An examination of Seán Gallagher’s presidential campaign in a hybridized media environment

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ABSTRACT

All of the seven candidates running in the 2011 Irish presidential election employed the internet and social media to communicate with voters. Of these candidates, Seán Gallagher's campaign, in an effort to break from dependence upon traditional media, relied most heavily upon Web 2.0 and its associated social media. We interview the officials in charge of media for that campaign, to discover the pros and cons of relying upon the internet and SNS to run an election. We examine how the combining of online social media with traditional media, to produce a new form of hybridized media, is transforming the political communications environments and influenced the waxing and waning of Gallagher's election prospects.

Keywords: political communications, internet, SNS, Facebook, Twitter, Séan Gallagher, hybridized media,
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 "interdisciplinary 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, pp. 61-62). Nimmo and Sanders (1981, p. 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 offers the possibility of a level of interaction between political parties and the public previously absent. 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, p. 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. Little research has been conducted into the role played by SNSs in election campaigns, apart from studies in the United States (US) by Gueorguieva (2008), Williams and Gulati (2007) and Zhang et al. (2010). As such, this research aims to expand our understanding of the use of SNS in elections in other democracies apart from the US. The fact that we are
examining the use of SNS in an Irish presidential election campaign means that the perspective is national as opposed to constituency focused.

**PERSPECTIVES ON THE INTERNET AND POLITICAL COMMUNICATION**

According to Tolbert and McNeal (2003, p. 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 utilization by political parties. SNS offer a world of opportunities to their users "to track what everybody is saying about everything" (Savage, 2011, p. 18).

SNS such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and LinkedIn, gives voters the "chance of entering into a real online dialogue with representatives" (Mackay, 2010, p. 23). Such dialogical interactions allow for the possibility of relationship building (Briones et al., 2011). Dialogic communication 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 a 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’.\footnote{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) argues that during election campaigns the traditional media turns to new media to serve as sources for their coverage. 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). Thus, these political information cycles involve the hybridization of the new online media with the old broadcast and press media (Chadwick, 2011: 3).

Thus, 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, as it risks their 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 percent of the population) were active on SNS, (Social Bakers, 2012). In all, 78 percent of the population had access to the internet (Kennedy, 2011). Consequently, most of the 566 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>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>19/21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fine Gael</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>69/9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>40/7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: [http://candidate.ie/?page_id=213](http://candidate.ie/?page_id=213)

Healy (2011) argues this was the final general election where politicians had 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. Thus, 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</th>
<th>YouTube Channel</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**

Our research involved in-depth interviews with the 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. 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.

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). It is a "study focusing on individual lived experience" (Marshall and Rossman, 2010, p. 93). An in depth interview allows the researcher explore the interviewee's perspectives on a particular idea, program, or situation (Boyce and Neale, 2006). Unlike a normal interview, "an in depth interview is much longer, follows a schedule of questions, and is a method in and of itself" (Stacks, 2011, p. 173).

This approach seeks to provide understanding of how an interviewee attributes meanings to experience (Yow, 2005). As Lummis (1987, p. 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." 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).

**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, p. 632).
Presidential elections are conducted using the alternative vote (AV) system and not proportional representation by the single transferrable vote (PR-STV) employed in parliamentary elections (Sinnott, 2009). This is because the presidential election constitutes competition within a single seat constituency – a novelty in Irish politics – with the whole country 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 4 city/county councils, restricts candidacy to those backed by a major party (Gallagher, 2009).

The 2011 presidential election was contested by:

- Mary Davis, entrepreneur and rights campaigner.
- Michael D. Higgins, academic and senior Labour Party politician;
- Seán Gallagher, entrepreneur and television personality;
- 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 a judge on the Irish version of the Japanese television show Manê 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 Web site www.seangallagher.com. They 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 interviewees felt that a significant media moment came when the campaign announced it would not be erecting 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, p. 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 candidate’s Facebook and Twitter fans in the moth prior to the election**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidate’s</th>
<th>September 28th 2011</th>
<th>October 23rd 2011</th>
<th>Percentage Increase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>Facebook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael D. Higgins</td>
<td>2,499</td>
<td>4,811</td>
<td>4,478</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Seán Gallagher 13,169 5,108 35,562 9,018 170 77
Martin McGuinness 4,034 1,275 8,970 2,999 122 135
David Norris 25,000 20,711 28,625 22,260 2.5 7
Mary Davis 1,838 1,374 2,664 2,367 45 72
Dana Rosemary Scallon 0 0 765 594 765 594
Gay Mitchell 766 1,190 1,310 2,060 71 73

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 percent 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 that their contemporaries. Despite this, or the fact that 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 mechanism to market his campaign, to communicate to, as opposed to with, the public (Browne, 2011). There was no real dialogue to glean insights from the electorate (Browne, 2011), something that Bortree and Seltzer (2009) also discovered with advocacy campaigns in the US. 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.

