enjoying an expanded revenue base investing in policy extensions, like new disability support, only to face a commodity price crash when the policy comes to be implemented (Kingdon 1995).

To recap, multi-streams model is a ‘synthetic’ model of policy change. In this thesis, it provides a heuristic device to organise the information that arises in the case studies into three streams and highlighting windows and entrepreneurs, where they appear relevant.

Sources and the collection of evidence

This thesis collects the case study evidence in a variety of ways to generate a body of evidence from which to interrogate the research questions. The research in each case study involves the collection of the following information through the following techniques:

(i) **Semi-structured communications** with formal and informal policy participants, including policy makers, elected officials, interest groups and journalists, to canvas their views about the changes taking place in the policy field, what they observe about social media use, their own choices about the use of social media, what it has and has not achieved, and so on (a list of interviewees is available at Appendix 1);

(ii) **Analysis of policy related documentation** including policy documents, press releases, Parliamentary reading speeches, submissions to Senate committees, media coverage past and present, government and non-government reports and discussion papers, articles and communications that concern the policy topic of the case studies; and,

(iii) **Analysis of social media activity** including Facebook, Twitter, blogs and public commentary and e-petitions in relation to the policy topic, from all policy
participants. This includes observation of the volume of traffic to the site, the capacity for dialogue, the scale of the networks it draws on and the way policy issues are framed and citizens are invited to engage.

Summary

In three parts, this chapter has described the analytical and methodological approaches selected to support the thesis’s two research objectives. As stated in the introductory chapter, the objectives are to bring a new perspective to scholarship about the relationship between social media and political engagement in Australia by moving beyond the positivist methods and uncritical engagement with the prevailing presumptions about social media that have featured in scholarship to date. This motivation finds company in the ‘interpretative turn’ that has recently been called for in Australian political science.

To briefly recap: Part A introduced some of the characteristics of a critical approach to social research, and explained how they help to reconceptualise the research topics. Key here is Habermas’ public sphere and the normative conditions of political communication – independence and reflexivity - that give rise to public opinion, crucial to citizens’ satisfaction with politics and its institutions. Part B introduced political ethnography and the interpretative nature of the case study approach, and highlighted their merits for this thesis. Part C detailed the research strategy, specifically the three policy case studies, and how specific data would be collected in relation to each of these. It also described Kingdon’s multi-streams model, and how this will support the broad yet systematic organisation of case related information.
Case Study One: Social media and Sydney’s ‘one-punch’ laws

*I think social media has become far more important than print and increasingly feeds electronic media (especially radio) and I can only imagine this will continue to be the case. It is the most direct medium available. It allows for genuine exchange of views and ideas. Yes it has its faults, but what doesn’t?*

Former NSW Premier Barry O’Farrell (personal communication, 2015)

On a night in July 2012, 18 year old Thomas Kelly and his girlfriend went to Kings Cross in Sydney for a friend’s birthday party. They got out of a taxi and walked along Victoria Street, where Thomas was punched in the face and fell instantly to the pavement, hitting his head. He died two nights later from brain injuries, when his parents turned off of his life support system. In January 2014, eighteen months later and on the same street corner, 18 year old Daniel Christie was punched, fell and hit his head on the pavement. He died 11 days later.

The tragic deaths from ‘one-punch’ assaults\(^7\) of Thomas and Daniel and, more recently, Trevor Buroux on the Gold Coast (December 2015), and Cole Millner in Brisbane (January 2016) are relatively small in number: 91 one-punch assaults in the past 15 years, with 28 occurring in NSW (Monash University, 2014).\(^8\) In the past decade, however, all State and Territory governments have introduced legislation specifically in response to assaults of this kind. Typically, such legislation limits the supply of alcohol through ‘lock-outs’ that restrict the licensing arrangements for particular venues, and introduce minimum and mandatory prison sentences for violent assaults involving drugs or alcohol.

This case study examines the contribution of social media to the policy debate that occurred in response to the one-punch assaults of Thomas Kelly and Daniel Christie.

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\(^7\) One-punch assaults are defined as a “singular punch causing death” (Hemming 2015, p. 130). One-punch assaults are typically between male strangers, while assaults between people who know each other (that is, domestic assaults) in which females are typically the victim, are significantly more common, as are incidents in rural areas (Quilter 2014, p. 28).
outlined above. The period between these young men’s deaths was a highly active time in policy debate: a cross-government task force was established; a citizens’ jury was convened; the Liquor Act was reviewed; the NSW Parliament sought public submissions; and consultancies detailing other cities’ approaches to reducing alcohol-related violence were commissioned. Ideas from the liquor lobby, club venue owners, victims of violence, police officers, senior hospital administrators, public health groups, and politicians were aired in the media. Solutions circulating in the public domain were many and varied: local infrastructure improvements; rethinking policing tactics; restricting liquor licensing and venue density; regulating steroid use; regulating advertising and taxation of alcohol; and education through schools, were all included among the available options.

Shortly after the sentencing of Kieran Loveridge, in November 2013, for the assault on Thomas Kelly, and the assault on Daniel Christie on New Year’s Eve 2013, the NSW Parliament announced that it had settled on a two-part response. First, it introduced the Liquor Amendment Act 2014. This restricted the availability of alcohol in licensed venues, including a 1:30 am ‘lock-out’ in the Sydney CBD, 10:00 pm closing time for take-away sales of alcohol across NSW, and measures to limit the sale of certain drinks at certain times in certain circumstances. These are commonly knowns as the ‘lock-out laws’ and were described in posters across the city as a Plan of Management. Second, it introduced the Crimes and Other Legislation (Assault and Intoxication) Act 2014 which introduced a new offence of assault causing death that carries a maximum penalty of twenty-five years’ jail, and a mandatory minimum penalty of eight years. Known as the ‘one-punch’ laws, these measures removed the defence of ‘accident’, as well as discretion to consider the age, circumstance, and level of intoxication that are usually taken into account by judges when determining sentences. These measures have been described as a ‘high water mark’ in the use of penal measures to pursue policy aims in Australia (Quilter 2014).

In this case, study social media was found to have played a significant, but not defining role in the policy debate. Most immediately, social media was a source of images of the perpetrators and victims of the assaults that were used by the media to create in the public mind the perception of thuggish madmen roaming the streets randomly attacking
innocent boys, which became the defining images of the policy debate. Social media was also effectively used by a collective of families of one-punch victims to generate a change.org e-petition advocating for mandatory minimum sentencing, which was delivered to the NSW Attorney General a week before the NSW Parliament announced it would introduce such laws. Social media was also a key distribution platform for the communication strategies of the public health lobby, the liquor industry and the NSW government.

The uses of social media uncovered in this case study are largely consistent with the Australian government’s presumptions set out in the *Engage: Gov 2.0*, outlined in the background chapter of this thesis. Although social media is not employed as a consultation tool by any of the formal political actors, it nevertheless enabled a diversity of sources, such as the broad community of public health interests, to contribute information to the public sphere. It also supported citizens’ views in relation to prison penalties for perpetrators of violence to be communicated directly to Parliament, through an e-petition, for instance. What is striking about this case study is that while there was a diversity of policy solutions in circulation at the time, it appears that existing interests, namely the media and the liquor lobby, remained highly influential in shaping the policy choices of the NSW Parliament. These actors also effectively utilised social media to extend their policy preferences, but this was not consequential to the overall outcomes of policy debate. Rather, familiar responses to law and order issues were evident. For instance, the media focused public attention on the visceral quality of one-punch assaults – the bloodied faces, muscled thugs, swarms of police and paramedics – instead of highlighting evidence that the rates of violent assault across Sydney had steadily declined in the past 10 years (BOSCAR 2014). Also, rather than foster public debate about whether the social cost of alcohol ($14 billion in 2012) is acceptable, the NSW Parliament chose instead to introduce mandatory prison sentencing for the rare, tragic occurrences of one-punch assault. This case study argues that social media was certainly present in this policy debate, but that it entrenched rather than paved new pathways for public deliberations.
Overview

This ethnographic case study collected information by observing the key policy actors and their interaction preceding the NSW Parliament’s decision to introduce the lock-out and mandatory sentencing laws in February 2014. This included fifteen personal communications, including with Premier O’Farrell, representatives from the Kings Cross Accord (business lobby), the NSW Police communications unit and the Superintendent of the Kings Cross Police Station, the Sydney City Council, and the Kings Cross Residents Association. It also included monitoring the social media sites of these and other policy actors, including those created by the friends of the victims and their families, the media, and formal political actors, such as members of NSW Parliamentary Committee on Law and Safety, which was responsible for taking submissions and drafting the lock-out laws.

The case study proceeds as follows:

(i) For the purposes of background, it provides a brief historical overview of the way alcohol-related violence has been approached by governments, specifically NSW, to the present day;

(ii) Using the multi-streams model, it describes the problems, policies and politics that the evidence suggests shaped the policy choices of the NSW Parliament, and the contribution of social media in relation to these issues; and

(iii) Reflecting on the expectations of Engage: Gov 2.0, it provides some preliminary observations about the role of social media in the horizontal (citizen to citizen) and vertical (citizen to government and vice versa) input to policy debate.

Background: Australian policy narratives

The repercussions of public drunkenness have been a concern for governments since the early days of Australia’s colonisation. Historians claim that alcohol has played a role in many of the scenes that make up the theatre of Australia’s development: the rum

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9 Unfortunately, the recordings of the interviews in this case study were lost due to a virus in my computer. For this reason there are limited direct quotes from policy actors in this case study.
rebellion of 1808; the women’s suffrage and prohibition movement; the ‘work and bust’ habits of distant and itinerant workers in the bush, or on the gold fields; the ‘six o’clock swill’ of the war era; and the post-war growth of Australian suburbs and expanding tastes of the new multicultural society (Luckins 2007; Room 2010; Fitzgerald and Jordon 2009). Given that Kings Cross has also been the historical setting for an Australian mythology of alcohol, violence and the ‘rites of passage’ for young men, the recent one-punch assaults may be viewed as the latest in a longer trajectory of policy interventions.

It is not unusual for Australian governments to restrict access to alcohol, or for it to be heavily penalised. For most of NSW’s history, ‘public drunkenness’ was a stand-alone offence and one of the most frequently prosecuted crimes on the statute books (McNamara and Quilter 2014). Early closing times have been the subject of public referendum in 1916, 1947 and in 1954 (when 6 o’clock closing was lifted) and have not always been opposed by the liquor and hotel industry. A NSW Royal Commission into liquor licensing in 1951, for example, found that publicans favoured six o’clock closing because they made more profit selling alcohol quickly in a short period of time and by saving on the labour costs associated with closing later (Fitzgerald and Jordon 2009).

Governments’ approach to alcohol consumption is said to have gone through distinct phases (Room 2010, p. 157). The 1960s are associated with a shift from a ‘correctional’ to a ‘medical’ rubric that involved framing consumers as either alcoholics who had a personal predisposition to drinking and in need of specialised medical treatment, or as ‘social drinkers’ who were capable of drinking responsibly and should be left alone (Room 2010, p.156-157; Fitzgerald and Jordon 2009, p.154). For policy makers, this shifted the focus of solutions for problematic alcohol consumption away from the source of the supply (the pub, the industry) to the source of the demand (the consumer). Since the 1980s, policy attention has been largely directed at addressing individual drinking behaviours or drinking ‘cultures’ through information and ‘public safety’ campaigns, commonly through graphic images TV (McNamara and Quilter 2014). Most recently, the Rudd government funded a $53 million campaign to address an ‘epidemic in binge drinking’ among young people, while the Gillard government invested $600,000 for point of sale educational advice about drinking while pregnant. The assumption
underpinning these initiatives is that the dangers of consuming alcohol are best mitigated through the twin strategies of information provision, and the public adopting greater personal responsibility for the side effects of consuming alcohol.

**Multi-streams**

As described in chapter three, the case study examines the role of social media in relation to the determinants of influence on the politics, policy and problem dimensions of the policy issue, as described by John Kingdon’s multi-streams model. It focuses on the period of debate triggered by the assaults on Thomas Kelly (July 2012) and Daniel Christie (January 2014), culminated in the NSW government’s decision to introduce ‘lock-outs’ and ‘one-punch’ laws described in the introduction.

**Politics stream**

For Kingdon, the politics stream identifies the pressures that immediately occupy the minds of politicians, such as upcoming elections, negative media attention and interest group campaigns. Exploring the political pressures in this case, three issues predominate: (i) media pressure and a sense of ‘community expectation’ directed personally at then Premier Barry O’Farrell for the introduction of harsher prison sentences for alcohol-related violence, (ii) the e-petition from the Kelly family and its 144,000 supporters to the Attorney General, also calling for harsher prison sentences, and (iii) the financial and inter-personal influence on NSW politics of the Australian Hotels Association, the peak lobby for the liquor and hotel industry, which shared the public’s disgust at the one-punch assaults while wanting to minimise the impact on their membership.

**Politics: pressure on the Premier**

Media’s interest in one-punch assaults in Sydney’s CBD peaked between November 2013 and January 2014 - the period immediately before the NSW Parliament introduced the lock-out and one-punch laws (see also the evidence presented under ‘one punch as focusing events’ p.90). On 8 November 2013, Kieran Loveridge was tried for the manslaughter of Thomas Kelly, and four other assaults on that night. Kieran was sentenced to imprisonment for 7 years and 2 months (with a five-year and 2 month
non-parole period) based on his level of remorse, his youth, and likelihood of rehabilitation (Quilter 2014). Six years of the sentence and four years of the non-parole period were attributed to the assault on Thomas Kelly. As front-page news, the media only reported the non-parole period, making the sentence appear less than it was: the

\[ \text{Sydney Morning Herald's coverage was titled “4 years for a life” and the Telegraph’s “A} \]

king hit to justice” (Image 8).

\[ \text{Image 8: Daily Telegraph front-page on the sentencing on Kieran Loveridge} \]

Six weeks after Kieran was sentenced, another young man – Daniel Christie – was killed in a one-punch assault on the same street corner in Kings Cross. Sydney’s main newspapers notably scaled up their attention to the issue, and in the six weeks between the assault on Daniel and the introduction of the ‘lock-out’ laws, there were 76 articles in the Sydney Morning Herald and Daily Telegraph calling on the Premier to take action. As the Premier recalls, “criticism was generally focussed on government but, as Premier, of course I was the person who was usually in the media responding. This changed at the end of January 2013, following the death of Daniel Christie” (personal communication, 21 July 2015).

These articles featured headlines like: “Much more to be done Barry” (Telegraph, 25 January 2014); “Here’s your hit list Premier” (Telegraph, 17 January 2014); “Where’s Barry? Silence speaks volumes as alcohol debate rages” (SMH, 15 January 2014);
“Premier dodges tough issue” (*Telegraph*, 14 January 2014) and “Weak and unwilling to punish criminals” (*Telegraph*, 19 November 2013). The *Telegraph* also reported on a survey of NSW Members of Parliament and catalogued their comments about O’Farrell being ‘too soft’. For example: “We should be able to rely on our justice system to reflect the standards and punishment that our community expects” Niall Blair (Upper House); “I believe the community is outraged at the circumstances around this case and that the sentence is inadequate” Roza Sage (Blue Mountains); and “The courts have constantly shown contempt for community standards and are insensitive to victims” Andrew Fraser (Coffs Harbour).

This press coverage is extended through the social media channels of corporate brands (e.g. Fairfax reports a reach of 3.2 million), their individual papers (e.g. SMH, 780,000 Facebook followers), and their journalists (e.g. SMH State Political Report, 8000 Twitter followers) and, in turn, their followers. Comments by the then NSW Premier Barry O’Farrell indicate the combined effect of media coverage on decision makers:

... it is fair to say that MPs were influenced by feedback to electorate offices following media coverage which followed the December/January assaults and prior to the legislation being debated. The latter provoked considerable media attention – print, electronic and social – and community comment. It was particularly prevalent on talkback radio across public and private broadcasters (personal communication 21 July 2015).

The records of parliamentary debate on the draft *Liquor Amendment Act 2014* and the *Crimes and Other Legislation (Assault and Intoxication) Act 2014* also reflect the mounting pressure on parliamentarians to respond to ‘community expectation’ that action be taken. Among many examples, the NSW Attorney General Greg Smith MP argued that:

The public wants members of the Parliament to ensure that intoxicated thugs go to jail if they commit these stupid, senseless acts of violence and cowardice ... Now the warnings are out there and the message is clear from the community generally, and from the Parliament, it would be stupid and senseless for them to
continue such behaviour (2nd Reading Speech, Crime and Other Legislation Amendment, 30 January 2014).

Australian legal academics Quilter (2014) and Hemming (2015) argue both the speed and process by which the ‘one-punch’ laws were introduced stand in stark contrast to governments’ usual deliberations on legislative changes of this magnitude. Both note that the legislation was passed without input from the NSW Law Reform Commission, the Sentencing Board, and other expert legal reference groups, yet take the significant step of reversing the governments’ trend away from the use of mandatory sentencing.

Politics: the profile of the victims’ families
The court’s deliberations over the sentencing of Kieran Loveridge were attended by the Kelly family and closely followed by the media. The views of the grieving Kelly family were reported at length, for example:

   How many of our children have to die before somebody does something to change these laws – to make people accountable for what they've done? If they're never going to be accountable and they get a slap on the wrist, then they're just going to keep offending week after week after week, and somebody else is going to be standing here and be heart broken. No matter what he got, it would never be enough. But four years? It’s a joke, it’s a joke, an absolute joke and we're horrified, absolutely horrified (Mrs Kelly, SMH November 11, 2013).

The victims’ families, particularly the Kelly family, were frequently mentioned in the records of Parliamentary debate, and while it is not unusual for politicians to note on public record their sympathy for grieving families, the relationship appears to have gone further. As the NSW Attorney General’s comments in the Sydney Morning Herald reveal:

   ... these incidents have focused community attention on alcohol-related violence, and the government will be working with police to make our streets safer. Last month I met with the Kelly family and I am giving careful consideration to their proposals (SMH 1 January 2014).

And, as John Robertson MP’s comments in parliament show:
I pay special tribute to Ralph and Kathy Kelly, parents of Thomas Kelly, for the work they have done on this issue. I acknowledge also all the victims of alcohol violence and their families, and the suffering they have endured. I am certain that without the advocacy of these families the Government would not have been forced to recall Parliament (Robertson, 30 January 2014).

Immediately after the sentencing of Kieran Loveridge, the Kelly family started an e-petition on Change.org calling for the introduction of mandatory sentencing laws (see Image 9). Change.org is a platform that uses email and social media to facilitate the distribution of petitions across personal networks. The Kelly family’s petition utilised the large network of supporters and sympathisers that the family had attracted through the media’s coverage of Thomas’s assault (20,000 people on Facebook). Following the assaults on Michael McEwen and Daniel Christie, the Kelly family expanded the petition to include calls for additional aggravating factors in sentencing. Additional aggravating factors mean that offenders cannot seek a lesser sentence on the grounds that they were under the influence of drugs or alcohol at the time of the offence, or that they are in their youth. As Mr Kelly expressed in the petition, “Too often, alcohol abuse and excessive drinking is actually used as a defence in court as an excuse for their criminal behaviour. The time for excuses is over.”

10 Michael McEwen was assaulted in a ‘one-punch’ attack on Bondi Beach the week before Christmas. He was unconscious for a week, but regained consciousness.
Furthermore, the e-petition stated that sentences should be increased if the victim was unable to defend themselves, and the offender was on a good behaviour bond at the time of the offence (as was Kieran Loveridge). The e-petition attracted over 144,000 signatures and was delivered to the NSW Premier and the Attorney General a week before parliament adopted the mandatory sentencing laws, containing aggravating factors consistent with the petition’s request. About this e-petition, NSW Premier, Barry O’Farrell reflected that:

The Thomas Kelly petition was further evidence of something the Government already knew: that violence involving alcohol and drugs was an ongoing public concern and more work needed to be done. The Kelly family were (and are) tremendous advocates of sensible policy solutions in this area (personal communication, 21 July 2015)

Politics: the hotel and liquor lobby
The records of parliamentary debate on the draft *Liquor Amendment Act 2014* and the *Crimes and Other Legislation (Assault and Intoxication) Act 2014* suggests the influence of the hotel and liquor lobby was front of mind for politicians. MP Linda Burney (Canterbury) for example, stated:

...we must take cognisance of the entrenched culture, the availability of alcohol and the power of the liquor lobby, but most importantly, we also must recognise that the community has said that enough is enough ...

The liquor lobby is represented by the Australian Hotels Association (AHA), which was established in NSW in 1873. It has a national membership of 5000 and a NSW membership of 2000 – comprising liquor manufacturers and liquor license holders, as well as industry partners that include clubs, banks and supermarket chains (AHA.org.au). The industry has a close financial and personal relationship with NSW politics: in 2012-13 it was the third largest donor (after the mining and energy sector) to NSW political parties (Rodgers 2014), and in 2013-14 Liberal MP Paul Nicolaou was simultaneously the Chief Executive of AHA NSW and the Chief Executive of the Liberal Party’s fundraising
organisation Millennium Forum. In a 2014 communication for industry magazine ‘Shout’, Mr Nicolaou explained that he was selected as Chief Executive of the AHA because:

Well, look, it’s a Liberal Government. Let’s be upfront and honest, it’s no good beating around the bush, you’re not going to put a person with Labour ties in as the CEO ... Just from the point of view of knowing who’s who in the zoo and also who um, you know, need to be um, consulted in particular matters in relation to the Australian Hotel Association (Atkinson 2014).

To summarise, the politics stream highlights three dimensions of the policy debate in this case study. First, the volume and intensity of the media’s coverage of the sentencing of Kieran Loveridge as grossly inadequate, and in creating a profile for community and political leaders calling on the Premier to take swift, tough action. Social media did not determine this course of action but extended the audience for the media’s portrayal of events this way. Second, and at the same time, the victims’ families (Kelly, McEwan and Christie) mobilised support for the introduction of mandatory sentences, and the removal of aggravating factors and the ‘accidental’ defence of manslaughter. Social media was the platform for these families to come together with a common message and utilise their support networks toward the cause. Third, the power of the AHA’s membership – which would favour a focus on individual and licensee behaviour over industry regulation – may have influenced what the NSW Parliament considered as viable policy options at this time.

