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# Chapter 1 — Contextualising our digital age

It becomes normal, if you do it enough. Everything does.

— Dr Philip Myman, *'Pilot', Better off Ted* (Fresco, 2009, s01e01)

## The Australian media landscape

Digital media has been increasingly making a mark on the practice of politics in Australia. In the days before the 2010 federal election, 'progressive' online public interest advocacy group GetUp! took a legal challenge to the Australian High Court. Based on concerns of its members that reforms to electoral enrolment laws made under the previous Coalition government had unfairly disenfranchised younger Australians in 2006, the group mobilised legal resources and supporters to successfully change the law. Similarly, the organisation forced the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) to accept online enrolment, setting up an online system to aid in the registration of voters — a direct intervention in the management of elections (Hopewell, 2010). This group, which had formed only five years previously, suddenly became a significant voice in Australian electoral politics. GetUp! moved from a focus on media campaigns to actions which directly altered Australian electoral law, the operations of the AEC, and the electoral balance in a year that was marked by a knife-edge electoral contest.

The 2007 election was also marked by its use of digital media, this time from within the world of formal politics. Then Opposition leader, Kevin Rudd, was placed front and centre of a campaign employing a slick presidential-style website, and strong use of social networking services (SNS) and online video (Chen and Walsh, 2010). This marked the beginnings of political campaigning in Australia that employed direct video and 'social media' to target supporters and key groups, moving party campaigns further away from the mass-media strategies that dominated political campaigns since the 1960s. Additionally, this use of technology had other meanings for the electorate. Rudd's use of digital media emphasised his 'newness': not just a change of government, after a long period under Prime Minister John Howard, but a generational change from a man associated with talkback radio and television, to Rudd and his emphasis on information technology and the internet.

At the grassroots level we have also seen the way a range of applications of the internet have affected the political world. Increasingly Australians are accessing online media as a source of political information. This continues a process of the

‘mediation’ of politics: the tendency for the media to become pre-eminent in linking people and institutions in the modern political environment. This is not, however, simply a passive process of ‘more TV politics’. People are empowered by the interactive nature of the technology to be more politically expressive in online forums, SNS and blogs. Political memes — viral ideas — move rapidly through a globalising online community. The speed of contemporary politics can be remarkable. A paternalistic and patriarchal comment by a Canadian police officer<sup>1</sup> in late January 2011 spurred a colourful protest in downtown Toronto in late April (BBC, 2011). By early May, similar ‘slutwalks’ were being undertaken in Melbourne (Craig, 2011) as a new generation of young women identify that the personal is political and attempt to reclaim words that control and interpellate women. The rapid movement of ideas and culture serves as a new reservoir for the knowledge and traditions of social movements outside of their organisational contexts.

We’ve also seen a debate about the future of our media landscape, with the ‘Princes of Print’<sup>2</sup> — newspaper barons — under assault by the upstart new media. Draining off the ‘rivers of gold’ that once flowed from classified advertising and introducing increased competition for the advertising dollar, the internet attacks the economic base of mass-media production: the scarcity of communications that is associated with the cost of plant and equipment. At the same time, new and alternative forms of publication compete for the attention of audiences. This impacts the stable diet of most Australians’ media consumption, with implications for the sustainability of high-cost content like news and investigative journalism. On the other side of the ledger, we have seen alternative experiments in new forms of journalism: non-profit publication, the crowd sourcing of stories and content, and citizen journalism have all begun to make claims for legitimacy and political significance in today’s complex media landscape (Deitz, 2010). These new voices challenge established institutional loci of power to define what is newsworthy, and the interpretation of political events and issues.

## On digital media

This is not a technical book. It uses the term ‘digital media’, however, to describe the increasingly complex and interconnected set of technologies that have been reshaping the media landscape over the last few decades. The term has been deliberately selected over other competing ones (e.g. ‘new media’) because of its focus on the key technical driver of change: the digitisation of media content.

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1 ‘I’ve been told I’m not supposed to say this — however, women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimised’ (cited in Pilkington, 2011).

2 A term used by former prime minister Paul Keating (1986) to describe the regulation of media ownership (Guthrie, 2011: 37).