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. 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 your react and is a good first impression.

Facebook also permitted the posting of 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 through 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 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 148 campaign videos in total, which acquired 92,391 views. ‘However, YouTube, while it provides additional tools for parties and political organizations, 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, 2013). Gallagher's Twitter following increased throughout the campaign, rising by 77 percent 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 off-line. 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”. 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 employed such tools as – Audio Boo. 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.

Despite this, neither Gallagher, nor any of the other candidates, used SNS to their full dialogical potential (Browne, 2011).

The tweet that torpedoed the campaign

At a crucial time in Gallagher’s campaign, with just three days left to the election, the candidate who had relied so heavily on social media to promote his image, found it working against him. If the polls were to be believed, it was predicted that Gallagher would win a landslide victory the on 27 October (Collins, 2011). But, on the evening of 24 October, with
less than 72 hours to voting, the last primetime debate between the candidates took place on
the national broadcaster’s (Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ)) news/current affairs program The
Frontline. In a free flowing context all seven candidate’s participated in answering questions
from studio the 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 program’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.’

In this debate Gallagher ‘suffered a degree of hostility from his rivals that was
unprecedented for a presidential campaign’ (McGee, 2011). Martin McGuinness accused
Gallagher of collecting a €5,000 donation for Fianna Fáil from a Dundalk businessman, who
had been convicted as a smuggler (McGee, 2011). Fianna Fáil was considered a political
toxic brand due to its mismanagement of the economy, its cronyism with builders, bankers
and other corrupt businessmen and its collapse in the parliamentary election the previous
February. The implication was that Gallagher was much more closely linked to Fianna Fáil
than he was admitting. This claim was initially denied by Gallagher with the words “that is
not correct, absolutely not correct’, as were his links to Fianna Fáil. However, later in the
debate, The Frontline’s presenter read out a tweet from the Twitter account, Martin
McGuinness for President, which 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.

The introduction of this tweet into the debate left Gallagher reeling. He then seemed
to soften his denials with ‘well, I’ve no recollection of getting a cheque from this guy’
(McGee, 2011).’ Then he conceded he ‘may have collected an envelope’ (McGee, 2011). He
went on to describe the businessman involved as a "convicted criminal and fuel smuggler" (McGee, 2011). Gallagher’s inability to provide a definitive answer raised questions to his truthfulness and credibility. Additionally, the image of an envelope full of money has in recent years become byword in Ireland for political corruption. The die was cast and the image of Gallagher as a putative Fianna Fáil “bag man” was formed (Cullen, 2012a). Gallagher was linked in the public consciousness with Fianna Fáil, political cronyism and corruption (The Irish Times 2011a). The studio audience turned against Gallagher with loud boos and hisses, highlighting public perception as to the credibility of information on SNS, something Johnson and Kaye (2004) pointed to almost a decade ago.

This is an example of the contention by Sutton et al., (2008) that the traditional news media have increasingly come to rely upon information generated by the public through social media. In this case, the broadcaster selectively integrated one online source – namely Twitter - into their program. 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, 2013). Chadwick (2011) suggests that broadcasters do this in order to outperform their rivals in both the traditional and new media environments. However, this does not address the issue of the particular tweet on The Frontline. The incident raises all sorts of questions as to why the program’s producers felt this particular tweet, the provenance of which was highly questionable, should be introduced. Were they trying to heighten the drama of the debate? Or were they even trying to influence the outcome of the election? There was certainly a failure on the part of RTÉ to adhere to what Munger (2008) regards as the professional norms of balance and objectivity by taking into account 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 to him in failing to clarify the provenance of the
tweet wrongly attributed to the campaign of Sinn Féin candidate Martin McGuinness (Cullen 2012b).

Nevertheless, on the 24 October, almost 800,000 citizens were watching what according to Cullen (2012a) was the moment that swung the election. The debate on The Frontline, and the now infamous tweet, serious affected Gallagher's election prospects. While Cullen (2012a) concludes 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.' Browne (2012) argues that 'were it not for that anonymous, erroneous tweet, we might not have been alerted to the scale of Gallagher’s involvement with Fianna Fáil'. According to McGee (2011) the debate on traditional media and the tweet via social media transformed the election - hybridized media played a significant part.

The last polls conducted prior to The Frontline broadcast all showed Gallagher far in the lead, at about 39 percent support, followed by Michael D. Higgins at 27 percent. 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 percent of first preference votes to Gallagher's 28.5 percent (The Irish Times, 2011b). As is clear from Table 4, by the fourth and final count of the election Higgins emerged as the clear winner, with a total of 1,007,104 votes to Seán Gallagher's 628,114 (The Irish Times, 2011c).