**Policy stream**

The policy stream draws attention to the policy options that are before decision makers. Options can come from sources inside and outside government, such as think tanks, policy fora, government-sourced consultancies and research bodies, both domestic and international. In this case, a raft of policy measures for reducing alcohol-fuelled violence had been in place in NSW for over a decade and, as becomes clear in the ‘problem stream’, below, appeared to be effective. However, in the period under study, two policy ideas featured prominently in public debate: first, the ongoing battle between the public health and liquor lobby groups to ‘frame’ the alcohol-violence policy problem and,
second, the far-reaching recommendations of the citizens’ policy jury. As will be shown, social media played a significant role in the first, but not the second, of these topics.

At the outset, it is important to recognise the impact of the National Competition Policy (NCP) on the scope of the policy options open to the NSW government at this time. The NCP was a pillar of the economic liberalisation agenda initiated by the Hawke/Keating government in the early 1990s, and takes the form of a series of agreements between the Commonwealth and state/territory governments that reduce barriers to competition in order to improve international competitiveness (Harman 2010; Beeson and Firth 1998). In relation to alcohol, NCP limits the capacity of State governments to control the density and types of liquor outlets in the community. By illustration, Victoria’s experience of the NCP shows that over a ten-year period, the total number of licensed premises grew from 4000 to 17,400 (Munroe 2008, p.206). Competition policy also removes the anti-monopoly cap that controls the market share of the liquor industry that could be held by a single entity. This is associated with large retailers like Coles and Woolworths owning the lion’s share (58 per cent) of Australia’s liquor market (Macay 2012). Public health groups argue that the consolidation of market power in these two retailers (who also own Dan Murphy’s, Liquorland, Safeway Liquor and 1st Choice) encourages ‘price wars’, ‘loss-lead’ tactics, and aggressive alcohol advertising like incentives for consumers – particularly young consumers – to make bulk purchases (FARE 2014).

**Policy: framing public perceptions of alcohol**

In 2010, the Commonwealth government received $7.075 billion in total revenue from alcohol importation and taxation, and expended double that ($14.325 billion) on the management of alcohol-related incidents through the criminal justice and health systems, and in lost productivity in the workplace (Manning et al. 2013). Creating awareness of these figures and whether they suggest that alcohol is crucial to Australia’s social and economy fabric (as the AHA claim), or ‘not like any other product’ (as FARE claims), is critical to the direction of policy debate about alcohol-related violence in Sydney.
Chapter Four

An active community of public health lobbyists, with support from public hospitals, advocate that a radically different approach to alcohol is needed. In the period examined here, Dr Alex Wodak, Director of St Vincent’s Hospital in Kings Cross (a recent nominee for Australian of the Year 2016) frequently issued press statements, along the lines that:

... focusing on change in consumption is nothing more than a detail, the first order question we should be asking is whether Australia regards the health, social and economic costs of alcohol to be acceptable (Carah 2010).

This view is also advocated by the Federation of Alcohol Research and Education (FARE) – the principal public health group active in the policy debate about alcohol and violence. FARE met with the NSW Premier’s Office and presented a ‘10 Point Plan to Reduce Alcohol Related Harms’ in NSW. In the press release for the plan, which received minimal coverage and was not accompanied by a social media strategy, the Chief Executive of FARE argued that:

The heart of the problem is excessive availability of alcohol, with one liquor licence in NSW for every 470 people. Increased availability of alcohol, both through the increased numbers of outlets and longer trading hours, contributes to alcohol-related violence and harm (Thom 2012).

While the plan supported specific measures for licensed premises in the Sydney CBD, it argued for wider reforms including greater community say in the issuing and terms of liquor licenses, and preventing the discounting and promotion of alcohol to young people (Amy Fergerson, personal communication, 5 August 2014).

More significantly, FARE describes the death of Thomas Kelly as a ‘watershed moment’ for the public health lobby (Annual Report 2013-14). It prompted FARE to form a NSW-wide alliance of otherwise disparate groups with a shared interest in reducing alcohol-related harms in society. The alliance – the NSW/ACT Alcohol Policy Alliance (NAAPA) – is made up of approximately 50 organisations, including the NSW Police, the Australian Medical Association, the College of Physicians, local governments and residents’ associations. Through NAAPA, FARE’s Chief Executive remarked that “the sector is now integrated and better organised” and it has “lead to a discernible change
Case Study One: Sydney’s ‘one-punch’ laws

in the tone of the public debate and government rhetoric about alcohol control” (Thom, Annual Report 2012-13).

NAAPA has developed its identity and established its policy voice for these organisations through a strong social media presence (Jeremy Henderson, personal communication 10 August 2014). Key amongst their activities is the social networking site DRINKTANK – “a conversation space about alcohol” that provides a blogging platform for journalists, students, professionals and grass roots advocates to share stories and research that “help draw attention to what would otherwise be silent voices in the debate about our alcohol culture” (Annual Report 2012-13). DRINKTANK allows the public to respond to its stories, and includes a Twitter account, Facebook page and electronic newsletter.
Reflecting its focus on sharing news items and research with membership organisations and journalists, its most popular channel for promoting the blog is Twitter, which has approximately 2000 followers.

While social media plays a key role in providing a common message for organisations seeking to highlight the public cost of alcohol, it performs the same function for the liquor industry. The industry’s principal public communication tool, DRINKWISE, was established in 2005 with assistance from government specifically to deliver public information campaigns promoting sensible alcohol consumption. The industry has been particularly successful in using social media for this purpose. For instance, in 2015 it launched a campaign called ‘Drinking – Do It Properly’ that aims to “teach young people how to drink in a classy way”. Using YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, the campaign had reached two million viewers – a reach 1000 times greater than NAAPA’s DRINKTANK initiative – just weeks after its launch (Press Release, 19 August 2015), and attracted a suite of innovation and business awards (brw.org.au). This success is consistent with research that shows alcohol brands have the third highest ‘consumer engagement’ rate on Facebook, after cars and retail shopping (Nicolls 2012). Studies by the University of Queensland (2012) and the Australian Catholic University (2013) argue that the success of alcohol companies online is due to their ability to use young people’s self-promotional habits on social media to blur the boundary between marketing and socialising to both generate and distribute alcohol marketing through youth networks (Griffin 2013; Munroe and Wever 2008). This is possible, FARE argues, because the current regulatory codes for advertising alcohol were designed in the pre-Facebook world and that the scope for consumer ‘co-production’ opened up by social media is less visible to authorities and regulators than corporations (FARE in Worthington 2015).

Policy: Citizens’ Jury

In late 2013, the City of Sydney, with funding from the Thomas Kelly Foundation and the NSW government, commissioned the newdemocracy Foundation to convene a citizens policy jury to come up with “innovative new approaches to stop alcohol-related violence” and “cut through” perceived vested interests in the policy debate (Media Release 2013). For Mr Ralph Kelly, father of one-punch victim Thomas Kelly, the importance of the
Case Study One: Sydney’s ‘one-punch’ laws

citizens’ jury was “to really look at what is happening and for there to be a sensible and informed conversation which government listens to” (Press Release 2013). newdemocracy confirms that a randomly selected Jury offers this kind of progress in policy debate because they are “not linked to lobbyists nor interest groups (and) thus has the power to...ensure worthwhile policy options have the chance to be publicly considered.” (newdemocracy.com.au).

The Jury (43 randomly selected individuals) sought presentations from the Australian Medical Association, the Director of Public Prosecutions, the Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, NSW Police and the Australian Hotels Association, among others. It also undertook a night time ‘study tour’ around Kings Cross, and opened a public submission process for which it received written input from 39 individuals. 11 The jury’s recommendations included a diversity of solutions: restoring funding for mandated drug and alcohol education programs in all primary and secondary schools; diversifying the range of entertainment options available in the city at night, such as art installations, popup markets, night time libraries; and increasing the availability of night-ride services between entertainment hubs and the outer suburbs, for instance. The Jury supported the NSW parliament’s proposal to increase the visibility of police and the introduction of lock-outs for high risk venues, reviewed within 12 months, but made no mention of the need to introduce mandatory minimum sentencing for perpetrators of alcohol-related violence. The jury’s report was submitted to the Lord Mayor of Sydney and the NSW Premier, and tabled in parliament.

To summarise, the policy stream highlights two policy specific dimensions of this case study. It began by arguing that National Competition Policy constrains the market based options available to governments in terms of controlling market share, limiting the density of outlets and promotional activities of the liquor retailers. With this in mind, one of the few channels available to government is to adjust the terms of individual

11 There is no evidence that social media played any role in the jury’s process; requests to the Sydney City Council about the process were unanswered.
license holders, such as specific night clubs in Kings Cross. Concerning social media, the
public health lobby utilised its networking and blogging capabilities to assist in
establishing a national advocacy group that would generate – in their words –
‘conversations about alcohol in Australia’ and highlight the social cost, and the
regulatory failures in advertising and taxation, as they perceive them. Similarly, the
liquor industry utilised social media’s popularity among young people, especially its
capacity for co-production of advertising materials (e.g. drinking selfies) to saturate
social media. Concerning the citizens’ jury, its deliberations were illuminating for two
reasons: first, the importance for all sponsors on the independence of the Jury process,
suggesting two of the main institutional policy actors (Sydney City Council, NSW
government) and the principle policy entrepreneur (the Kelly Foundation) did not have
confidence in the policy debate in the public domain, facilitated by the media, and
second, that the recommendations of the jury - established as representatives of the
citizenry - were diverse, creative, and did not include enhanced penal power for the
state.

Problem stream

The problem stream draws attention to what Kingdon called ‘focusing events’ that come
to public attention through the media, and ‘routine indicators’ of issues that are
monitored by sources inside or outside of government. These ‘problems’ capture
political attention, and when they align with favourable options from the policy and
address the pressures of politics streams, may shift the issue on the political agenda. In
this case, the media’s portrayal of the assaults of Thomas Kelly and Daniel Christie were
clearly public ‘focusing events’ and triggered a broader debate about ‘alcohol-fuelled
violence’ in Sydney. The ‘routine indicators’ available for consideration in public debate
were statistical reports of the rates of assault published by the NSW Bureau of Crime,
Statistics and Research (BOCSAR) and sourced from the hospital emergency wards and
police stations in proximity to Kings Cross. The following discussion suggests that the
social media in this stream was low, but powerful determinant on the direction of the
policy debate.
Problem: one-punch assaults as focusing events
As highlighted in the policy-stream, the assaults on Thomas Kelly and Daniel Christie were front page news in Sydney papers. The articles featured photographs of these healthy smiling boys, alongside thuggish photos of their muscled and menacing attackers. The images of Shaun McNeil (see Image 12 and 13) who punched Daniel Christie, were taken from his Facebook profile, along with a selection of entries like “Monsters don’t sleep under your bed, they sleep inside your head” (Morri 2014).

Historians argue that one-punch incidents have been reported in the Australian news since the early 1900s, and that what makes these incidents newsworthy (given the low rates of occurrence) is that they transgress what we accept as ‘respectable’ male violence (Flynn et al. 2015, p.3). Popular reference to one-punch assaults being ‘coward punches’ reflects these dishonourable connotations. Flynn (2015) argues that this approach to reporting one-punch assaults focuses attention on the psychological state of the perpetrator; an article in The Daily Telegraph shortly after the attack on Daniel Christie illustrates this, “It is impossible to find reason why such devastation should be inflicted...It is mindless violence...that is totally unnecessary” (in McDougall and Bodkin 2014).
In addition, The Sydney Morning Herald and the Daily Telegraph both launched public safety campaigns – ‘Safer Sydney’ and ‘Enough is Enough’ respectively – that included a suite of activities like surveys, video competitions, communications and editorials about the need to address alcohol-related violence among young people. In the 18 months between his death in July 2012 and the introduction of mandatory sentences, the assault on Thomas Kelly was the subject of approximately 400 articles (Factiva), while also the subject of radio commentary and TV coverage. News Limited, which owns major newspapers in every state and territory, also launched the campaign ‘Real Heroes Walk Away’. This was a multimedia campaign that included CCTV footage of violence between men on the street and smashed, bloodied faces, overlaid with the voices of politicians, health experts and citizens reciting statistics about the impact of violence: “$1.4 billion – the cost of violence on the economy”, “3,451 – the number of hospitalisations from violence in 2010-2011”, “394 – the number of face reconstructions in 2012” and so on.

The newspapers campaigns were matched by campaigns from the NSW government – titled ‘Stop before it gets ugly’ and ‘A coward punch can kill’ – which were broadcast on mainstream media and across the government’s social media channels.

For policy debate, focusing on the psychology of the perpetrator and creating a generalised fear of random violence at the hands of strangers, diverts attention from the cultural, political or economic factors that may go some way to explaining what motives violent behaviour. In turn, the range of policy responses the public expects the government to (urgently) pursue will typically focus on reducing the unpredictability of
these assaults, such as making the law clear and unequivocal through mandatory sentencing, and removing possible triggers from the immediate environment, such as access to certain types of alcohol at specific times in certain venues.

**Problem: Routine indicators - assaults on the decline**

‘Routine indicators’ of alcohol-related violence are produced by the NSW Bureau of Crime, Statistics and Research (BOCSAR) which has been tracking the numbers, types and locations of assaults across the suburbs of Sydney and the state more generally for the past 15 years. BOCSAR reports that the number of non-domestic incidents of assault recorded by the NSW Police in Kings Cross, Sydney CBD and across the State have been declining: reporting in 2014, over the previous two years, there has been an average drop by 30 per cent around licenced premises in Kings Cross, and a drop by 15 per cent in the CBD (BOCSAR 2014).

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Reflecting on the statistics, Director and Chief Statistician for BOCSAR, Dr Weatherburn, argued that:

The main options which are known to work, and are in the power of state and local governments to effect are restrictions on trading hours and days of sale, restrictions on liquor outlet density and vigorous police enforcement of responsible service of alcohol laws (Davis 2012).

These comments suggest that existing measures to curb alcohol-fuelled violence had been having an impact. Earlier government strategies, dating back to 2007 include penalties attached to the licenses of high risk venues, 2am lock-outs, rules about the use of glass containers and types of drinks that could be consumed after midnight, cessation of alcohol service 30 minutes prior to closing, increased Police powers, and new precinct
liquor accords, backed with $1 million fund to help develop local night time safety measures with licensed venues.

Recalling the media’s portrayal, following the sentencing of Kieran Loveridge, of the justice system being out of touch with public expectations, BOCSAR also produces reports on public confidence in the NSW criminal justice system. In the period relevant to this case study, BOCSAR reported a five year increase (from 25 per cent to 30 per cent) in the numbers of people who were ‘very’ or ‘fairly’ confident that the system brings people who commit crimes to justice, and that the courts handed down sentences that were ‘about right’ (2012). While noting that levels of public dissatisfaction remain high, Dr Weatherburn also observed:

Those who lack confidence in the criminal justice system tend to hold the most mistaken views about crime and criminal justice. The vast majority of those surveyed thought most crime reported to police is violent when the true percentage in only seven per cent. We need to find more effective ways of dealing with these misconceptions if we want to strengthen public confidence in the administration of criminal justice (Dr Weatherburn 2012, p.3)

To summarise, the evidence in this stream indicates that the media’s portrayal of ‘one-punch’ assaults and those that perpetrate them are powerful ‘focusing events’, and have a far greater impact on the nature of the policy debate than the ‘routine indicators’. The policy solutions governments reach for in these circumstances will be those that most directly make a show of gaining control of the situation: limiting access to alcohol, increasing localised surveillance and the powers of the police, and making it mandatory that perpetrators be sent to prison for a long time. Social media played a significant but small role in this stream: the media used a selection of images from Shaun McNeil’s Facebook page (which appears to no longer exist) to help create the image of a violent perpetrators in the public mind.

Observations

The 18 months between the one-punch assault on Thomas Kelly and then Daniel Christie was a highly active time in policy debate in relation to alcohol-fuelled violence in NSW.
While historically alcohol-related violence is not an unfamiliar policy challenge for NSW governments and is tied up in mythologies about Australian culture, it may be argued that the degree of activity over this period was unprecedented. What role did social media play and did it assist in public policy deliberation?

The government’s expectations of social media, outlined in the *Engage: Gov 2.0* report, suggests that benefits will flow in both the horizontal (citizen to citizen) and vertical (citizen to government/government to citizen) relationships. Considering the evidence in these terms, social media played only a small role in facilitating horizontal engagements between citizens, namely facilitating the coming together of the three families of young men killed in one-punch assaults for the purposes of petitioning government. The citizens’ policy jury comes closest to citizen policy deliberation, yet this was orchestrated by the NSW government and Sydney City Council and did not involve social media. More markedly, social media assisted the organisations working on public health concerns to form a 50-strong alliance (NAAPA), both strengthening their standing in policy debate and fostering dialogue within this policy community (DrinkTank). The legislative choices made by the NSW parliament suggest that the agenda pursued by this lobby, such as restrictions on the density of licensed premises and improved regulation of liquor advertising to children, did not gain traction.

Marginally more social media activity is evident in vertical relationships. Social media clearly facilitated citizen to government engagement by way of an e-petition created by the three families of one-punch victims. This was delivered to the NSW Attorney General at a crucial time in parliamentary decision making, and appears to have been highly influential in that Parliament adopted its measures. Otherwise, social media was not used by NSW parliament, nor the core policy and legal agencies, to garner public input on the policy options, and while some agencies, like the Department of Justice and the NSW Police, have active Facebook and Twitter accounts these are primarily used to extend the distribution of their press releases. Likewise the official social media accounts of the NSW Members of Parliament who were influential in drafting the legislation for consultation, such as the Minister for Hospitality, were hardly used.
The case study highlights the significance of other actors – non-state, non-public – in shaping policy outcomes. Most notably, as the politics stream highlighted, the media closely followed the sentencing of Thomas Kelly’s attacker, Kieran Loveridge, and reported in detail on the family’s grief and the seemingly inadequate sentence. The former Director of Public Prosecutions Nicholas Cowdery argues that the news headlines likened the justice system to “some sort of market, where periods of imprisonment are equated to consequences of action and regarded as payment” (Cowdery 2013). In effect, by being encouraged to share in the family’s grief and sense of injustice, the public was being enlisted to support demands for heavier sentences. Cowdery argues that “… we should not ask our public authorities to give them personal vengeance and the community should have confidence in the criminal justice system to do the right thing by objective standards” (2013). Furthermore, as evident in the problem stream, the media created the impression that violence is both random and on the rise. The policy solution best fitted to mitigating this fear necessarily focuses on the immediacy of the incidents and the environment – controlling alcohol and drug use, and guaranteeing that perpetrators will be jailed for a long time.

The cumulative effect of the media’s campaign was to silence any debate about policy alternatives, or a thorough-going debate about the merits of mandatory sentencing. On this, the NSW Shadow Attorney General was one of the few people to raise concerns, arguing in parliament that:

... it is preposterous to argue that someone who is intoxicated and about to assault someone will pause to do some elaborate calculus as to whether it will result in eight years jail rather than four or five ... and make that the basis for not completing the assault ... the government has not produced one scintilla of evidence to show that there will be any deterrent effect from this legislation ... (Second Reading Speech, Crimes and Other Legislation Amendment Bill, 30 January 2014)

Paul Lynch MP went on to cite research from NSW legal bodies that show mandatory minimum sentences have perverse effects, such as juries regarding mandatory sentences as disproportionate and as a result refuse to prosecute, and that it
discourages offenders from admitting guilt. In states and territories that have adopted ‘one-punch’ laws, it has been found that sentencing patterns are below the average for manslaughter cases, and being used to pursue lesser sentences in cases of serious and prolonged domestic violence (Quilter 2014; Anderson 2014).

The case study also highlights the significance of national policy priorities, in this case unrelated to violence, in setting the parameters of the policy options available to state and local governments. As the policy stream highlighted, two decades of National Competition Policy has progressively deregulated the alcohol market and made it possible for citizens to easily access a wide range of discounted alcohol, including from supermarkets and convenience stores. Public health groups argue that a growing body of research shows a clear relationship between the density, price and trading hours of liquor outlets and the levels of violence in both public and private spaces (FARE 2015). With the aid of social media, public awareness of the social cost of alcohol consumption (borne by the public to the tune of $14 billion per annum) and its importance to deliberations as to the best policy options, will surely grow.

In some respects, the policy outcome seen in this case study is unsurprising and followed a familiar law and order trajectory: the media’s portrayal of the incidents fuelled a ‘moral panic’ about violence at the hands of unhinged young men on the streets of Sydney, while also mounting sustained campaigns, directed at the Premier, to pursue harsher penal measures. The solutions put forward by the citizens’ policy jury, which drew from the same sources of evidence as the NSW parliamentary committee that drafted the laws, suggested citizens had an appetite for a more creative approach. However, it may be argued that the pressure to target venues in the city with ‘lock-out’ laws and target violent individuals with harsher penalties served the government well. For the parliament, these responses gave the impression of responding to community expectations, which the record shows were clearly on their minds, while effectively nullifying the other policy considerations on the table, such as reforming taxation and regulation of alcohol, as public health groups suggested. These other options would, however, be unfavourable to the hotel and liquor industry, and may jeopardise the positive financial benefits that flow to NSW political parties from this relationship.
Epilogue

In 2016 the ‘lock-out’ laws were the subject of a two-year review, undertaken by former High Court Judge Ian Callinan. The review found that the government’s objective of reducing alcohol-related violence had been achieved: a 45 per cent reduction in Kings Cross and a 20 per cent reduction in the CBD, and a 25 per cent reduction in alcohol-related presentations to St Vincent’s Hospital (Quilter 2016). It also acknowledged that late-night businesses, restaurants and live music venues, had been adversely affected by the lock-out laws. It recommended that government consider relaxing the lock-out time by half an hour (to 2am) and remove the requirement that bottle shops across the state close at 10pm.

As of October 2016 the findings of the review are with government for consideration, and a formal response will be announced before the end of the year. During this time, supporters and opponents have taken to social media to press their respective cases about the effectiveness and impact of the laws (see for example Image 15). As a study of social media, there are a couple of developments to note.

