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AN EXAMINATION OF SEÁN GALLAGHER’S PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN IN A HYBRIDIZED MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

Siobhán Graham & John Hogan

Introduction
Political communications is an underdeveloped area of research in Ireland. There is no precise definition of political communications as the topic has developed as an ‘inter-disciplinary endeavor, drawing on theoretical, philosophical, and practical foundations of diverse disciplines of study, including communication, political science, history, psychology, and sociology, among others’ (Miller and McKerrow, 2010: 61–2). Nimmo and Sanders (1981: 12) describe political communications as ‘one of three intervening processes (political leadership, and group structures being the other two) by means of which political influences are mobilized and transmitted between formal governmental institutions, on the one hand, and citizens voting behavior, on the other’.

Web 2.0 possesses the potential for new kinds of interaction between political parties and voters. This is critical in light of Putnam’s (1995a, 1995b) argument that traditional media reduces the amount of time people spend engaging with politics. Thus, political communications has never been more important, yet many political scientists have pointed to the falling levels of political interest, electoral turnout, participation and trust in the system (Dalton, 2007; Ward and Gibson, 2009). However, ‘if political organizations can present politics in ways that are more relevant to voters, the current decline in their political interest levels may be slowed, stopped, or perhaps even reversed’ (Lupia and Philpot, 2005: 1123).

Here we examine the use of a specific aspect of the internet, social network sites (SNS), by the campaign of candidate Seán Gallagher in the Irish presidential election of 2011. Internationally there is a growing body of literature on the role played by SNSs in election campaigns, from studies in the United States (US) by Williams and Gulati (2007; 2008) and (Zhang et al., 2010), to studies in the United Kingdom (UK) by Chadwick (2011) and in Germany by Jungherr et al., (2012). As such, this research aims to expand our understanding of the use of SNS in an Irish electoral context. The fact that we are examining the use of SNS in a presidential election campaign means that the perspective is focused on the national as opposed to the constituency level.

Perspectives on the Internet and Political Communication
According to Tolbert and McNeal (2003: 175) ‘there is evidence to suggest that changes in communication technology may play an important role in influencing electoral behavior’. In particular, the internet has been promoted as a channel through
which the young may become mobilized in politics (Baumgartner and Morris, 2009). In the context of Web 2.0, the growth of SNS has been one of the most notable trends on the internet, as is their increasing utilisation by political parties. SNS offer a world of opportunities to their users ‘to track what everybody is saying about everything’ (Savage, 2011: 18).

SNS such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and LinkedIn, gives voters the ‘chance of entering into a real online dialogue with representatives’ (Mackay, 2010: 23). Such dialogical interactions allow for the possibility of relationship building (Briones et al., 2011). Dialogic interaction refers to potential, active and quality dialogue that can take place between a candidate and the public (Kent and Taylor, 1998) that is two-way and symmetrical (Zhang and Seltzer, 2010).

Along with Facebook, MySpace and LinkedIn, Twitter is generally regarded as an SNS, although Bruns and Burgess (2011) wonder to what extent any group of participants in Twitter may be described as a community. A community suggests the sharing of specific interests and deliberate engagement as on Facebook, whereas individual messages in Twitter are not necessarily responding to each other. As such, Twitter could be regarded as a broadcasting (or micro blogging) tool wherein anyone can say what they want and in the moment be deemed credible (Towner, 2012). Nevertheless, Twitter occupies an increasingly significant role in public communication (Bruns et al., 2011).

Young people, in particular, rely on SNS for their political knowledge, with nearly half using them for political interaction (Zhang et al., 2010). In 2004, Howard Dean emerged as a leading contender for the Democratic presidential nomination in the US through the use of SNS (Hale, 2003). Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign’s utilization of SNS ‘changed the way politicians organize supporters, advertise to voters, defend against attacks and communicate with constituents’ (Miller, 2008). Zhang et al. (2010) argue that Facebook helped bring in new voters, the majority of whom supported Obama. This success led to claims that SNS provided new opportunities for online campaigning and electoral engagement (Smith, 2009).

Wallsten (2011) found that during election campaigns the traditional media turns to new media to serve as sources for their reporting. In this context, an event can attract a myriad of online contributors, all of whom may capture the attention of the traditional media and drive the ‘political information cycle’ (Chadwick, 2011). Consequently, these political information cycles involve the hybridization of the new online media with the old broadcast and press media (Chadwick, 2011: 3).

