SUMMARY OF THE PROJECT!

The project aims to empirically assess how the adoption of a social media-enabled ‘Citizens’ Agenda’ may contribute to increasing (and potentially generating) public engagement among citizen-participants, and examine how local and national media and politicians use it. It analyses the impacts of a social media intervention that was designed to explore to what extent democratic engagement amongst diverse population groups could be enhanced during the Australian federal election.

The project continues to analyse how issues raised in the Citizens’ Agenda are reported on in the media.

The research is investigating the following research questions:

1. How, and in what ways, does the Citizens’ Agenda treatment impact on political interest, engagement and efficacy among members of the public and to what extent is that impact sustained?

2. What influence does the Citizens’ Agenda platform have on policy makers’ (decided and appointed) practices of policy prioritisation and formation and how is that reflected over time?

3. What difference does the Citizens’ Agenda make to the agendas, practices and coverage produced through various platforms of political journalism during and after the election?

4. To what extent do innovative political and media practices, such as the Citizens’ Agenda, disrupt existing modes of political information during election periods, how enduring are these modal changes, and what does this mean for the role of media in public life?

To provide the intervention, the social media group OurSayAustralia was contracted to recruit for and conduct a citizen sample of discussions in the lead-up to the 2013 federal election. OurSay’s method used an online platform, as well as offline meetings, to generate voter awareness, interest, and interaction with crosswalked issues and political candidates in ten electorates. Citizens were invited to use OurSay’s online forum to propose, debate and vote for questions to which they wanted their political representatives to respond. To a certain extent, which we are now analysing, these questions and debates affected the agenda frame, and scope to broadcast and print coverage of the election and created a ‘Crowdsourced Agenda’.

Methods

Substantive qualitative interviews, and survey responses from the general public and Citizens’ Agenda members are providing rich data from which to explore the relationship between changing forms of political engagement, the effect of social media on political participation and emergent forms of political journalism, and their significance for political communication.

One of the project’s two quantitative elements is complete. A national telephone survey of representative samples was conducted with a representative control on attitudes to politics, levels of political engagement, and sense of political efficacy. In line with a disorienting narrative of current levels of engagement, trust, and efficacy between citizens and Australian institutions (see Chart). A parallel online survey of Citizens’ Agenda members, conducted before, during and after election events, is in the process of being analysed.

Interviews with Citizens’ Agenda participants, journalists, and politicians are ongoing. These enquire about changes to subjects’ practices during the election because of the Citizens’ Agenda. The Project is also conducting content analysis of election coverage to measure the extent to which the issues raised in the Citizens’ Agenda forums were reported on in the media, as well as how the role of public participation and journalism in democracy is reported.

In sum, the benefit of testing the Citizens’ Agenda in terms of impact, influence and efficacy demands: (a) significant levels of participatory innovations. This research will enable us to elaborate and test who, what, how, and contexts agency in new political spaces, analysed new forms of political participation roles, and any impact on political reality.

A sense of democratic dissatisfaction has occurred over the last two decades that some have identified as a ‘crisis of democracy’ (Castells 2009, 1981). Dissatisfaction is empirically indicated through such variables as declines in voter registration and perceived declines in vote registration (Sahu, Print, & Edwards, 2005), low levels of trust in trainees and government (Beam, 2005; Goot, 2002), and declining membership of and/or attachment to political parties. All of these factors suggest rising political disengagement (Leigh, 2002) and democratic decline.

Other studies, however, note that political engagement appears to be changing rather than ‘declining’. For example, citizens are more likely to engage in non-electoral forms of political participation (e.g., petitions, demonstrations), and use the Internet as a medium/mode of political involvement (Ventresca, 2003; Dahlgren, 2012, Martin, 2012). Meanwhile, citizen organisations, political parties, national governments and supranational institutions are developing ‘participatory’ forms of decision-making that emphasise deliberation and co-production between diverse actors (Vowles 2008, Camaerts 2008; Maxmumura 2010). The state of affairs for reporting on politics in Australia also shows similar, and concerning, trends in terms of efficacy. Critics describe political journalism as serving to produce politics as a domain of ‘insiders’, reproducing the strategic agendas of political parties and presenting politics as ‘spectator sport’ through ‘horse race’ and ‘game frame’ coverage (Young, 2011, Bennett et al, 2005, Lawrence, 2005, Simone 2012). Challenges to revive modes in the current media environment make engaging publics to sustain and extend journalism’s role as a facilitator of democracy more pressing (O’Donnell, McKnight, and Esbo, 2012, Young 2011).

However, like changing and innovative modes of political engagement, other research has focused on the democratic potentials of collaborative forms of participatory journalism (Simons 2011, Frew 2009, Domingo et al 2008). In this context, UK media professor and media activist Joyn Rosen posted a set of proposals for replacing managed and ‘mediatized’ agendas (Landry, 2009) with a ‘citizens’ agenda’. In a set of proposals aimed primarily at media organisations and journalists, Rosen suggested that prior to the election, journalists should begin with ‘a simple question’ not, ‘who are you going to vote for?’, but ‘what do you want the candidate to be doing as they compete for votes at this year’s election?’ (Rosen 2010, n.p.)

These dual changes in Australian political engagement and political journalism have not been measured in an interval/non-linear research design. Significantly, this study considers the annual Citizens’ Agenda ‘treatment’, affects the interval data of political engagement and political journalism have not been measured in an interval/non-linear research design. Significantly, this study considers the annual Citizens’ Agenda ‘treatment’, affects the interval data of political engagement and political journalism.