First, the views of the state Premier (now Mike Baird) continues to be a focal point for the debate, with social media enhancing a focus on personal leadership. For example, in February, Premier Mike Baird announced on Facebook his view that the lock-out laws have been effective and should not be changed (see Image 16). Now, however, the
practicalities of the lock-out laws are clear and as there have been no public one-punch assaults dominating debate in the media, there has been room for public opposition to the laws to become much more vocal. Baird’s Facebook posting attracted 17,000 responses, mostly complaints that Sydney is ‘dead’ and the government has introduced a ‘nanny state’.
Second, during the period under study, public opposition to the proposed ‘lock-out’ laws was not extensively covered by the media, with the exception of a small number of articles about the impact on musicians and small bar owners (e.g. Olding 2013). Further, online campaigns such as ‘Keep Sydney Open’ and ‘Save our Nightlife’ attracted only small numbers of followers. Today, Sydney musicians, restaurant and hotel owners have rallied behind the Keep Sydney Open campaign, in large part through social media and with coverage by the media. To date, it has successfully mobilised people to protest about the lock-out laws (approximately 15,000 marched in February 2016), and established an e-petition of over 50,000 people voicing opposition to the laws. This was spearheaded by an extensive blog from Matt Barrie, CEO of Freelancer.com, which chronicles the evidence that pedestrian traffic in Kings Cross has dropped by 84 per cent compared to 2012 levels, resulting in closed venues and empty streets. His claim that “the soul of the city has been destroyed” has attracted close to a million viewings (Cooke 2016). Other elements of the campaign are focused on the exemption of the newly opened Crown Casino in Barangaroo from the lock-out laws and a range of other licensing restrictions (see #casinomike). Evidence from BOSCAR suggests that the Pyrmont area around the Casino has experienced a 22 per cent increase in violent assaults in the past 12 months (Rooke 2016). Yet unlike Kings Cross it has not attracted calls for lock out laws.
Third, public health groups like FARE, St Vincent’s Hospital, and NAAPA have released a campaign titled #KeepSydneySafe – a counter to #KeepSydneyOpen in much the same way that DrinkTank and DrinkWise could be said to be social media rivals. These groups are seeking to leverage the Callinan review’s findings of the link between reducing access to alcohol and falling rates of assaults, yet distance themselves from Justice Callinan’s recommendations. That is, they maintain that the reduction in violence has also been experienced in families, and that there should therefore be no relaxation of these laws restricting the hours of bottle shops. As Prof Nadine Ezard, St Vincent’s Clinical Director of Alcohol & Drug Services, stated in a recent press release, “If … we as a community are serious about tackling domestic violence, then we must take the evidence seriously that any extension of bottle shop trading hours will lead to increased harms” (St Vincents Hospital, October 2016).

Summer and Christmas are peak periods for alcohol-related violence in Sydney (BOSCAR 2015). This year (2016), this coincides with the NSW government’s consideration of Justice Callinan’s recommendations to maintain, with minor change, the lock-out laws for the city and to relax the restrictions on bottle shop opening hours across the state. While government has evidence that restrictions in alcohol supply are effective in controlling both public and domestic violence, and the Premier has made public commitments to address the “plague” of domestic violence across the state (Baird 2015), the evidence suggests that the direction of this policy debate is unlikely to change, even with the public being manipulated into an outcry over rare incidents of one punch involving young men out on the town.
Case Study Two: social media and disability reform

By the time people get to the newspaper, people have already made up their minds. You can help them make up their minds in social media, showing people the NDIS is working and getting positive stories out.

Kym Carlton, National Disability Insurance Agency (personal communication, 2015)

The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) has been described as the most significant social policy reform introduced in Australia since Medicare in 1975 (Goggin 2014; Baker 2012). The NDIS replaces the government’s block funding of disability service providers with personalised care plans that are negotiated with individual disabled citizens deemed to have permanent and significant disabilities. These personalised care plans are serviced through the competitive provisions of the free market, and therein are intended to provide those who receive NDIS support with ‘control’ and ‘choice’ over the services they need. When the Scheme is fully implemented in 2019, it expected that 10 percent of people with a disability — about 460,000 people - will be receiving a disability support package through the NDIS.

Leading up to the NDIS, a series of high-profile reports had bought to government attention the parlous state of existing services for the disabled. Shut Out (2009) for instance, demonstrated that disabled Australians experienced poverty, unemployment, imprisonment and social isolation in far higher numbers that the national average, while the Productivity Commission’s Inquiry into Disability Care and Support found existing arrangements were “inequitable, underfunded, fragmented and inefficient” (2011, p.5). While this evidence of deep inequalities was disturbing, the National Disability Strategy brought to government attention that the number of people with profound disability was projected to increase from 1.4 million to 2.9 million over the next 40 years, yet the ratio of informal carers would decrease by more than half over this period (2009).
The proposal to radical overhaul disability policy and service delivery was overwhelmingly supported by stakeholders. For disability advocates ‘choice and control’ meant disabled people could exercise greater self-determination, and be recognised as individuals with unique needs that required flexible, tailored support. This had been the rallying cry of disability reform advocates since the 1970s. For government, the NDIS was consistent with international trends to ‘responsibilise’ social service recipients through individually negotiated support plans, as well as divest in direct service provision and rely on the competitive market to deliver social services. Both government and advocates encouraged disabled Australians, and their carers and families, to ‘get behind’ the NDIS.

Social media played a significant role in efforts to mobilise the participation of disabled people in the development of the NDIS. As an informal medium that is accessible from home, social media was an ideal channel to support the participation of people that are otherwise unlikely or unable to engage in policy debate (Kate Thomas, personal communication, 15 February 2015).

This case study examines social media and the engagement of disabled Australians in building the case for disability policy reform and the development of the NDIS. It finds that social media was used by government and disability organisations to facilitate the collection and far-reaching distribution of personal stories about the experience of disability in Australia, and successfully generated a ground swell of popular interest and political momentum for reform. Social media also enabled connections between formal actors in an otherwise fractured policy space, and enhanced their capacity for mobilisation and political action to push for reform. Furthermore, as the scheme is rolled out in trial sites across the country, social media became the principal channel through which the clients of the NDIS were voicing their concerns and frustrations with the changes, and seeking support and practical guidance from others.

The uses of social media uncovered in this case study are consistent with the expectations of Engage: Gov 2.0. Social media is supporting vertical engagement by amplifying the voice of disabled Australian’s about their experiences and the potential benefits of policy reform, which are being channelled directly to decision makers through the efforts of disability organisations. Further, it is supporting horizontal
engagement by enabling citizen to work with other citizens in negotiating the new system, as shown by the example of the NDIS Grassroots Facebook community of 15,000. This case demonstrates that the storytelling functions of social media can be used effectively to enrichen policy discussion and create widespread momentum for policy change. The evidence also suggests, however, that for some participants the experience of participating in the push for policy reform (through social media) caused the solutions offered by the NDIS to be ‘oversold’. Considered in historical light, it becomes clear that the ‘choice and control’ offered by the NDIS do not resemble the independence and quality of life that has been the rallying cry of the disability movement for the past 50 years.

**Overview**

Interest in this case study was originally sparked by a remark made by the CEO of *Bang the Table* – a consultancy that implements digital engagement strategies for government – that the engagement of disabled Australian’s in the development of the NDIS was an outstanding illustration of the power of digital media in bringing citizens into policy making (Crispin Hull, personal communication, 3 December 2014). Examining this claim has involved a study of both the initial consultations for the design of the NDIS, and the use of social media by the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) as the NDIS is rolled out in ‘trial sites’ around the country. Beyond these formal uses, social media has also been adopted as a channel for community groups to manage information about the roll out of the new arrangements, and for people to express their anxieties about this process and governments ongoing commitment to fully fund it. As an ethnographic study, this involved tracking social media activity, and interviewing the main disability advocacy groups, like Carers Australia, Mental Health Australia, the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations and Down Syndrome Australia, as well as key political actors including Minister for Families and Community Services (Jenny Macklin) and former Minister for Disability in NSW (John Della Bosca). It also involved meeting with representatives from the National Disability Insurance Agency and attending a two-day regional conference for NDIS clients and their supporters.
This case study proceeds as follows:

i. For the purposes of background, it briefly outlines the dominant approaches to disability policy pursued by Australian governments over the recent past, and how this has shaped the way disabled Australian’s have engaged in policy debate to date;

ii. Using the multi-streams model, examines the policy options, political drivers and ‘problems’ influencing the adoption of the NDIS, including observations about the social media activity within each of these areas; and

iii. Provides some preliminary observations about social media and how the disabled have been engaged in the policy debate.

**Background: disability policy narratives**

The *International Year of the Disabled Person* in 1981 marked a turning point in the Australian government’s policy approach to disabilities. Up until this time, disability had been viewed as an impairment of the body or a personal tragedy that could be solved, or corrected, by medical science (Leipoldt 2011). For disabled people, this view is associated with a paternalistic power that privileges medical opinion and medical intervention as the only way to understand the challenges of living with a disability (Oliver 1996, p. 2012). In the 1980s, however, policy framing shifted to focus on the social and economic structures, and the physical and attitudinal barriers that limit disabled people’s equal participation in society (Fawcett and Plath 2012). Described as a ‘social model’ of disability, this:

...separates out disabling barriers from impairment (not being able to walk or see or having difficulty learning)...It enables us to focus on exactly what it is which denies us our human and civil rights and what action needs to be taken (Morris 2000, p.1-3).

The shift to the ‘social model’, and with it a new language to express inequality, was key to the rise of the disability rights movement in Australia. As Newell recalls,

...informed by our common experience of systematic oppression...we were discovering the social nature of disability, claimed a social definition which
Case Study Two: Disability Reform

informs action. This was a fundamental element in the rise of a social movement of oppressed people speaking for themselves... (1999, p.47).

For government, the social model involved “recognising disabled people as policy subjects rather than simply policy objects” (Newell 2006, p.184). The Hawke/Keating government (1983-1996) responded by funding the first national advocacy group for people with disability (Disabled People’s Australia) and introducing the Home and Community Care Act (1985) and the Disability Services Act (1986) which triggered the twin processes of de-institutionalisation and enhanced support for community and home-based care (Carling-Jenkins 2014; Manne 2011). This period is also associated with changes to the Disability Support Pension that obligating disabled people to gain employment in exchange for social support, consistent with a neoliberal concern for re-regulating the nexus between social security and the labour market (Soldatic and Pini 2012, p. 185).

The Howard government era (1996-2007) saw an increased emphasis on the family as the primary site of support for people with disabilities, and for weakening the capacity of advocacy groups to represent the interests of disabled Australians in policy debate (Jakubowics and Meekosha 2002). Under Howard, the peak disability advisory body was replaced by the National Family Carers’ Voice, the charitable tax status of disability advocacy organisations was reduced, and funding agreements to these organisations required that they report to government any forthcoming media about government initiatives (Maddison and Hamilton 2007). Scholars argue that under these terms the disability rights movement in Australia became fragmented, competitive and predominately organised around disease or impairment labels (e.g. Down Syndrome Australia, Blind Society Australia) making it harder for disabled citizens to take collective action on policy issues (Soldatic and Chapman 2010). Similarly, during this period it became increasingly common for organisations in the sector to represent people with disabilities as ‘consumers’ and ‘clients’ of social services, again consistent with neoliberal discourse that shifted away from the language of rights and entitlements in favour of market based understanding of service delivery (Newell 1999).
The Rudd/Gillard government (2007-2014) was thought to have re-established the policy priorities of the disability sector by ratifying the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (UNCARED, 2008). The convention emphasised the importance of disabled people having the opportunity to participate in economic and social life on the same basis as all others, and of governments’ adopting ‘people-centred’ policies that focused on the unique needs of the individual. This government also formed the National People with Disability and Carers Council (the council) and commissioned a study of the daily experience of being disabled in Australia. The council’s report - *Shut Out: The Experience of People with Disabilities and their Families in Australia* (2009) – showed that although most Australians with disability no longer lived in large institutions, they remained ‘shut out’ from public life. The introduction to the report argued that political, social and environmental changes were still needed if disabled Australians were to experience equality:

> Hundreds of voices from across Australia contributed to consultations...a consistent message from their contributions is the desire to have the same opportunities as everyone else for a fulfilling and productive life. The task that falls to us is to make the political, social and economic changes necessary to enable this to happen. We have been told we need to tackle issues and barriers around disability services, we need to ensure an adequate standard of living for all our citizens (2009, p.iv).

The *Shut Out* report was followed by the release of a *National Disability Strategy* (2010-2020) by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG). Like the *Shut Out* report, this document recognises that changes to attitudes, practices and structures are the key to addressing social inclusion and inequality, and that the ‘social model’ provided the framework for doing so (2010, p. 16).

Legislation to introduce the $22 billion National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) was adopted with bipartisan and broad public support three years later, in 2013. The NDIS replaces direct service provision by organisations funded by government with personalised care plans to be serviced by the service recipient through the market. The
following section examines this move, and the contribution and impact of social media on the engagement of disabled Australians in this development.

**Multi-streams**

As described in Chapter Three, this thesis uses the multi-streams framework as an organising heuristic for isolating the political, policy and problem dimensions of policy change. The following section highlights the factors that policy actors raised as relevant to each stream, and the use and influence of social media in each stream where relevant.

**Politics stream**

In the multi-streams model, the politics stream draws attention to the political pressures such as electoral events, leadership dynamics and interest group campaigns that may occupy the minds of politicians. Although a rolling succession of reports had highlighted to government the urgency of reforming disability services, political dynamics of the time were also highly significant in at least two ways: first, because personal political ambitions motivated key political actors to deliver a signature policy reform, and second (and relatedly) this prompted the peak disability advocacy groups to come together specifically for the purpose of mobilising broader public political pressure for the reform of disability support arrangements. These two issues are the focus on the following discussion.

**Politics: personal ambitions**

The possibility of introducing a National Disability Insurance Scheme was raised at the Rudd government’s 2020 Summit held in 2008. The proposal, which as flagged as a ‘big idea’, was specifically to support people with a brain injury for the course of their life (Australian Government 2008, p. 175). At this time Bill Shorten had recently been appointed to the role of Parliamentary Secretary for Disabilities and Children’s Services. Insiders believe Shorten was disappointed by this appointment as he saw disability and children’s issues as marginal to political debate, with little leverage to further his political profile (Skeketee 2013). It was however a politically expedient time for both the recently elected Labor Party and for individual power brokers to seek to introduce a major
initiative to the parliamentary agenda. While the idea of shifting to an insurance model was under examination by the Productivity Commission, Dr Jeff Harmer, co-chair of the government’s NDIS Advisory Group recalls:

New to the job, Julia Gillard needed a signature reform (and something that wasn’t Kevin Rudd’s), particularly in the social policy area. She signed up to it (the NDIS) almost straight away...that’s basically how it happened (personal communication, 1 May 2014).

Julia Gillard’s second reading speech on the *National Disability Insurance Scheme Bill* illustrates the importance of delivering this ‘signature reform’:

The NDIS will stand along-side the minimum wage, the age pension, Medicare and universal superannuation as one of the great Labor pillars of social justice and opportunity for all Australians. It will change our society in profound and lasting ways, enabling those who live with disability to fulfil their potential as valued and valuable members of our society. I count it as a privilege to introduce this legislation today. I commend the bill to the House and to all those who have waiting so long and worked so hard for this moment (Prime Minister Julia Gillard, 29 November 2012)

**Politics: mobilisation by disability organisations**

Interest in disability matters at the highest levels represented an opportunity for disability organisations (Ava Cresswell, personal communication, 9 December 2014). The challenge was, however, that the disability sector was more familiar with competing with each other for limited funds to deliver their work than to working together. As John Della Bosca, the former NSW Minister for Disability, explains:

Each of the key groups approached disability and the politics of disability in different ways, depending on whether they were advocates, carers of people with disability, or service providers (in Steketee 2013, n.p).

Seeing political interest as opportune, however, the three peak bodies in the disability sector - People with Disabilities, Carers Australia and the Australian Federation of
Disability Organisations - decided to form the Disability and Carer Alliance to mobilise support for disability reform. As Ava Creswell, CEO of Carers Australia, explains:

We came together, to say together: we all care for people for disabilities, we need a coalition to get the NDIS through (personal communication, 9 December 2014).

The Alliance jointly employed former NSW Minister for Disabilities John Della Bosca to lead a national campaign to promote the NDIS. Della Bosca was of the view that the political sustainability of the NDIS would depend on persuading people without a disability that reform was needed:

Instead of talking in terms of vulnerability and compassion we couched it for the public in the social model, and used part of Australia’s cultural furniture – it’s unfair – that some Australians experience high levels of poverty, lack education, lack housing and so on because Every-Australian-Counts. People with disability aren’t asking for anything more, but to enjoy what everyone else does (John Della Bosca, personal communication, 30 September 2015).

The campaign, EveryAustralianCounts, engaged the digital marketing and communications company Essential Media Communications to develop and deliver a campaign. Described by Communications Director for AFDO as “taking the NDIS to a new level” (Leah van Poppel, personal communication, 16 Feb 2015) the campaign made the experiences of people with disabilities its centre-piece.

The campaign strategy arranged for people with disabilities and their families to meet with their local member of parliament to describe the positive changes the NDIS would make to their lives. People were primed to say “I need you to be my champion in parliament” and to take a photo of the MP holding a sign saying “I count” or “Every Australian Counts” which then became the material for social media circulation. 150 members of parliament received these visits. Social media was key to delivering the strategy. As Della Bosca describes, “Social media made it possible to pick up the stories. Instead of reams of numbers and tables, we could tell the stories of people under the old system and new system” (personal communication, 30 Sept 2015).
In addition to circulating images of political endorsement, social media is credited with enabling the rapid formation of a national campaign because it built on the existing networks of organisations within the disability sector. As Della Bosca observed:

Unlike the old days, social media was unique here because it gave the capacity to build almost like a virtual political party. There are a whole lot of other organisations with existing channels, social media made it pretty seamless to follow, and to like others at their source – so we were able to leverage relationships with other organisations (John Della Bosca personal communication, 30 September 2014).

Key policy actors credit the EveryAustralianCounts campaign with the passage of the NDIS through parliament with bipartisan support. It is said that the campaign “got thousands and thousands writing to government – social media delivered the people” (Liz Wright, personal communication, 17 Feb 2015). Likewise, Minister for Families and Community Services, Jenny Macklin described the EveryAustralianCounts campaign as “one of the best grassroots campaigns I have seen” (Jenny Macklin personal communication, 17 Feb 2015). The campaign successfully “confronted and connected voters and politicians with people with disabilities and their carers” (Jenny Macklin in Skeketee 2013, n.p). A number of insiders noted that by the time the Gillard government tabled legislation to introduce the NDIS in 2012, the level momentum and commitment
to the reforms promised by the scheme made it very difficult for either side of government to oppose it (Jenny Macklin personal communication, 17 Feb 2015; Ruth Webber, CEO of Down Syndrome Australia, personal communication, 19 Feb 2015).

In summary, in the politics stream it is evident that the political ambitions of the newly elected Labor government, particularly of Shorten and Gillard, created a political setting receptive to signature social policy reform. For the three peak organisations in the disability sector – representing carers, service providers and people with disabilities – this was a unique opportunity to rally together to garner public support, and build political pressure, for reform. Using a digital strategy that drew on the multimedia and networking capabilities of social media, the campaign for the NDIS was able to connect the experience of disabled stakeholders directly with politicians, while persuading the public that a social injustice needed to be corrected.

**Policy stream**

In the multi-streams model, the policy stream directs attention to the ‘soup’ of policy options that can be drawn on by political decision makers. These options, which can originate from sources inside and outside government, gain traction when they demonstrate financial and technical feasibility, and align with political motivations (political stream) and the public perception of policy problems (problem stream). As has been explained, the need to address chronic shortfalls in the provision of disability support had been the subject of a suite of reports that prompted government to call on the Productivity Commission to examine the financial feasibility of alternate models, such as the insurance model being trialled in NSW. The model that was selected – the NDIS – is underpinned by two policy principles: ‘consumer choice’ in the open market, coupled with an assessment of what is ‘reasonable and necessary’ on an individual basis (Foster et al. 2016). This section describes these and their relationship to the long standing demands of the disability rights movement. While social media does not feature prominently in this stream, the dynamics described here foreground the social media activity that dominates the problem stream.
Chapter Five

Policy: ‘consumer choice’
The NDIS replaces government’s block funding to disability service providers with personalised care plans negotiated directly between the disabled person and a government case worker. Care plans are funded by government, but sourced by the disabled recipient from service providers in the open market. As the enabling legislation explains, this approach aims to provide people with disability with greater independence over the type of services they can access:

People with disability have the same right as other members of Australian society to be able to determine their own best interests, including the right to exercise choice and control, and to engage as equal partners in decisions that will affect their lives, to the full extent of their capacity (Section 4 (8) NDIS Act 2013).

The shift away from ‘block funding’ to ‘personal care plans’ is consistent with trends to increase penetration of the market and reduce direct responsibilities of government in welfare service provision that has been adopted in a number of OECD countries in the last decade (Oliver and Barnes 2012, p.167). Trials of personalised care plans in the United Kingdom have found that those who are advantaged by education, financial resources, transport, geographic location and family support are those who do well under these arrangements. As a result, the outcomes for people under these arrangement have been highly variable (Fawcett and Plath 2012, p.8). In Australia, most state governments have experimented with ‘care packages’ for health services, or ‘direct payments’ for welfare recipients, but largely as pilot projects with selective, voluntary participation and with close external monitoring (Purcal and Fisher 2014).

Policy: ‘reasonable and necessary’
Contrary to the calls of the disability movement dating back to the 1970s, the NDIS determines people’s level of support (ie., the amount they receive in their personal care package) based on a medical assessment of what is ‘reasonable and necessary’ for their level of disability. The reason for this medical framing is the need to cost the Scheme’s projected expenditure, and to demonstrate the cost-effectiveness and efficiencies to flow from the model (Leipoldt 2011). This approach personalises the level and scope of services, broadly categorised in three tiers. Tier 1 is targeted at all 22.5 million
Australians; it provides reassurance that in the event of acquiring a significant disability while under the age of 65 years, a support plan will be available. This is the ‘insurance’ part of the NDIS. Tier 2 of the scheme provides information and referral services, and limited funds to the 4 million Australians who are affected by disability such as episodic mental health issues, or partial loss of physical mobility, but not in a ‘profound and enduring’ way. People in these circumstances are to draw support from their families and existing mainstream health, housing and community-based services (Walsh and Johnson 2013). Tier 3 is where the attention and resources of the NDIS are directed; this tier is targeted at supporting an estimated 410,000 people (approximately 6 percent of the population) with profound and enduring disabilities. The opportunity to exercise ‘control and choice’ is targeted at this small cohort of people, and to be realised by making selections from competitive providers in the market.