Digitisation (the conversion of content from analog to computer-readable formats) is significant because it allows for increased communicative capacity (bandwidth), higher fidelity, and the ability to easily integrate content into computer networks (interoperability) such as the internet. This has powerful implications for the reach of information and the way information processing (data storage and analysis) is applied to ‘ordinary’ communication activities.

A good example of this is the remoulding of content channels into the ‘social media’. Social media is defined as by Axel Bruns and Mark Bahnisch as ‘technologies to provide space for in-depth social interaction, community formation, and the tackling of collaborative projects’ (2009: 1). Social media is a subset of digital media that adds database capacity to communication to record and represent the social relationship between participants. In doing so, technologies like Facebook, Twitter and blogs are able to enhance communication within social groups: either through re-creating offline social networks (i.e. university mates) or generating new communities of interest (i.e. Furry fans) (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). Like ‘old media’ these systems allow for communication, but the addition of computerisation and networking technologies enhances the way that particular individuals and groups can be identified and brought together. Thus, these technologies enhance ‘discoverability’ and ‘social cohesion’ through automation. This changes our basic relationship with media from passive recipient to active engagement.

While the idea of ‘convergence’ sees a future where all digital media is contained on an internet-enabled system, to date, digitisation has produced a hybrid media system that is gradually taking previously specific-purpose technologies and turning them into devices with a wide range of applications. The most visible examples of this have been in the way computers (once glorified typewriters and calculators) are now entertainment and communication systems, and how telephones have got smart and morphed into minicomputers. Importantly, convergence is not simply a technical process, but can also be seen in the way that digital media that remain offline (not connected to an open interoperable computer network) get ‘overlaid’ by social media through the creation of online communities around these channels (such as the use of Twitter hashtags for particular television shows or the sharing of static content pages through SNSs). Thus, the emphasis of this book is on that part of the digital media environment that is being drawn into the networked environment of the internet, either directly through technical means, or indirectly through the social media.

## Non-linear, multi-factoral implications

Each of the vignettes above is dissimilar in their scope, scale and implications. Change comes from a variety of sources (individuals, organisations, economic

signals, cultural production and meaning-making). Because of the considerably diffused (or alternatively, ubiquitous) impacts that digital media have had on Australian political life, it is easy to discount the importance of digital technologies in this nation. This 'normalisation hypothesis' — that social factors and tradition bring new technological developments into alignment with existing power distributions and patterns of social action (Resnick, 1999) — is widely accepted as the dominant description of the way digital media has been diffused in Australian society. The argument rests on the premise that technologies may be catalytic for change, but this is shaped and moderated by existing power structures and norms.

Because of this, the study of new types of media within the discipline of Australian politics has not been a growth area, attracting modest levels of attention when compared with that seen in comparative nations. While the media landscape has undergone dramatic and radical successive reconfigurations over the last two decades as a result of the rise of digital technologies, a tendency in the academy has been to see the political implications of this technological reconfiguration as comparatively small. Initial 'hype' about the potential for digital media to bring about 'electronic democracy' (e-democracy) at the turn of the century did not result in a fundamental alteration in the institutional or individual political practices of Australians, and more recent moves towards 'Government 2.0' has not produced much scholarly interest by researchers in politics or public policy. Similarly, while a digital media pioneer in its early stages (through the use of digital media, but also in the development of policies aimed at increasing high-speed internet uptake in Australia), the Rudd Labor government quickly floundered in a quagmire of over-reaching reforms, with Rudd's use of microblogging-cum-instant messaging<sup>3</sup> service Twitter painted as symbolic of a man out of touch with ordinary Australia (Maiden, 2010).

