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## **Social Networks as Sites of e-Participation in Local Government**

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### **Abstract**

This paper proposes that electronic social network sites (SNS) make visible forms of participatory behaviour to which local governments must respond. Groups and individuals – publics – operating in diverse ways for diverse purposes, propagate and respond to communication by local governments via SNS and, in doing so, practice electronic e-participation. In addition to alternate channels of communication, SNS can facilitate alternate forms of participatory behaviour online, but there is little alignment between public perceptions of these emerging practices and local government behaviours in the same space. The publics seeking to engage with local governments on SNS, expect that their participation should be both sought and valued, but local governments are active on social networks for different purposes, primarily information sharing. A study of the main social network channels of five local governments, in and around the Illawarra region of New South Wales, reveals that local governments are neither aware of this shift in public e-participation expectations, nor equipped to understand them. In particular, certain forms of e-participatory behaviour are not recognised by the local governments as genuine forms of participation. Nonetheless, there are some promising signs that local governments are making efforts to acknowledge and respond to publics and individuals on SNS, pointing to opportunities for more active engagement between publics and councils.

### **Tony and the 'Roo**

On September 12, 2013, the local government authority in the Southern Highlands of New South Wales posted to its Facebook and Twitter pages an image of a former professional athlete restraining an iconic Australian animal in the middle of a coffee shop-filled plaza. The athlete was former Australian rules footballer Tony Lockett who retired to the semi-rural Southern Highlands some years earlier. The kangaroo, whose tail Lockett was holding, had wandered into the middle of the town of Bowral and narrowly avoided being struck by a vehicle on the nearby main street. It was dazed and distressed but otherwise okay.

On Facebook, the image quickly became the Council's most interacted-with post since their page was set up in March 2012. It remains the most re-shared post of any the Council has created. Two hundred and ninety three Facebook users and pages shared the image and post with their own networks. In terms of other posts on the Council's page, this post was only outdone on Facebook's ubiquitous 'like' function by photos of volunteer firefighters battling local blazes later in 2013. But it was never bested on the share count. The image and story of how Tony Lockett came to grapple with a kangaroo in Bowral, a town of only about 8,000 people (ABS, 2013), soon spread around Australia on Fairfax Media websites, including that of the Melbourne metropolitan daily newspaper *The Age* (Syllag, 2013).

Just 18 months earlier, public communication from this local government – the Wingecarribee Shire Council – had been largely restricted to press releases emailed to local media and others who had asked to receive them. The occasional email newsletter and a quarterly shire-wide mailout supplemented this broadcast model media ecosystem, which was rounded out with articles and reports in the local professional media, the Fairfax-owned *Southern Highland News* and 2ST Radio, and occasionally some media further afield such as the Wollongong-based ABC Illawarra (radio and online) or WIN television.

But Tony Lockett and the kangaroo never appeared in an official Council press release. They were only ever published by the Council on the social networks Facebook and Twitter, the accompanying image duly acknowledged as having been ‘sent in’ by a fan of the Wingecarribee Shire Council’s Facebook page. So how did this medium-sized local government authority come to have this seemingly irrelevant and irreverent story published so widely when, even by their own standards, it was not really newsworthy (since it was never published in a press release)?

It would be simple, and it is a logical deduction, to say that the novelty of this image is its appeal. But to attribute the spread of this particular post only to novelty would be to ignore McLuhan’s (1964) aphorism that ‘the medium is the message’. By ignoring the method of distribution in favour of acknowledging only the content, we are missing the underlying behaviour, the medium through which it occurs, and the messages inherent in that medium. McLuhan offers a clarifier, less pithy but also less ambiguous: ‘The effect of the medium is made strong and intense just because it is given another medium as ‘content” (1964, 19). The post is only content for the medium of the social network site, which has an internal logic geared to sharing, replication and spread of content. By establishing a presence on Facebook (and other SNS), the Council inevitably becomes a node in the process of data proliferation and concurrently invites other users to take agency and control of some content on the network. The comments, likes and shares of users further disseminate the post amongst user connections, reinforcing the social role of seemingly technical functions in promulgating content.