SNS allow lesser-known politicians to have their policies heard in an affordable manner (Gueorguieva, 2008). However, from the politicians’ perspective, the interactive exchange of ideas offered by SNS can be burdensome, they risk losing control of the conversation (Fernandes et al., 2010). Additionally, the threat for politicians of being embarrassed through the greater transparency SNS provide has increased substantially (Zavestoski et al., 2006).

**Irish Political Parties and their Use of SNS**

At the time of the 2011 general election, over 2 million citizens (45 per cent of the population) were active on SNS, (Social Bakers, 2012). In all, 78 per cent of the population had access to the internet (Kennedy, 2011). Consequently, most of the 356 candidates had a profile on Twitter, Facebook, and sometimes both (Healy, 2011).
Wall and Sudulich (2011) found that online campaigning had more than doubled since 2007. Table 1 shows that the majority of candidates from the major parties had a Twitter or Facebook profile.

Table 1: Candidates’ Presence on Twitter and Facebook During the 2011 General Election

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Number of Candidates</th>
<th>On Twitter</th>
<th>On Facebook</th>
<th>On Twitter and Facebook</th>
<th>No Presence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fianna Fáil</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fine Gael</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: http://candidate.ie/?page_id=213

According to Healy (2011) this was the final general election in which politicians would have the choice of whether to engage with social media.

In 2004 there was no presidential election, as the only nominee was the incumbent, Mary McAleese. The last presidential election was in 1997, prior to the advent of Web 2.0. Consequently, 2011 was the first presidential campaign to witness the use of SNS. Table 2 shows that all candidates, in addition to having their own Web pages, employed a variety of SNS.

Table 2: Candidates in Presidential Election and Their Use of Social Media

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Party Affiliation</th>
<th>Personal Webpage</th>
<th>Facebook</th>
<th>Twitter Channel</th>
<th>YouTube</th>
<th>Flickr</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Michael D. Higgins</td>
<td>Labour Party</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seán Gallagher</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin McGuinness</td>
<td>Sinn Féin</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay Mitchell</td>
<td>Fine Gael</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Norris</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dana Rosemary Scallon</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Davis</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research Methodology

The starting point for this project is the fact that the internet and SNS, since their inception, have come to play increasing prominent roles in elections. We wished to discover what it was like for a political campaign to rely heavily upon the internet and SNS. What were the pros and cons of this approach? This research involved in-
depth interviews with the two senior officials in charge of media for the Seán Gallagher campaign, with a focus on their use of SNS. These officials worked closely with Gallagher, and oversaw all communications emanating from the campaign across a broad range of media. As such, they were the ideal interview candidates for this topic. They also provided us with some of the SNS data the campaign collected and used. The interviews were conducted in the spring of 2012, four months after the election. It was the interviewees’ wish to remain anonymous for this research.

The in-depth interview is a qualitative technique that gives researchers an opportunity to gain an understanding of how others interpret the world. It is indispensable for probing behind the public-oriented statement (Yow, 2005). This approach seeks to provide understanding of how an interviewee attributes meanings to experience (Yow, 2005). As Lummis (1987: 75) points out, the ‘advantage of oral evidence is that it is interactive and one is not left alone, as with documentary evidence, to divine its significance; the ‘source’ can reflect upon the content and offer interpretation as well as the facts.’ However, it is necessary to recognize the problems associated with interview findings – such as interpreting interviewee perspectives in a favourable manner – and seek to avoid these through the triangulation of the interviewees’ accounts with other sources of evidence (Thies, 2002). By other sources of evidence we mean other contemporary accounts, academic research and newspaper reports, so as to minimize inconsistencies, inaccuracies, or biases, in any one individual source of information and ultimately provide a more accurate overall account of events (McCullagh, 2000). As we are conducting interviews with two individuals, who were closely connected with the campaign of a specific candidate, such triangulation will be invaluable.

Thus, to write the narrative and build the chronology of events around Gallagher’s online social media campaign, and the wider presidential election of 2011, we used both primary and secondary sources. Forty open-ended questions were asked and the interview transcripts coded, using a grounded key-word-in-context approach, where key terms are used to tease out themes (Ryan and Bernard, 2003). Book, journal, newspaper and online accounts of the Gallagher campaign, and the wider Presidential election, were also employed here, to supplement the primary data for triangulation purposes.