There is remarkably very little critique of the policy principles, or the evidence from other countries of the asymmetric benefits of the ‘market model’ of the NDIS, from disability organisations. A lone voice of criticism, Dr Erik Leipoldt, argues that there is a fundamental disjunct between the premises of the social inclusion that have been pursued by the disability sector and the model underpinning the NDIS. He argues that for decades activists have worked to show that disability arises from the interaction of the effects of impairment, social attitudes and values as well as from environmental barriers. Using the ABC’s RampUp blog to air these views, Dr Leipoldt believes:

A disability movement that backs this market-based NDIS is confusing our need for more individual choice and independence, where admittedly we come from a very low base, with that of the self-interested kind of consumer choice and competition that is the market....Social inclusion involves relational processes of engagement with difficult issues, respect, trust and openness. Not top down marketing and appeals to ‘unity’ where substantial issues are never really explored (2011, p. 3).

As well as highlighting the limits of a market based solution for delivering person-centred solutions for quality of life, Leipoldt’s comments about ‘top down marketing
and appeals to unity’ hint at the orchestrated nature of the NDIS development. This is further revealed in the contrasting comments of disability activists soon after the enabling legislation was passed in mid-2013. In December 2013 the government announced cuts to funding (by 40 percent) to eight of the peak disability advocacy bodies, representing 200,000 members (Inclusion Australia 2015). The cuts were introduced under the ‘A New Way of Working’ grants process and targeted impairment-specific bodies, such as Blind Citizens Australia and Brain Injury Australia, in favour of ‘cross-disability’ groups, such as First People’s Disability Network, and the Women’s Disability Network (Morton 2014). For some, such as the peak body for intellectually disabled people, these cuts “silenced the collective voice of people with intellectual disability – those most in need of representation at the highest level given their historical marginalisation” (Stone 2015). However, Craig Wallace, president of People with Disabilities Australia (one of the three organisations that formed the Alliance behind the EveryAustralianCounts campaign) favoured the cuts, arguing that they encourage:

...modern, coherent and more comprehensive national voice for people with disability. This means that people with any kind of disability can directly join, elect and hold accountable the peaks who represent them to Government (Wallace 2016).

These divergent viewpoints suggest that campaigning for the NDIS embodied an ‘appeal to unity’ across the disability sector had the effect of silencing any opposition to the model and, in the words of Dr Leipoldt, “engagement with substantial, complex issues” arising from the prevailing understanding of disability as an economic and medical issue. Wrapped in empowering language - ‘control and choice’ - the NDIS was welcomed by disability advocates. Keen to leverage the opportunity for reform at large, advocates and government used digital tools to co-opt the support of disabled to this cause, and thus blind-spotted the complex needs, abilities and structural barriers to the full participation of all disabled people. As become clear in the problem stream below, people with disabilities were inculcated in this process as both government and advocates encouraged the telling of personal stories that implied that ‘choice and control’ would
see them embark on a journey from despair and neglect to empowerment and self-determination.

Problem stream

The problem stream directs attention to the indicators, events and feedback systems that alert government to the need to take action on a policy matter. On the need for reform, the indicators from within government, and from the community consultations, were clear.

Problem: indicators from government

As has been described, leading up to the NDIS a number of reports had been tabled with government that contained warnings of an impending crisis. Key for government was that of the Productivity Commission, released in August 2011. The report highlighted that current disability support system:

...is underfunded, unfair, fragmented, and inefficient, and gives people with a disability little choice and no certainty of access to appropriate supports. The stresses on the system are growing, with rising costs for all governments (Productivity Commission 2011, p. 1).

Similarly, the National Disability Strategy (2009) highlighted that:

The number of people with severe or profound disability is projected to increase over the next 40 years from 1.4 million to 2.9 million. The projected growth rate in the population with severe or profound disability will outstrip the (general) population growth rate by two to three times over the next 70 years. At the same time, the ratio of informal carers will decrease by more than half over the next 50 years (p. 19).

Problem: community indicators

Early in the development of the NDIS, the Department of Social Security engaged digital engagement specialists (Bang the Table) to provide a platform for ‘Your Say’ discussion fora and storytelling. The Government’s Report on this process states:
Online engagement forums were established to ensure that the needs of people with disability, their families and carers and the disability sector were incorporated into the design of the scheme. This allowed us to open discussion to a much wider audience by allowing people to participate at a time and a place that was convenient for them. This was especially important to reach people with disability who may not have been able to attend an open forum (Australian Government 2012).

The discussion fora asked a range of operational questions about the design of the scheme, such as ‘what qualities are needed for a disability support worker?’ and ‘how would you define reasonable and necessary support?’ and received more than 30,000 visits and over 500 comments which were reported to the NDIS Advisory Council for consideration (Kate Thomas, personal communication, 15 February 2015). Like the EveryAustralianCounts campaign, the platform also encouraged people to document their personal experiences and why reform to disability policy was important to them. 

As Bang the Table website reports:

The most profound engagement outcome was the collection of stories gathered through the site. Some 300 people shared their personal experiences. All were honest and affecting. And all, in a small way, helped to drive the policy debate. It reminded us of the everlasting truth that facts and figures may change minds, but stories and personal connection changes hearts. Heart changes are more capable of driving more profound policy change more quickly than mind changes.

*Image 19: Bang the Table’s approach to consultation about the NDIS*
In another example, the National Disability Insurance Agency maintains a webpage that relies heavily on story based media, including videos, stories, cameos, information links and discussion fora, to communicate information and messaging about the NDIS. It has a suite of social media, and a particularly popular Facebook page, which Kym Charlton, Manager of the NDIA Digital Engagement Strategy, believes is an effective means for instantaneously garnering reactions to government announcements and concerns within the media that the rollout of the NDIS may not be going to plan. In Kym’s experience, “by the time people get to the newspaper, people have already made up their minds. You can help them make up their minds in social media by showing people the NDIS is working and getting positive stories out” (personal communication, 12 February 2015).

During the rollout of the NDIS in trial sites, now in its third year, it has become clear that a new set of ‘problems’ require attention. These problems emerge from unmet expectations, which, according to the government actuary, stem from the fact that the Productivity Commission’s emphasis on funding only the ‘reasonable and necessary’ services for the Tier 1 cohort was not well understood, and that services like public housing, changes to public transport, education and employment services for people with disabilities are not covered by the NDIS (2011, p.67 in Baker 2012). This is further evidence that the momentum of the campaign to generate public and political support for the NDIS, in part successful because of social media, meant that what was actually
being proposed was overlooked. Access to suitable housing, transport and education are examples of the sorts of supports that get addressed under the ‘social model’ of disability, not individualised care plans.

Concerns about the scope of the NDIS are being aired on social media. A Facebook site called *NDIS Grassroots* has over 20,000 members. It expressly aims to "bring the lived experience of disability to the table, and being very clear about what ‘choice and control’ means to those who often don’t have it in their lives, and the support required" (website statement). This Facebook site is dominated, among other topics, by requests for help to interpret NDIS procedures and work with the NDIA, issues with service providers, inequities in funding support by different trial locations, and the scope of services that will be funded by the NDIS. Comments on the site suggest its appeal is that it is moderated by other people with experience of disability, who are also navigating the new disability arrangements. It is a hotbed of discontent about the NDIS that is not found on the interactive communication channels of government, nor the three peak advocacy organisations. Ava Creswell, CEO of Carers Australia raised concern that:

> If media got hold of the Facebook page, it could derail the NDIS as (it shows) the angst and fury of people who haven’t been accepted as clients, or lost state based services, or they feel they’re not being heard (personal communication, 9 December 2014).

This is not to suggest that problems emerging in the rollout of the NDIS are not being canvassed by some policy stakeholders. More formally, a citizens’ jury was recently sponsored by People with Disability (PWD) and coordinated by deliberative consultants *newdemocracy*. With 12 randomly selected citizens, 6 of whom have disabilities, the aim
of this project was to ensure that the implementation of the NDIS “mirror(ed) the person-centred nature of the NDIS. Much like the stories at the heart of the Productivity Commission report that informed the creation of the NDIS, personal accounts and direct experience were at the centre of this project and in turn reflected through the citizens’ jury scorecard” (Citizens’ jury Report 2015, p. 2). The jury process included a ‘social media forum’ that consisted of a dedicated Twitter account and Facebook page for people to submit comments for consideration by the jury members. 78 people participated in the Facebook fora, but the jury’s report does not mention how it incorporated the input received through these channels. The jury recognised that the NDIS has provided people with confidence that their needs would be met in the long term, yet that advocates and government planners needed to take an active role in building the capabilities of the most vulnerable disabled to articulate their needs and access services through the market.

In summary, this stream has bought into focus a range of ‘problems’ with the provision of disability service under the NDIS. As evident on social media, some of these problems stem from the fact that the NDIS is not intended to address the social, economic and physical impediments to the equal participation of disabled people in society, while others stem from the difficulties of exercising real ‘choice and control’ in the market. Facebook has provided a forum where disabled people and their carers freely and informally discuss these issues, and seek direction from others on how to effectively meet their needs through the NDIS. If the number and diversity of advocacy groups that can provide a ‘voice’ for disabled interests is further reduced by funding cuts, social media may become increasingly important for this purpose.

**Observations**

The NDIS is the most significant reform to social policy since Medicare. Through remodelling service delivery and substantial new investment, it seeks to address a chronic short fall in services for the disabled and to correct the situation in which they are ‘shut out’ from experiences that are taken for granted by other Australians, such as access to education and meaningful employment. Prompted by claims that digital tools
like social media facilitated high levels of engagement by disabled citizens in this process, this case study set out to examine how this occurred, and the policy implications. Beginning the case with an appreciation of the historical claims of the disability rights movement helped to contextualise this inquiry. A number of observations can be made.

First, social media enables people who may not otherwise be engaged in public fora (due to physical access, format, availability of support, and so on) to share their views about proposed policy reforms. This case study highlighted a number of formal opportunities, including: to tell stories and meet politicians through the EveryAustralianCounts campaign; to respond to questions and contribute stories to the government’s Your Say fora; to contribute stories via the Bang the Table website; and to provide input to a citizens’ jury sponsored by the peak body, People with Disability. Clearly, social media is well suited to capturing personal stories about being disabled and what a change in policy could achieve, and disseminating these to decision makers. Furthermore, as Della Bosca noted, disability organisations benefitted from social media because it made it possible to rapidly bring together and build on existing networks in the sector; “like a virtual political party” (personal communication). The use of social media in this way was instrument to creating political momentum for the NDIS and in generated wide-spread expectation that the reforms would address the social disadvantage that disability organisation had long sought.

The use of storytelling as a tool is well recognised in social movement scholarship for exploiting popular narratives about people over power, and human need over technical rationality (Thrill 2014) Vromen and Coleman (2013) describe it as an effective tactic for accumulating ‘moral capital’ – recall the CEO of Bang the Table’s comment that the personal connection of stories can ‘change hearts’. Indeed, keen to leverage the opportunity for reform at large, advocates and government used digital tools to co-opt the support of the disabled to this cause, yet in the process blind-spotted the challenges of introducing market-based service provision to people with complex needs and different capabilities. The policy choice disabled people were being rallied behind entailed, at its core, a shift from block funding to personalised care plans in which the
benefits of ‘control and choice’ were taken for granted as uniformly beneficial for all identified as ‘disabled Australians’.

Comments by Wendy Brooks, National Advisor to Australian Federation of Disability Organisations (AFDO) further highlight the temporality of digital storytelling for campaign purposes. She argued that while the EveryAustralianCounts campaign popularised the NDIS, it has not been conducive to the creation of a broader strategy of policy engagement for disabled Australians. She described a ‘getup-for-the-disability-sector’ through which diverse groups could identify and work together on rolling campaigns and policy dialogues, each with its own tactics, targets and participants. She also argued that the shift to personalised care plans made it all the more important for disability groups to launch a coordinated approach to tackling the systemic barriers - not covered by the NDIS - to equal opportunity for the diverse population of disabled Australians (personal communication, 17 Feb 2015).

These comments point to the limitations of storytelling on social media as a tactic for policy engagement, beyond campaigning for short term political ends. The success of the collective campaign for disability policy reform drowned out long-standing (and well-documented) calls to address the environmental and cultural barriers to social inclusion for disabled Australians. Nick Couldry’s (2010) distinction between ‘voice as process’ (giving an account of oneself) and ‘voice as value’ (being ‘heard’ in political terms), helps to conceptualise this. As process, voice can enrich the quality and diversity of information in the public sphere, and therefore contribute to the reflexive processes of public opinion formation. The volume of storytelling highlighted in this case study demonstrates this. However, as value, voice is consequential in concrete terms because it is ‘heard’ by those with the power to make decisions about access to public resources. In the case study, the convergence of the disability movement (long-standing) call for greater independence and choice over services, with the governments’ aims to shift services to the market, foreclosed the possibility that disabled people’s voices would have ‘value’ in this way. Couldry argues that “a system that provides formal voice for its citizens but fails markedly to listen exhibits a crisis of political voice” (2010, p. 101).
Epilogue

In July 2016, the NDIS moved from trial phase to a full national roll-out. It remains “one of the most ambitious and significant projects recently undertaken in Australia” (Gilchrist 2015). Judging by media coverage and periodic reports on progress towards implementation, it is beset with administrative difficulties and unmet expectations.

The first quarterly report on implementation of the scheme was released in November 2016. It showed that the NDIA is struggling to reach its projected expectations for the number of enrolments in the scheme: from July to September 2016, the target for enrolments was 20,000 people, yet it enrolled only 7,440 (Hermant 2016). The explanation for this shortfall is that the NDIA shifted to a new IT system in July 2016, yet did not undertake any live testing of the site before it was launched. The system crashed, with both the portal for participant submission of information for their care-plans (called MyPlace) and the payment system for disability service providers being affected for two months (Macklin 2016). This resulted in significant delays in the assessment of participants and payment of providers. The NDIS Grassroots Facebook pages are dominated by complaints about delays and failures in NDIA administration (Image 22 is typical).

Image 22: Grassroots Facebook page
Claims that the NDIS has not been adequately costed are common in the media. Documents accessed by the ABC through Freedom of Information show that the NDIA has warned the Minister of the risk of a $5 billion funding gap by 2020, and advised of the need to revise the legislation so that the agency can control costs (Conifer 2016). This is confirmed by NDIA’s submission to an independent review of the NDIS legislation conducted by Ernst and Young, in which it states that it needs greater power to demand evidence from participants, as well as clarity on the definition of disability (Morton 2016). The funding challenge is fundamental, however, as CEO of the Not-for-Profit Initiative David Gilchrist describes, “we don’t know how many people need services or what those services might be; we don’t know what it costs to provide those services; and the NDIS is trying to approach all disabilities and all locations in a uniform manner” (2016, p. 1).

EveryAustralianCounts remains a key advocate for the NDIS. Since 2014 it has shifted its focus to keeping its followers abreast of media coverage, providing a blogging platform for disabled Australia to talk about the implementation of the NDIS (see Image 23) and agitating government to continue to meet its commitment to the full rollout of the scheme.
In a recent example EveryAustralianCounts utilised its social media network to encourage people to contact government and demand that people with ‘lived experience’ of disability should hold positions on the management board of the NDIA (see Image 24). This followed an article published in The Australia that claimed Minister for Social Services Christian Porter was planning to ‘shakeup’ the management board and replace it with ‘corporate heavyweights’ such as the CEOs of Optus and Westpac. The list of potential replacements to the board, which was circulated to State and Territory Governments for consideration, did not include people with disabilities (Williams 2016). EveryAustralianCounts reports that thousands of people have rallied behind the #livedexperiencematters campaign, yet at the time of writing (November 2016) no further announcements on the composition of the board have been made.

Image 24: EveryAustralianCounts campaign regarding the NDIA Board
Case Study Three: Social media and the voluntary euthanasia debate

Twitter is like two dogs barking. Two doors down, more dogs start barking. 2000 dogs barking won’t necessarily change politician’s minds, but good research will.

Neil Francis, President of the World Federation of Voluntary Euthanasia Societies (personal communication, 2012)

Voluntary euthanasia is one of Australia’s most debated policy issues (Plumb 2014). It touches on deep and conflicting social norms that reflect culturally constructed values like personal autonomy, control, and choice. It is core to religious beliefs about the inviolability of life and society’s responsibility to care for the most vulnerable. It also taps into concerns that the modern state considers euthanasia to be a cheap solution to the costly and complex problems of caring for the socially dependent (Hitchcock 2015, p. 22; Faunce and Townsend 2012). Conversely, some argue that policies supporting the free market have run rampant in health provision, creating a situation in which pharmaceutical companies are profiting from keeping people alive, unnecessarily (Ann Quadroy, personal communication, 22 January 2016).

Since the Northern Territory’s Rights of the Terminally Ill Act (1995) was overturned in 1997, legislation to legalise voluntary euthanasia has been put to state and federal Parliaments on at least twenty-eight occasions (Plumb 2014). In all instances, these Bills have been rejected by a conscience vote. Yet, since the 1960s, polls have suggested there are high levels of public support for voluntary euthanasia for the terminally ill, reaching eighty-two per cent in 2012 (Dying with Dignity NSW). As the baby-boomer generation ages, the pressure on parliaments to respond to public sentiment on this issue is only likely to increase (Grattan Institute 2014, p.2).
This case study examines the role of social media in the voluntary euthanasia debate: specifically, whether social media is facilitating the resolution of divergent political positions in both horizontal and vertical relations. It finds that social media is being increasingly used in political campaigning by both advocates and opponents to encourage their members to engage with parliamentary inquiries and with politicians directly. As expected, the success of these social media strategies appears closely related to the composition, size and political penetration of the networks on which they draw. The case also finds that professionals at the front line of caring for the terminally ill are actively using social media to raise public awareness of the end-of-life options, and for challenging the traditional meaning of ‘palliative care’ profession. Most strikingly, the case shows social media being pivotal to the rise of informal and community organisations seeking to ‘reclaim’ conversations about death and dying from medical institutions. This indicates that social media is supporting public deliberation in the ‘third spaces’ of everyday political talk, discussed in Chapter One. On these accounts, the government’s expectations that social media will enhance the capacity of citizens for information sharing and networking around policy issues are borne out in the voluntary euthanasia debate. However, once contextualised, this case also shows that the political influence and extensive social networks of religious bodies, particularly the Catholic Church are formidable - both online and offline – and may well continue to forestall legislative reform on this issue.

**Overview**

The dimensions of the policy debate documented in this case study reflect those raised by the policy actors. Researching this case study involved communications with senior representatives from advocates (e.g. Dying With Dignity) and opposition groups (e.g. Australian Christian Lobby), as well as doctors involved in the care of dying people, and government officials involved in end-of-life policy issues. Other than the Australian Greens, political groups such as the Voluntary Euthanasia Party and the NSW Parliamentary Working Group on Voluntary Euthanasia, declined to participate in the study. A wealth of pertinent information is available in the public domain, arising from
recent enquiries conducted by the Victorian and federal parliaments on proposed changes to the law.

The case study proceeds as follows:

(i) A summary of the central theoretical arguments for and against voluntary euthanasia in Australia that illustrates the sources and variety of views in this debate;

(ii) Application of the multi-streams model to identify the policy considerations, political pressures and problems relevant to the debate, and highlight the use and contribution of social media in each stream; and

(iii) Analysis of the impact of social media in facilitating deliberation and communication of public opinion about voluntary euthanasia.

Terminology and key arguments

Terminology

The Australian Human Rights Commission argues that the discourse on euthanasia is bedevilled by problems of shifting and uncertain descriptions of key concepts, many of which are the subject of lengthy legal reasoning (1997, p. 2). Euthanasia, which is derived from the Greek language, simply means a gentle and easy death. In common usage it means “a deliberate act that causes death and is undertaken by one person with the primary intention of ending the life of another person, in order to relieve that person’s suffering” (Keown 2002, p.10). References to euthanasia usually include a qualifier: ‘involuntary’, ‘non-voluntary’, ‘active’ and ‘passive’ and while technically important, these semantic nuances gloss over deep differences about what assisting someone to die really implies (Hausmann 2014). Comments by two social-activist Australian doctors demonstrate this:

Euthanasia is a bastard of a word, it doesn’t clarify the debate. I prefer to use ‘voluntary assisted dying’ – it opens it up. Euthanasia is associated with the animal world and giving a lethal injection. I’ve helped a lot of people to die but never given a lethal injection. For me, the person needs to be given the power,
the choice, and take an active role – so, voluntary, yet assisted, logically by a doctor – to die (Dr Rodney Syme, personal communication, 8 Feb 2016).

And,

... euthanasia advocates wield powerful yet slippery words: this debate has fallen into euphemasia ... The right to kill has been reframed as the right to die. A power bestowed on doctors by the state has been reframed as an expansion of a layperson’s rights (Dr Karen Hitchcock 2015, p.20).

The following section briefly describes the two core and recurring arguments that dominate the voluntary euthanasia debate in Australia: first, arguments about the sanctity of life and the autonomy of the individual, and second, arguments concerning social obligations to the aged and vulnerable.

**Sanctity of human life and the autonomy of the individual**

The sanctity of life argument holds that human life is sacred and inviolable and should be protected and guarded at all cost (Amarasekara 2002). This argument draws directly from the view that human life is created in the image of God. Statements issued by the Second Vatican Council make this clear: “To make an attempt on the life of or to kill an innocent person is an evil action. Intentionally committing suicide is a murder of oneself and considered a rejection of God’s plan” (1962-1965, No. 27). Other opponents of euthanasia believe that the right to life (or not to be killed) is the most basic and fundamental of all human rights, as evidenced by its centrality to criminal law and international human rights covenants (Somerville 2001). Amongst opponents, some concede that there are ‘quality-of-life’ considerations for people who are dying, and that in a small set of circumstances the termination of life may be warranted on compassionate grounds (Walker 2003).

Advocates for voluntary euthanasia argue that it is an encroachment upon individual liberty to prevent a terminally ill patient and a cooperative doctor from acting upon the patient’s desire to end their life. For advocates, to make someone live contrary to his or her wishes is a form of tyranny (Prasser 2012). In other words, it is up to the individual to determine whether one’s life should continue, and the timing and circumstances of
Case Study Three: Voluntary euthanasia

death (Ardelt 2003). Neil Francis, former President of the World Voluntary Euthanasia Societies, has asserted:

If voluntary euthanasia is killing to you, then don’t engage with it, but that doesn’t give you a right to annul other people’s rights (personal communication, 9 Feb 2016).