## Method

I conducted a study of the main social media channels (Facebook and Twitter) of five local governments located in and around the Illawarra region of New South Wales during 2013. One of them is the Wingecarribee Shire introduced above. The others are the peri-urban Wollondilly Shire, the largely urban Wollongong City and Shellharbour City, and the coastal town-based Municipality of Kiama. The five local governments have been chosen because they occupy contiguous territory and share key geographic and cultural resources and populations. They have things in common, but important differences, offering a good opportunity to interrogate some of the different social conditions that might arise within each. Wollongong City acts as a regional capital for this area. A key reason for selecting the Illawarra in general, and Wollongong specifically, as the focus case study for this research is the promotion of the information technology industry as a bedrock of Wollongong’s ‘transition’ from an ‘industrial and manufacturing centre’ to a silicon beach’ (Wollongong City Council, 2012). This claim, promoted by the Lord Mayor Gordon Bradbery and others, attempts to position information and communication technology at the heart of Wollongong City’s brand and attraction as a region with both suitable lifestyle and business environments in a post-industrial situation. As such, how the local councils themselves understand and use these information and communications technologies is worth detailed consideration.

The data collected for the case studies in this paper was sourced through two third-party applications from the social network sites Facebook and Twitter. These two websites were selected for the availability of data extraction tools, and their relative use by the councils as compared to other social media sites. Posts were sourced for the calendar year 2013 in order to give a robust comparative sample as this was the first year that all five councils had both Twitter and Facebook pages. Furthermore, by selecting data from an entire calendar year, a full series of annual events and activities could be considered. Both suites of data were collected in mid-February 2014 and are not guaranteed to be free from error, though manual inspection of a selection of posts indicates that they are accurate to the extent that such posts remain visible on the sites in question. Bruns et al. (2011, 20) note that: ‘no retrieval methods guarantee a comprehensive capture of Twitter data’. The same can be said for Facebook, though both datasets appear to be representative samples. Neither dataset includes posts that may have been deleted prior to collection of the data.

Tables 1 and 2 below set out some key comparative characteristics of the Twitter and Facebook accounts of each selected local government.

Council	Profile Est.	Followers*	2013 Tweets	User Name

Shellharbour	20/05/2009	1367	304	@ShellharbourCC
Wollondilly	03/01/2010	527	1379	@wdillycouncil
Wollongong	11/02/2011	1952	916	@Wollongong_City
Kiama	26/02/2013	174	270	@KiamaCouncil
Wingecarribee	15/08/2013	137	222	@wsc_media

Table 1: Twitter Profiles

\*Note: Followers as at date of data collection: approximately February 15, 2014

Council	Page Est.	Fans*	2013 Posts on Page	Facebook Address (www.facebook.com/...)
Shellharbour	03/05/2010	804	364	ShellharbourCC
Wollondilly	22/07/2010	1421	909	wollondilly
Wingecarribee	02/03/2011	2832	520	WingecarribeeShireCouncil
Wollongong	14/11/2011	4579	849	wollongongcitycouncil
Kiama	25/02/2013	453	279	Kiama-Municipal-Council/165460560273767

Table 2: Facebook Pages

\*Note: Fans as at date of data collection: approximately March 10, 2014

The first of the third-party applications used for data collection is NetVizz, a 'general-purpose data-extractor for different subsections of the Facebook platform' (Rieder, 2013, 354). NetVizz calls on the Facebook Application Programming Interface (API) to capture data from selected Facebook pages or groups. This application was used to collect data from the main Facebook page of each of the five selected local governments.

The data extracted included the text of posts made on and by each of those Facebook pages during 2013 and extensive metadata related to those posts, including time, date, relevant links (to the post itself and any images included), whether the post was made by the page or a user, and the number of likes, comments and shares. The data was anonymised. NetVizz provides an engagement score that proved useful in deciding which posts had proved particularly popular. This score is a simple whole figure that comes from adding up the total of number of likes, comments and shares on each post. However, more work needs to be done to deduce the relative value of each of these actions, so the resulting figures are used with caution.

Data from Twitter was gathered via the commercial service Twitonomy (<http://www.twitonomy.com>). This calls on Twitter's API to return a variety of information from selected Twitter accounts or hashtags and also displays some data graphically. The information returned included text of the original post plus metadata such as links to the post, the platform from which it was posted, the type of post, and retweet and favourite counts. Unlike NetVizz, Twitonomy does not provide the text of replies made by other users to posts. However, these are available on Twitter itself and were briefly considered in the study. Twitonomy provides information indicating which users were most replied to, mentioned and re-tweeted by each of the studied accounts, indicating the level of public engagement occurring between council accounts and other users. On the whole, the service allows efficient collection and retrieval of Twitter data within chosen parameters (in this case, selected accounts and a set time period).