The Irish Presidential Election Context
The Presidency is a non-executive office in which the office holder plays no part in the day-to-day affairs of government. As such, the Irish political system is a parliamentary system with a popularly elected President, not a semi-presidential system (van Gerven, 2005). ‘The job is about being, rather than doing’ (van der Brug et al, 2000: 632).

Presidential elections are conducted using the alternative vote (AV) system and not proportional representation by the single transferrable vote (PR-STV) employed in the parliamentary elections (Sinnott, 2009). This is because the Presidential election, unlike the parliamentary elections, but akin to by-elections, constitutes competition within a single seat constituency, with the whole country as the constituency. Consequently, the larger parties select only one candidate each. Thus, intraparty competition, a staple of Irish parliamentary elections (Gallagher, 2005), is absent from presidential elections. That a candidate requires the support of 20 members of the Oireachtas, or four city/county councils, tends to restrict candidacy to those backed
by a major political party (Gallagher, 2009). However, we can see from the below list of presidential candidates in 2011 that these requirements did not prevent Mary Davis, Sean Gallagher, David Norris and Dana Rosemary Scallon from getting their names on the ballot paper.

The 2011 Presidential election was contested by:

Mary Davis, entrepreneur and rights campaigner.
Seán Gallagher, entrepreneur and television personality;
Michael D. Higgins, academic and senior Labour Party politician;
Martin McGuinness, senior Sinn Féin politician, deputy first minister of Northern Ireland
Gay Mitchell, Member of the European Parliament (MEP) and former Minister of State.
David Norris, senator, academic, and gay right activist;
Dana Rosemary Scallon, a former MEP and singer.

The Use of the Internet and SNS by the Gallagher Campaign

www.seangallagher.com

Seán Gallagher is known widely as an investor on the Irish version of the Japanese television show Man no Tora (Dragons’ Den). In May 2011 Gallagher announced he was going to run for President (Connolly, 2011). Although a former member of Fianna Fáil, he distanced himself from that party throughout his campaign (Regan, 2011). Fianna Fáil’s poor showing in the 2011 general election, its mismanagement of the economy and accusations of corruption, damaged its brand (Murphy, 2011). Despite this, Gallagher was dogged by questions about his relationship with Fianna Fáil.

The Gallagher campaign’s first move online came with the establishment of the candidate’s website www.seangallagher.com. An interviewee told us that:

the idea of the website was to be more engaged with the audience, allowing them to see videos and photos. From the website they could follow Seán on Twitter, follow Seán on Facebook, or subscribe to the newsletter, so we could never lose the visitor once they came to the page, which was pretty good.

According to the interviewees, this site proved a great initial success, with an average of 18,000 unique visitors per week, peaking at nearly 23,000 just prior to the election. The interviewees stated that www.seangallagher.com was a medium through which Gallagher could ‘readily engage with the public’. One interviewee told us:

the defining moments for me was when search terms for the website changed from Seán Gallagher Dragons Den to Seán Gallagher presidential election, as people began to see him as a Presidential candidate. That was an eye opener.

The unmediated nature of the web permits politicians to use these resources as largely broadcast media (Lynch and Hogan, 2012). The campaign team also employed the bulk email tool Mail-Chimp to inform subscribers of where Gallagher was going to be campaigning. This use of email represents a modification on the traditional use of letters, flyers and candidate postcards (Karpf, 2010a). The intervie-
wees felt that a significant media moment came when the campaign announced that it would not be using election posters:

I think this was a breakthrough moment. It was announced through email first and the way we set up the newsletter, people could actually retweet the newsletter, or put the link on Facebook, so it was quite a viral thing.

As Sudulich and Wall (2009: 472) point out:

Online campaigning offers candidates enhanced editorial control over their campaign, first because site content can be straightforwardly amended and updated in real-time, and secondly because candidate and party Web sites allow politicians to communicate directly with their audience without recourse to external media actors.

**SNS**

As social networks provide the fundamental building blocks for collective action we have seen increasing attempts by politicians and political parties to foster these networks through SNS (Pasek et al., 2009: 202). The Gallagher campaign used the major SNS in communicating with the public. Gallagher already had a Facebook page and a LinkedIn account prior to contesting the election. Once he initiated his campaign his number of followers in both of these SNS expanded rapidly (see Table 3), while his campaign also sought to establish a presence for him in a range of other SNS, including Twitter, Audio Boo and Instagram.