This is unfortunate. Dramatic claims about the power of digital media technologies to revitalise political participation and practice have, largely, been unrealised in Australia. The massively expanding media environment of Australians has, and will have, however, an important impact on political practice. This viewpoint comes from the observation that citizens of developed nations are increasingly embedded in an environment that is shaped and defined by media. Changes to this environment's contours, content and actors, therefore, have impacts on the shape and nature of the political world. We take our existing expectations, beliefs, and practices with us into this new environment. Thus, there will be continuity, but continuity with change. Overall, therefore, what we see is a

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3 I recognise the definitional ambiguity here. Following Goggin and Crawford (2010) we have to recognise that definition of new media by the technical characteristics of the specific channel/tool is problematic. The increasingly active way that users/audiences employ technologies make static definitions of questionable value. This is particularly the case where there are considerable intergenerational differences in the way media channels are used.

set of very complex and non-linear changes that have resulted from the rise of digital media (Castells, 2000: 74). Far from being technologically deterministic in nature, these changes stem from the altered social world in which we live: as active agents who use media as instrumental tools for action, but also as carriers of culture.

The nature of continuity and change in Australian digital politics is what this book explores.

## Media thinking: Is anything really ‘new’ here?

One of the longstanding central concerns of the study of ‘political communication’ (the largely North American individualistic formulation focusing on political candidates) or ‘media politics’ (the more British and Australian transition, with emphasis on organisational power), is the impact that media has on political life (Goot, 2009: 174–75). Media in these two traditions are either seen as technologies and practices that serve as modifiers of human communication at one level of analysis, or as a set of formal social institutions with key democratic ‘functions’. We have long accepted that media form an increasingly important part of political practice around the world: through the extended capacity of individuals to know about and participate in political events outside of their immediate physical environment, and as political actors in their own right. The rise of national media reflects the rise of the nation state itself, and the gradual shift to the centre, in nations like Australia, of power and authority. In addition, effective national communication systems are essential for the operation of contemporary bureaucracies, and it is possible to see political systems as not just systems for the distribution and use of power, but also as information systems: ‘a collection of elements (people, hardware, software, and data) and procedures that interact to generate information needed by users in an organization’ (Morley and Parker, 2009: 499).

The structure of power shapes the behaviour and responses of those who live within its sphere. An increasingly mediated politics thus requires individuals who have ‘media literacies’. These literacies are what Pierre Bourdieu (1973) would call symbolic and cultural ‘capital’: not just skills, but also knowledge of the genre conventions and lingo of the communities in which they need to operate. This capital creates meaning in any particular area of human activity: art, sport, consumption and politics (Harker, et al., 1990: 8, 13). Without the ability to ‘read’ and value symbols and behaviours, there would be no cultural system that creates power relations beyond the raw exercise of individual violence. Politicians, in their special field of mediatised politics, see media as both avenues to communicate to a variety of political constituencies and organisations

to be courted and controlled. Thus, the skills of the effective leader today lie in maintaining their party or organisational support base, developing effective public policy (which may or may not be 'good policy' as we'll see in Chapter 7), and being an effective media 'performer' (Louw, 2010). In addition, as politics in Australia is a quasi-competitive sport, the ability to innovate in the use of media (and particularly new forms of media), may provide competitive advantage to some individuals and organisations, encouraging the development of mediated political practices that evolve and change as the media landscape changes.

The key question we have to ask, therefore, concerns the key characteristics (technical, social and political) of digital media that observers of politics need to focus upon to make meaningful assessments of recent political behaviour in Australia, and the trajectory of political practice into the future.

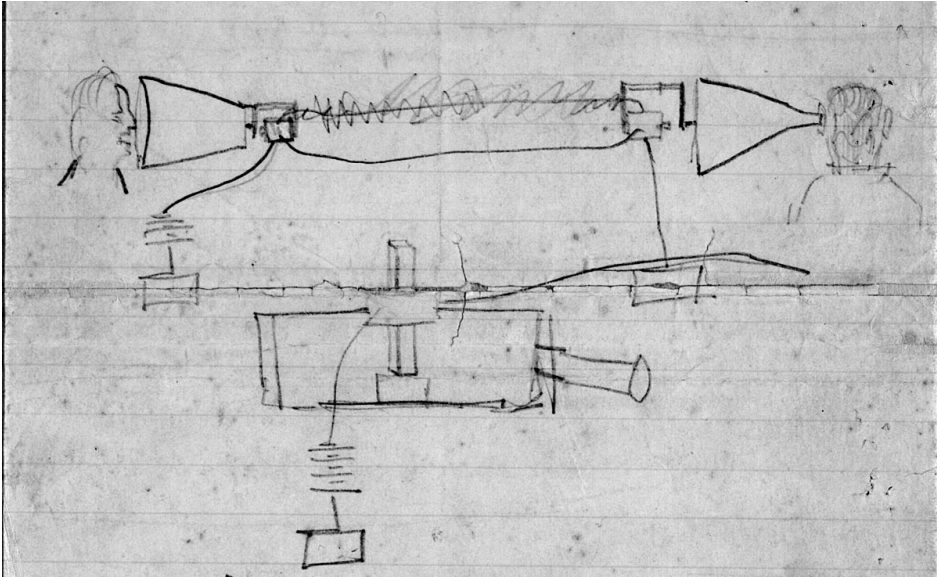
## Thinking about 'media': From technical to social models