A central tenet of this study is the fact that SNS constitute part of a broader media ecology<sup>1</sup>, with a complex set of histories, relationships and interdependencies to other media and technologies and certain sociocultural perspectives. There is not scope to address each of these complexities in detail in this paper. However, this paper is part of a larger research project that will further consider other issues in the field of communication and media studies as they relate to the engagement practices of local government. That study includes a deeper examination of the Community Strategic Plans and Community Engagement Strategies of each of the five councils and accesses data from interviews with staff, councillors and members of the public that is beyond the scope of this paper.

## **Social Network Participation**

This article proposes that users take a participatory approach to the social network channels of local governments. They challenge, comment on, question and propagate the content on these channels. Jenkins (2006, 275) identifies three potential levels or moments of media participation: 'production, selection, and distribution'. It is these three activities, exemplified by specific actions undertaken by users on SNS, which underpin the description and understanding of participation in this study. As each of these occur on the social network channels of local governments, they have the potential to become visible and therefore lay claim to being genuine attempts to influence, engage or collaborate with local government. For local governments, this potentially introduces a new element to the legal requirements imposed by supercedent state governments for consultation with their communities. For example, New South Wales local governments must prepare an integrated Community Strategic Plan accompanied by a Community Engagement Strategy, both 'based on social justice principles' (DLG, 2010a, 8), one of which is 'participation and consultation about decisions' (DLG, 2008, 1). Further, the *NSW Local Government Act 1993* lists numerous ways for the community to 'influence what a council does', the primary focus of which is making submissions and commenting on or objecting to proposals and plans. The Act specifies that these are to be written submissions (S. 706), but does not restrict the medium of delivery. Therefore, the Act appears to be open to a variety of forms of participation that might take place on SNS.

Burgess and Green (2009) argue that practices usually associated with audienceship become visible online and are therefore implicated as active, participatory and social. These include: 'quoting, favoriting, commenting, responding, sharing, and viewing' (Burgess & Green, 2009, 57). The online environment offers visibility to these actions by generating quantifiable and collectable data. In part, it is the availability and ubiquity of this data that presses the case for councils to reconsider what is counted as participation and consultation. Mcnamara (2013, 167) convincingly argues that user actions on SNS should be understood as 'cultural practices of participation' in order to appropriately institute listening practices in civic institutions. Jenkins (2006) sought to apply the term 'spreadable media' to content that users freely and actively engage with. He argues that spreadable media 'carries with it a greater sense of agency on the part of the user' (2006, 274) than widely used terms like meme. The data discussed in this paper was generated by users exercising this very agency further underlining its potential understanding as active participation.

The data from the Facebook and Twitter accounts of each of the five selected local governments show that the councils largely make informational posts to these SNS and often ignore attempts at interaction from users. Nonetheless, users continue to undertake participatory activities by commenting, questioning, challenging, liking, and sharing content. There are indications that the councils undertake limited response behaviour, usually by directly addressing comments in a customer-service like paradigm. This aligns with Mcnamara's (2012) observation that governments tend not to resource architectures of listening, despite seeking voices. The data indicates that although the five local governments post regularly on both Twitter and Facebook, two of the councils (Wollondilly and Shellharbour) post to Twitter almost exclusively as cross posts from Facebook and, as such, do not make use of the technical and cultural features of Twitter such as hashtags and the retweet function. Three of the councils posted more to Facebook than to Twitter, and most have significantly more Facebook fans than they do Twitter followers, Shellharbour being the exception.

Local governments face resource and institutional constraints that may impact upon their ability to adapt to new technologies. Evans and Reid (2013) suggest widespread consultation might slow down decision-making and make it easily influenced by sectional interests, while Artist et al. (2012) identify a focus on financial concerns and efficient decision making as barriers to implementing changes to consultation practices. Such constraints are potentially part of the reason why local governments may not seek to incorporate additional forms of information gathering such as SNS into their consultation and engagement practices.

### **Crisis Communications on Social Network Sites**

During the sample period, there was a series of bushfires that impacted all five of the local government areas in this study and is reflected in the data. Two of the local government areas, Kiama and Shellharbour, were not impacted by fire directly but were affected by major road closures related to the fires. Towns and villages in the Wingecarribee and Wollondilly Shires were directly impacted by the fire, as were roads and outlying areas in Wollongong City Council. All five local governments made posts on their social network channels about these fires, and those posts are among the most widely shared and commented upon on both Twitter and Facebook.