### Table 3: Increase in the Candidates Facebook and Twitter Fans in the Moth Prior to the Election

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidates</th>
<th>September 28th 2011 Facebook</th>
<th>September 28th 2011 Twitter</th>
<th>October 23rd 2011 Facebook</th>
<th>October 23rd 2011 Twitter</th>
<th>Percentage Increase Facebook</th>
<th>Percentage Increase Twitter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Michael D. Higgins</td>
<td>2,499</td>
<td>4,811</td>
<td>4,478</td>
<td>6,834</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seán Gallagher</td>
<td>13,169</td>
<td>5,108</td>
<td>35,562</td>
<td>9,018</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin McGuinness</td>
<td>4,934</td>
<td>1,275</td>
<td>8,970</td>
<td>2,999</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Norris</td>
<td>25,000</td>
<td>20,711</td>
<td>25,625</td>
<td>22,260</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Davis</td>
<td>1,838</td>
<td>1,374</td>
<td>2,664</td>
<td>2,367</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dana Rosemary Scallon</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>765</td>
<td>594</td>
<td>765</td>
<td>594</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay Mitchell</td>
<td>766</td>
<td>1,190</td>
<td>1,310</td>
<td>2,060</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Gallagher campaign data.

**Facebook**

The interviewees argued that Gallagher wanted to use Facebook, and SNS more generally, to build relationships with the public. The whole point of social media is to
engage with people, as opposed to sending them to the donate button. It’s better to build up a relationship.’ Gallagher’s number of Facebook followers grew by 170 per cent in the last month of the election, to surpass 35,000 by 27 October (see Table 3). This was to Gallagher’s advantage as Pasek et al., (2009) found that Facebook users had greater political knowledge and were more civically engaged than their contemporaries.

The interviewees felt that Facebook was the most effective SNS they employed – as it provided the public with access to Gallagher’s whereabouts on a daily basis, as well as giving the public the opportunity to ask Gallagher questions. They told us ‘another reason was that visitors and fans could volunteer to be part of the campaign and help spread Seán’s message of positivity.’ They also said that:

we spent quite a lot on Facebook advertising, so that’s why our likes were up a lot higher than on twitter. What we did was something called sponsored stories. When one of your friends liked something, it would appear on your news feed and you’re more inclined to like something they’ve liked. Another thing we did was … when it was someone’s birthday we’d wish them happy birthday from Seán Gallagher and then people would click into his page. It’s the small things that make people say oh that’s so cool, and then when they click through, they engage with Seán. It’s something positive straight away it makes you react and is a good first impression.

They also posted on Facebook the links to other SNS, such as YouTube and Twitter, being employed by the campaign. One of the interviewees told us that:

I believe in terms of the campaign, the relationships formed though social media were real. Relationships were built up on Facebook and many supporters actually came because of the message Seán was spreading through Facebook.

The media officials felt that a successful strategy was what they called ‘online canvas days, as opposed to doing an offline canvas day, which we did through handing out leaflets’ on Facebook. ‘We did the online canvas days which no one else had done and it was just basically telling people through Facebook that Seán had a video and getting them to share the message.’ They told us ‘presidential broadcasts were posted online before they actually went on TV and people who had already been following Seán could see these first.’ This approach allowed the public to share Gallagher’s 13 YouTube broadcasts, which acquired an average of 1,701 views each. This, according to Giliberti (2011), constituted a highly innovative use of SNS in the Irish context. Wallsten (2010: 164) points out that in the US online videos of the kind found on YouTube, have become an important tool for candidates in their efforts to win election. All seven candidates uploaded a total of 148 campaign videos, which acquired 92,391 views. Although YouTube has proved useful for political campaigns, ‘its influence is often overstated when commentators focus on the technology in the absence of the organizations that use it’ (Karpf, 2010b: 144).