Before discussing digital media, we need to think about what we mean by 'media', both as a general definition, and in comparison with current developments. Marshall McLuhan oriented us to the need to pay attention to technologies so naturalised or domesticated that we fail to fully consider their implications and effects. He chided the complacent with the observation that '... fish know exactly nothing is water, since they have no anti-environment which would enable them to perceive the element they live in' (McLuhan and Fiore, 1968). We live in a media-saturated world and, thus need to reflect on our cultural medium.

There are many ways to look at 'media'. A traditional and technical view has tended to see media as a modifier for human speech communication — something we've developed to enhance our capabilities in the same way a club expanded our capacity to kill through increasing the effective strength and reach of our arm. A good example of this is the common communication models that look at media as a transmitter of information at a distance or over time, where the optimal design is the one which reduces the likelihood of corruption or decay (through, for example, 'redundancy'), or degradation (it has 'high fidelity' (hi-fi) and introduces low levels of 'noise' to the signal) (Shannon, 1948). In these models of communication, such as the basic design of the Bell's telephone (see Illustration 1), there tends to be a focus on a very simple view of human communication: such as the conversion (encoding) of sound into electrical impulses and their reproduction (decoding) at a distance. These models have tended to dominate the views on media during most of the 20th century, with a resulting tendency to see mediated communication as a process focused on production and transportation, rather than on reception and interpretation. In addition, these models privilege speech and face-to-face communication as more



‘authentic’ and natural forms of communication, an assumption we’ll see has implications for power and authority, as well as the methodologies employed to evaluate media power.



**Illustration 1: Extract of Alexander Graham Bell’s sketch of the telephone (1876)**

Source: Library of Congress, Manuscript Division

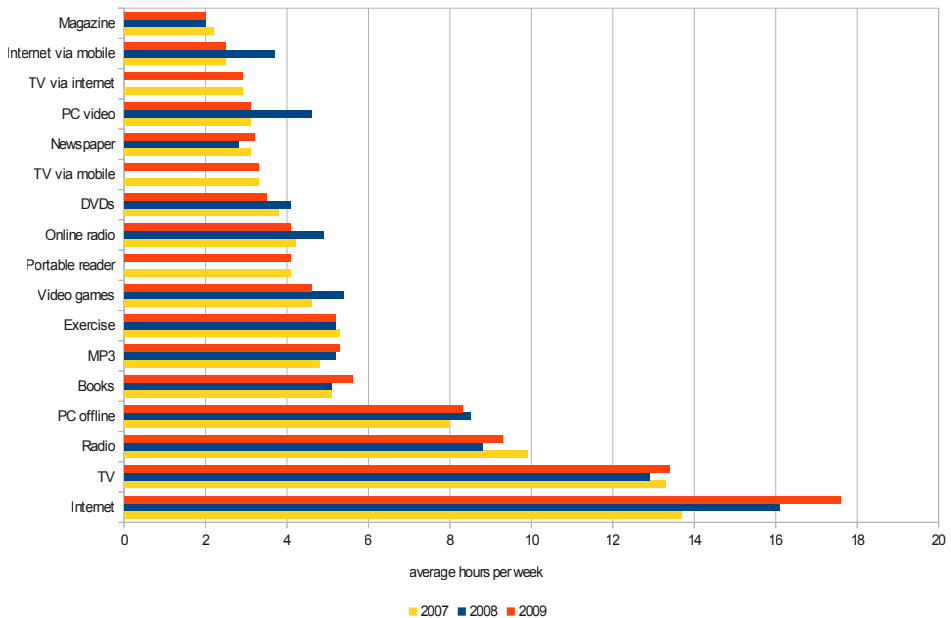
While the idea that the communicative world we inhabited was ‘naturally’ dominated by face-to-face communication *may* have been true of Bell’s time, since the advent of, first, widespread literacy and, then, broadcast media, Australians have been increasingly engaged in their social world through a variety of communications technology. Until the late 1990s these technologies tended to be defined by *scarcity*: either the economic scarcity of publication and mass circulation (which limited the number of newspapers, for example), or the scarcity of electromagnetic spectrum and the limited number of frequencies available for analogue radio and television broadcasting. This placed a small number of individuals — the media barons — at the apex of organisations that controlled these media organisations, a position that conveyed both status and political influence.