<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>529,401</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>109,469</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%)

Thus, in the context of the increasingly hybridized nature of 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 an impact on politics (though not the kind of impact Gallagher anticipated) through their power to shape the flow of political information (Nohan et al., 2012).

Social Media Following and First Preference Votes
The Lazarsfeld et al. (1948) Erie County Study, conducted over 70 years ago, found that, contrary to popular belief, the media rarely influenced a voter's decision during an election, with the voting public rarely changing their minds. More recently Williams and Gulati (2008) found that the number of Facebook supporters can be considered a valid indicator of electoral success, while Tumasjan et al. (2011) regarded Twitter as reflecting the political landscape offline. However, in the case of this presidential election, contrary to the Lazarsfeld et al. (1948) contention, the power of both the traditional and social media, in what is becoming a hybridized media, can be seen in the derailment of Gallagher's campaign by a single tweet delivered in a live television debate. But, interestingly and in line with the arguments of Williams and Gulati (2008) and Tumasjan et al, (2011) Gallagher’s level of Facebook and Twitter support ultimately, if only on account of hybrid media, equated with his electoral performance. Thus, a combination of traditional and social media influenced the election outcome, while Gallagher's SNS following, with the second highest number of
Facebook and Twitter followers (behind David Norris), mirrored his electoral performance – coming in second behind Michael D. Higgins. However, Higgins, the ultimate winner, was only fourth in terms of Facebook and Twitter followers. In this case we are witnessing the increasing influence of social media on traditional media and on politics and political campaigns – raising questions as to the validity of earlier research that studied traditional and social media as separate entities and in isolation from each other.

As can be seen in Figure 1, the overall percentage of followers Gallagher had across the various SNS did not translate into a similar percentage of votes cast.

**Figure 1 here**

Both pie charts illustrate the difference between the share of social media following and first preference votes cast for each candidate. Michael D. Higgins, had only 9 percent of the total social media following of all of the candidates, but acquired 40 of the first preference votes. Gallagher had 35 percent of the total social media following and collected 28 percent of the 1st preference votes cast.

**Table 5** shows that overall the number of SNS follower’s accounted for 7 percent of all votes cast, allowing for the possibility that some voters followed candidates on more than one SNS.

**Table 5: Analysis of 1st Preference Votes and Social Media Followers amongst Candidate’s**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidate</th>
<th>Social followers</th>
<th>Social followers as percentage of 1st preferences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Michael D. Higgins</td>
<td>701,101</td>
<td>11,312</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seán Gallagher</td>
<td>504,964</td>
<td>44,580</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Norris</td>
<td>109,469</td>
<td>47,885</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay Mitchell</td>
<td>113,321</td>
<td>3,370</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin McGuinness</td>
<td>243,030</td>
<td>11,969</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dana Rosemary</td>
<td>51,220</td>
<td>1,359</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scallon</td>
<td>48,657</td>
<td>5,031</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Davis</td>
<td>48,657</td>
<td>5,031</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1,771,762</td>
<td>125,506</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above data illustrates that a politician with a large SNS following (eg Norris), compared to his rivals, will not necessarily see that advantage translate into a large share of the vote. However, we must also take account of the fact that in Gallagher’s case his campaign was seriously damaged in the last few days prior to the election. It is intriguing to ponder counterfactually how the election might have turned out had the infamous tweet never been made. An event combining traditional and social media seems to have played a significant part in changing the minds of many in the voting public.

These findings correspond to what de Zúñiga et al., (2010: 45) discovered in the US – namely ‘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.’ Thus, the advent of Web 2.0 and SNS is creating in Ireland what Chadwick (2011) sees as a hybridized media to coincide with a hybridized form of political participation.

**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. Online 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.

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. It is clearly vital that candidates have the skills, as well the support staff, to deal with unexpected events that can be thrown up by social media. Consequently, it is no surprise that studies have found this potential for interactive engagement is not being full realized, as from the politicians’ perspective it risks their losing control of the conversation. Nevertheless, as SNS continue to evolve, and social media becomes an ever more important part of our lives, political communications use of social media will increase. Thus, the growth of social media presents new challenges to a politician in managing their communications. The days of unidirectional political communications from a candidate, through traditional media to the public are over. Social media played a large 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 more recent research which 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. What we are arguing for here is an integrative approach to research that seeks to understand the ongoing 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, may offer the possibility of conceptual breakthroughs in our understanding of the influence of this new hybridized media in elections, adding significantly to the extant literature which is largely made up of single country examinations and has been found wanting.

REFERENCES


Available at:


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