Twitter

Similar to Facebook, the Gallagher campaign frequently updated its Twitter account, allowing subscribers to closely follow the candidate. Twitter in particular ‘has become
a legitimate and frequently used communication channel in the political arena as a result of the 2008 [US presidential] campaign’ (Tumasjan et al., 2011: 402). The benefit of Twitter is that it provides an immediate and direct link between a politician and voters, but carries a risk in that it is unfiltered (Peterson, 2012). Gallagher’s Twitter following increased throughout the campaign, rising by 77 per cent in the last month, to reach over 9,000 (see Table 3). The interviews told us that ‘we also had a Twibbon, where people would put say “Vote Seán Number 1” on their profile picture. So it was just small little things like that to help spread the message.’ The Gallagher campaign used the social media tracking tool Radian 6, from Salesforce.com, in conjunction with its Twitter account. This tool permitted the media officials to follow what the public and wider media were tweeting about Gallagher. Of relevance here is the finding by Tumasjan et al. (2011) that Twitter is a valid indicator of the political landscape offline. The officials also told us that they utilized Google alerts,

so that any time Seán’s name was mentioned I got an alert, I could see what people were saying. It’s good to kinda notice these things, just so if there’s anything negative it gets highlighted straight away.

LinkedIn and other SNS

The Gallagher campaign found LinkedIn, a popular platform for business professionals, very useful. LinkedIn assisted Gallagher in connecting with potential donors and gained him over 2,000 additional connections. The interviewees told us that ‘LinkedIn was really successful in converting people into actually getting involved and was where we saw the greatest donations to the campaign.’ This is an interesting point, as it suggests a distinction between the passive ‘like’ or ‘follow’ associated with Facebook and Twitter and a more committed form of support for the campaign. The fact that LinkedIn is a professional networking site, and unlike the other SNS is made up almost exclusively of users who are over the voting age (Kemp, 2012: 168), may account for this high level of commitment to the campaign. With a reputation as a successful businessman and TV personality, Gallagher was viewed by many as a pro-business candidate, who would use the presidency to assist job creation.

In addition to the main online resources mention above, the campaign also employed Audio Boo and Instagram. The interviewees said that using Audio Boo, a site that permits users upload and share audio files, meant that ‘Seán could just be there talking away, upload it straight away and it gets sent out to all our subscribers.’ The campaign also made use of Instagram, which is a photo sharing network. The media officials regarded Instagram as:

a great tool for on the road, to take photos and upload them and go straight across the top of our website. It was really good for people to see these instantly. We also had a photographer out on the road with Seán, which all went up on Facebook also.

Interestingly, there was no suggestion from these media officials that the campaign ever saw SNS as a means of specifically attracting young voters. ‘We never solely targeted the under 30 age group, but social media was a key driver in attracting voters of all ages.’
As we saw in Table 3, Gallagher had almost 45,000 followers between Facebook and Twitter. This, along with the decision to eschew posters, was regarded as highly innovative (Reilly, 2011). Towner (2012) argues that Web 2.0, and the accompanying SNS, has allowed candidates to more effectively accomplish their campaign goals, particularly in targeting and connecting with voters. In this respect, one of the interviewees told us:

I think that in order to reach a wider audience and engage with them, the use of internet is paramount in spreading your message. Using the internet, it is possible to do things differently. The capabilities of videos, tweets, posts, etc. going viral are what make the internet remarkable. The more times you push your message in someone’s face, the more chance you’ll get a reaction. If you post a message ten times it will click with the person eventually.

The Absence of Dialogue
Despite the above, none of the candidates used the SNS to their full dialogical potential. Browne (2011a) pointed out that ‘while each candidate has a presence on Twitter and Facebook, none has truly engaged with people online’. Although Gallagher may have had many more people ‘talking about’ his Facebook page than those of his rivals, he was no different to his rivals in using SNS as a means of promoting his election bid. All of the candidates sought to communicate to, as opposed to communicating with, the public. ‘Gallagher is no different to the other candidates in using the tool primarily as a “push” mechanism to market their campaign’; there was no real dialogue to glean insights from the electorate (Browne, 2011a). This is something that Bortree and Seltzer (2009) also discovered with advocacy campaigns in the US. While the candidates did respond to messages of support, they did not engage in conversions with their followers (Browne, 2011b). As Fernandes et al., (2010) point out, SNS are appreciated by political parties for the depth of information presented and ease of accessibility offered, as opposed to interactivity. Brown (2011b) points out that part of the problem is also down to the fact that most of the messages were sent by the candidates’ campaign teams, not the candidates themselves, and thus lacked the personal touch and failed to provide insight into the candidate.