The advent of digital technology and computer networking (radically decentralising the production, storage and distribution of content) has had a dramatic impact on scarcity. No longer are we subject to the economics of spectrum availability as the boundaries of our media consumption; today, it’s the number of waking hours that limits the time Australians spend in mediated communications of some form or other. This is illustrated in Figure



1. Demonstrating Australians' hourly consumption per week of different media forms, it shows us a number of things: first, that the type of media needed to be studied continues to expand, as the array of consumer media products and media expands.

In addition, the way that we might think about characterising media audiences — say for political segmentation purposes — also changes. This diversity makes it difficult to define media consumers with simplistic tags like 'ABC viewer' or 'talkback listener', because our array of media channels is increasingly complex and individualised. Secondly, the number of hours that Australians spend consuming media has increased over time, particularly online and digital media. Thus, while we may have once feared becoming a nation of 'couch potatoes', vacantly sucking on the 'cathode ray nipple' (Franti and Tse, 1992), Australians are increasingly supplementing — not replacing — these 'one way' media with more interactive and dynamic media forms.



**Figure 1: Weekly hours spent per media**

Sources: Compiled from Nielsen, 2009, 2010

The figure shows that the nature of our world is progressively defined in terms of the media we use, for different purposes, and with different outcomes. In general there are three ways we can look at media: as a channel of communication (the 'channel effects' perspective), as a set of institutions (the 'media power' perspective), and as a set of tools that individuals can employ for different communicative purposes (our 'media environment', Krotz, 2009). Each has relevance for this book. Through either the analytical isolation of

individual digital sub-media<sup>4</sup> of communication to look at their political use and implications (such as SNSs for ‘microactivism’, see SNS politics, Chapter 3); the examination of new organisations or institutional political practice; and, via a constructivist media sociology which considers how we use media to create social meaning in both deliberative and non-reflective ways. This latter perspective is critical in that it argues media so saturates our lives that it has supplanted other forms of socialisation in defining ourselves as individuals, communities or nations. This view has traditionally been a story of top-down power; an insidious process of elite media institutions ‘cultivating’ attitudes among a passive viewing public (Gerbner and Gross, 1976): the homogeneous group of paste-eaters formally known as ‘the audience’.

Does the interactive nature of digital media change this view?

## Digital media as a ‘platform’

The view that mass media audiences are passive recipients of media messages is old and not without ongoing controversy. Stemming from work looking at the effectiveness of wartime propaganda, writers like Walter Lippmann (1925) saw the general public as uninformed and easily manipulated by authoritative voices. Discounting the atypical nature of war propaganda in their case selection, these authors saw the emerging mass media as highly effective in directing the biases and opinions of the ‘mob’, a body politic largely made up of reactionary simpletons and paste-eaters. In doing so they explained away the insanity of nations engaging in total war, not once, but twice in short order.