The specific conditions concerning when, who and how someone can request to die are the main contentions between opponents and advocates of voluntary euthanasia.

**Responsibility to the vulnerable**

Much of the opposition to voluntary euthanasia rests not on the inherent wrongfulness of this act, but on the possibility it will lead to the widespread and involuntary termination of life – that is, murder (Ardelt 2003). Often cited in support of these arguments is the conclusion drawn by the British House of Lords Select Committee on Medical Ethics in 1994:

To create an exception to the general prohibition of intentional killing would inevitably open the way to its further erosion whether by design, by inadvertence, or by the human tendency to test the limits of any regulation (1994).

These ‘slippery slope’ arguments tend to draw the debate into claims and counterclaims over the veracity of the ‘evidence’, which in the voluntary euthanasia debate concerns whether or not jurisdictions that allow voluntary euthanasia (Belgium, Switzerland, Oregon, California, Canada and the Netherlands) have experienced widespread, coercive deaths of the elderly and disabled. Similarly, opposition to euthanasia often involves claims that its legalisation sends a message to the elderly and the terminally ill that it is acceptable to want to die. Right to Life Australia expresses this as follows:

Many elderly people already feel a burden to family, carers and a society which is cost-conscious and may be short of resources. They may feel great pressure to request euthanasia ‘freely and voluntarily’. These patients need to hear that they are valued and loved as they are. They need to know that we are committed first
Chapter Six

and foremost to their well-being, even if this does involve expenditure of time and money. The way we treat the weakest and most vulnerable people speaks volumes about the kind of society we are (Rightolife.org.au).

Advocates for legalisation of euthanasia argue that it is already possible for vulnerable people to be pressed into premature death: people are entitled to refuse life-saving treatment, and to refuse food and fluids, both of which have the effect of hastening deaths. Advocates argue that the current arrangements force people to experience prolonged and painful death – a ‘slow euthanasia’ – and that a lack of control over death is having a more damaging effect on the mental health of the aged than legalised voluntary euthanasia (Dr Syme, personal communication, 8 Feb 2016). Furthermore, some argue that the lack of legal clarity in the current arrangements compound the vulnerability of the aged because, as comments by former Northern Territory Chief Minister, Marshal Peron, highlight:

If you want to have a conspiracy with your doctor to put down Grandma and inherit the estate, this is the country for you – because today, in Australia, a doctor can assist a patient to die with no witnesses, no second opinions, no cooling-off periods or whatever (2015 in Denton 2016).

Multi-streams

This section uses the multi-streams model to highlight evidence of social media contributing to the political pressures, policy constraints and options, and the public perception of the problem of voluntary euthanasia.

Politics stream

For Kingdon, the pressures that immediately occupy the minds of politicians, such as upcoming elections, negative media attention and interest group campaigns, can be identified in policy debate. There has, and continues to be, a great deal of political activity in relation to voluntary euthanasia in Australia. Since the Northern Territory Rights of the Terminally Ill Act was overturned by the federal government in 1997, voluntary euthanasia has been the subject of legislation before the federal parliament.
on two occasions, and before state parliaments twenty-eight times (Plumber 2014). The predominance of legislative activity in state parliaments reflects the fact that euthanasia falls within the criminal law, a matter of state jurisdiction. In all instances, these proposals have been defeated by a conscience vote. Nevertheless, the momentum for legislative change is unrelenting: at the time of writing in early 2016, the federal parliament was considering the Medical Services (Dying with Dignity) Exposure Draft Bill 2014 tabled by the Australian Labor Party and the Australian Greens, as well as a private member’s bill tabled by Senator David Leyonhjelm, and a proposal by a group of MPs from each party to restore the Northern Territory’s rights to legislate on euthanasia. Similarly, state parliaments are considering the results of an Inquiry into End of Life Choices (Victoria), hosting a Cross Party Parliamentary Working Group (NSW), and considering newly tabled legislation (South Australia, Tasmania). This section focuses on whether social media has had a notable impact on parliamentary activity by focusing on (a) the federal parliament’s Senate Committee Inquiry triggered by the Medical Services (Dying with Dignity) Exposure Draft Bill tabled by the Australian Greens in late 2014 (the Greens bill), and (b) the voting patterns of parliamentarians considering voluntary euthanasia legislation.

Politics: Social media and parliamentary activity
The Greens bill is only the second attempt to legalise voluntary euthanasia through national legislation. It draws on section 51 of the Constitution which allows the Commonwealth to make laws regarding the provision of medical services. To source public input, the Senate Committee Inquiry that was triggered by the tabling of this bill was advertised in The Australian, and the committee wrote directly to over 150 organisations and individuals inviting submissions.12 The committee report argues that, as the first bill to specify the medical dimensions of voluntary euthanasia, such as the meaning of ‘suffering’ and the obligations of attending doctors, it attracted an unusually high number of submissions (2014). The committee received 4700 pro-forma

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12 The Inquiry was also published on the Senate Committee’s website, for where it can be shared on Twitter by others (although there is no evidence of this) and via the general Senate Twitter account (21,000 followers).
submissions, as well as 700 submissions from academics, individuals and organisations. Of these submissions, 53 per cent opposed and 47 per cent supported the draft bill (2014, p. 1). Of the pro-forma submissions, the vast majority were not from campaigners but were in response to the pro-forma submission template on the committee’s website, which encouraged people to explain in as little as 100 words or less why they did or did not support the draft bill. In addition, the committee received 170 form letters, from eight different sources, all opposing the bill. The committee secretariat will not divulge where these form letters originate (e.g. Right to Life, the Catholic Bishops Council).

The two key lobby groups in the voluntary euthanasia debate – the Australian Christian Lobby (ACL) and Dying with Dignity (DWD) – encourage their membership to contact members of parliament. They both assist this process by providing draft paragraphs for constructing letters, emails, and submissions. The ACL, which has over 50,000 official members, coordinates this through a platform called ‘Make a Stand: make pollies sit up and listen’ (Image 25). It relies on social media to encourage members to inform others within their own networks of the action they’ve taken. The ACL’s Director of Communication, David Hutt, believes this platform:

...has been very successful – across a whole range of issues – euthanasia remains illegal in Australia, as does preserving the definition of marriage. It’s been a very effective website for us (personal communication, 17 Feb 2016).

Image 25: The Australian Christian Lobby (ACL) web platform ‘Make A Stand’
Although neither ACL nor DWD keeps statistics of how frequently submission aids like ‘Make a Stand’ are utilised by members, figures supplied by the Senate Committee suggest that they comprised only a small portion of the overall numbers of submissions received by the committee. This is consistent with the claims from representatives from both lobby groups that ‘clicktivism’ (in which engagement with a political representative or process is in no way tailored by the individual) is generally avoided because experience has shown that politicians are not responsive to mass communications (Neil Francis, personal communication; David Hutt, personal communication 17 February 2016). Nevertheless, both organisations acknowledge that they are increasingly using social media to alert their membership of new research, developments in other jurisdictions, and opportunities to participate in formal political processes that are underway.

The success of this strategy depends on how receptive the lobby groups’ members are to social media campaigning. This is a distinct challenge for DWD, according to Ann Quadroy, Coordinator of DWD in Port Macquarie:

> Membership of DWD is mostly all over 65 and in their 70s. They are not on social media, and only 50 per cent have emails, and others use the phone. And they are not the sort who think they can change society. They are of a generation that puts up with what you’ve got, and doesn’t question the powers that be (personal communication, 22 Jan 2016).

Logically, groups that campaign across a number of issues have a more extensive membership base offline and online. The Australian Greens, for example, have a following of 215,000 on Facebook and attract close to 2000 likes on each euthanasia-related post, which is more than the combined DWD membership. Likewise, for the ACL, which is part of a larger network of church groups:

> Social media is very helpful in getting the word out about campaigns and achieving a reach beyond our supporter base and talking directly to people. On Facebook, with 13,000 people, it provides an opportunity for peer to peer
encouragement to participate (David Hutt, personal communication 17 Feb 2016).

Research in the United States has found that online social networking is fast replacing traditional church gatherings, like the Sunday service, as the means by which people of shared faith communicate and organise themselves, and is particularly popular with evangelical Christians (Tickle 2008; Boerl 2013). This trend has been noted in Australia among the rapidly growing Pentecostal ‘mega-churches’, such as Hillsong in Sydney’s Western suburbs (Maddox 2005), which has a domestic following of 12,000 and a global Facebook following of 1,377,000 (Hillsong Facebook, March 2016).

Politics: Voting on conscience

Conscience votes are typically taken on policy matters that touch on ‘life and death’ issues, on which a party may not have a formal position – like euthanasia, access to abortion, and embryo research (Plumber 2015). A conscience vote is a pragmatic way of accommodating diverse ethical views within a party, and is considered preferable to a public display of division by members ‘crossing the floor’ (Ross et al. 2009, p. 122). Research by Maddox (2009), Plumber (2015) and Willmott and White (2003) of the reading speeches on voluntary euthanasia legislation before state and federal parliament shows that politicians typically approach conscience votes by drawing from their private preferences, or those of the party leader. Long-time follower and activist on the legalisation of voluntary euthanasia, Neil Francis, former President of the World Voluntary Euthanasia Societies, argues:

Yes, a conscience vote is a non-party vote but it’s a farce: in the conscience voting on dying with dignity bills in SA and NSW and Tasmania, no liberal politicians voted in favour, so there is no evidence that anything other than the conservative party line was being followed. It masks horse trading behind the scene (personal communication, 9 Feb 2016).

Research has also found that religious convictions, particularly Christian values, feature prominently in the reading speeches and responses to voluntary euthanasia legislation (Maddox 2005; Plumber 2015). As the largest religious group in Australia, it is to be
expected that Christian beliefs will be reflected in the composition of parliament and, as Warhurst has observed, the organisational structure supporting these beliefs has significant benefits:

...the strength of this community lies in its size, relative unity, its school system, church media and the high level of weekly Mass attendance. All of these could be utilised. It could work alone and apply mass pressure (2008, p.217).

Christian views seek to influence a variety of policy debates, including education, refugee policy, and international aid, for example. For advocates of voluntary euthanasia, and political commentators more generally, the key problem in the voluntary euthanasia debate is the perceived dominance of the so-called ‘Christian Right’. Reflecting on the make-up of Abbott government, Seccomb (2015) highlighted the issues as follows:

...we have the extreme Catholic conservatism of Defence Minister Kevin Andrews. In between are the likes of the very devout Barnaby Joyce, Andrew Robb and Mathias Cormann. Among the non-Catholics is the arch right-winger Eric Abetz, aligned with the Christian Reformed Churches of Australia, who use the mission statement ‘Pray, multiply, train and align’, and Scott Morrison, aligned with the Pentecostal Assemblies of God, one of the few growing faith movements in the country, with its intoxicating blend of showbiz, God and Mammon (2015, p.2).

The extent of the influence of conservative Christians in Australian politics was noted by all advocates of voluntary euthanasia interviewed for this case study. The views of Dr Sarah Edelman, President of DWD in NSW, captures the sentiment:

Opponents (of voluntary euthanasia) are relatively small in number but have disproportionate political clout. They are feared by those on both sides of politics. Many politicians who personally support legislative change skirt around the issue for fear of alienating religious groups (personal communication, 28 Jan 2016).

In summary, the politics stream highlights that Australian parliaments have frequently considered legislation to legalise voluntary euthanasia. Social media is increasingly being
used by organised policy participants to encourage citizens to voice their views on this issue directly to politicians, and to take the opportunity to contribute to legislative review processes. In this context, religious networks are more successful in mobilising large numbers of people and are more influential because they draw on deep historical roots, a broad organisational structure, and a significant proportion of members who appear readily engaged with social media. The deference to conscience voting on morality issues like voluntary euthanasia means that the decision to legalise voluntary euthanasia rests on the personal – often religious – beliefs of parliamentarians, and/or the position of the party they belong to. Organisations oppositional to euthanasia, which are predominantly religious, can use social media to channel their voices to political decision makers more readily than other policy actors.

**Policy stream**

As outlined in my other case studies, the policy stream draws attention to the policy options that are before decision makers. Options can come from sources inside and outside government, such as think tanks, policy fora, government-sourced consultancies, and research bodies, both domestic and international. In this case study, both advocates and opponents of voluntary euthanasia pointed to the absence of safe and legal options for people with terminal illness to ease their suffering, and the limits of palliative care, as the principal and urgent policy issues for citizens and government. Professor Margaret Otlowski made this clear to the recent Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry on End of Life Choices:

> ... it is not a question of whether we should commence to allow euthanasia, it is already occurring. It is rather a question of: do we continue to ignore it and pretend that a prohibition is effective, or do we act openly and honestly, and recognise that it is happening in practice? (2014, p.6).

This section explores whether social media is playing a role in addressing this situation.

**Policy: the scope of palliative care**

Opponents and advocates of voluntary euthanasia share the view that access to quality palliative care is critical to having a peaceful end-of-life experience and that
governments should invest heavily in the provision of these services (Lyons 2016). Palliative care is a specialist field of medicine that focuses on improving the quality of life for people facing life-threatening illness. Frith Rayner, Director of Communications for Palliative Care Australia explains that:

Palliative care is about symptom management – pain, vomiting etc. When a doctor can’t manage the illness anymore, then they call in the palliative care specialists. It is not necessarily at the end of life, people can survive for years on palliative care. For us, assisting someone to die is not part of palliative care and we will always argue that palliative care is the better option (personal communication, 2 Feb 2016).

However, it is also widely acknowledged, including by Palliative Care Australia and the Australian Medical Association, that there is a limit to the relief that palliative care can provide (Francis 2015). This was brought to the attention of the recent Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into End of Life Choices as follows:

… even the best of palliative care cannot help all patients – between 5 and 10 percent find their suffering so unbearable that they persistently request an assisted death. Our palliative and medical care is highly regarded but it can never be 100 percent effective (DWD South Australia 2014, p.1)

Advocates of voluntary euthanasia argue that relief from the physical symptoms of dying are only part of what makes the case for assisted dying; as Ann Quadroy of DWD in Port Macquarie points out:

If you’ve always valued your independence or dignity and then you’re in nappies being force-fed – along with the pain, this suffering is as important. At the end of the day, existential suffering should be included. You should be able to have medical assistance to die if you have un-relievable suffering, which includes mental health problems (personal communication, 22 January 2016).

Scenarios in which terminally ill people are suffering and cannot be relieved by palliative care are of great currency in the battle to establish whether to legalise voluntary
euthanasia. Catholic health service providers are the largest non-government health provider. They manage approximately 25 per cent of Australia’s palliative care services and hospices and are reluctant to entertain the idea of personal control over the timing of ones’ death (Catholic Health Australia 2015). This is clear in a statement from the CEO of Catholic Health Australia released in the lead-up to the ABC’s Q&A discussion on euthanasia (in November 2015):

It is understandable that a person living with a terminal illness and perhaps suffering terrible pain as a consequence will consider – at a point – the prospect of ending their life. Should we not, as a society, be first dedicating a greater level of resources to improving the living person’s ability to experience a meaningful period of life, leading to death, rather than accepting that the wish to suicide be the product of clarity, unaffected perspective, and a mind free of mental illness? (Greenwood 2015).

While acknowledging the limits of palliative care, Palliative Care Australia believes that people are attracted to euthanasia because they have a poor awareness of the benefits that palliative care can provide. This is confirmed by research conducted by The Economist (2015): its global ‘Quality of Death Index’ ranked Australia comparatively high for quality of services, but low for ‘community engagement’ – measured by The Economist as ‘levels of public awareness’ of palliative care. For Palliative Care Australia, social media is key to changing this: “... we want to bring attention to the complexities, and encourage a discussion, and one way we can achieve this will be by engaging new audiences through social media” (Frith Rayner, personal communication, 2 Feb 2016).

To date, initiatives include Palliverse and TweetChats, both launched in 2014.
Palliverse describes itself as a network of palliative care specialists that use digital tools to encourage sharing of ideas and building public awareness of palliative care in Australia. Through contributions of eight bloggers it circulates views and news through Twitter (for which it has a following of 3,500), and runs regular TwitterChats on behalf of Palliative Care Australia. Frith Rayner of Palliative Care Australia describes how TwitterChats operate: “We release four subjects beforehand – a general one and then three subtopic areas – for 15 minutes of conversation on each that are moderated by palliative care specialists. We don’t have any specialists in the office, so it gives us insights into research and ideas within the professional community. The numbers are small so we’d like to extend it to other consumer groups” (personal communication, 2 Feb 2016).

For example, following the death of musician David Bowie, a TwitterChat about ‘celebrity deaths’ was held (Image 26). It sought participant experiences of being affected by the death of a celebrity, how they responded and what they learnt from it. While only a small number of people (18) contributed directly to the Chat, the conversation generated 270 Tweets in one hour, and may have been seen 300,000 times by others in the participants’ networks (these are called ‘impressions’ in social media jargon).
Policy: the implications of the euthanasia’s illegality

One implication of the impasse on voluntary euthanasia outlined above is that terminally ill people are taking their own lives. In the recent Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry (2015), two State Coroners John Olle and Caitlin English presented evidence of 50 people over 65 committing suicide per year from 2009 and 2012 in order to bring an end to ‘irreversible decline’, such as terminal disease or permanent physical incapacity. The coroners tabled a number of individual cases, emphasising that they do so to assist legislators to appreciate the urgency of introducing legislation: the 75-year-old with prostate cancer and a poor prognosis who was found to have shot himself multiple times with a nail gun; the 93 year old woman with crippling arthritis who smuggled a razor blade into her aged-care facility and bled to death in the bathroom (Victorian Parliament 2015).

Furthermore, patients are said to be ‘at the mercy’ of individual doctors, in that some doctors will be prepared to hasten the death of someone in pain, while others will not (Lyons 2016). The latest survey of doctors (in 2007) indicated that 35 percent will administer drugs with the intention of hastening death, despite the possibility of de-registration by the Australian Medical Association and prosecution under criminal law (Graham and Prichard 2013). Concerning for citizens, research by Magnusson in 2002 found that Australian doctors do not receive specialised training and were widely ignorant about what is needed to achieve a ‘gentle death’. This research also uncovered evidence of coercion upon the patient and the medical staff, of rash or hasty decisions by doctors who have little knowledge of the patient’s circumstances, often in a setting of secrecy and deception (Magnusson 2002). Despite these pressures, the Australian Medical Association opposes voluntary euthanasia on the grounds that it is contrary to the Hippocratic Oath, the professional commitment to ‘do no harm’. Online activity in the medical profession (interestingly, there is very little social media activity) reflects the divided, personal conflicts that doctors and nurses, on the front line of decisions about assisted dying, face when asked to facilitate death.

In summary, at least two policy challenges arise from the ongoing illegality of voluntary euthanasia. First, there is a lack of support for those who wish to die rather than draw
Case Study Three: Voluntary euthanasia

on palliative care. This is compounded by the reality that a large portion of health services for the aged are run by Catholic Health Australia. Social media is used by some palliative care professionals to raise public awareness and widen discussion among care providers about the nexus between assisted-dying and end-of-life care. In time, this may lead to a new consensus on voluntary euthanasia, and in turn political mobilisation.

Second, the absence of legal recognition creates risks for doctors, patients and their families, and hospitals. Some terminally ill people who wish to die are doing so at their own hands, while a large proportion of doctors are practicing euthanasia in the absence of training and systems of accountability and review. Social media plays no notable role in these circumstances but, as the problem stream identifies, public dissatisfaction with current arrangements is mounting and may in time lead to heightened pressures on political decision makers to take action.

**Problem stream**

The problem stream includes those things that indicate to political leaders that something warrants a place on the political agenda. These can be routine statistical indicators, reviews and periodic reports from sources inside and outside of government, or ‘focusing events’ that are elevated by media attention. This section describes findings that suggest social media has made a contribution to (a) voluntary euthanasia as a ‘focusing event’ in the mainstream media, and to (b) the rise of a broader public discussion, aided by think-tank research, about end-of-life choices in Australia.

**Problem: Focusing events from the media**

Insiders claim that some Australian newspapers have stated their support for greater public debate about voluntary euthanasia (Max Sutherland, personal communication, 9 February 2016). *The Age* has been particularly vocal, as illustrated by the following editorial:

> Life is inestimably precious and should be protected – but not at all costs. Many terminally ill people suffer dreadfully, physically and psychologically, as their death draws near. This newspaper believes such people have a right to
physician-assisted death, also referred to as voluntary euthanasia, in strictly defined circumstances (July 2014).

A survey of articles since mid-2014 reveals a clear strategy by *The Age* to report on the personal experiences of terminally ill people that wish to end their lives. While these stories have the ingredients that attract media attention, it is notable that social media greatly extended the audience for these stories beyond the immediate readership of *The Age*. The stories of Victorians Peter Short (December 2014), and Pat and Peter Shaw (January 2016), both covered by *The Age*, are outlined here to illustrate this.

Peter Short died in December 2014 from oesophageal cancer. Described as a ‘business high-flier’, Peter dedicated his final months to campaigning for voluntary euthanasia on the national stage. This involved: a daily blog called *Tic Toc Tic Toc* that was followed by 158,000 people (see Image 27); running an e-petition that received 25,000 signatures; crowd-sourcing funding for a documentary film called *Fade to Black*; video communications with politicians (circulated on his social media channels); appearances on TV (e.g. the Project) and on radio; and attending the Senate Inquiry in response to the *Medical Services (Dying with Dignity) Bill* tabled by the Greens in Canberra.

*Image 27: Excerpt from Peter Short’s blog about contact with Prime Minister Tony Abbott.*
Peter Short’s campaign was pivotal to the public support generated for the Bill tabled by the Greens, as Stephanie Hodgins-May, the Greens campaign manager, explains:

> Peter Short was what was needed – Peter’s blog and petition – he broke down the stereotypes about people who campaign on this issue. I do wonder if Peter was still around, how far the Bill would get. We need a public lobbyist – a personal story, linked with the ability to share it on the web (personal communication, 9 February 2016).