This offers an opportunity to consider the spread of content via SNS in these local governments in the context of recent research on the role of Twitter in the Queensland floods of 2011 (Bruns et al., 2011). Of particular relevance is the role of retweeting in 'amplifying the visibility of messages sent by 'official' media and emergency authority accounts' (Bruns et al., 2011, 29) and 'mythbusting' posts which aim to correct misinformation. On Facebook, the equivalent action is sharing posts by official emergency service accounts, which distributes the original post in context with a link to the source page. Wingecarribee Council undertook both amplifying and mythbusting approaches, frequently retweeting and sharing posts from the main NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) accounts as well as posts by the RFS Southern Highlands Team (SHT). Indeed, @RFSSHT and @NSWRFS were the two most retweeted accounts by Wingecarribee Shire Council in 2013, with 32 and 20 retweets respectively, accounting for over half of all retweets by the @WSC\_Media account. Tellingly, retweets of @NSWRFS posts were the only time Wollondilly Council made use of the retweet function during the sample period. In both cases, the councils were acting to amplify messages for their own audiences in order to help spread information during the fire crisis. The @NSWRFS Twitter account is also prominent among retweet counts for Wollongong and Kiama councils.

Wingecarribee additionally undertook what Bruns et al. (2011) refer to as 'mythbusting' practices: posting updates that seek to address misinformation. For example, when residents of the village of Hill Top were worried that State Emergency Service (SES) crews were undertaking an evacuation order, the council responded by tweeting:

“ There is NO evacuation order in place for Hill Top. SES Crews were doing a familiarisation run only. #Nswfires - @WSC\_Media, 3:19pm, October 23, 2013 ”

A similar message, though with more detail, was shared on Facebook. The Facebook post was onward shared 30 times, and 'liked' by 70 users. Additionally, a number of the comments were simply users tagging other users to alert them to the post. The total engagement metric provided by NetVizz, which takes account of all of these data points, indicates that there were 117 active engagements with that post, with each moment of engagement further replicating and spreading the content in the network.

Four of Wollondilly Shire Council's five most popular Facebook posts in 2013 were crisis content. In June, the council posted a photograph of flooding that included a list of road closures in the shire. This post was widely shared. Three other popular posts by Wollondilly council related to the October fires, including an image of dozens of fire trucks at the town of Wilton overlaid with text. This format was evocative of popular online memes that make use of textual and visual templates which users combine as they see fit (see Whitman, 2004; Pullum, 2004). This post too attracted significant attention. Another post discussed options for people seeking to move animals to shelter and attracted many comments from site users seeking to collaborate with the council in that endeavour while notification of a town meeting for a village under threat was also shared by many users. Despite

these three posts being on the same topic, they each took a different approach. One was a sense-making exercise, another was about information sharing, and a third was a practical offer of assistance. All three types of post are identified by Bruns et al. (2011) as being among the common social network site responses to crisis events. The socio-technical features of SNS facilitate these and many other types of participatory practice. Though the council initially published these posts, users actively shared, liked and commented on the content, propagating it throughout the network and spreading its impact.

The use of SNS in crisis situations is further evidenced in Kiama Council only setting up Facebook and Twitter accounts after a severe weather event in February to spread information about damage and recovery. Indeed, the first 16 posts to Kiama's Facebook page (excluding the addition of a cover photo) were about the storm. They ranged from information on damage to council facilities, photographs of property damage, details about how to dispose of waste from the event and a link to a blog post by the mayor. The first 11 tweets on @KiamaCouncil were also storm related. On both sites, other users actively participated in propagating the information by sharing, liking and retweeting it, despite the accounts being very new and having only attracted a small following until that point. The response to both natural disasters, in which users collaborated with the local governments to spread important information SNS, demonstrate participatory principles at play. These actions are socio-technical in nature, taking advantage of the inbuilt features of the particular social network, but also requiring active participation of users.

## **Customer Service**

The data indicates that users posting to the local government Facebook pages are often seeking to directly influence council activities in very specific, often prosaic ways. The visibility of these posts as well as their further propagation by way of comments and likes adds strength to the proposition that they are genuine attempts at participation or engagement. Vigoda (2002) argued that deployment of the customer/client paradigm by governments denotes a certain passivity on the part of citizens that privileges the role of government as service provider instead of participant. This underlines Mcnamara's (2013) suggestion that voice is favoured over listening by governments. That is, customer service approaches seek to hear and respond to voices, not to listen and understand them. The data in this study demonstrates that users are sometimes directed to make formal written submissions to council that, presumably, are dealt with privately rather than in public, unlike posts on SNS. These responses can be categorised as customer service like responses (Vigoda, 2002), and often attract criticism from the original poster and other commenters.