While later writers have shown that the public is far more engaged and selective in the way they take up and filter media messages (Lazarsfeld, et al. (1944) being the earliest influential work in this tradition), the tendency to view particular audiences as uninformed or docile remains active in our political discourse. These perspectives often contain implicit or explicit biases embedded within them about the nature of these audiences (of which there are commonly underlying narratives about the political literacy of different classes), and their impact on the wider political culture (normally negative). In Australia we see characterisations of, for example, tabloid newspaper readers and commercial

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4 A sub-media, in this context, is a communications technology defined by a specific technical standard. Thus, within the arena of internet communication, electronic mail and World Wide Web content are sub-media, whereas blogs, webpages, and social networking services are not. These latter represent different genre conventions, channels, and/or online communities. It is recognised, however, that this classification is increasingly ambiguous as different sub-media become integrated into the web environment and the distinctions between types of online interaction are more usefully defined in terms of their social meaning. The book uses ‘channel’ as a meta-descriptor.

talkback radio audiences in this way. These audiences tend to be presented as followers of particular media 'lines', rather than active decision makers in their media consumption habits (see, for example, Hamilton (2006)).

While this clearly has political implications in the ongoing battle over who is 'worthy' to be represented and what defines a political middle ground in Australia (a way in which we 'prime' political discourse towards the way in which we prefer it to be interpreted), the notion of groups of individuals as passive and habitual consumers of media has to be challenged. The increasing diversity of media sources and content in Australia is also matched by increasing levels of education, and particularly intergenerationally. Studies of media effects that are based on nationalist propaganda in the first part of the 20th century are almost 100 years old in their method and assumptions, and we need to consider how technological and social changes may effect the way in which people engage in a contemporary media environment. The Power Inquiry in the United Kingdom argued that today's citizenry in developed nations are significantly different in their political concerns and capacities than when propaganda effects were first assessed. While noting a degree of disengagement with formal political institutions, they rejected arguments that the citizenry was unworthy or ignorant. They stated that '[c]hanges of the post-war era have gradually created citizens who are better educated, have a higher sense of self-esteem, enjoy and expect to make decisions for themselves, and either lack or chose their own geographic, social and institutional bonds' (2006: 103).

In addition to a shifting base of cultural capital, digital media have an important part to play in this story. First, for the more educated and informed citizenry, digital expands the number of choices available to diversified audiences. A good example of this can be seen in the proliferation of digital television channels (cable, internet and free-to-air) in recent years, which reflect the more complex composition of the Australian community post the era of White Australia (circa 1970). Second, we have to recognise that the convergence of computer technology and media magnifies the nature of change in the media landscape by altering the capacity of individuals to act within the media system. This has the effect of destabilising fixed roles like 'audience' and 'producer', and adding systemic characteristics and capacities into the media system. The embedding of information and communications technologies (ICTs) into our media systems serves to accelerate the pace of change because, instead of giving us 'channels', they provide a 'platform' for engaging in human behaviour. We no longer 'watch television', but, rather, inhabit a mixed-media environment.

The shift from 'dumb' communications technology to 'smart' digital media is important because it requires a careful re-evaluation of established thinking about media politics. The rise of the internet as a core aspect of this technological

change (or more appropriately, the culmination of a variety of developments),<sup>5</sup> is not simply the introduction of ‘a’ new channel for communication. Its significance is not that it has better hi-fi than media it is displacing (in some areas, for example online video, it is popular *despite* having lower fidelity). It is significant because it is a technology that enables the expression of human creativity in novel and more effective ways. ICTs are catalytic for change because of the combination of a number of key technologies (Flew, 2008). These are:

- *Computerisation*: which accelerates the capacity for data information to be created and employed by skilled individuals and organisations. Computerisation is important because it makes information dynamic: it can be presented in a variety of forms, recalculated, and overlaid to create new information that was not envisaged by the original collectors. Increasingly data is a by-product of human activities: generated and stored whether we like it or not. SNSs represent a good example of this. They allow individuals to access social networks online, massively reducing the time cost in locating old friends or family members. These services also permit advertisers, using data-mining techniques, to identify new markets or consumption trends. The storage of personal behaviour online, and its ease of access, creates new privacy concerns that have become political debates as their social significance becomes increasingly apparent. Overall, computerisation is important because it can increase the scale of human agency through the automation of tedious or repetitive tasks (Hansen, 2010).
- *Digitisation*: which allows for low-cost reproduction of large amounts of content, as well as its manipulation and redistribution with ease. This changes the economics of content creation and distribution (creating, in some areas, a superabundance), as well as creating new tools for the production and modification of content (such as the use of low-cost personal computers to produce high-quality publications and audio-visual material). In addition, because this material can be stored with perfect fidelity,<sup>6</sup> it can be reused (in original or altered form) repeatedly at little or no cost.
- *Networking*: the linking together of computers and networks using technologies like the internet and mobile voice and data services. These allow complex communications systems and social groups to be formed dynamically and ad hoc, with reduced impact of, and reference to, the user’s geographical location. This impacts on the way we respond to classical political problems, such as the co-ordination of individual effort and the tyranny of distance, which has resulted in considerable ‘network effects’. As such, computer