The Incident that Transformed the Campaign
The polls were predicting that Gallagher would win the election on 27 October (Collins, 2011). On 24 October, the last primetime debate between the candidates took place on the national broadcaster’s (Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ)) news/current affairs programme The Frontline. In a free flowing context, all seven candidates answered questions from the studio audience, the public via SNS, the show’s host and each other. Chadwick (2011: 4) has pointed to the increasingly hybridized nature of news systems highlighted by this programme’s format, where ‘personnel, practices, genres, technologies, and temporalities of supposedly “new” online media are hybridized with those of supposedly “old” broadcast and press media.’

During this debate Martin McGuinness accused Gallagher of collecting a €5,000 donation for Fianna Fáil (McGee, 2011). Fianna Fáil was considered a damaged brand at the time, due to its mismanagement of the economy and its cronyism with developers, bankers and other businessmen (Allen, 2011: 67). There was also the
problem that Fianna Fáil, until then ‘one of the most successful parties in post-war Western Europe’ (Weeks, 2010: 148), had been ‘trounced’ (losing 72 per cent of its seats) in the parliamentary election the previous February (McDonald, 2011). The implication was that Gallagher was much more closely linked to Fianna Fáil than he admitted. Gallagher initially denied this claim. However, later in the debate, ‘an unchecked tweet purporting to be from the Sinn Féin party was unwittingly read out by the host Pat Kenny’ (Hannon, 2013: 57). This stated that Sinn Féin was going to produce the businessman who gave Gallagher the cheque at a press conference the following morning. It later transpired that this Twitter account was not officially associated with Sinn Féin or the McGuinness campaign (Mehta, 2013: 102).

Following the introduction of this tweet Gallagher softened his denials: ‘well, I’ve no recollection of getting a cheque from this guy’ (McGee, 2011). Before conceding he ‘may have collected an envelope’ (McGee, 2011). Gallagher’s inability to provide a definitive answer raised questions to his truthfulness. Additionally, the idea of an envelope full of money has in recent years become associated in the public’s mind with political corruption in Ireland (Collins and O’Shea, 2000). Suddenly, Gallagher was linked in the public consciousness with Fianna Fáil, political cronyism and corruption (The Irish Times 2011a). The studio audience turned against Gallagher, highlighting public perception of the credibility of information on SNS, something Johnson and Kaye (2004) pointed to almost a decade ago.

The example shows how traditional news media have increasingly come to rely upon information generated by the public through social media (Sutton et al., 2008). In this case, the broadcaster selectively integrated one online source, Twitter, into its programme. Twitter, in particular, has carved out a separate niche in the cultural zeitgeist – often being referred to in traditional media sources and by national broadcasters (Miller, 2009; Peterson, 2012). Chadwick (2011) suggests that broadcasters do this in order to outperform their rivals in both the traditional and new media environments. However, the Frontline incident raises questions as to why the programme’s producers felt this particular tweet, the provenance of which was questionable, should be introduced (Mehta, 2013).

There was a failure on the part of RTÉ to adhere to what Munger (2008) regards as the professional norms of balance and objectivity, by not taking into consideration the details of the Twitter account that this tweet came from. In the spring of 2012 the board of RTÉ had to apologize to Gallagher after the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI) found that The Frontline had been unfair in failing to clarify the provenance of the tweet wrongly attributed to the campaign of Sinn Féin candidate Martin McGuinness (Cullen 2012a).

Nevertheless, on the 24 October, almost 800,000 citizens watched what according to Mehta (2013: 102) was the moment that ‘many believe caused the frontrunner in the polls to lose the election three days later’. However, Cullen (2012b) points out that ‘it is impossible to say with certainty whether the false tweet sank Gallagher. He was already on the ropes thanks to McGuinness’s attack, which highlighted an aspect of his Fianna Fáil past he was reluctant to talk about.’ However, ‘were it not for that anonymous, erroneous tweet we might not have been alerted to the scale of Gallagher’s involvement with Fianna Fáil’ (Browne, 2012). According to McGee (2011) the debate on traditional media and the tweet via social media – hybridized media – transformed the election.
The last poll, conducted by Red C market research prior to the *Frontline* broadcast, showed Gallagher far in the lead at about 39 per cent support, followed by Michael D. Higgins at 27 per cent (RTÉ, 2011). However, after the first count of election ballots on 28 October, it was clear that these positions had been reversed, with Higgins collecting 39.6 per cent of the first preference votes to Gallagher’s 28.5 per cent (Reddy, 2012). From Table 4 we can see that by the fourth and final count of the election Higgins emerged as the clear winner (*The Irish Times*, 2011b)