Peter and Patricia Shaw, both academics in their late 80s, arranged to suicide together by taking the life-ending drug Nembutal. Their decision, and the highlights of the life they had lived together, was covered in a feature-length article in *The Age* in January 2016. On their final night, the Shaw’s and their daughters’ families shared a supper, played music, and read together. In the morning, they all sat in the backyard enjoying breakfast. On returning the following day, the daughters found their parents dead, as expected, along with a statement from each of them making it clear that they were of sound mind and took their lives entirely un-assisted. The daughters called the family GP to arrange for the deaths to be officially confirmed but were advised that they needed to call 000. This prompted the arrival of the paramedics, the police, and then the homicide squad. The parents’ belongings were confiscated and the house was cordoned off as a crime scene.

The experience of the Shaw’s attracted public outrage, communicated through social media. The day after the article about the Shaws was published, the author subsequently wrote:

> On my personal Facebook page, people of all ages were sharing the article, urging friends and family to read it. We estimate the story has now been read by nearly a million Australians. Thousands have made the effort to comment on the posts about the story, many sharing their own, often harrowing, experiences of seeing loved ones die in difficult circumstances (Medew 2016).
Additionally, the Sydney Morning Herald’s Facebook page on the same story attracted ‘likes’ from 13,761 people, comments from 1,124,000 people and was shared nearly 4000 times.

Commenting on Medew’s article, Keyrn Curtis, a journalist who writes about aging, noted that:

“Over the past decade, it feels to me as through the tide is really on the turn. What seems to me to have changed is not so much the number of people who would like the choice of an assisted death, but an increased willingness to speak out publicly in great numbers” (frankandearnst.com.au).

The attention (facilitated by social media) toward the experiences of Peter Short and the Shaw’s in Australia are significant, but small in comparison to cases in other jurisdictions. In the United States, for example, the case of 2-year-old Brittany Maynard, who died in 2014 of brain cancer, is credited with “changing the optics on the debate” (People.com). Brittany’s decline over six months, and her experience of having to move between jurisdictions in order to legally access assisted-dying services, was documented on YouTube and attracted in excess of 11 million viewers.
Problem: Public conversations about dying

The second issue to indicate the need for agenda change was the Grattan Institute’s recent survey of Australians’ preferences about dying. It found that between 60 and 70 per cent would prefer to die at home and that hospitals and nursing homes are the least-preferred places to die (Grattan Institute 2014). However, only 14 per cent of people are in a position to make that choice (2014, p.4). One of the reasons for this is that people are living longer lives and, as result of dying later (after 75 years of age), are more likely to experience chronic and degenerative diseases. These diseases are more likely to manifest in disabilities that severely limit a person’s independence. As a result, greater numbers of people are spending time, more often, in institutional settings like hospitals and aged-care facilities where they can access medical professionals (ABS 2013 in Grattan 2015).

Some doctors associate these institutional settings with a declining ‘death literacy’ (Noonan et al. 2016). That is, it is argued that these institutions and their incumbent bureaucracies have crowded out the personal and familial decisions about the end-of-life experience (Benoliel and Degner 1995). Horsfall argues that death has become “cellular, private, curtained, individualised and obscured” and that the notion of a ‘good death’ has been replaced by a ‘managed death’ (2012, p. 374). The Grattan Institute’s survey confirmed this. It concluded that “we need more public discussion about the limits of health care as death approaches” and “we need the courage to promote mature discussions about a topic we may dislike but cannot avoid” (2014, p. 2).

In the past five year’s a number of grass roots initiatives have emerged around Australia specifically to foster public discussion about dying. The Groundswell Project is one of the more popular. The health professionals that run this project foresaw the need for a discussion:

...with no health agenda, no euthanasia agenda, no advanced care planning agenda being pushed. Instead, let’s talk about: what does death mean to you? what do you value? what do you want? how can we work with you? what do you need from us? (Dr Kerry Noonan, personal communication 11 Feb 2016).
One of the ways the *Groundswell Project* encourages public dialogue is through support for a Dying-to-Know-Day: a national day of action dedicated to ‘bringing to life’ conversations and community action about death, dying and bereavement (see image 29) It includes a range of resources on topics like, how to inform people about their rights in hospitals, how to care for someone dying at home, how to talk to children about dying, how to manage a funeral and conduct a burial and so on.

![Image 29: Facebook screenshot from Groundswell](image)

Social media has been key to the project’s development, as the founder of Groundswell explains:

> Social media has been our main way of engaging more directly with people. Through social media we try to share a range of topics and information that is relevant to people, and to our mission around bringing to life peoples knowledge about dying. We want to create a more social consideration of advanced care planning and a family or community context to dying (personal communication, 11 Feb 2016).
‘Death Cafés are a global movement that uses social media as the main channel, through which people are re-socialising’ discussion about death and dying. First established in London in 2011, there are now 133 Death Cafés operating in Australia, and 3,000 worldwide. Coordinated through social media, these are informal opportunities for people to meet and talk about death and dying.

As the coordinator of one of the Brisbane cafés describes:

The collective wisdom that inhabits all Death Cafés is a breath of fresh air, and people are so generous in their sharing. We have met many professionals in the areas of health, palliative care, chaplaincy, ministers and humanists, musicians, visual artists, media artists, academics, who have all been willing to network and shared their ideas and knowledge (No name, at DeathCafe.org.au).

In summary, this stream indicates that social media is playing an important role in elevating the topic of voluntary euthanasia among citizens. First, it is facilitating greater circulation of the media’s coverage of personal stories of the practical and political
complications of managing dying in the way one would wish. Second, it has been key to enabling a discussion about death and dying in informal ‘third spaces’. While not overtly political in nature, these conversations are clearly part of a wider project to ‘reclaim’ dying from institutional settings. This may in turn strengthen public calls for greater personal choices about the end of life, including the choice to legally access assistance to die.

**Observations**

This case study has examined how social media is being deployed in the voluntary euthanasia debate. Voluntary euthanasia is a policy topic that taps into deep yet divergent perspectives about the meaning of life and the individual’s right to choose how to end it. Since the 1990s, legislation to legalise voluntary euthanasia has been frequently tabled in Australian parliaments, reflecting high levels of public support for voluntary euthanasia in certain circumstances. However, all of these attempts have been rejected by a conscience vote. The multi-streams framework makes it clear that social media is being used in vertical engagement, such as Senate Inquiries in response to draft legislation, and horizontal engagement, such as in informal community based activities like Death Cafés. This section considers this activity in more detail.

Parliamentary committee processes are at the forefront of formal processes of policy making, and are therefore highly significant fora for policy dialogue when the participants’ views may be too highly-charged or entrenched to be successfully deliberated in less formal public settings. Although lobby groups on both sides of the debate use social media to promote engagement with parliamentary processes, contrary to the hopes of the *Engage: Gov 2.0* agenda the formal policy actors (parliaments, parliamentarians, government agencies) are not using social media to foster debate on voluntary euthanasia.

In this case study social media was used by advocates and opponents of voluntary euthanasia for the formative task of circulating preferred sources and interpretations of information that may otherwise be factually incorrect or contested in public debate. The Facebook presence of HOPE: Prevent Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide is a prime example,
Case Study Three: Voluntary euthanasia

with a proportion of its content being the circulation of material from religious bodies, such as the Life, Family and Marriage Office of Catholics Victoria. However, social media’s capacity to shape public perception of an issue is far from settled. Neil Francis, the former President of the World Federation of Voluntary Euthanasia Societies, believes on the one hand that: “Twitter is like dogs barking – two doors down, more dogs start barking. 2000 dogs barking won’t necessarily change politician’s minds, but good research will” (personal communication, 9 February 2016). Yet, on the other hand, he has dedicated his energies to establishing a website and social media platform precisely to distribute information about voluntary euthanasia (see Image 31). Called ‘Dying-for-Choice’, the rationale for establishing the site in 2013 was that “it needs to be clear to policy makers and legislators where the information comes from and who is distributing it, and the deeply vested religious circles that influence this” (Neil Francis personal communication, 9 February 2016).

Lifetime campaigner on assisted dying, Dr Rodney Syme, also has reservations about social media as a channel for debate on issues like voluntary euthanasia:

With social media, the comments on things are disheartening. Before you know it, the conversation goes in a completely different direction. It is good for a quick
comment, but if you’ve got something important to say then give me this [picks up the phone]. This is a shitty way [points to computer]. For real communication, it’s lousy (personal communication, 8 February 2016).

Social media features in the campaigning of organisations on both sides of the voluntary euthanasia debate, and as such the volume of information the public is exposed to will naturally continue to grow. Recalling, however, the divergence of views in this debate - that public support for voluntary euthanasia currently stands at over 80 per cent, yet legislation for the legalisation of voluntary euthanasia has been tabled and defeated in state and federal parliaments on close to 30 occasions over the past 20 years – the success of either side of the debate will in large part depend on the scale of the networks they are able to leverage to support the circulation of that information, and in turn to mobilise people politically. As has been demonstrated, the political and social networks of the Catholic church and its affiliates is significant.

Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that social media is playing a pivotal role in horizontal engagement, specifically in the form of non-institutional initiatives aimed at generating public discussion and expanding public knowledge about death and dying in Australia. The media’s coverage of personal stories that highlight how people take control of their end of life choices, and how public institutions like police and hospitals struggle to respond appropriately, contribute to this. Similarly, the efforts of the palliative care community to broaden public understanding and test the boundaries of the profession, further expand public dialogue about this topic. In the main, these activities are not pursuing policy change, but they collectively highlight that the political pathway to resolving this issue has not been entirely captured by religious interests. In the absence of legal choices, people will continue to make their own choices about the circumstances in which they die, resulting in the law being further discredited over time.

**Epilogue**

In the past 12 months the debate to legalise voluntary euthanasia has rocketed in national profile as well-known Australian TV personality Andrew Denton has taken up the cause. Motivated by the experience of his father’s passing, Denton’s campaign has
relied on his personal profile and extensive networks to attract both traditional and social media attention to this campaign. Denton initially contributed his views through a series of twelve podcasts that documented his research around the world, followed by TV interviews and an address to the National Press Club in August 2016. To consolidate these efforts, in 2016 Denton established an organisation, *Go Gentle Australia*, specifically to “spark a national conversation about national assisted dying laws” (gogentleaustralia.org.au). The organisation has engaged political campaign strategist Tanya Jones, who was instrumental in the success of the Kevin07 election campaign (discussed in the literature review), the re-election of Anna Bligh in Queensland in 2009, and Jay Wetherill in South Australia in 2014. This is part of a deliberate strategy, as Denton explains, “We need to explain and find ways to inflame public conversation” and social media is central to the campaign, “I’m trying to shake a big cyber-fist in the face of politicians” (Canning, 2016).

*Go Gentle Australia’s* campaign strategy is reminiscent of the tactics used in The EveryAustralianCounts campaign to push for reforms in the disability policy. It involves individuals attaching their name and photos to a proposed bill on voluntary euthanasia and sending it directly to South Australian parliamentarians. Titled ‘Be the Bill’, the campaign is being circulated through Facebook using videos of Australian celebrity actors and politicians endorsing the campaign and encouraging others to do the same. These efforts are currently targeted at South Australian legislation that will be voted on in early November, which has come closer to success than legislation in any other jurisdiction. In the lead-up to this vote, it has been found that the government whip for

![Image 32: Be the Bill social media campaign, Go Gentle Australia]
the South Australian Parliament has emailed concerns about the embedding bill to a church network, calling for their members’ prayers to defeat it.

As Victoria and NSW draft new bills for parliamentarians’ deliberation in 2017, it remains to seen whether Denton’s efforts, aided by leading political campaigners, will rival the deep and extensive networking capability of church groups in Australia. In the meantime, the divergence in views remains strong. For long-term campaigners like Dr Syme, the political sphere is powerfully stacked against change:

We won’t change the religious opposition, but have to tackle the hypocrisy of palliative care. Ultimately, it’s about educating politicians and putting enough pressure on them to take the issue seriously. This does involve the Web, but ultimately we lack the political nous to really get in there, our arguments are sound but we lack members that will march down Burke Street (personal communication, 8 Feb 2016).

For church representatives, like David Hutt of the Australian Christian Lobby, public debate has been exhausted and change is not inevitable:

Voluntary euthanasia is one of the more persistent issues. It’s an important one, and I understand why some people are so motivated by it. But parliaments have spent a disproportionate amount of time on it. It has been debated more extensively than any other issue in Australia. People have every right to keep proposing ideas, but I think it’s been dealt with (David Hutt, personal communication, 17 Feb 2016).
Chapter Seven: Findings and discussion

Historically, part of what makes for a healthy democracy, what is good policy, is when you’ve got citizens who are informed, who are engaged. And what Facebook allows us to do is make sure this isn’t just a one-way conversation, makes sure that not only am I speaking to you but you’re also speaking back and we’re in a conversation, we’re in a dialogue.

US President Barack Obama (April 2011)

As highlighted in the background chapter, the Australian government, like Western governments around the world, is deeply concerned with the public’s cynicism about politics. As Senator Faulkner remarked in his 2014 inaugural Light on the Hill address, “too many Australian’s have come to see our parliaments, our political parties, and our politicians, as practising ... a values-free competition for office and the spoils it can deliver” (Faulkner 2014). Following the lead of liberal governments around the world, Australia placed great stead in the remedial benefits of social media and championed its uptake. Australian policy echoes the US President’s sentiments, above: a healthy democracy and good policy requires informed and engaged citizens, in dialogue with government, and Facebook “allows us to ... make sure” that high-quality engagement occurs.

This chapter considers the findings from the case studies and addresses the questions motivating the research. The first question is: what is the impact of social media on public policy debate in Australia? The framework for addressing this question is Australian government policy, articulated mainly, but not only, in the Engage: Getting on with Government 2.0 Report. This report discusses what is unique about social media, and proposes a normative account of why it will transform the relationship between citizens and government, and what the outcomes will be. The second question considers the implications of the findings in relation to the first question. It asks: do changes in public policy debate, brought about by social media, assist in addressing the democratic deficit? The framework for addressing this question is Habermas’ public sphere, specifically the various ways in which social media may impact on the normative
conditions of communicative action. This framework was developed through historical and critical study of the nature of public communication and the conditions for political legitimacy.

In response to the first question, this chapter shows that the evidence supports the Australian government’s presumption that social media enhances horizontal engagement (i.e. between citizens). The case study evidence supports the contention that social media increases the availability of citizens’ insights and personal experiences in relation to policy; encourages offline political mobilisation; facilitates citizens’ collaboration outside of government; and supports the standing of organised civil society in policy deliberation. In what I describe as government’s expectations of vertical engagement (i.e. reciprocal communication between citizens and government), the case study evidence shows that political institutions and politicians largely use social media as an enhanced promotional tool, an instrument in their ‘strategic’ management of information and relationships with their constituents, rather than fostering mutual deliberation on policy issues or collaboration around service priorities. Some elements of organised civil society have successfully used social media to amplify the effects of their public and political engagement, but for the most part, the stimulation of the public’s engagement in the political domain appears to be countervailed by efforts from actors in the political domain to manage their relations with citizens on their own terms.

In response to the second question, this chapter argues that social media accentuates existing and well-documented trends in modern politics. Habermas’ public sphere framework highlights three instances of this. First, with a focus on the private domain it is argued that social media encourages the ‘sentimentalisation’ of citizens’ contributions to public policy debate. Second, with a focus on the political domain, it is argued that social media contributes to a shift towards governance as ‘information management’, as well as to the trend recently labelled the ‘intimitisation’ of citizens’ perceptions of political actors. Third, with a focus on the public sphere it is argued that social media is being adopted by powerful, well-established political and corporate interests to choreograph citizens’ contributions to policy debates. In conclusion, this chapter argues that rather than contributing positively to the independence and deliberative capacity
of the public sphere, the overriding effect of social media is to accentuate trends that are wholly consistent with what scholars have identified as the deleterious impacts of neoliberalism on political engagement.

Overview

This chapter has two main parts, as follows:

(i) Part A: an evaluation of the evidence from the case studies, organised around the presumptions of the Australian government’s Gov 2.0 agenda, in terms of horizontal engagement between citizens, and reciprocal vertical engagement between citizens and the government, concluding with a summary that addresses the first research question; and

(ii) Part B: a discussion of the evidence from the case studies in terms of the structural and discursive dimensions of the public sphere, concluding with a summary that addresses the second research question.

Part A: Findings from the case studies

In what ways does social media impact on public engagement in policy debate? As the background chapter described, the Australian government’s understanding of the ‘Internet economy’ gave rise two main presumptions about social media’s impact on democratic relations. To recap, first, that social media enhances engagement and information sharing between citizens: that is, citizens’ ability to engage ‘horizontally’. By lowering the threshold for people to produce or document information, social media will encourage the free exchange of citizens’ knowledge and improve the flow of information to where it was needed, making efficient use of the organic, unregulated nature of networks. Recall here the government’s example of the cancer patient using social media to find peer support and guidance on the best medical solutions available to them. Second, that social media will pave the way for citizens to share information more directly with government and political representatives; to engage ‘vertically’. On the one hand, by adopting social media, governments will be more ‘open’ to citizens’
contributions, both in policy deliberation and as users of public services, and to working in partnership as co-producers. On the other, citizens will be empowered to engage directly, on their own terms, in political processes and with political representatives. In this way, social media will provide an antidote to elite-driven politics and help restore public confidence in political leadership that is alert to public needs.

**Horizontal engagement (communication between citizens)**

The following discussion identifies four instances of social media facilitating horizontal engagement that are common to all three case studies. It focuses on citizens’ experience, but also notes the activities of citizen-aligned policy actors, such as civil society groups, where relevant to the enquiry.

First, the cases showed that social media is being used by citizens to *create and disseminate information* in relation to policy issues. For instance, two of the leading campaigns in the voluntary euthanasia case are the product of individual efforts: Paul Russell is the sole producer of the web platform and social media presence of the *HOPE: No Euthanasia* campaign, as is Neil Francis of the *Dying for Choice* campaign. Both campaigners expressed the view that offline engagement, such as attending parliamentary inquiries and writing to the media, was more effective in generating public debate. But both were committed to ensuring that their research and opinion pieces were available to any interested party, and that this would be achieved with a social media profile. In the case of the ‘lock-out’ laws, individual families that had lost children to one-punch assaults used a popular online petitioning platform (change.org) to raise public awareness of their campaign to increase prison sentences for alcohol-fuelled violence. They also used social media to publicly highlight the support that their campaigns garnered. In these three examples, social media enabled citizens to contribute their own insights to the public sphere where it could potentially be picked up in broader policy debate.

Second, the case studies showed that *citizens’ insights* are articulated and circulated through social media. Social media is being widely used to source and express and then circulate citizens’ views in the public domain. In the disability reform debate, the CEO of
Bang the Table associated the digital story telling that social media made possible with “heart changes that drive profound policy change more quickly than mind changes” (personal communication). Similarly, John Della Bosca, former NSW Minister for Disabilities and Director of the EveryAustralianCounts campaign, observed that “social media made it possible to pick up the stories. Instead of reams of numbers and tables, we could tell the stories of people under the old system and the new system” (personal communication). In the voluntary euthanasia case, Peter Short’s personal experience of dying, documented through daily blogs, Facebook entries, and videos, were used by the Australian Greens as the ‘human face’ of the Medical Services (Dying with Dignity) Bill. As Gov 2.0 anticipated, social media amplifies citizens’ experience in relation to policy debate, and as Beth Noveck (2008) imagined, brings both an ‘expert and democratic’ dimension to policy making.

Third, the case studies show that social media greatly improves citizens’ capacity to organise deliberative spaces. In the case of reforms to disability support, Facebook provided (and continues to provide) the infrastructure for 20,000 NDIS clients across the country to raise questions and concerns about the policy changes underway. Importantly, it is understood to be a community space where these people can freely express their experience of the new arrangements and the progress of its implementation by government. In debate about addressing alcohol-fuelled violence in Sydney, Facebook provided a forum for citizens to rally behind the Kelly family and for 144,000 people to lend support to a petition to government for the introduction of harsher penal responses to violence, as desired by the families of three victims. Likewise, in the voluntary euthanasia arena, social media is the medium by which thousands of people take part in informal community groups to discuss the experience of dying, free from media attention and the highly-charged political debate.

Fourth, the cases also provide evidence that social media is used to mobilise citizens to engage in policy issues offline. The clearest example of this is the use of Twitter and Facebook in organising the street protests against the ‘lock-out’ laws, which took place in Sydney in early 2016 under the banner of ‘Keep Sydney Open’. Approaching the two-year statutory review, the aim of the protests was to draw attention to the impact
of the ‘lock-out’ laws on Sydney’s restaurants, music scene, and entertainment venues, in terms of loss of employment and the international appeal of the city. They also aimed to heighten public awareness about the exemptions from the ‘lock-out’ laws that have been made for the Star Casino, owned by the Packer family’s Crown Casinos. Under the hashtag #casinomike, the protesters drew attention to the comparatively high levels of alcohol-fuelled violence that occur at the casino, and suggested that financial incentives and political relationships appear to dominate policy decisions.

Consistent with this finding, across the three case studies, social media also enhanced the communication and organisational capacity of civil society groups. For public interest groups in the disability sector, social media helped facilitate the presentation of the common objectives of three otherwise disparate, competitive organisations. While clearly responding to the opportunity generated by the personal ambitions of Bill Shorten (then Parliamentary Secretary for Disabilities and Children’s Services) and Julia Gillard (then Prime Minister), by collectively funding a digitally-based campaign, the combined efforts of these organisations were instrumental to the introduction of the NDIS. A similar development occurred in response to policy activity generated by the one-punch assaults of Thomas Kelly and Daniel Christie. The National Alliance on Alcohol Policy was formed to bring together over 50 organisations under a common banner; members ranged from the NSW Police Association to the Salvation Army. While these alliances were formed to respond to a policy issue at a particular time, social media made it easier to quickly present a united, common response in policy debate. It
is unlikely that this level of collaboration would have been achieved without social media, or been less effective, and more difficult and costly to achieve.

**Vertical engagement (reciprocal communication between citizens and government)**

The following discusses the instances of social media in facilitating vertical engagement, common to all three case studies. To recap, ‘vertical engagement’ refers to reciprocal communication between citizens and government, including the institutions and actors of the political domain more broadly. Here, the Australian government associated social media with improving the communication of citizens’ insights and preferences to policy makers, both by providing instantaneous feedback on services, such as waiting times in hospital or the quality of local infrastructure, and in a wider endeavour to empower citizens “to directly collaborate in their own governance” (Australian Government 2009, p. 1).