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5 The internet is a good example of how the development of media technology and practice is cumulative and draws in an array of technologies to create a more powerful system.

6 A good example of the impact of storage is to see the effect of widespread domestic refrigeration on the landscape of urban environments through alterations to commerce and distribution systems (decline of travelling vendors and local shopping) which then moved back up the production chain.

networking has remarkable generative qualities (Zittrain, 2008: 71–74), resulting in the creation of new private and public goods. Examples of these goods can be found in the creation of new public information repositories (e.g. Wikipedia or the Urban Dictionary), new virtual organisations (ephemeral, such as flashmobs (Rheingold, 2002: 174–82); or more lasting, such as the internet political site *On Line Opinion*) and new informational goods (such as the Linux Operating System or audio books online; Gensollen, 2007: 84–87).

## What we do with media, what it does to us

The implication of these changes is why ICTs are more appropriately viewed as a platform for human activity that has neo-institutional characteristics. In this context, neo-institutionalism addresses the relationship between human agency (our freedom of action) with the organisational (formal institutions) and social structures (informal institutions) in which we live. Sitting firmly on the fence between an over-deterministic view of the impacts of social, technological and economic structures on human decision making (e.g. Langdon Winner's argument about the nature of technologies, such as atomic power, leading automatically to authoritarianism; 1986), and the complete free will and omniscience of radical egocentrism (Bradley, 2005: 49), a neo-institutional view of media has an analytical focus on what can be done in particular structural contexts. Thus, our structured existence (in a family, a community, a workplace or a political organisation) both facilitates and constrains our action. It does this through the provision of enablers and barriers (physical resources and constraints), as well as incentives and disincentives (social norms, rules, expectations and rewards) (Lowndes, 2010: 75–77).

This perspective recognises the ability for individuals and groups to use available tools to achieve specific objectives (such as using a religious social network to organise an advocacy political campaign), as well as the potential to be reflexive about how structures shape the 'rules of the game' in which decisions are made (Rhodes, 1997). The latter perspective also means some actors have the ability to shift action to a context more likely to advantage them (what can be called 'arena shopping'; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1999) or even reconfigure the resource and meaning structures that encourage or discourage specific forms of political behaviour (changing the rules themselves<sup>7</sup>). Politics plays out on these levels: using the resources and institutions available to achieve our ends in the short term, or adapting them to ensure our ends are more likely to be achieved in the future. While political resources can be physical, with an eye

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7 For example, the incorporation of critics of government regulation of internet services in the late 1990s by giving one of the industry groups the power to create industry codes of practice (self-regulation) was a powerful mechanism by which the government shaped the nascent representative bodies of the internet industry in Australia by strongly incentivising them to join a particular body which would serve as a focal point for decision-making about the industry code.

to media politics we must also recognise the importance of information, ideas, beliefs, values and meaning and place increased emphasis on the constructivist nature of media environments to shape political culture and therein shape the temporary disposition of the formal institutions in which speech acts become law and policy.