Based on the NetVizz engagement score (total of likes, comments and shares), three of the four most engaged-with posts on Shellharbour City Council's Facebook page were complaints posted by users about poor road maintenance. Two of these, on July 4, were photographs posted by the same user who claimed their vehicle was damaged after hitting a pothole. In comments on both photos, the council responded advising the user to seek legal advice. On one post, the council advised users that reports of road damage could only be made via the council website or over the phone, and on another they asked users to refrain from using profanities. A number of users weighed in to report other road maintenance issues and the council responded that potholes had already been filled. However, many comments raising other issues went unacknowledged.

Council's apparent bureaucratic responses to the comments by users – in particular by advising them to report maintenance issues via other channels – seemed to upset users who were participating in these comment streams. Unfortunately for council, the nature of the Facebook platform and user activity meant that other users were drawn into the conversation as more comments and likes were posted on the original photograph, propagating the material throughout the user networks. The nature of the content helped to form a temporary public around the posts, signalling the social nature of participation on SNS. danah boyd (sic) (2014, 8) refers to these context-dependent user groups as networked publics, which means 'the space constructed through networked technologies and ... the imagined community that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice'. Users with experiences of poorly maintained roads coalesced around the specific content for the purpose of attempting to influence the council's response and behaviour. They became a networked public in a very real sense, but it was a public that the council did not feel the need to thoroughly address.

## **The special case of larger councils**

The most engaged-with posts on Wollongong City Council's Facebook page are more diverse than those on many other pages in this study. This may be on account of Wollongong having a much higher fan base and larger population than any of the other councils. There are six posts that have a NetVizz engagement figure higher than 100, indicating their relative popularity. Of these, one relates to the aforementioned bushfire, two were informational posts reminding users of forthcoming smoking bans in the city's main open air mall, two were user complaints, and one was addressing public concern about the financial position of the Council. The two user complaints were also about very different matters, with one seeking support for more skate parks in the Wollongong local government area and a second complaining about the state of the mall after council-funded

renovation works had finished. Wollongong Council sought to actively address these complaints by posting timely and factual responses. Other users joined in and debated the merits of the developments, their comments attracting further participants. However, in both cases, Wollongong Council only made a single response to the post and then allowed users to continue discussion among themselves. The 'no smoking' posts attracted a series of largely positive comments and likes, as well as a high number of shares.

The post about Wollongong's financial position, which was part of a larger attempt to consult the community about potential strategies to address the issue, attracted a very high number of comments, including a mix of negative and positive feedback. Council participated in this conversation and often encouraged users to provide their feedback via the official website. The irony of this approach is that users were actively participating in providing comments and feedback on the plans at hand, and yet their input was not acknowledged beyond being asked to provide it somewhere else. The Council seemed to be seeking this input on Facebook and yet was asking users not to provide it in that space. Where users take the time to actively participate in SNS-based conversations, this should be seen as legitimate, especially when such participation is apparently sought out. The conversations that took place on Wollongong's most engaged with Facebook posts in 2013 attracted a variety of users from both within and beyond the local government area. Many attempted to influence the council by actively participating and sharing information.

## Conclusion and Further Research

Further research in this project will ground the participatory behaviours evident on SNS in wider concerns of the field of communication and media studies as they relate to the engagement practices of local governments, and position the e-participation project in relation to fields such as e-government. The later research will include a broader case study incorporating policy documents from the councils concerned and interviews with relevant staff and elected officials. It will also seek to directly consider members of the publics who engage with the councils online in order to more thoroughly explore their motivations and practices.

Jenkins' (2006, 275) moments of participation – production, selection, and distribution – have the potential to become visible and lay claim to being genuine attempts to influence, engage or collaborate with local government. The local governments themselves have access to tools that can draw out the data behind these moments of participation, in addition to the actual written text of many of the user posts. The written posts alone strongly lay claim to being recognised the local governments as genuine acts of participation, whether or not associated data such as likes are taken into account. Whether making original posts or comments on posts or mentions on Twitter, users are demonstrating agency on SNS and press the case that the content of such posts are valid types of submissions or comments invited under the *Local Government Act 1993* and related regulations.

## Note

1 See Strate (2006) for a discussion on the nature of media ecology as a formalised field. It is used here more generally to indicate a kind of interdependency between different media and their particular cultural locations, but with due recognition to the media ecologists such as McLuhan and Neil Postman, amongst others.

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