First, in each case, individual citizens used social media to directly contact notable political figures, consistent with presumptions about how social media will open political channels for citizens. This was evident in the case of the Kelly family and their petition to the NSW Premier for tougher penalties for one-punch assaults, and through the multi-media campaign of Peter Shaw for the legalisation of voluntary euthanasia that attracted direct attention from then Prime Minister Tony Abbott. The use of social media to target key politicians was more pronounced, however, in the campaign activities of the civil society groups, particularly those formed in relation to alcohol-fuelled violence and disability reform. The EveryAustralianCounts campaign arranged for people with disabilities to meet with members of parliament to directly press the need for disability reform, and to publicise these political commitments to the broader public through social media. In the voluntary euthanasia case, both the Australian Christian Lobby (ACL) and Dying with Dignity (DWD) use social media to alert members to opportunities to press their views within the political process, such as letter writing and submissions to parliamentary enquiries.

Second, and in contrast, across the three case studies, the use of social media by formal political actors was very mixed. For the Victorian parliamentary inquiry on assisted dying,
the NSW parliamentary inquiry on alcohol-fuelled violence, and the Senate inquiry on assisted dying, social media was overwhelmingly used by formal political actors and governments as an additional channel to announce hearings and submission processes. There was no evidence that social media was used to solicit public input to these formal inquiries. However, some individual politicians involved in these inquiries chose to actively promote their views of the issue on social media. For example, Colleen Hartland (MP) for the Victorian Legal and Social Issues Committee used Facebook to circulate media articles sympathetic to assisted dying, and updates on the progress of legislation about voluntary euthanasia through federal parliament. This is unsurprising as Hartland is a representative of the Australian Greens, the only political party to actively campaign in support of legislative change on voluntary euthanasia. In contrast, none of the six members of the NSW Parliament Legislative Assembly on Law and Safety (responsible for public consultation on the lock-out laws) used social media channels to discuss the issue, seek public affirmation of their views, or inform the public of how the policy process was proceeding. Indeed, high-profile political leaders, such as the NSW Premier and the Prime Minister, actively used social media to propel their views on the policy issue at hand. For instance, the current NSW Premier Mike Baird announced on Facebook his view that the lock-out laws should remain in place as they are correlated with a decline in violent assaults in Sydney, attracting 17,000 responses. This is consistent with a trend toward greater adoption of social media by Australian politicians, the high point of which was Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and his 1.2 million followers on Facebook (Marshall 2014).

Third, a large number of government agencies were involved in the policy issues examined in the case studies. In the development of the NDIS, for instance, at the federal and state levels, these included, the Department of Human Services, Department of Social Security, Council of Australian Governments, Productivity Commission, and Department of Finance. Each of these agencies used their social media channels for announcements, including opportunities to participate in consultations offline. The central coordinating agency for disability reform, the NDIA, actively used social media to announce developments in the rollout of the scheme, and to promote the
achievements of individual clients that have transitioned to individual care plans. The NDIA has the strongest following on social media (Facebook 60,000+) of any organisation in the disability field.

The case studies showed that government agencies typically utilised social media in campaigns that distributed information to citizens, as evidenced in campaigns about alcohol consumption and violence (via the communications unit of NSW government), awareness raising about palliative care services (via Palliative Care Australia), and the promotion of the NDIS (via the NDIA). In this respect, social media has joined the suite of marketing tools that government’s use to encourage citizens to alter their behaviour such that it complies with government policy objectives. The clearest evidence of this is the suite of campaigns targeted at young people that were released by the NSW government and highlighted the risks of consuming alcohol. These were released on the NSW government’s social media channels and designed for further circulation across personal networks. Using social media in this way is a logical progression in government marketing campaigns, which are an increasingly common approach to encouraging behavioural change in line with policy goals, particularly in relation to health choices.

Fourth, in all three cases traditional offline forms of garnering public input to policy decisions were favoured by political actors and institutions. For instance, in the lead up to the introduction of the ‘lock-out’ laws, opportunities for public engagement included a Town Hall meeting, a citizen policy jury, two parliamentary submission processes, and a review of the Liquor Amendment Act. As a scheduled two-year review of these laws approaches, a youth consultation and roundtable was coordinated by the Department of Justice. Similarly, formal public consideration of the need to legislate for voluntary euthanasia has occurred through parliamentary consultation and legislative review processes in the states of Victoria and NSW, and at the federal level. Through these processes, the public, organised lobbyists like the Australian Medical Association, and associated public authorities like the coroner have had the opportunity to lodge their views. While social media is important in the ways political actors and institutions ‘communicate to’ citizens, there is far less evidence that social media has any significant role in their ‘communication with’ citizens.
In summary, the case studies indicate that the use of social media by citizens and civil society groups is largely consistent with the presumptions of government policy about enhanced horizontal relationships: it increases the availability of citizens’ insights and personal experiences in relation to policy, encourages mobilisation offline and into political processes, facilitates citizens’ collaboration outside of government, and supports civil society’s standing in policy deliberation. Concerning vertical relationships, the evidence suggests improvements in information flow from citizens and civil society groups to the political domain (consistent with the increased horizontal activity), particularly in the form of petitions and campaigns that utilise the personalised content and networking capabilities of social media. The cases also show that social media is used by political leaders and government agencies to amplify their messages to citizens, for instance by cultivating personal social media profiles and focusing on information campaigns, but infrequently used as a channel for open or two-way dialogue between citizens, political actors, and institutions. Opportunities for citizens to formally contribute to policy making remains primarily through invitation to off-line fora created by the political domain, involving more traditional avenues and methods, such as citizens’ juries, parliamentary inquiries and legislative review processes.

**Part B: Discussion**

This part turns to the second question motivating this thesis: what are the implications of this evidence of social media activity? Does social media help to address the democratic deficit? The following discussion ‘changes lens’ from the above assessment – which looked at the evidence through government policy – to the critical framework of the ‘public sphere’. It cascades through three arguments. These arguments are closely inter-related, but for convenience, they each focus in turn on the private domain, the political domain, and then the public sphere and its capacity for communicative action.

To briefly recap on the Habermasian model of communicative action, which is the source of public opinion. For Habermas, the private domain is the place of ‘raw’ and unfiltered discourses of everyday life. Historically, the private domain was where economically-motivated discussions of work productivity and the intimate relations
Findings and discussion

governing the family took place. Discussions in this domain were ‘private’ because they were not concerned with public affairs (meaning non-personal and collective), nor were they political (the exclusive domain of the aristocracy and the church). Habermas believed that the public sphere needed to be bracketed from the motivations of the private domain because these would disrupt citizens’ rational, critical deliberation over collective concerns. In modern society, the informal, opinion-forming discourses that Habermas associated with the private domain are said to take place in myriad more ‘third spaces’ beyond the home (Wright et al. 2015). Nevertheless, scholars acknowledge that everyday talk in private spaces continues to perform an important educative role in constructing political identities and vocabularies, laying the groundwork and seeding the agenda for deliberation in the public sphere.

For Habermas, it is the job of the public sphere to transform the raw and unfiltered discourses of the private domain into rational, reflexively established opinions about the appropriate exercise of political power, including policy decisions. The degree to which the public sphere serves this function depends on the realisation of two normative conditions. First, ‘independence’ from the corrupting influences of private money and state power, and second, ‘reflexivity’, meaning that opinions are formed through deliberative processes of dialogue about what is in the public interest and how best to achieve it. In Habermas’ schema, political legitimacy is the product of relations between the political domain and the public sphere, but the quality of these relations depends on a public sphere in which these two normative conditions are maximised. Recasting the case study findings in this light, how does social media impact on the two normative conditions for a functioning public sphere? This is addressed in three steps.

The first step is to consider social media in relation to citizens’ ‘raw’ discourses of everyday, private life. In all three case studies, social media facilitated the capture and wide public display of personal insights and expressions of grief, injustice and optimism. In Habermasian terms, this represents the channelling of raw, weak discourses from the private domain into the public sphere. On the face of it, this is a positive development, entirely consistent with deliberative practice, in which storytelling assists citizens to contribute to policy deliberation (Fisher 2003; Dryzek 2010; Morrell 2010). As
deliberative theorist Jane Mansbridge highlights, “stories can establish credibility, create empathy, and trigger a sense of injustice” (2010, p. 65). Likewise, for Susan Bickford, talking about personal experiences is one of the central ways in which “people negotiate and dispute meaning and value in political communication...emotional expressions are interpreted, reacted to, given meaning by ourselves and by others in a context of difference, conflict and inequality” (2011, p.1029). However, the increasing capture and transit of citizens’ personal experiences has implications for the public sphere and thus for citizen engagement in public policy.

It is important to bear in mind that social media is designed around a business model that relies on users producing and sharing content through this medium. For the corporations that own social media, these products can be provided for free because the content users provide on them contains personal information, such as profile data, and browsing and clicking behaviour, that are marketable and saleable data. In other words, social media is designed to encourage personal sharing and indications of personal preference because it generates commodities that are sold to advertisers; the more it reveals, the more valuable it becomes (Fuchs 2014; Andrejevic 2004). Real-time media like Facebook seek to intensify user’s desire to present things about themselves to others. According to theorists Palmer (2003) and Marichal (2016) the impact of this is to create users who engage with others as a ‘performative subject’.

It may be argued that the shift towards ‘performative subjects’, or what Brown and Baker (2012) called ‘expressive individuals’, is both a symptom of and a response to a historical trend. This trend is associated with citizens being progressively dis-embedded from traditional forms of social solidarity, defined in terms of class, locality and party affiliation, and instead negotiating a path through life assembling an identity from their consumption choices in the material world. Rose (1990) described this with a shift toward self-inspection and self-examination, in which the problems of public life move from an ethical (and thus political) to a psychological (and thus personal) register. Likewise, in The Fall of Public Man (1974) Sennett argued that the tendency to engage in public life through the lens of one’s personal experience gives the impression that “identity may be freely constructed by talking, and that there is no ‘society’ as different
from intimate transactions” (1974, p.196). Pursuing self-actualisation and self-satisfaction, citizens are less focused on questioning the larger structural forces that shape society, the conditions under which self-realisation is achieved, or the policies of government that promote that introspection (Rose 1990, p. 213). A wealth of scholarship has delineated and instanced this trend as a ‘mass project’ characteristic of advanced capitalism (see for example, Giddens 1991).

The second step is to consider the political domain, and the implications of the findings that political institutions and individual political actors appear to be adopting social media as an enhanced information dissemination and marketing channel. This is contrary to government’s presumptions that social media will support mutual dialogue between political actors and citizens and improved performance and accountability of the political domain. This has two aspects: first, the implications of the rise of information campaigns as a tool of government; and second, the adoption of social media by political leaders. Both of these developments need to be situated within in the context of broader contemporary political developments.

The strategic use of information in the form of campaigns and other artefacts of ‘spin’ has long been a feature of government-citizen relationships. Scholars note that this has escalated since the introduction of media advisors to government in the 1970s, signalling what has been described as the “institutionalisation of public relations” by the state (Ward 2003). The contemporary significance of this becomes more apparent when we consider governments’ reframing of perennial policy challenges as ‘wicked.’ As conceived in both Engage: Gov 2.0 (2009) and the Blueprint for Reform of Public Sector Administration (2010), policy challenges arise from societal diversity and complexity, for which there is no single solution and traditional hierarchical approaches and standard regulatory solutions are ill equipped. Accordingly, wicked policy challenges are cast as requiring knowledge and expertise from diverse sources, and collaboration among political actors, citizens and experts.

A number of scholars have argued that, in modern networked societies, this reframing deftly recasts the core preoccupation (and obligation) of government from providing for
citizens and exercising decisive power to the management of communication flows (Crozier 2007; Bang 2007 in Marsh et al. 2010; Hajer 2009). Bang (2007, 2004) described this as ‘discursive governance’ and characterised it as a shift from an input-output model of politics – inputs from citizens, via parties and interest groups, were negotiated and aggregated into policy outputs by government – to a model of governance in which knowledge is socially constructed through ongoing dialogue. Under this model, there is no singular policy focus or specific policy target, and ultimate accountability for outcomes is discounted in favour of ‘good process’. While the invitation to participate in open and shared dialogue can be enticing for citizens, it can also disguise a subtle detachment of responsibilities for public services from the public sector, and can loosen the ‘democratic anchorage’ of citizens to the state (Boxelaar 2006, p.114).

The significance of the institutionalisation of public relations and the discursive governance becomes starker when viewed in concert with the ‘responsibilisation’ of the liberal subject in modern democracies (Rose and Miller 2008). This term refers to a process associated with neoliberal political discourses (especially with Blairite ‘Third Wayism’)13, in which citizens are encouraged, or pro-actively render themselves, to take responsibility for tasks or functions previously carried out by government. As contemporary history shows, responsibilisation has had hard-edged implications for welfare recipients in the fiscally-constrained times since the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. But of more interest here is how responsibilisation is part of an assembly of policy framings in which government information campaigns articulate the maxims of individualism, and valorise entrepreneurial, market-engaging and self-regulating norms. Here, citizenship is increasingly seen as a responsibility to act in a particular way, not as a suite of rights accruing as a result of membership of a political community collectively sharing responsibility for policy decisions.

The ‘personalisation of politics’ noted earlier in relation to the private domain, is not surprisingly also evident in the political domain. That is, the case studies also point towards social media being instrumentalised by political leaders as part of wider efforts

13 According to then UK Prime Minister Tony Blair (1998, p.4) “rights and opportunity without responsibilities are engines of selfishness and greed”.

166
to appear ‘ordinary’ – imperfect, every-day and ‘normal’ – and therefore ‘in touch’ with citizens as ‘friends’ (Wood et al. 2016). Van Zoonen rather awkwardly described this increased focus on politicians’ personal lives and personal characteristics as the ‘intimitisation’ of politics (1991 in Aelst et al. 2012, p. 207). Scholars have noted that in the ‘age of anti-politics’ the manipulation of volatile variables like public trust and confidence is increasingly important to the exercise of political power (Pels 2003). For citizens, the danger in viewing political leadership with the same expectations of intimacy, authenticity and collegiality that we hold for the private relationships is that it leads to a false belief that public (political) life is indistinct from personal life (Marchial 2016, p. 142). Reinforcing myths of individualism, this “represent the disintegration between the private and the public” and may be considered a key means by which the political celebrity retains control of power (Marshall 1997, p. 247).

Having considered the implications of the findings regarding social media and political engagement in relation to the private domain (the first step, above), and the political domain (the second step, above), the third step is to turn to the implications for the public sphere and its capacity for communicative action. For Habermas, the public sphere was where popular political will was formed, distinct from the motivations of the private and political domains. To facilitate this will formation (public opinion), the public sphere needed to operate under two conditions: first, independent of private, corporate, and state interests, which Habermas argued corrupted and distorted the public interest and second, to favour informed and rational debate that was open to all. The following discussion focuses on whether the findings from the case studies, and the impacts on the private and political domains argued above, advance these conditions.

Concerning the independence of the public sphere, the case studies demonstrate the ways that social media is used by both private and corporate actors to amplify their interests in policy debate. The case of the NSW ‘lock-out’ laws illustrate this clearly: the blogging platform DRINKTANK, which is coordinated by the peak public health groups (FARE and NAAPA), has published over 300 discussion items from doctors, academics and advocates since 2012, available to anyone who accesses their website. As the excerpt from FARE’s Annual Report highlights (Image 35), this blog is diversifying
information and cross-sector policy dialogue about the social cost of alcohol in Australia (FARE Annual Report 2014/15). 2000 people follow the DRINKTANK blog.

DRINKTANK is not the only source of information about alcohol consumption in the public domain. DRINKWISE is a web-based platform sponsored by the alcohol industry, which has won multiple awards for using of social media to advise young people to ‘Drink Properly’. This campaign was seen by 2 million viewers in its first few weeks’ of release – one thousand times greater than the DRINKTANK following. This level of popularity has been achieved by using the ‘coproduction’ and networking capabilities of social media to engage young people in product placement, advertising games, and image competitions through apps, Facebook, and blogs (Griffin 2013). Blurring the boundary between marketing and socialising, this approach to marketing circumvents advertising regulations that limit the presentation of alcohol to young people. Image 36
Findings and discussion

illustrates how popular the approach is: a single advertisement for Jim Beam on Facebook received 73,000 likes and 14,000 shares.

Image 36: Jim Beam alcohol promotion on Facebook

In addition to amplifying corporate messages, the case studies also highlighted that social media enhances the organisational capability of established special interest networks. The Australian Christian Lobby actively uses social media to access its existing network of supporters that is well-practiced in coming together around shared values, and influencing public opinion and policy formation across a variety of fields, such as health, education and politics. As the case study showed, this network is readily at hand to voice their opposition to voluntary euthanasia campaigns. In contrast, the lead campaign organisation for the legalisation of voluntary euthanasia, Dying with Dignity, struggles to build momentum for its online campaign. This is in part because the organisational structure reflects the likelihood that legislative change would occur at a state level, and in part because voluntary euthanasia is primarily a concern for older people, who are not usually strong adopters of new technologies. As a result, the social media presence of Dying with Dignity is fractured (a Facebook and Twitter account for each state) and under-developed. This would suggest that the effectiveness of social media for policy engagement is asymmetric, with the capacity to be leveraged by established networks over new networks. This does not facilitate the conditions for independent deliberation in the public sphere.
The case studies also show that the corporate media continues to play a pivotal role in framing the information available to policy debate in the public sphere. This was clearest in the debate about the solutions to ‘one-punch’ assaults in Sydney. Over a sustained period, both the *Sydney Morning Herald* (Fairfax) and the *Daily Telegraph* (NewsCorp) focused on the grief of the Kelly and Christie families, and on generating pressure for the NSW Premier to target historical night-time hotspots in the city. This singular preoccupation stands in contrast to the breadth of ideas put forward both online and offline, by the citizens’ policy jury, and the Sydney City Council, for instance. Notable amongst these ideas were options that had been successfully trialled in other cities, such as alternative night-time entertainment options and all-night transport to the suburbs. These ideas were directed at systemic change, such as real-time reporting of political donations, or rolling back the self-regulating arrangements for alcohol advertising in sport. Despite statistical evidence from BOSCAR and the NSW Police that levels of violence in the city were declining, and against the advice the state’s legal authorities on the perverse effects of mandatory sentencing, media singularly favoured the mandatory sentence solutions favoured by the Kelly and Christie families.

The pervasive influence of corporate alcohol and media industry interests compromises the public sphere’s capacity to support the independent development of public opinion. Furthermore, by increasing the traffic of the raw and unfiltered discourses of the private domain, centred primarily on concerns for the ‘self’, into the public sphere, social media is adversely affecting the reflexive, deliberative capacity of the public sphere. Political theorist Hannah Arendt argued that when we expand the private sphere of the personal we lose the sense of what is ‘public’ (2003, p. 202). Arendt illustrates this using a séance analogy, where the public is a ‘table that brings us together’:

> What makes mass society so difficult to bear is the fact that the world... has lost its power to gather them together, to relate and to separate them. The weirdness of this situation resembles a spiritualistic séance where a number of people gathered around a table might suddenly, through some magic trick, see the table vanish from their midst, so that two persons sitting opposite
Findings and discussion

...each other were no longer separated but also would be entirely unrelated to each other by anything tangible (Arendt 2003, p. 203).

In both Sennett’s (1974) and Arendt’s (1958; 1970) arguments, the transformation of the public domain is the result of gradual changes in behaviours understood to be ‘public’. As we have seen, while constructing politics around matters of the personal self can be an effective way for citizens to contribute to the public sphere, the subjectivity of personal experience is not an effective frame through which to see the public priorities of the sphere and engage with its reflexive and critical functions. In Arendt’s words, when we see public life strictly though the lens of the personal, we fail to see the ‘table that brings us all together’ (in Marichal 2016).

It is now possible to draw together a reflection on the second question: *do changes in public policy debate, brought about by social media, assist in addressing the democratic deficit?* The contextualising made possible by the case study method has brought to the fore the ways that social media tends to accentuate existing, well-documented trends in modern democracies, which arguably compound rather than address the causes of the democratic deficit. It has been shown that social media contributes to the ‘sentimentalisation’ of citizens’ contributions to the public sphere, the shift toward ‘discursive governance’ across the public sector, moves to ‘responsibilise’ citizens, and the ‘intimitisation’ of citizens’ perception of the nature of political leadership. In addition to these potentially corrosive developments, it is also clear that social media is being used by powerful, well-established political and corporate interests to advance their own interests in public policy debate.

**Summary**

In two parts, this chapter has achieved two things. First, it has highlighted trends in the evidence from the three case studies, and described how these align with the presumptions of Australian government policy in terms of the ‘horizontal’ and ‘vertical’ relationships of political engagement. It concluded that the evidence supports a positive response to the question of social media’s impact on public engagement in policy debate in Australia. Second, using the framework provided by Habermas’ public sphere, it
illustrated the ways in which social media has had a deleterious impact on the normative functions of the public sphere and its capacity to produce independent, reasoned public opinion. On the question of whether social media is helping address the democratic deficit, it is argued that social media is making a corrosive not a generative contribution.
Conclusion

Technology is neither good nor bad, nor is it neutral.

Melvin Kranzberg, Technology and History (1986)

This thesis was motivated by a concern about the aspirational claims of government regarding social media as a potential remedy for the democratic deficit. The objectives of this research were firstly to assess the ‘impact’ of social media through the lens provided by Australian government policy, namely Engage: Gov 2.0, and secondly, to evaluate how these impacts might be ‘assisting’ in relation to the democratic deficit, with the aid of concepts drawn from Habermas. The presumption that this research would be able to reveal a close relationship between social media and elements of public policy formation on the one hand, and trajectories of modern democracy on the other, was flagged by the terms ‘impact’ and ‘assist’ in the two research questions: what is the impact of social media on policy debate? And, do changes, bought about by social media, assist in addressing the democratic deficit? Before turning to these relationships, this chapter discusses the juxtaposition made in this research between these two questions.

In respect of the first question, the case studies provide ample evidence – although uneven and at times asymmetric – of the kind that the architects of Engage: Gov 2.0 would expect: blogs being used by public interest groups to ‘start a conversation’ about policy issues; Facebook communities established to support frank dialogue between citizens affected by policy change; citizens organised through Twitter to provide feedback to government about the appearance of special dispensations for some policy actors; e-petitions to pressure decision makers to favour particular options; Twitterchats among professionals keen to expand the debate among themselves about the nature of their profession; and political leaders using Facebook to announce and seek responses to legislation under review.