The advantage of this type of approach for digital media lies in incorporating how active we can be in using and shaping the platform. Thus, rather than talk about internet ‘audiences’ we use the more active term of ‘users’, drawn from the computing arena. As digital media has become more prevalent and increasingly designed for the general consumer, this has considerably lowered the barriers for individuals using these platforms creatively (Lister, et al., 2003). This observation led Bruns (2008) to develop the notion of online creativity as ‘produsage’, the tendency for the internet and its various online communities, tools and environments to give users the capacity to be both producers and users of content simultaneously. While Wikipedia (the poster child of the ‘read-write web’ movement) may be the most obvious example of this, because of its high profile presence online, we see this also in a variety of situations (Benkler, 2006: 63–67). This includes the comparatively mundane activities of commenting on blogs or sharing photos, but also includes less obvious interactions like the automation of online data collection in shaping the platform itself. A good example of this more passive produsage is an online activity many people do every day: make choices from Google’s list of search results, which are stored, analysed and tabulated to adjust the results for future search engine users. Whereas these online practices tend to be individualistic in nature, they aggregate into patterns of social practice (conventions and norms over time). Shirky (2008: 81), for example, has identified how the editorial conventions of media based on scarcity are becoming *inverted* with the rise of digital media. Rather than employing careful editorial processes and controls to vet material before it is published, the online convention is increasingly to publish early and then allow the ‘social filtering’ process of user choice, recommendation and trackbacks to determine what content has value and what does not.

We may not (yet) be cyborgs, but the digital media continues to shape us as we shape it.

## **New media = new politics?**

As the internet, in its most popular form, the World Wide Web (WWW), reaches its 20th year, we can see how cycles of innovation and practice have evolved to develop the institutional characteristics of digital media: new structural barriers and enablers. These have arisen either through the creative destruction



of old practices (such as the decline of high-cost investigative journalism in the commercial media); through the 'remediation' of existing forms of media, their recreation in the digital environment (such as online TV as like, but unlike, the traditional broadcast media; Bolter and Grusin, 2000); and, via the development of wholly new forms of practice (i.e. Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs)).<sup>8</sup> These new institutional contours have developed their own social meaning and political importance.

Because of this there is no simple argument about what digital media 'does' to the practice of politics in Australia. Like any essential change to the environment in which we operate, we can make an argument that the politics we see in a digital media saturated environment will be substantially different over time to what we have seen in the past. This change, however, will not be easily predictable, and will remain in tension between the tendency for the new capabilities of these platform technologies to shift practice, while constrained by existing habits, values and political practice. In addition, the breadth and rapidity of change make prediction possible. This is an area of scholarship that is subject to rapid obsolescence.

To fully explore the implications of digital media for Australian political life, the following chapters look at a range of key political domains. Within each domain we examine available evidence regarding the way digital media has been employed, and look at the political implications these technologies and practices have had to date:

- Chapter 2 looks at the impacts on the formal practices of democratic government in Australia, with the way digital media has been employed in the electoral process. This chapter focuses on the way that parties and candidates have employed new communications channels to solicit votes and distribute political information, as well as examining new entrants into the electoral space. Considering the more active role of voters, the chapter questions the audience for political information during campaigns, and examines the way active audience members have engaged in the process of elections.
- Chapters 3 and 4 examine the discursive environment online, exploring the way new forms of participative digital media have changed the way in which Australians talk about politics. Critically employing the concept of the public sphere, this chapter considers opinion formation and debate online. This allows us to consider the active process of meaning formation among new and virtualised online communities, and we can examine what a politics

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<sup>8</sup> In a good example of the social shaping of technology, however, it's genuinely difficult to think of wholly new online practices. MMOGs can be traced back to freeform acting and live-action role-playing, which were popular in the 1970s and 1980s.

of ‘conversation’ might look like, its impact, and the new forms of agency it generates.

- Chapters 5 and 6 consider the use of digital media by political elites. Looking at an array of key political institutions, including lobby groups and the mass media, these chapters examine the way the digital age has changed their capacities. From the creation of new forms of political social movements to alterations to the political economy of existing media institutions, the reconfiguration of the fields of power that lie in the elite sphere of Australian politics needs careful consideration in a country that tends to rely on top-down mobilisation.
- The final chapter, Chapter 7, looks at the impacts of new technologies on the public sector, still the largest single-industry segment in this nation. This chapter considers not just the use of digital media tools for participation and inclusion, but also the way new technologies have shaped government services and functions. Looking at notions of e-service delivery and government 2.0, this chapter considers the implications of these developments in terms of the capacity of the state, but also in altering perceptions and expectations of the public.