### Table 4: Presidential Election Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Candidate</th>
<th>% 1st Pref</th>
<th>Count 1</th>
<th>Count 2</th>
<th>Count 3</th>
<th>Count 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Labour Party</td>
<td>Michael D. Higgins</td>
<td>39.6</td>
<td>701,101</td>
<td>730,480</td>
<td>793,128</td>
<td>1,007,104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>Seán Gallagher</td>
<td>28.5</td>
<td>504,964</td>
<td>520,401</td>
<td>548,373</td>
<td>628,114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sinn Féin</td>
<td>Martin McGuinness</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>243,030</td>
<td>252,611</td>
<td>265,196</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fine Gael</td>
<td>Gay Mitchell</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>113,321</td>
<td>127,357</td>
<td>136,309</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>David Norris</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>109,409</td>
<td>116,526</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>Dana Rosemary Scallon</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>51,220</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>Mary Davis</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>48,657</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Electorate: 3,191,157 Valid: 1,771,762 Spoilt: 18,676 (1.0%) Quota: 885,882 Turnout: 1,790,438 (56.1%)

This election shows how online social media is being increasingly integrated into traditional media, forming a new hybridized media environment. Thus, in the context of the increasingly hybridized nature of the media, the integration of non-elites into the construction of news is an important characteristic of the political information cycle (Chadwick, 2010). This is a very different approach from how the traditional media constructed political news – which involved a small elite of politicians and their staff on the one hand and the professional journalists on the other (Callaghan and Schnell 2001; Gans 1979). It is clear that the internet and its many SNS do indeed have the potential to shape the flow and diffusion of information in the political domain (Nahon et al., 2012: 6). In this environment, journalists act as intermediaries between the political elite and the social media world by focusing the attention of political actors on important online information (Farrell and Dreznner, 2008; Nahon et al., 2012; Wallsten, 2007). The *Frontline* incident, drawing traditional and online media together in a hybrid media environment as per Chadwick (2011), along with the subsequent and saturated traditional and online media coverage of the indecent, transformed the election (Mehta, 2012).

**Social Media Following and its Relationship with Electoral Support**

The relationship between the media, voter behaviour, and electoral success has always been a fascinating and contentious topic. The Lazarsfeld et al. (1948) Erie County Study found that, contrary to popular belief, the media rarely influenced a voter’s decision during an election, with the voting public seldom changing their minds. However, more
recently Williams and Gulati (2008) found that, in the US, the number of Facebook supporters can be considered a valid indicator of electoral success, while in Germany, Tumasjan et al. (2011) discovered that Twitter reflected the political landscape offline. In an Irish context, McMahon (2011) discovered that in the 2011 general election Facebook support was a fairly good indicator of voter support, while Twitter was not.

However, during the presidential election Norris, who had the highest combined number of Facebook and Twitter followers, only managed to finish fifth, being eliminated after the second count. Interestingly, but possibly due to sheer coincidence, Gallagher’s level of Facebook and Twitter support equated with his electoral performance. But, as can be seen in Figure 1 below, the overall percentage of followers Gallagher had across the various SNS did not translate into a similar percentage of votes cast. Higgins, the ultimate winner, was only fourth in terms of combined Facebook and Twitter followers, suggesting that a reliance on traditional campaigning methods is still the most effective.

In contrast to the above literature that indicates the predictive powers of SNS in elections, Metaxas et al. (2011: 171) point out that ‘just because a candidate is scoring high in some social media metrics (e.g., number of Facebook friends or Twitter followers), this performance does not guarantees electoral success.’ Other studies have also found that predictions using social media have relatively low accuracy, as SNS do not reflect societal demographics, biasing random sampling (Jungherr et al., 2012; Yu and Kak, 2012). Yet, contrary to the contention by Lazarsfeld et al. (1948), the power of both the traditional and social media, in what is becoming a hybridized media environment, can be seen in the derailment of Gallagher’s campaign by a single tweet delivered in a live television debate (Mehta, 2013).