The literature review (Chapter Two) highlighted, however, that a more robust foundation was needed to address the second question of this thesis, namely whether these developments could have a positive bearing on the public’s retreat from politics,
known as the democratic deficit. The review illustrated that existing scholarship had a number of limitations: it was overly positivist; relied on superficial indicators of political engagement; glossed over the fact that citizens communicate within a hybrid, multi-faceted, and dynamic media environment; and often draws conclusions about political relationships without adequate consideration of context and power. To augment our existing knowledge, the thesis proposed the use of critical theory and Habermasian concepts that are relevant to the democratic decline, along with a research method that foregrounds political context and relationships. The effect of this theoretical and methodological approach has been to dramatically problematise the findings reported in response to the first question. That is, when the case study evidence is exposed to the second question, the conclusions drawn in relation to the first question are different, and the impacts of social media may be seen to be accentuating trends in political relationships that are arguably driving the democratic deficit across several fronts.

In order to arrive at a coherent response to both research questions, the disjunct between the findings in relation to question 1 and question 2 invites further interpretation. Here, it is important not to overstate the relationship between social media and democracy. For instance, it is essential not to lose sight of the fact that social media is highly dynamic in the sites and manner of its application, and rapidly changing in its technological forms. By contrast, the emerging trends in political culture and practice that are evident in this thesis may, as Sennett (1974) and Arendt (1958) documented decades ago, be transformative but are the result of long-running, gradual changes.

In conclusion, this research argues that scholarship concerned with the relationships between social media technologies and the prospects for democratic politics needs to be open to three sets of possibilities. The first possibility is that social media may be resulting in the largely positive effects anticipated by government policy, but not materially changing democratic relationships more generally. In other words, even where the effects of social media are consistent with the presumptions underpinning government policy (Gov 2.0), there may be no discernible positive impact on the
normative foundations of the public sphere (that is, reflexive and independent opinion formation), nor on the responsiveness and mutual accountability of political actors and formal institutions to the public will. This prospect is worth foregrounding. As the review of literature in Chapter Two showed, it is not uncommon for the presumptions of policy – especially when involving technologies already branded as ‘transformative’ – to be taken for granted, and for researchers to seek empirical support for a relationship, rather than question the deeper importance of their findings.

As this thesis has attempted to demonstrate, this first possibility (that social media appears not to be deepening the democratic relationship) is more likely to be brought to light by research that is alert to the ‘context’. That is, to the forces and structures, histories and political economies that create the conditions in which contemporary ‘events’ occur and their impacts are felt. Such are the forces driving and structuring the conditions of policy processes (for example, the dependence of fiscally-subordinate State governments on revenues from the alcohol and entertainment industries, as shown in Case Study One) that it would be logical to assume that these are more likely to have causative significance on policy outcomes than the comparatively soft power of the Twittersphere or the number of followers on a Facebook page.

The second possibility is that the impacts of social media are likely to be reinforcing rather than countering trends in politics at large. For one thing, there are strong affinities between governments’ presumptions about the political consequences of social media, the ways in which the problems and remedies of policy challenges are framed, and the wider logic of neoliberalism that prevails at the level of everyday political culture in Australia. For another, social media may act to reproduce, reinforce, and accentuate these trends because, other things being equal, they will be adopted and instrumentalised by, and the rewards will accrue to, those already capable of mobilising the rules and resources through which the technology is applied.

It may be argued that despite libertarian and communitarian roots in the Silicon Valley, the promotion of social media by government is entirely consistent with a neoliberal project that, as Wendy Brown (2015) put it, is waging war on public goods and the very idea of ‘the public’ by dramatically thinning public life, albeit without ‘killing’ politics.
Struggles over power, values, resources and future policy positions – of the sort that populate all three case studies in this thesis – are all much in evidence, but the engagement between citizens and the political domain is characterised “by ranting and posturing, emptied of intellectual seriousness, pandering to an uneducated and manipulable electorate and a celebrity-and-scandal-hungry corporate media” (Brown 2015, p. 39). At the level of the second question, social media in these three cases is arguably not strengthening the connections and accountabilities between citizens and the political class; it is not reinvigorating democracy. Papacharissi’s remark provided an insightful way of drawing this distinction: “Online digital technologies create a public space” she remarked, “but do not inevitably create a public sphere” (2010, p.124).

There is, however, a third possibility. Social media may have impacts that prove to be socially generative and positively impact on the democratic deficit. In all three case studies, social media facilitated public conversation and exchange of personal experiences and knowledge. This is important for two reasons. As earlier noted, deliberative theorists like Jane Mansbridge argued that “stories can establish credibility, create empathy, and trigger a sense of injustice” (2010, p. 65). Likewise, for Susan Bickford, talking about experiences is one of the central ways in which:

...people negotiate and dispute meaning and value in political communication...emotional expressions are interpreted, reacted to, given meaning by ourselves and by others in a context of difference, conflict and inequality (2011, p.1029).

Constructing public stories is critical to ‘public making’ and performing politics. From this standpoint, social media is arguably instrumental in respect of one of the prerequisites for a healthy democracy. Second, the context in which this occurs – the societal structures, dispositions of resources, power and values – are not given, but socially constructed. If, as a growing number of scholars have argued, neoliberalism is not hegemonic but dynamic, “a process, not a state of being” (Hall 2011, p. 728), and its progress is not linear, unidirectional or assured, then the net cast by neoliberalism over contemporary politics is contestable, the future is not foreclosed (Newman 2014; Clarke...
Research must therefore remain alert to the counter-hegemonic possibilities that may arise from the use of social media by citizens.

Relevance

The efficacy of the conclusions drawn in relation to question 1, the way these conclusions shift when exposed to the critical theoretical frame and scrutiny of question 2, while at the same time being open to all three possible sets of conclusions, underpin the relevance of this research. One way to draw this to the fore is to return to examine the trajectory of the issues surrounding #indigenousdads from the thesis introduction.

By November 2016 (four months since first appearing), #indigenousdads is no longer the focus of news reports or trending across Twitter. Indigenous families appear not to have contributed to the hashtag since early August when Bill Leak’s cartoon first appeared in The Australian. Yet the hashtag has proven to be an anchor for both horizontal dialogue and significant challenges to political conventions regarding vertical communication. It has become a staple feature of the social media output of indigenous health, welfare and advocacy groups, like Reconciliation Australia and the Aboriginal Health Authority, providing an important lever to ongoing efforts to educate and stimulate informed public opinion about indigenous policy issues. This lever in the public sphere has enabled citizens to invoke the formal machinery of the law and political oversight bodies – complaints that cartoonist Bill Leak has breached Section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act (1975) have been lodged with the Australian Human Rights Commission. Section 18C makes it unlawful for someone to do something that is reasonably likely to offend, insult, humiliate, or intimidate someone because of their race or ethnicity. The complaints have generated social media activity directed at the Racial Discrimination Commissioner, who has been accused of using his Facebook account to encourage aggrieved indigenous Australians to lodge complaints with the

Image 37: Twitter support for Bill Leak
commission, and that this display of bias is grounds for him to resign. These moves have not occurred in the absence of raw diatribe and sentimentalism of the kind observed in the three case studies, as evidenced in debate around the hashtags #BillLeak and #politicalcorrectness, and other claims that there is a ‘war on free speech’ in Australia (see image 37). Bill Leak has continued to defend the cartoon:

My sympathies are with these children and it is disgusting that when you try to draw attention to them, you are labelled a racist on social media and by the loud ‘anti-racists’ who are in fact the most racist of all. I am repulsed and repelled by racists and I have been all my life. Section 18C is an outrageous piece of law which leads to completely farcical situations like this (Thomas 2016).

At the same time, #indigenousdads also foregrounded sentimentalised input from indigenous families by enhancing the contribution of personal stories that are characteristic of the ‘weak’ discourses of the private domain. In this light, it is no surprise that while #indigenousdads was praised by actors in the political domain, efforts to bring disciplinary action against The Australian were quickly extinguished. The Press Council defended Leak’s cartoon as promoting “the contest of ideas that best enables sound policy making, good government and a strong and open society” (Press Council 2016). Similarly, it is not clear whether the Human Rights Commission will find in favour of Section 18C or, as called for by Section 18D, find that the broader public interest is best served by regarding the cartoon as a mark of freedom of the press. The point, however, is that social media appears to have played a positive role in public opinion formation, including debate about fundamental norms in democracy, as embodied in Sections 18C and 18D of the Racial Discrimination Act (1975).

Meanwhile, the manner in which the Royal Commission triggered by the ABC Four Corners investigation was established has all the hallmarks of ‘discursive governance’ (Bang 2007), and the deft recasting of government away from the exercise of power, favouring further investigation and stimulating ‘the management of communication flows’. In this light, government drew criticism in social media for its swift issue of the Commission’s terms of reference and for the restrictive scope of enquiry. In response to
this criticism Attorney General George Brandis said, “The fact that we didn’t hold some endless public seminar with any number of groups to talk about what should be in the terms is hardly the point ... The test is whether it will come up with actionable answers” (Graham 2016). While ‘actionable answers’ is clearly what is called for, critics highlighted the government’s decision to privilege the views and participation of the Northern Territory government, which oversees the administration of Don Dale Detention Centre, not indigenous families, in developing those terms (Hall 2016). Some point to examples of the mistreatment of youth in detention in other states and argue that the focus of the inquiry should be on why indigenous youth are chronically overrepresented in detention centres. These criticisms highlight public scepticism that the royal commission – which should be independent, have broad scope and be well-resourced such that it can investigate why and how there has been an abuse of power – will be able to effectively fulfil its public mandate (Fernandez 2016).

Clearly the situation, and the impact of social media, is dynamic. By November 2016, the Attorney General appears to have mollified persistent public criticism and has announced another inquiry; "I have decided to make a new reference to the Australian Law Reform Commission, to ask them to examine the incarceration of Indigenous Australians, and to consider what law reform measures can be put in place to help ameliorate this national tragedy” (Thomas 2016). This has exposed deep cleavages in the government; the head of the Prime Minister's Indigenous Advisory Council, Warren Mundine, has responded by saying that work to highlight the massive overrepresentation of Indigenous prisoners in jail had already been done and that "this is a joke, and I'm getting sick and tired of the crap that is coming out of this Government in regard to Indigenous Affairs” (Henderson 2016).

Recalling Papacharissi’s remark that “Online digital technologies create a public space, but do not inevitably create a public sphere” (2010, p.124), research must be alert to the three possibilities in this dynamic relationship: namely, that social media, for all the public sphere dialogue generated, may not materially affect deeper trends in relations between citizens and government; it may have the effect of invoking the reproduction or reinforcement of trends that are inimical to the norms of democracy; or be
instrumental in socially generative ways. Researchers need not be sanguine about the possibility that social media-animated political discourse will unhinge the values embedded through 200 years of colonisation in Australia, but they should, as noted above, be alert to the fact that all hegemonies are dynamic and subject to change.

Objectives

This thesis aimed to augment existing scholarship by pursuing two objectives. The first was to look beyond the presumptions of logical positivism and the focus on singular instances of social media in political engagement, to examine social media’s impact in the settings and on the political relationships in which its impact was expected to be positively felt. Each of the three case studies (Chapters Four, Five and Six) achieve this by foregrounding the historical and political dynamics particular to that policy debate before considering, through policy actors’ own views, whether and in what ways social media played a role. As was shown, in some instances social media had little impact on the direction of the policy debate, and in others it was pivotal. This approach was possible through the use of the broad and exploratory tools of the multi-streams model and political ethnography.

The second and related objective was to bring a critical lens to the study of social media’s impact on citizen-state relations. In particular, it drew on Habermas’ insights about the evolving nature of public discourse and the legitimacy of democratic institutions in late capitalist societies. In Chapter Seven the evidence from the case studies was viewed first through the lens of government policy (Gov 2.0) and then juxtaposed against the Habermasian framework of the public sphere. This cast the evidence from the case studies, and the government policy reading of this evidence, in a new light. Considering the evidence in the context of private domain, and then the political domain, and arriving finally at the public sphere, helped expose the various ways that social media is having a corrosive effect on the public sphere’s normative capacity to provide a space for citizens to identify and deliberate on public interest concerns.
In casting the evidence in a new light, the answers to the thesis research questions are less clear cut. What is the impact of social media on public policy debate in Australia? The thesis demonstrates that there is no singular ‘impact’ of social media; rather, as the uses made of social media are highly contingent on context and motive, so too the ‘impact’ for different policy actors engaged in policy debate. As a new communication medium, social media is clearly generating or animating political exchange, particularly in horizontal relationships, less so in vertical relationships. Do changes in policy debate, brought about by social media, assist in addressing the democratic deficit? In respect of the three core case studies, this thesis concludes that the impact of social media on public engagement is consistent with trends that have been associated with driving the decline in democratic relations.

Limitations

There is a plethora of computer packages (and companies) that claim to be able to extract insights from social media accounts: how a hashtag is ‘trending’, the sentiment of a succession of blog postings, or the reach of a Facebook network, for example. In this climate, there is an expectation that research of social media will make use of these tools and the big data that social media interactions leave in their wake. It may be argued that the claims advanced in this thesis would benefit from quantitative verification that tools to measure social media metrics claim to be able to provide. Be that as it may, one of this thesis’ central observations is that existing scholarship is over-reliant on the quantitative analysis of social media, and could be extended and enriched by the tools of interpretative research methods common to social science. If this thesis had simply reproduced popular convention and pursued a quantitative assessment of social media, it would have delivered very different findings – arguably much narrower, less generalizable and less contextually rich. As explained in the literature review (Chapter Two) these dimensions of social media research have been lacking.

Contribution

Critically informed research about the impact of social media on public policy and political relationships in Australia is limited, and insights relevant to the questions asked
in this thesis are scattered across a range of political science themes. Against this background, this thesis contributes to the field in three ways.

First, this thesis builds on the scholarship of Liu (2016), Henman (2011) and Chen (2011) and their efforts to go beyond the ‘review’ of policy pronouncements. In different ways, these scholars provide theoretical frameworks through which the government’s social media agenda may be critically examined, particularly the core presumptions that deeper, more meaningful connections between citizens and government will flow from the uptake of social media. This thesis contributes empirical, context-sensitive research on substantive policy processes that lie at the heart of democracy, such as public safety, the protection of those vulnerable to market capitalism, and the role of the state in the private lives of citizens. This is important because the promise that new technologies will mend the disjunct between citizens and political institutions, and improve the delivery of government, continues to underpin policy pronouncements from governments around the world.

Second, while there is rich speculation in scholarship about whether or not new technologies improve citizens’ engagement with politics, how these technologies interface with the formal policy process – as defined earlier, the core of political contests – is largely unexplored (Galderaro 2013). Little has changed since Hood and Margetts argued, almost a decade ago, that “it is time for the relationship between the Internet and policy to emerge from the ghetto and to develop new theories and hypothesis of contemporary public policy” (2007, p.18). By highlighting social media’s contribution to vertical political relationships, particularly where its use is largely realised, this research has contributed to this wider ambition.

Third, the case studies show that social media has indeed become integral to political communication and mobilisation in Australia today. Political scientists should be vigilant to its impact and the implications, and less dazzled by the new banks of empirical source material – the big data – available for statistical manipulation. It is important to reflect more critically on the relationship between policies and larger, yet perhaps less readily visible, shifts in the political landscape, rather than just government policy pronouncements. Arguably, these shifts, which as remarked in this thesis have been
associated with neoliberalism, have a far more profound impact on citizens’ engagement with politics and regard for the democratic system than fluctuations in the turn-out to elections or the popularity rating of political leaders at any given time. As Judt reminds us, participation in policy heightens a collective sense of responsibility for the things government does, and keeps our rulers honest and holds authoritarian excesses at bay (Judt 2010). If we hold these connections to be true, then there is a critical need to evaluate promises about enhanced citizen participation in political affairs and how they impact on citizenship and democracy. This thesis supports efforts to do so.

**Directions for further research**

New technologies continue to be pivotal to the Australian Government’s efforts to reform the public sector and draw citizens into greater collaboration in the challenges of governing. For instance, in keeping with the evolution in e-government initiatives across the Western world, the Australian Government has published a *Public Service Mobile Roadmap* (2013). Picking up where *Engage: Gov 2.0* left off, it is envisaged that mobile technologies will provide “increased opportunities for collaboration with stakeholders in real-time and provide them with up to date government information regardless of their location”, while also enabling government to “achieve greater citizen participation in the consideration of policy options and decision making through the improved sharing of information and ideas with stakeholders” (Australian Government 2013a, p. 7). It has also issued a *Big Data Strategy* (2013) in which Big Data is described as the key to enhancing intelligence on policy needs, streamlining service delivery, creating opportunities for innovation, and supporting effective delivery of existing programs across a broad range of government operations (Australian Government 2013b, p. 5). Digital technologies also feature prominently in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet’s *Open Government Action Plan* which was released for consultation in November 2016. The Plan sets out 14 action items that government claims “will advance transparency, accountability, public participation and technological innovation in Australia” (p.9). Action item 5:2 commits to enhancing public participation in government decision making and asserts that “digital technologies open up new
opportunities for engagement and there are a range of innovative techniques that could be further explored at the Commonwealth level (e.g. policy hacks, online challenge platforms and citizen juries)” (p. 51).

As this thesis has shown, the links between participatory technologies, public engagement, and improved policy outcomes are highly contingent on the ever-changing ways that citizens incorporate new technologies into their lives, and the influence of corporate actors, including the formal media, and government’s historical approach to a given policy setting. As government continues to look to new technologies to address the deficits in its relationship with citizens; the research challenge remains to question and empirically examine and expose the realities of these assumptions for citizens in the Australian political context.

In considering the evidence from the case studies and the broader aims of re-engaging citizens in democracy, the thesis argued that social media accentuates trends that are consistent with deleterious effects of neoliberalism on political life. While this is the central argument of the thesis, it does not foreclose the possibility that social media may deliver other, perhaps more promising, outcomes. This was flagged as the ‘third’ possibility summarised earlier. Reflecting on the recent work of scholars like Newman (2014), Duggan (2012) and Brown (2015), it is possible to view neoliberalism not as a singular and all-encompassing force – a hegemony – but as a series of projects whose control over contemporary social, cultural and political forces is not guaranteed. As Hall argues, “… no project achieves a position of permanent ‘hegemony’; it is a process, not a state of being. No victories are final. Hegemony has constantly to be ‘worked on’, maintained, renewed and revised” (2011, p. 728 in Newman 2014, p. 136). When we see hegemony as a form of rule that relies on winning the consent of subjects, we see that alternate, counter-hegemonic possibilities are part of our political landscape.

The paradox of the crisis of democracy is that the space for public deliberation about policy priorities, supported by the public sector and democratic institutions, has shrunk and been colonised by a rationality that seeks to naturalise as common sense the pre-eminence of ‘the market’ and with it, singularly private concerns (Brown 2015). In
challenging the neoliberal logic that has hollowed out our politics, we need to find new spaces and actions of public-ness, of framing issues as public issues, and of articulating explicitly public discourses. Social media may help to achieve this.
Appendix One: Interviewees

Interviews took place wherever the interview suggested, including coffee shops, private homes, offices and by skype.

General

1. Sam McLean: Director, Getup.org
2. Dr Andrew Leigh: Member for Fraser
3. Dr Sarah Logan: Digital Politics Research Fellow (ANU)
4. Catherine McGrath: Chief Political Correspondent, SBS
5. Jessica Coates: Executive Officer, Digital Alliance Australia

Case study one

2. Carlee Mahoney: Manager, Eyewatch (NSW Police)
3. Adam Janco: Director, Media Unit (NSW Police)
4. Senior Constable Holton: Kings Cross Police Station
5. Detective Inspector Fitzgerald: Kings Cross Police Station
6. Laura McLean: Media Manager, Council of Social Services NSW
7. Sean Nicholls: State Political Editor, Sydney Morning Herald
8. Andrew Woodhouse: President, 2011 Residents Initiative
9. Alana Mew: Communications Manager, Last Drinks Campaign
10. Peter Remfrey: Secretary, NSW Police Association
11. Kate O’Connor: Director, Safer Sydney, Sydney City Council
12. Suzie Mathews: Office of Liquor Gaming and Racing, NSW Government
13. Doug Grand: Executive Director, Kings Cross Liquor Accord
14. Amy Ferguson: Senior Policy Manager, Foundation of Drug and Alcohol Education (FARE)
15. Jeremy Henderson: Communications Manager, FARE

Case study two

1. Wendy Brooks: National Advisor of Strategy, Australian Federation of Disability Organisations (AFDO)
2. Leah van Poppel: NDIS Information Loop, AFDO
3. Liz Wright: Vice President, Equal Opportunity, Human Rights and Disability Board (Vic)
4. Vern Hughes: CEO, Civil Society Australia
5. Jenny Macklin: Shadow Minister for Disability Services
6. John Della Bosca: Director, Every Australian Counts Campaign
7. Kate Thomas: Media Accounts Manager, Department of Human Services
8. Crispin Buttress: CEO, Bang the Table
9. Jeff Harmer: Chair, Disability Investment Group
10. Ava Cresswell: CEO, Carers Australia
11. Sam Hardiman: Communication Manager, Carers Australia
12. Ruth Webber: former CEO, Down Syndrome Australia
13. Kim Charlton: Manager, Communications and Engagement, NDIS
14. Fiona May: ACT Disability, Aged and Carer Advocacy Service
15. Sally Box: NDIS client
16. Ivan Muench: NDIS client

Case study three

1. Anne Quadroy: Convenor Dying with Dignity (Port Macquarie)
2. Dr Sarah Eldman: President, Dying with Dignity (NSW)
3. Dr Rodney Syme: ex-President Dying with Dignity (Victoria)
4. Dr Neil Francis: CEO, Dying for Choice/International Association of Voluntary Euthanasia Societies
5. Stephanie Hodgins-May: Campaigns Manager, Australian Greens
6. Paul Russell: Director, HOPE: Preventing Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide
7. David Hutt: Communications Manager, Australian Christian Lobby
8. Amy Orange: Voluntary Euthanasia Youth Group (South Australia)
9. Max Sutherland: ‘media watch’ on voluntary euthanasia
10. Frith Raynor: Communications Director, Palliative Care Australia
11. Dr Kerry Noonan: Director, Groundswell Project
12. Dr Adrienne Coulter: citizen


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