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**Figure 1: Share of Social Media Following v Share of 1st Preference Votes**

![Pie chart showing share of social media following and share of 1st preference votes for candidates including McGuinness, Scallon, Davis, Higgins, Mitchell, Norris, and Gallagher.]

Source: RTÉ, 2011; Gallagher campaign data 2011.
We are witnessing ‘the emergence of a hybrid form of political participation that combines the virtual and real world realms of political engagement and action – a new digital democracy’ (de Zúñiga et al., 2010: 45). Thus, the advent of Web 2.0 and SNS is creating, in Ireland, what Chadwick (2011) sees as a hybridized media to coincide with this hybridized form of political participation. However, in the context of SNS, there is room for improvement in terms of developing a real dialogue between candidates and voters.

That said, there is significant room for improvement in our understanding of how SNS support, and traditional media campaigning, combine to influence election outcomes. Thus, in the 2011 presidential election we can see the increasing influence of online social media on traditional media and political campaigning – raising questions as to the validity of earlier research that studied traditional and social media as separate entities in isolation from each other. The findings also raise questions as to the contention that SNS support reflects real world political support. This highlights the need for more studies that look specifically at hybridized media environments.

**Conclusion**

Social media is just one communication channel amongst many and will not replace traditional media, but it has, with the evolution of Web 2.0, become an increasingly important feature in political communication. SNS figured prominently during the Irish parliamentary elections in February 2011. Social media proved even more significant during the presidential election later that year. All of the presidential candidates had an active presence across multiple SNS, with Seán Gallagher’s campaign the most active. Gallagher successfully utilized social media as a political communication tool while placing less emphasis upon the traditional media. The Gallagher campaign was subsequently nominated for the best use of social media in an election in 2011 (Social Media Awards, 2012).

The interviewees admitted that, in addition to the positives that came with campaigning through social media, there were significant drawbacks. It proved difficult, throughout the campaign, to commit the resources necessary to manage this fast-changing medium. ‘Social media never sleeps’ was how they described it. They found that they lacked the resources necessary to deal with the challenges presented by, and the consequences of, the tweet on *The Frontline*. If they had possessed these resources then they might have been able to swiftly question the origin of the tweet and verify the actual owner of the *Martin McGuinness for President* Twitter account. Thus, it is vital that candidates have the skills, as well the support staff, to deal with unexpected events that can be thrown up by social media.

In this respect it is important for candidates to appreciate that social media, unlike traditional media, involves two way unmediated communication with the public – a dialogue. However, studies, such as Fernandes et al., (2010), have found this potential for interactive engagement is not being fully realized, as from the politicians’ perspective it risks their losing control of the discussion. In the Presidential election there was a failure on the part of the candidates to engage with voters online – to converse with them. SNS was used for promotional purposes primarily, almost as if traditional media methods were being applied to the social media environment. Campaign managers seems to have a different perception as to the effectiveness of SNS than those looking at the use of social media in elections from an impartial

Nevertheless, as SNS continue to evolve, and social media becomes an ever more important part of our lives, political communication’s use of social media will increase. Thus, the growth of social media presents new challenges to politicians in managing their communications. Although candidates might wish to continue engaging in unidirectional communications with the public through social media, this may not be an option in future, as the absence of a dialogue, and a failure to engage, becomes more of an issue. Social media played a significant part in making Gallagher the front-runner for President and in his subsequent reversal of fortune.

The impact of the combination of traditional and social media on Gallagher’s campaign raises questions as to the continuing validity of media research findings from the 20th century in the 21st century. The election result also raises questions as to the validity of research that contends that Facebook and Twitter support reflects real world political support. This, in particular, is an area for future research, as the influence of Web 2.0 and SNS, in hybridizing the media environment, as well as hybridizing political participation, is challenging us to revisit the validity of our earlier understanding of the media, as well as the findings from more recent research on SNS. What we are arguing for here is an integrative approach to research that seeks to understand the on going assimilation of traditional with social media and how this is impacting upon politics and political participation. A limitation of this study is that it focuses exclusively on one election campaign in one country. Future comparative studies of elections in a number of jurisdictions, or at different times in the one jurisdiction, may offer the possibility of conceptual breakthroughs in our understanding of the influence of this new hybridized media on elections, adding significantly to the extant literature which is largely made up of single-country examinations and has been found wanting.

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